

To: City Executive Board

Date: 09 July 2015

Report of: Executive Director Community Services

Title of Report: A Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxford City Council 2015

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To agree the adoption of A Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxford City Council 2015 -2020 following a public consultation exercise.

Key decision? Yes

Executive lead member: Councillor John Tanner, Executive Board Member for Climate Change and Cleaner Greener Oxford

Policy Framework: Sustainability Strategy 2011-2020

Recommendation(s):

1. To adopt the Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxford City Council.

Introduction

1. Oxford City Council has a duty to conserve biodiversity under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. Section 40 of the Act states that:

"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".

2. Delivering positive biodiversity outcomes contributes to all the City Council's core priorities. Biodiversity underpins all human life and is central to providing natural benefits which are the natural processes that we rely on, such as food and fuel production, maintenance of air, soil and water quality and the regulation of climate and flooding. It also provides opportunities for community engagement and recreation and contributes to healthier communities and stronger local economies. It is an essential element of 'Building a World Class City for Everyone'.
3. Oxford is an exceptional place for wildlife and has an impressive range of diverse and rare species and habitats for a city of its size. It is a key part of what makes Oxford a special place to live. This abundance of wildlife and dedicated people who care for it should be celebrated and others should be inspired to help to protect and enhance this wonderful resource.
4. The purpose of the action plan is to "get our own house in order" and will form the starting point for assistance in developing a city wide approach to biodiversity conservation and enhancement. The action plan, which has been developed following public consultation, aims to act as a practical tool for Oxford City Council to influence and encourage biodiversity work within the council's direct influence. It also aims to demonstrate how Oxford City Council is fulfilling its duties as set out in the NERC Act.

Public Consultation

5. In December 2014, City Executive Board approved the draft biodiversity action plan entitled "Oxford City Council Corporate Biodiversity Strategy 2015 – 2020" for public consultation. The public consultation was open between January 2015 and 27 Feb 2015.
6. The public consultation attracted a relatively high level of response; 91 responses were received in total. It is clear from the public consultation that respondents want to see biodiversity given a high priority by the City Council. There is also a wish to see Oxford's unique biodiversity resource celebrated. There is concern that the city's biodiversity resource is declining and that urgent action is required to reverse this decline. Respondents want to see a robust and ambitious strategy that provides a commitment to strong leadership and effective protection by the City Council. In order to achieve this, respondents suggest a need for more surveying to better understand our biodiversity resource and the allocation of more resources within the council, particularly of suitably qualified

expert staff. The consultation has revealed public concern that the council is able to maximise its opportunities to protect and enhance biodiversity through its planning powers and that opportunities for partnership working are not being fully exploited.

7. These comments reflected the concerns of members of the City Executive Board when the consultation draft was brought for approval. The document as proposed however, continues to focus on getting our own house in order within existing resources. The wider roles that the City Council could take emerging from the strategy drafting and consultation will be discussed with relevant board members in the lead up to the Service and Budget Planning Process for 2016/17 as additional resources are likely to be required.
8. All comments received have been carefully considered and actions which can be delivered within existing resources have been incorporated into the updated Biodiversity Action Plan document. Suggested actions which would require significant additional resource have not been incorporated into the action plan at this time.
9. All comments and actions that were received through the public consultation exercise are presented in appendix 2 alongside details of how the council has addressed each point.
10. The Draft Biodiversity Action Plan has taken into account as many of the comments received during the public consultation as possible. The aim of the strategy is to ensure that our responsibilities to conserve and enhance biodiversity are integrated into all Oxford City Council's policies and service areas. It also aims to achieve a clear understanding across all staff on the importance of conserving biodiversity and how biodiversity relate to their own decisions and actions. The action plans' vision, aims and objectives are set out below. The full document is included in Appendix 1.

Action Plan Vision, Aim and Objectives

11. The vision is "to ensure that Oxford City Council enables a future, rich in wildlife, where people can enjoy climate resilient, healthy and species rich ecosystems which contribute to the conservation of biodiversity in all its forms."
12. The Action Plan aims "to ensure that Oxford City Council's responsibilities to conserve and enhance biodiversity are integrated into all Council policies and service areas and that there is a clear understanding across all staff of the importance of biodiversity and how it relate to their own decisions and actions."
13. Objective 1: To act as a responsible **landowner and manager** for the purpose of conserving and enhancing biodiversity.
14. Objective 2: To undertake our duties as a **regulator and policy maker** to ensure the continued protection of biodiversity resources in accordance

with legislation and to ensure that new policies are formulated to promote new development that allows biodiversity to flourish.

15. Objective 3: To promote the benefits of conserving and enhancing our biodiversity resource to local communities through our role as an **advocate and facilitator**.

Monitoring and Review

16. The draft action plan sets out a realistic and achievable set of actions and provides a starting point for developing a more detailed programme of actions, owned by individual service areas. Actions have been allocated to specific service areas and they are responsible for their implementation. Where longer term actions require work, individual service areas are responsible for developing the detail and implementation.
17. A tracker document, managed by the Environmental Policy Team sits behind the action plan in order to monitor progress. The overall action plan would be reviewed every 5 years.

Risk

18. The draft Biodiversity Action Plan sets out our responsibilities and how we intend to meet them. The adoption of the action plan itself should reduce reputational risk to the council by communicating our roles and responsibilities clearly. It is particularly important to ensure that the city council do not cause damage to legally protected habitats or species as set out in the Habitats Directive. It is important to note that there have been cases where local authorities have been fined for causing damage and disturbance to protected habitats and species.
19. Commitment has been sought and gained from all relevant service areas to help to deliver the actions presented in the action plan. This will help reduce the potential reputational risk of not delivering what we said we would.
20. A risk register has been completed and is available to view in Appendix 3.

Financial Implications

21. The actions proposed within the action plan can be delivered within present funding levels. Further commitments are likely to have financial impacts and are not resourced within existing budgets.
22. The Council currently do not have dedicated staff resource available in order to support actions within the action plan and hence actions are devolved to individual service areas.

23. There are potential cost savings from altering management practices. For example, the Parks Service Area has reduced the frequency of grass cutting in our parks, which saves the council money and also provides improved habitats for species. Furthermore, planting perennials rather than annual bedding plants has also saved the council resources.
24. Biodiversity is essential for sustaining the natural ecosystems on which humans and, therefore, human economic systems depend. Green spaces contribute to our local economy in a variety of ways for example; they provide important opportunities for tourism and recreation and contribute to reducing the impacts of flooding by providing essential flood storage capacity.

Climate Change / Environmental Impact

25. The environmental benefits of improving biodiversity are numerous. Biodiversity is central to our ecosystem services which are the natural processes that we benefit from, such as food and fuel production, maintenance of air, soil and water quality and the regulation of climate and flooding.
26. The draft Biodiversity Action Plan links closely to the City Council's Sustainability Strategy adopted at City Executive Board in December 2011.

Equalities Impact

27. The social benefits of implementing the action plan include community development opportunities and health benefits that can be enjoyed by all. Effective delivery of the proposed actions would have equality benefits. No significant adverse equality impacts have been identified.

Legal Implications

28. We have a duty to conserve biodiversity under the NERC Act and to not disturb or damage particular habitats and species protected under the Habitats Directive. This strategy will help the city council demonstrate compliance with our legal duties.

Appendices to report –

- Appendix 1: Draft Oxford City Council Biodiversity Action Plan
- Appendix 2: Consultation Responses – Comments and Actions
- Appendix 3: Risk Register

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