

Biodiversity Task Group meeting

14 May 2024

Agenda item 7 - Options for further biodiversity enhancements on Borough Council land and buildings going forward

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Environment Act 2021 sets out new legislation, which includes a biodiversity duty for public bodies. This means that, as a public authority, the council must:
 1. Consider what to do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
 2. Agree policies and specific objectives based on the council's consideration.
 3. Act to deliver the policies and achieve your objectives.
- 1.2 The council will therefore need to agree policies and specific objectives to show how it is meeting this duty.
- 1.3 Norfolk County Council has separate duties under the Environment Act, and as the 'responsible' authority', is tasked with producing a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). This has been covered at a previous meeting of the task group, and NCC will be starting that process, including consultation, in the near future. The council will need to consider this strategy when it comes into force, and how we comply with it.
- 1.4 The biodiversity duty is separate to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), which is now a statutory function of the planning process. BNG came into force in February 2024 for major developments, and at the beginning of April 2024 for all other qualifying development.
- 1.5 Whilst BNG could theoretically provide opportunities for the council as a landowner, through the creation of new habitats and then the selling of credits, in the short-medium term, this is not considered to be a realistic option, as it will likely take a lot of resources to bring forward. A full review would need to be commissioned if this was to be pursued by the council.

1.6 At an earlier meeting, there was discussion about production of a Pollinator Action Plan for the council to adopt in relation to its own land, although there was no recommendation to do this. This should form part of a recommendation to Cabinet. There was also the offer of help from the NWT on such a plan.

1.7 There are clearly further opportunities for the council to improve the activities it undertakes to improve biodiversity.

2.0 Public Open Space (POS)

2.1 It is clear there are a number of existing biodiversity initiatives taking place within the POS team. However, as the council looks after approximately 2,604,583 m² of land, which includes public open space, NCC verges, land at Mintlyn crematorium etc., much of which is directly under the control and influence of the BCKLWN, there will be further opportunities to build on this.

2.2 Options that could be taken forward include:

- Identify areas of POS for possible biodiversity projects now and in future.
- Consider extending the semi-improved grassland and wildflower areas within our parks and open spaces
- Filling in gaps in existing native hedging to improve and promote wildlife habitats.
- Progress and promote seasonal flowering (year-round pollinators) by planting suitable species within our parks and gardens. This would be in accordance with a Pollinator Action Plan should one be approved.
- enhance working to assist existing community groups/volunteers with biodiversity projects and resource permitting encourage and nurture new community groups and volunteers to take on biodiversity projects within their locality. It should be noted that this will need a specific resource.

3.0 Major Housebuilding Project

3.1 There are already biodiversity actions that are taking place on the council's housing sites. These include bat roost boxes, various types of bird nest boxes to cater for various species, bee bricks, and hedgehog highways on the Parkway scheme.

- 3.2 Again there are considered to be further opportunities for biodiversity enhancements, and it is considered these can be done at a relatively low cost, when compared to the cost and selling price of a house.
- 3.3 The majority of the council's housing developments will come with an ecological survey and recommendations through the planning process, and it is these recommendations that are already followed in the council's new developments. The local planning process will be strengthened and enhanced once the new Local Plan is adopted, as that has a policy requiring further specific biodiversity enhancements.
- 3.4 However, additional enhancements on the council's own housing projects can form part of an overall biodiversity strategy and be built into 'business as usual' going forward.

4.0 Property Services

- 4.1 Property services are responsible for the council's land and buildings. There will potentially be opportunities therefore with regards to both.
- 4.2 It is considered that there will need to be an initial assessment of the council's land and buildings, with a need to catalogue what we have & what potential there is for biodiversity. This will enable opportunities to be identified.
- 4.3 A resource will be needed for this, which is discussed in 5.2 – 5.3 below.

5.0 Resources

- 5.1 There will be particular resource implications within the POS department associated with expanding biodiversity projects on Borough Council land. The POS department is a traditional operational department, and if biodiversity projects are to be effectively implemented, they will require more specialist skills and less generic equipment.
- 5.2 As mentioned above the POS teams have an operational bias, and whilst we have several successful interactions with community groups this is not an area of their expertise. To promote further a number of projects in the borough a dedicated resource is recommended, whose "day job" is focused on the softer skills associated with volunteer and community engagement which is considered the best way to ensure delivery. Such a Biodiversity Project Officer role would also liaise with other sections of the council, including POS teams as necessary. This engagement work is

both successful and rewarding but can be time consuming. This seems to be role that is becoming more common within councils, likely as a result of the higher profile of biodiversity, and the new biodiversity duty.

- 5.3 A Biodiversity Project Officer could work to organise/lead on community projects. Working with community groups, volunteers, schools and the POS operational team to identify suitable areas/projects and help to develop management plans, consult with residents and co-ordinate future proposals. The role would also need to be involved in other tasks including aiding other officers in biodiversity related projects, for example the tree officer in POS in delivering the tree strategy, and Property Services in collating a catalogue of potential borough council sites for biodiversity. Such a role would likely cost around - £35,000 - £40,000 per annum with on costs, and it is proposed that this is a 2 year fixed term post initially. It is proposed that this could be paid for out of the climate change budget.
- 5.4 Whilst we are suggesting a specific Biodiversity Project Officer, there could also be the potential to offer internships to further support this role, offering general work experience, training and development for young people in our communities.
- 5.5 Whilst specialist equipment is not proposed at this time, it would no doubt be required in the future if large areas of open space were to be converted for biodiversity. In addition consideration should also be given to future maintenance costs, and it is important that any areas that the borough provide, can be properly and suitably maintained. This will likely have an impact upon the maintenance budget, although is difficult to quantify at this time.
- 5.6 There will no doubt be a call on the council's ecologist based within planning, employed to deal with the new statutory BNG regime, who can add her expertise as and when required, whilst noting this will be an addition to her main duties, so will need to fitted in around these.
- 5.7 As above, the production of a biodiversity strategy to set out the required biodiversity policies and specific objectives will need to be produced in some format. It can be a very high-level document, with broad statements, through to a more detailed document. However, if it is to be the latter, it will require a dedicated resource to produce it, and a

sum set aside for this, as there is no existing resource to produce it. Officers recommend the former at this stage. This can always be revisited in the future, and there is a requirement to review these policies every 5 years.

6.0 Conclusion

- 6.1 The new biodiversity duty will mean the council will need to take steps to conserve and enhance biodiversity in its area. A key part of that will not only be producing policies and specific objectives (a strategy), but also delivering on improved biodiversity outcomes for our communities. Alongside planning policy changes in the new Local Plan and initiatives through the major housebuilding schemes, the council is in a good position to do this given the land and buildings that it already owns.
- 6.2 However as described in the report resources will be required to ensure the council can deliver on its aims and objectives that would be set out within its strategy and plans.

7.0 Suggested recommendations for the task group to make to Cabinet:

- 1) That consideration be given to the appointment of a Biodiversity Project Officer role, for a fixed period of 2 years to carry out the duties set out in the report;
- 2) That biodiversity policies and specific objectives are agreed to show how the council is meeting the biodiversity duty;
- 3) That a Pollinator Action Plan be produced.

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