

To: Cabinet
Date: 24 January 2024
Report of: Climate and Environment Panel
Title of Report: Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxford City Council Parks and Nature Areas – September 2023 Review

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Panel of the Scrutiny Committee recommendations for Cabinet consideration and decision
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Panel Chair
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Chewe Munkonge, Deputy Leader (Non-Statutory) and Cabinet Member for Leisure and Parks
Corporate Priority:	Pursue a Zero Carbon Oxford
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.	

Appendices	
Appendix A	Draft Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee

Introduction and overview

1. The Climate and Environment Panel met on 29 November 2023 to consider a review of the Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxford City Council Parks and Nature Areas undertaken in September 2023. The Action Plan was developed in 2020 when the initial Biodiversity Review for parks and nature areas was carried out; and set out a site-specific five-year action plan comprised of:
 - Top twelve priority projects (for the larger parks and nature areas).
 - Smaller urban parks.
2. The review of the Action Plan undertaken in September 2023 sought to assess progress against the actions. It was recommended that the Panel note and comment on the report and agree any recommendations.

3. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Chewe Munkonge (Deputy Leader (Non-Statutory) and Cabinet Member for Leisure and Parks) and Chris Bell (Green and Blue Spaces Development Manager) for attending the meeting to answer questions.

Summary and recommendations

4. Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Deputy Leader (Non-Statutory) and Cabinet Member for Leisure and Parks introduced the report, highlighting that there were only a small number of actions which had not been progressed and this was largely as a result of lack of available funding. Chris Bell, Green and Blue Spaces Development Manager added that the Biodiversity Review of Oxford City Council Parks and Nature Areas had been developed in 2020 to set out the Council's current progress and demonstrate what it was doing to promote and support biodiversity in Council parks and nature areas. He added that there was a lot of aspiration within the Council and highlighted the importance of identifying specific sites and projects where this aspiration could be delivered on the ground. There had been good progress made against the Action Plan, but there was still work to be done across the City.
5. The Panel asked a range of questions, including questions relating to the actions delivered which had been the most impactful; key areas where the Council still had more work to do; tree planting – specifically planting the right tree in the right place; ensuring the Action Plan was mainstreamed and not seen as an 'add-on'; the client-contractor relationship between the Council and Oxford Direct Services; data accessibility and mapping of sites/projects; and funding opportunities.
6. During discussion, the Panel noted that a Geographic Information System (GIS) project was underway at the Council and it would be useful if, as part of that project, consideration was given to collaborating with partners who hold relevant data and including an information layer within the GIS that identified particular landscapes and/or habits (e.g. peatland) alongside specific sites or projects which required funding – providing a centralised information asset. The Panel was of the view that, if this mapped information was made accessible to Members and the public then there would be opportunities for Members, community groups and the public more generally to locate projects near to them that they could support.

Recommendation 1: That the Council, in collaboration with partners who hold relevant data, maps data relating to landscape and habitat type onto a centralised system (e.g. GIS) and populates with information about particular sites or projects which require funding; and makes this publicly accessible so that Members, community groups and the general public can find and support local projects near to them.

7. The Panel also discussed the important role of volunteers in biodiversity work and the importance of volunteer coordination, however noted the lack of resource capacity to facilitate volunteer coordination. There was agreement among the Panel that a recommendation around obtaining additional resource for volunteer coordination would not be helpful. Instead, the Panel agreed to frame a recommendation around how volunteer coordination could be delivered

with existing resource and become part of core 'business as usual' rather than 'add-on' work which was nice to have.

Recommendation 2: That the Council explores how volunteer coordination could be delivered within existing resource as part of the Council's core 'business as usual'.

8. When considering the client-contractor relationship between the Council and Oxford Direct Services (ODS) in relation to the management of parks and green spaces, the Panel was interested in how the management contracts were structured. In particular, questions were raised around whether contracts were prescriptive in terms of undertaking a certain amount of work over a defined period of time, or whether they were more flexible and based on an output of supporting, protecting and enhancing biodiversity. The Panel was advised that contracts were not prescriptive, ODS held a lot of expertise and site-specific knowledge and the client-contractor relationship worked well.
9. The Panel noted minor concerns that, should there be a complete change of personnel within ODS, significant institutional memory could be lost in relation to site-specific knowledge and expertise, and in order to protect its interests it would be prudent for the Council to review the structure of contracts to ensure they are clear on whether the management of parks and green spaces is centred on prescriptive inputs (certain amount of work over a defined period of time) or outputs (supporting, protecting and enhancing biodiversity). Concerns around the loss of site-specific knowledge and expertise were noted as low likelihood but potentially large impact; the overall risk was deemed by the Panel to be low, therefore it agreed to recommend this as a longer-term piece of work.

Recommendation 3: That the Council reviews the structure of its contracts with Oxford Direct Services in relation to parks and green space management in the longer-term, to ensure that there is clarity within those contracts as to whether the management of parks and green spaces is led by prescriptive inputs (certain amount of work over a defined period of time) or outputs (supporting, protecting and enhancing biodiversity).

10. The Panel further discussed diverse landscapes and habitats and the different approaches required to support, protect and enhance biodiversity. The Green and Blue Spaces Development Manager advised that there had been a narrow focus on trees for some time, which had led to the planting of trees in environments which were not necessarily the most suited to trees (e.g. meadows, areas with peat deposits etc.); he further added that there was significant opportunity within Oxford to 'green-up' boundaries and thus enhance biodiversity, through the planting of hedgerows for example. The Panel agreed that there should be a focus on ensuring the right approach in the right place.

Recommendation 4: That the Council ensures the most appropriate approach for enhancing biodiversity is taken in its parks and nature areas according to environment on a site-by-site basis – with a focus on the right approach in the right place, rather than a uniform approach across all sites.

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