Seven Fields Local Nature Reserve

Ecological Condition Assessment Summary and Management Recommendations (2026)

Introduction

Wiltshire Wildlife Trust undertook a series of ecological condition assessments and walkover surveys across Seven Fields Local Nature Reserve (LNR) during 2026. These surveys were designed to evaluate the current condition of the site's principal habitats, establish baseline information for future monitoring, and identify management actions that will enhance ecological value and biodiversity.

The assessments included:

- Rapid Grassland Assessment (RGA)
- Woodland Condition Assessment (WCA) of Penhill Copse
- Shelterbelt and Hedgerow Assessment
- Review of statutory and non-statutory designations and constraints

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1. Rapid Grassland Assessment

A Rapid Grassland Assessment was undertaken between 29 June and 2 July 2026 across the seven meadow compartments within Seven Fields LNR. The survey provided an updated assessment of grassland condition approximately twenty years after the previous survey.

Key Findings

The assessment found that all seven meadows continue to support a diverse assemblage of characteristic neutral grassland species. Twelve positive indicator species were recorded across the site, including notable species such as:

- Pyramidal Orchid
- Greater Knapweed
- Common Restharrow

A range of pollinating insects was also observed during the survey, demonstrating the continuing ecological importance of the grassland habitat.

All seven fields met between three and six of the seven habitat attributes required to achieve favourable condition status. Positive indicator species were generally well represented, and herb cover exceeded target levels in most compartments.

Condition Constraints

The principal factors preventing the meadows from achieving favourable condition are:

- Excessive litter (thatch) accumulation across much of the site.
- Frequent occurrence of negative indicator species, particularly:
    - Upright Brome
    - Tor-grass
- Localised dominance of Tall Fescue and Field Bindweed within parts of Furrow Field.

These issues were most pronounced within Spring Field and Long Meadow.

Overall Assessment

All seven meadows are currently classified as **Unfavourable Recovering**. Although targets relating to scrub cover, bare ground and waterlogging indicators were met throughout the site, failures relating to litter cover and the abundance of negative indicator species prevented the grasslands from achieving favourable condition.

Despite these limitations, the survey confirms that the meadows retain significant ecological interest and continue to support a valuable and species-rich grassland flora.

Management Implications

Targeted adjustments to the existing cutting regime are recommended within Spring Field, Long Meadow and parts of Furrow Field. Enhanced management should focus on:

- Reducing litter accumulation.
- Suppressing dominant grass species.
- Increasing the abundance and diversity of positive indicator species.
- Improving overall grassland condition over time.

2. Woodland Condition Assessment: Penhill Copse

A Woodland Condition Assessment (WCA) was completed in August 2026. The assessment evaluates fifteen woodland indicators to determine overall ecological condition.

Assessment Result

Penhill Copse achieved a score of **30**, corresponding to a **Moderate Ecological Condition**.

Positive Features

The woodland performed particularly well in the following areas:

- Low levels of browsing damage.
- Good quantities of standing and fallen deadwood.
- Diverse native tree and shrub composition.
- Well-developed woodland structure.
- Evidence of natural regeneration.

These characteristics contribute positively to the site's ecological value and resilience.

Factors Limiting Condition

Several factors affecting woodland condition are beyond direct management control, including:

- Small woodland size.
- Presence of Ash Dieback.
- Surrounding land-use context.
- Absence of veteran trees.

Opportunities for Improvement

The assessment identified several management opportunities:

- Increase the abundance and diversity of Ancient Woodland Indicator species through selective canopy thinning.
- Control and remove invasive non-native species, particularly Cherry Laurel.
- Improve visitor experience through continued control of litter and dog fouling.

While litter and dog fouling do not influence the WCA score directly, addressing these issues would improve the quality and usability of the site for visitors.

3. Shelterbelt and Hedgerow Assessment

The Great British Hedgerow Survey methodology was applied to three of the site's principal hedgerows. However, many of these features have now developed into substantial shelterbelts and woodland strips rather than traditional hedgerows.

Ecological Value

The shelterbelts make a significant contribution to the ecological character of Seven Fields by:

- Providing habitat for a wide range of wildlife.
- Creating visual separation between individual meadows.
- Increasing structural diversity across the site.
- Supporting biodiversity connectivity.

Current Condition

The shelterbelts contain a good variety of woody species; however, fast-growing suckering species, particularly Blackthorn, are becoming increasingly dominant.

Ground flora assessments indicated that species such as:

- Docks
- Nettles
- Bramble

are common along woodland edges, suggesting elevated nutrient levels, potentially associated with intensive dog use.

Management Considerations

To maintain species diversity and structural variation it is recommended that:

- Shelterbelts are managed on a rotational basis, with sections coppiced or cut back on a 15-year cycle.
- Existing shelterbelt boundaries are maintained through cutting or flailing every 3 to 4 years to prevent encroachment into species-rich meadow habitat.
- Selected trees are retained and managed as standards to create variation in age structure.
- Dead and dying trees are retained where they do not present a health and safety risk.
- A replacement strategy is developed for mature Ash trees likely to be lost through Ash Dieback.

Consideration should be given to propagating replacement trees from locally occurring species, including Wild Service Tree, to maintain local provenance and ecological character.

As rotational cutting can appear severe immediately after works, local residents should be informed in advance of management operations.

4. Desktop Review

Site Designations and Constraints

Seven Fields LNR currently contains:

Public Rights of Way

- Footpath Haydon Wick 25 / Central Swindon North 2
- Bridleway Haydon Wick 18 / Central Swindon North 3
- Bridleway Haydon Wick 19

Local Plan Designations

- EN1 Strategic Green Corridor
- EN3 Open Space
- EN4 Local Nature Reserve

It should be noted that Furrow Field does not currently appear to be mapped consistently as part of the Local Nature Reserve on either Swindon Borough Council mapping or MAGIC.

Additional Constraints

- Located within the North Meadow Habitat Mitigation Strategy Outer Zone of Influence.
- Tree Preservation Order Reference 1987-01 covering Penhill Copse and several individual trees.

Mapping Discrepancies

The desktop review identified several potential discrepancies within national habitat datasets:

- Penhill Copse is not currently identified as Ancient Woodland on MAGIC.
- Only woodland blocks are shown as Priority Habitat.
- The species-rich grasslands are not currently mapped as Priority Habitat.

These omissions may not accurately reflect the ecological value of the site.

Recommended Action Plan

Short-Term Priorities (1 to 2 Years)

- Review and adapt grassland cutting regimes within Spring Field, Long Meadow and parts of Furrow Field.
- Implement control measures for Tor-grass, Upright Brome and other dominant negative indicator species.
- Begin targeted removal of Cherry Laurel and other invasive non-native species within Penhill Copse.
- Improve litter management and encourage responsible dog ownership across the reserve.
- Confirm the current legal extent and mapping of the Local Nature Reserve designation, including Furrow Field.

Medium-Term Priorities (3 to 5 Years)

- Introduce rotational shelterbelt management on approximately a 15-year cycle.
- Establish boundary management works on a 3 to 4 year rotation to prevent encroachment into meadow habitats.
- Undertake selective canopy thinning within Penhill Copse to encourage Ancient Woodland Indicator species and woodland ground flora.
- Develop an Ash Dieback replacement strategy using appropriate locally sourced native species.

Strategic Priorities

- Investigate opportunities for Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) funding and other external funding mechanisms.
- Submit ecological evidence to support recognition of the site's species-rich meadows as Priority Habitat on national habitat inventories.
- Review whether Penhill Copse meets criteria for Ancient Woodland recognition and pursue amendments to habitat mapping where appropriate.
- Establish a programme of repeat condition assessments to measure management success and track ecological change over time.

Overall Conclusion

Seven Fields Local Nature Reserve remains a site of considerable ecological value, supporting species-rich grassland, diverse woodland habitat and structurally varied shelterbelts. While all surveyed habitats demonstrate positive ecological characteristics, targeted management interventions are required to address identified condition issues and secure long-term biodiversity gains. The findings of the 2026 assessments provide a robust baseline from which future habitat management and monitoring can be planned and evaluated.