

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE		
DATE:	16 MARCH 2020	AGENDA ITEM:	14
TITLE:	BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR PAGE	PORTFOLIO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT
SERVICE:	PLANNING	WARDS:	ALL
LEAD OFFICER:	MARK WORRINGHAM	TEL:	0118 9373337
JOB TITLE:	PLANNING POLICY TEAM LEADER	E-MAIL:	mark.worringham@reading.gov.uk

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This report recommends that a draft Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) be published for public consultation. This provided a framework for actions that the Council will take to conserve biodiversity across the range of its functions. Reading's existing BAP covered the period from 2005-2015 and has now expired. A new version is needed to set out the actions needed as part of the response to the climate emergency.

1.2 Appendices

Appendix 1 - Equality Impact Assessment Scoping

Appendix 2 - Draft Biodiversity Action Plan

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

2.1 That the Biodiversity Action Plan (Appendix 2), incorporating any amendments agreed by Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee on 11 March 2020, be agreed for public consultation.

2.2 That the Deputy Director of Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services be authorised to make any changes necessary as a result of consultation and approve the final Biodiversity Action Plan, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Reading Borough Council declared a Climate Emergency at Council on 26th February 2019, and set out its commitment to work towards becoming carbon neutral by 2030. Biodiversity is a vital consideration within the context of climate change, as changes in the climate can have significant implications on habitats and wildlife. Biodiversity is also part of the response to climate change to ensure that Reading adapts to climate change as it occurs.
- 3.2 The Reading Borough Local Plan was adopted in November 2019, and this includes, as part of objective 6, maintaining and enhancing the natural environment of the Borough. Policy EN12 of the Local Plan identifies the need to protect those areas of greatest importance for biodiversity, but also to connect habitats together to form a green network which allows for movement between habitats. It also seeks a net gain of biodiversity on development sites.
- 3.3 At a national level, the UK Biodiversity Action Plan sets out a programme for conserving the UK's biodiversity and led to the production of action plans for many of the UK's most threatened species and habitats. The UK BAP was superseded by the 'UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework' in July 2012 to reflect the devolution in the UK, and, within this, 'Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife' was published in 2011. It describes what is needed to halt overall biodiversity loss by 2020 and sets ambitious goals across a number of areas.
- 3.4 In 2018 the government published its 25 year Environment Plan. It has 19 policies, with the most relevant being:
1. Embedding an 'environmental net gain' principle for development, including housing and infrastructure
 4. Focusing on woodland to maximise its many benefits
 6. Protecting and recovering nature:
 - i. Publishing a strategy for nature
 - ii. Developing a Nature Recovery Network
 - iii. Providing opportunities for the reintroduction of native species
 - iv. Exploring how to give individuals the chance to deliver lasting conservation
 - v. Improving biosecurity to protect and conserve nature
 9. Helping people improve their health and wellbeing by using green spaces
 10. Encouraging children to be close to nature, in and out of school
 11. Greening our towns and cities
 19. Leaving a lighter footprint on the global environment

4. THE PROPOSAL

(a) Current Position

- 4.1 Reading's most recent Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) was published in March 2006. It covered the period from 2005 to 2015 and has now expired. The

Strategy fed into planning policy documents produced within plan period, such as the Core Strategy and Sites and Detailed Policies Document, but these documents have themselves now been replaced by the Local Plan.

4.2 The BAP 2005-2015 was based around a series of specific action plans for different species and habitats. As it contains a significant amount of species and habitat-specific detail, it is a lengthy document, and is not always in the most user-friendly format.

(b) Option Proposed

4.3 This report recommends that a Draft BAP is approved for public consultation. The Draft BAP is included as Appendix 2. This plan was considered by Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee on 11th March, and any amendments to the document made at that committee should be incorporated into the plan as recommended for consultation.

4.4 The proposed Draft BAP is a more succinct and user-friendly document than was the case with the 2005-2015 version. The document is intended to be easier to use, but also easier to keep under review over the coming years.

4.5 The BAP is organised around the following themes, each of which will contain a set of actions. In some cases, these actions will require more detailed work to be undertaken, such as a more detailed action plan.

- Legislation - to ensure the Council's plans and actions comply with most up-to-date legislation.
- Designated sites - actions around management, monitoring and selection of important wildlife sites.
- Planning and building control - ensuring that there is no net loss and where achievable a net gain of biodiversity on development sites, which is likely to mean identifying priorities for a Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document.
- Woodlands, trees and hedgerows - management actions for woodlands, consideration of actions for identification of new woodlands and reviewing whether all ancient woodlands have been identified.
- Grasslands and road verges - actions around management of these features, including opportunities for wildflowers and pollinating species.
- The two rivers, their floodplains and other watercourses - ensuring that the wildlife significance of the watercourses and surrounds is maintained and enhanced, including opportunities for habitat creation.

- Management of Council projects and the sale of land - actions could ensure that biodiversity is considered as a fundamental part of Council projects and taken into account when disposing of land.
- Education, access to nature, public engagement and volunteering - a variety of actions around education at all ages, working with schools and the University, as well as volunteering and Council communications to the public about biodiversity.
- Ecological records - actions to continue and improve the maintenance of ecological records.
- Connectivity - actions to improve the connection of habitats in Reading to allow for movement of biodiversity.
- Coordinated approach across council departments and within policy documents - noting the need to co-ordinate efforts with a range of Council and partner strategies.
- Global biodiversity - actions the Council and partners can make to avoid contributing to global biodiversity loss, for instance in terms of procurement.
- Ongoing review - an action for an annual review.

4.6 Actions are accompanied by proposals for how and when they will be achieved, and it will be important to keep these actions under review on a regular basis over the life of the BAP. To achieve this, in some places the BAP avoids significant levels of detail and focuses on the strategic objectives, which means it is easier to review and update in a streamlined manner.

4.7 The BAP has been drawn up through co-operation with a number of interested stakeholder groups. A steering group comprising the following organisations, alongside the Council, has met a number of times to discuss the emerging document:

- Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust;
- Berkshire Ornithological Club;
- Caversham GLOBE;
- The Conservation Volunteers;
- Econet
- Reading Climate Action Network (nature and green spaces group);
- Reading Friends of the Earth;
- Reading Urban Wildlife Group;
- Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre;
- Tilehurst GLOBE
- University of Reading

- 4.8 The following organisations were also invited but, due to other commitments, have not attended the meetings to date. They have however agreed to review the document.
- Environment Agency
 - Friends of Fobney Island
- 4.9 There is an important relationship between the BAP and the Tree Strategy, which is also to be considered at this meeting. Production of the BAP has been co-ordinated with the Tree Strategy. Council officers who have inputted into the BAP have also fed into the Tree Strategy, as have many of the other organisations. The potential for the two documents to be combined has been considered, but this was not considered appropriate. Trees have many important roles in addition to biodiversity, whilst biodiversity has many facets beyond trees. The Tree Strategy is also a more detailed document. However, there is considerable cross-referencing between the documents, and the documents have been reviewed to ensure that there is no inconsistency or unnecessary duplication.
- 4.10 It is proposed that public consultation take place over a five-week period, between 20th March and 24th April 2020. The BAP and Tree Strategy will be consulted upon together. Once consultation is completed, responses will be considered in drawing up a final version.
- 4.11 This report recommends that, for reasons of putting the BAP in place swiftly, a final version taking account of consultation responses be approved by the Deputy Director of Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services, in consultation with the Lead Councillors for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport, Culture Heritage and Recreation and Neighbourhoods and Communities. It is expected that this would take place in May 2020.

(c) Other Options Considered

- 4.12 The alternative option is to not proceed with a revised BAP at this point. The previous BAP is out of date and has passed its end date, and this option would mean that there would be limited co-ordination of the Council and partner's efforts to deal with biodiversity loss, and would fail to adequately respond to the climate emergency.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 Approval of the Biodiversity Action Plan will contribute to the Council's priority of 'Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe' as set out in the Corporate Plan (2018-2021) by maintaining and enhancing habitats in Reading.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Preparing a new BAP is an essential part of the response to the climate emergency. Wildlife and habitats in Reading, as well as globally, will be

affected heavily by climate change, and it is essential that the BAP seeks to address and mitigate this wherever possible.

- 6.2 The Reading Climate Emergency Plan (RCEP) contains a nature theme, the actions for which have significant crossover with the BAP. The BAP will help to deliver many of the actions around matters such as connectivity of habitats, planting and habitat creation. The production of the BAP has been undertaken alongside the RCEP, to ensure that there is no contradiction and that the documents can work in tandem.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 The BAP has been drawn up in conjunction with a number of stakeholder groups with interest in biodiversity in Reading, which are referred to in paragraphs 4.7 and 4.8. These groups have contributed to drafts of the document as it has evolved.

- 7.2 Subject to approval, the BAP would be subject to a five-week period of public consultation in March and April. This will include publication on the Council's website, and sending to organisations and groups on the planning consultation lists. Consultation will take place in conjunction with the Tree Strategy. Responses received will be taken into account in preparing a final version of the document.

8. EQUALITY ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 The Scoping Assessment, included at Appendix 1 identifies that an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) is not relevant to this decision. A full EqIA is not therefore required.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (Section 40), each public authority, including local authorities, has a duty regarding biodiversity, as follows:

“Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity.”

- 9.2 Whilst having a BAP in place is not an explicit statutory requirement, it nevertheless helps to fulfil the duty by providing a framework for actions that a local authority will take to conserve biodiversity across the range of its functions.

- 9.3 There are a number of other existing pieces of legislation with reference to aspects of biodiversity. These includes the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and the Habitats Regulations 2017 (which implemented the European Habitats Directive into UK law).

9.4 The Environment Bill 2019-2020 had its first reading on 15th October and second reading on 28th October 2019, and was re-introduced to parliament following the general election on 30th January 2020. It includes a number of provisions relating to biodiversity and the natural environment. It would amend the Section 40 duty referred to above to include enhancing as well as conserving biodiversity. It also includes a provision for 10% biodiversity net gain as a result of development, introduction of a standard national metric for measuring biodiversity impact of development and a requirement for five-yearly biodiversity reports reporting on the actions carried out in relation to these functions. The Bill would also introduce a requirement to produce local nature recovery strategies which would cover many of the actions dealt with in the BAP, including a statement of priorities and a habitat map. If the Bill becomes law, the Council will implement required procedures.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The BAP has been prepared within existing budgets.

10.2 Many of the actions set out in the BAP can be achieved using existing resources and within existing budgets. However, others could have financial implications depending on how the specific action is carried out in practice. For instance, the BAP highlights the need for biodiversity to be taken into account in procurement. These are high-level actions, and the implementation of specific measures will need to be thought through in more detail.

Value for Money (VFM)

10.3 A clear plan for addressing the loss of biodiversity represents good value for money, as it ensures that the Council's wide-ranging functions are all contributing towards the same overall aims. Producing the BAP alongside the timing of the Tree Strategy and the Climate Emergency Strategy ensures that the best use of resources is made in drawing the purposes of those documents together.

Risk Assessment

10.4 There are no direct financial risks associated with the report.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Biodiversity Action Plan 2005-2015
- Environment Bill 2019-2020
- Report to Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee, 11th March 2020

APPENDIX 1: EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT SCOPING

Provide basic details

Name of proposal/activity/policy to be assessed:

Biodiversity Action Plan

Directorate: DEGNS - Directorate of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services

Service: Planning

Name: Mark Worringham

Job Title: Planning Policy Team Leader

Date of assessment: 04/02/2020

Scope your proposal

What is the aim of your policy or new service?

To set out objectives and actions for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity within Reading.

Who will benefit from this proposal and how?

The whole community will benefit from the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, which is essential to ensure a high quality natural environment, which contributes towards health and well-being.

What outcomes will the change achieve and for whom?

Halting the net loss of biodiversity and working towards an overall improvement will assist the retention and improvement of Reading's natural environment, which benefits the whole community.

Who are the main stakeholders and what do they want?

Local residents and environmental groups - protection and enhancement of biodiversity thus increasing the appreciation and understanding of the wildlife within Reading.

Council departments - clear targets and approaches to protection and enhancement of biodiversity, including management of areas of existing and potential wildlife significance.

Developers - a clear approach to the application of biodiversity net gain requirements

Assess whether an EIA is Relevant

How does your proposal relate to eliminating discrimination; promoting equality of opportunity; promoting good community relations?

Do you have evidence or reason to believe that some (racial, disability, gender, sexuality, age and religious belief) groups may be affected differently than others? (Think about your monitoring information, research, national data/reports etc)

Yes No

Is there already public concern about potentially discriminatory practices/impact or could there be? Think about your complaints, consultation, feedback.

Yes No

If the answer is **Yes** to any of the above you need to do an Equality Impact Assessment.

If **No** you **MUST** complete this statement

An Equality Impact Assessment is not relevant because: protecting and enhancing Reading's biodiversity does not have a differential effect on racial groups, gender/transgender, disability, sexual orientation, age or religious belief.

Signed (completing officer) Mark Worringham Date: 4th February 2020

Signed (Lead Officer) Mark Worringham Date: 4th February 2020