

## BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

<b>TO:</b> CABINET	<b>REPORT NUMBER:</b> <b>MCa/20/06</b>
<b>FROM:</b> Cllr Jessica Fleming - Cabinet Member for Environment	<b>DATE OF MEETING:</b> 09 November 2020
<b>OFFICER:</b> Cassandra Clements – Assistant Director for Environment and Commercial Partnerships	<b>KEY DECISION REF NO.</b> CAB230

### BIODIVERSITY TASK FORCE – PROPOSALS TO CABINET

#### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 A Joint Biodiversity Task Force was convened in response to biodiversity commitments made by both Councils at separate meetings in July 2019. Its role is to make recommendations to Cabinet(s) on opportunities and actions to protect and improve biodiversity, both in the way in which the Councils jointly or individually carry out their own operations and initiatives, and through partnership working. Both Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils recognise that there is an urgent need for action.
- 1.2 The Task Force was established in July 2020 and met on four occasions before completing proposals for consideration by the Cabinets. These proposals have been shaped by the areas of District Council influence, ability to effect change and resource requirements. They represent a first step in achieving both the councils' own operational ambitions, and those to improve biodiversity and natural capital across the county.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is therefore to present the findings of the Task Force to the Cabinets and for the Cabinets to agree the recommended Biodiversity Action Plan that has been informed by the Task Force's work.

#### 2. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The options considered by the Biodiversity Task Force are detailed in the Biodiversity Action Plan, attached at appendix A.

#### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 That the Biodiversity Action Plan, as created by the Biodiversity Task Force, be adopted by Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils.
- 3.2 That the Biodiversity Task Force group continue to meet to monitor the Action Plan and consider new ideas for increasing biodiversity.

#### REASON FOR DECISION

This Council recognises the increasing pace with which natural habitat is being lost and that it too, has now become a biodiversity emergency. This decision will enable the Council(s) to include 'biodiversity net gain' as a strategic priority

#### **4. KEY INFORMATION**

- 4.1 A biodiversity motion presented to Councils in September 2019 resulted in the following resolution:
- 4.2 Creation and development of a Wildlife Network Map from which Wildlife Corridors will be identified and created. The map, available to the public, will assist the District to develop Eco Tourism, thereby attracting much needed tourist revenue to the region.
- 4.3 As part of our commitment to Biodiversity the Council will work closely with our existing Partners, the County Council and other NGO's involved in protecting our natural habitats.
- 4.4 Introduction of the 'Trees for Life' scheme in Babergh District. This offers every family with a new-born baby a tree to plant. The trees to be planted will be native trees and will be locally grown and sourced.
- 4.5 That additional biodiversity resources be provided as necessary, to:
- Support the Task Force
  - Provide more input into supporting planning officers
  - Strengthen the role of the public realm team
  - Provide advice to parishes and any other community landowner
- 4.6 Any funding to maintain and improve the biodiversity of our area for 2019/20 will be recommended to Cabinet for approval. The taskforce would recommend the amount to be spent in future years in a report back to Cabinet by March 2020.
- 4.7 Therefore, these Councils pledge that:
- The Task Force will engage specialists to complete a survey that will identify the range of and the risk to our districts' biodiversity. It will identify sites of value in terms of biodiversity and rank them. This will identify isolated and vulnerable at-risk areas on which to focus.
  - The data from this survey will allow the creation and development of a Wildlife Network Map from which corridors will be identified and created.
  - This map will help us to protect and further develop the biodiversity of the area, allowing creation of wildlife corridors between hot spots where possible.
  - It will provide Planning with accurate information from which to make valued judgements in the planning process.
  - The mapping work will be made available to the public and will assist the districts to develop eco-tourism, thereby attracting much needed tourist revenue to the region.

- As part of our commitment to biodiversity the Councils' will work closely with our existing partners, the County Council and other non-governmental organisations involved in protecting our natural habitats.
- We will help to develop incentive schemes with sponsors and other interested parties to turn appropriate grass verges into wild flower meadow verges, using low growing flowers that stifle the growth of grasses and which provide food and habitat for the bees, butterflies and other insects necessary to maintain a balanced eco system.
- Further enhancement and protection of our biodiversity will be the Trees for Life scheme. The trees to be planted will be native trees and will be locally grown and sourced. It is hoped that a sponsor will be supportive in this area also.

4.8 A Biodiversity Task Force was established in July 2020

4.9 The first meeting of the Task Force took place on 13 July 2020, where the initial Terms of Reference were amended and agreed. The Terms of Reference for the group are attached at Appendix B

4.10 The Task Force met four times: July 13<sup>th</sup>, August 12<sup>th</sup>, August 26<sup>th</sup> and September 11<sup>th</sup>.

4.11 Whilst it would have been easy for the group to consider many ambitions, it was acknowledged by the Task Force that their focus should be on achievable actions that they have control or influence over. The priority for the Task Force has been to initiate the steps to which the Councils committed when the motions were passed. These centre on understanding and enhancing wildlife corridors and enhancing the Councils' arboricultural and environmental resources and expertise.

4.12 Learning from the Climate Change Task Force, experts, both from the Councils and other organisations, were included in the core group and, in addition, specialists were invited to meetings where their areas of expertise were explored.

4.13 The importance of reviewing and enhancing wildlife corridors was a key action agreed by the Councils in July 2019 and ecological mapping was acknowledged by the Task Force as an essential first step in carrying out its responsibilities. It was recognised that all actions are reliant on the mapping work, so it is crucial that this is funded and completed in order to support the Action Plan: mapping is the equivalent of baseline data on emissions for the Climate Change Task Force. The mapping proposal is attached at Appendix C.

4.14 The Task Force considered how it could improve management of land within its control such as certain grass verges and public open space, these could best support wildflowers by using a cut and collect method. By bringing public realm services in-house in Babergh along with Mid Suffolk, the councils can exert flexibility in the provision of services and the ability to consider all areas of land more holistically. Again, it is essential that such decisions about how grass verges are managed are supported by accurate mapping.

4.15 The second meeting of the Task Force took place on 12 August 2020, where the focus was on protecting and enhancing biodiversity in planning and development.

- 4.16 Robert Hobbs, the Council's Corporate Manager for Strategic Planning, presented information to the Task Force, which included information about how biodiversity is being addressed in the Joint Local Plan. The Task Force can identify projects and update mapping to identify opportunities for biodiversity to support the implementation of the Joint Local Plan. This can be done through producing a new green infrastructure strategy for both Councils. Following adoption of the Joint Local Plan, additional specific measures to protect and enhance biodiversity and natural capital could be documented in a supplementary planning document to add material weight to planning decisions. In the meantime, other guidance exists that can be used in informing the determination of planning applications.
- 4.17 At the third meeting of the Task Force, held on 26 August 2020. Andrew Graham, the Council's Assistant Arboricultural Officer, gave a presentation on trees. It is estimated that Babergh has just under 10,500 and that Mid-Suffolk has approximately 2,500 recorded trees. Tree stock and condition surveying is a priority area for the Arboricultural Team.
- 4.18 Andrew Graham explained the risk of Ash die-back to the Task Force and highlighted the need for both Councils to ensure that resource is in place to deal with this in the future.
- 4.19 Andrew Graham referred the Task Force to the 'Right Tree, Right Place' document produced by Suffolk County Council, which gives members of the public guidance on planting trees. Attached as Appendix D.
- 4.20 David Hughes, the Council's Public Realm Officer (Countryside), attended the fourth meeting on 11 September, and presented a paper "Enhancing Grasslands for Biodiversity" in respect of meadow planting on public open spaces, attached at Appendix E. David Hughes' presentation explained how meadow planting and associated management techniques could be introduced into our districts. Proposals are based on pilot studies and best practice from Dorset County Council.
- 4.21 Members also considered green burials and agreed to assess the feasibility of setting up a green burial site in Babergh or Mid-Suffolk.
- 4.22 Members of the Task Force identified the need to communicate the biodiversity programme to the public and to actively engage communities and parish councils in implementing some of the actions going forward.

## **5. LINKS TO CORPORATE PLAN**

- 5.1 The Joint Corporate Plan (2019-27) is designed to address the challenges and seize the opportunities facing the districts and their organisations for the foreseeable future. The Councils' vision is to have 'great communities with bright & healthy futures that everyone is proud to call home.'
- 5.2 The Joint Corporate Plan identifies six strategic priorities as set out in the visual below. Environment is one of those six, and the success of the Councils' ambition on climate change is intrinsically interlinked with the strategies that underpin the other five priority areas of Housing, Communities, Well-Being, Economy and Customers. The response to Biodiversity is not just the business of Environment but just as much the Councils' strategic framework. Conversely, Environment plays a key part in every priority within the Corporate Plan.



## 6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There will be financial implications associated with the process of gathering and inputting data required to create accurate mapping. Full details of the mapping proposal are attached in Appendix C.
- 6.2 The estimated costs for each action is shown within the action plan at Appendix A. A summary of the proposal costs for each Council is shown below:
- Mid Suffolk: £151,900.00
- Babergh: £147,350.00
- 6.3 Any actions relating to Housing will be funded by the relevant Council's Housing Revenue Account. All other actions will be funded by the relevant Council's General Fund.
- 6.4 The action plan implies an element of uncertainty on costs due to external factors stated within the plan.
- 6.5 The programme supporting bio-diversity is ongoing and therefore will continue to have a financial impact in years to come.

## 7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

## 8. RISK MANAGEMENT

8.1 Key risks are set out below:

Risk Description	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation Measures
1. The Councils do not meet their aspiration to enable net biodiversity gain, habitat and species decline continues unchecked.	Unlikely (2)	Bad (3)	<p>Task Force provides a robust set of options for the Cabinet to consider.</p> <p>Cabinet agree a clear prioritised action plan with milestones.</p> <p>Approaches are evidence based.</p>
2. The effects of habitat loss results in irreversible damage to numbers of native species and loss of biodiversity.	Unlikely (2)	Disaster (4)	<p>The impact of initiatives is monitored closely.</p> <p>The release of finance is based on business cases.</p> <p>Officers to begin giving the Cabinet suggestions around cost; priority; timescales; joint working; external funding.</p> <p>Continue to work alongside our peers both in Suffolk and nationally, collaborating where appropriate and sharing best practice and lessons learned.</p>

## **9. CONSULTATIONS**

- 9.1 No formal consultation has been undertaken to date. Representations have been made through the cross-party Biodiversity Task Force and the comments and conclusions of that Task Force have been incorporated into the recommendations to Cabinet today.
- 9.2 Several experts have been brought in to guide the work of the Task Force. These being from Essex County Council and Suffolk Wildlife Trust (SWT), Public Realm officers have consulted with Dorset County Council, Leicestershire County Council and Butterfly Conservation, feeding in information from these organisations to the Task Force.

## **10. EQUALITY ANALYSIS**

- 10.1 In preparing this report, due consideration has been given to the Councils' statutory Equality Duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations, as set out in Section 149(1) of the Equality Act 2010.

## **11. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 The collection and mapping of accurate ecological data will allow the Public Realm team to deliver a range of appropriate, targeted interventions which improve habitats of all kinds for plants and animals across Babergh and Mid Suffolk, and will add to our understanding of natural capital within the Districts.
- 11.2 Well-designed new woodlands not only capture Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) but deliver a wide range of other benefits too. Sustainably managed woodlands perform a vital role as carbon sinks and reservoirs by capturing CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere and storing it as a component of wood itself.
- 11.3 Roadside green infrastructure, particularly hedges or a combination of hedges and trees help to cut down the spread of air pollution from roads, including black carbon, harmful heavy metals, and microscopic particles.
- 11.4 A major consideration for the establishment of grass meadows in relation to the Councils' declaration of a climate emergency is their importance in carbon sequestration and increasing biodiversity. Grassland (which includes highway verge and public open space) has a significant role in carbon capture and storage. Research suggests that cutting grass and removing the clippings (best practise for meadow management) does not have a significant negative impact on carbon levels in grassland because most of the carbon is stored in roots and organic matter in the soil. Species rich grasslands are thought to store more carbon than those that are less diverse further highlighting the benefits of increasing biodiversity.
- 11.5 The cut and collect method of mowing reduces the dominance of coarse grasses, ragwort, and thistles. Areas treated in this way will provide a more diverse environment for wildlife, increase wildflower populations, and provide nectar sources for pollinators.
- 11.6 Wildflower meadows and verges require less intensive management resulting in a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, carbon sequestration, redeployment of resources and the potential reduction in operational costs.

## 12. APPENDICES

Title	Location
(a) Biodiversity Action Plan	Attached
(b) Biodiversity Task Force Terms of Reference	Attached
(c) Mapping Proposal	Attached
(d) "Right Tree, Right Place" guidance document	Attached
(e) "Enhancing Grasslands for Biodiversity"	Attached

## 13. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

13.1 None