

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL'S STRATEGY FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

Report By: Director of Environment

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

1. To consider progress in the preparation of a Biodiversity Strategy for Herefordshire Council, and seek the views of the Environment Scrutiny Committee upon the draft document.

Financial Implications

2. The adoption of the strategy will not of itself have any direct financial consequences. However it will not be possible to meet fully all the objectives and actions in the 3-year strategy within the existing budgets of those services responsible for implementing the actions identified. The intention should, however be to make progress in all the areas described within the strategy, and monitoring progress should identify whether resources need to be redirected. The funding of many activities is complicated: for example some are pursued through combination of funding with partners; some through encouraging other organisations to pursue them independently; some through bids to grant giving bodies; and some through realigning budgets. In some areas the Council has statutory obligations to meet duties and responsibilities; while others are driven by the need to meet targets. In both instances budgets should reflect this. The key to determining whether budgets need to be realigned is a comprehensive and effective monitoring procedure (see paragraph 11 below).

Background

3. Environment Scrutiny Committee, 12th March 2007 recommended the Cabinet Member for Environment develop a Biodiversity Strategy for the Council, carrying out internal consulting and seeking the views of this Committee, in particular in the light of advice anticipated by DEFRA arising from a new biodiversity duty placed on public authorities. A report was to be submitted to this Committee in September but deferred until December because of the extent of other business. A draft strategy document was circulated to Committee members at the March meeting.
4. The draft strategy was circulated within the Council and a copy also placed on its website. In addition to the Environment Directorate, those services most closely involved with matters where biodiversity issues may arise include Property Services (especially in relation to small holdings, land holdings such as Rotherwas Industrial estate, and school grounds maintenance) and the Parks, Countryside and Leisure Development Services (especially parks, open space, commons). Both those Services have identified areas where they are undertaking or could undertake measures to enhance biodiversity. Although they have and will continue to seek

Further information on the subject of this report is available from Bill Bloxsome, Conservation Manager on (01432) 261783

resources, including from external sources to undertake work that contributes to increasing biodiversity, funding and staff resources remain issues.

5. Since the March meeting DEFRA has issued guidance to public authorities in general and local authorities more specifically upon how they should have regard to the conservation biodiversity which is a new duty under section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2007. Appendix 1 attached is a briefing note upon implementing the “*new biodiversity duty*”, derived from the DEFRA guidance.
6. Officers have reviewed the draft biodiversity strategy (Appendix 2 is issued as a separate document) in the light of the DEFRA guidance, comments received and changes in Government’s approach to national indicators. The six objectives and associated actions and projects included within the draft Biodiversity Strategic compare closely with those activities described in the DEFRA advice. A comparison between the two has been made and a summary is set out in Appendix 3. It can be seen from this that there are a limited number of actions and projects described in the draft Biodiversity Strategy that are not reflected in the DEFRA guidance. The Council should, nevertheless continue to promote these and they have the support of the wider Biodiversity Partnership work especially in relation to implementing the LBAP.
7. There are also a limited number of actions suggested in the DEFRA guidance that are not included in the draft Biodiversity Strategy. These include:
 - Local Biodiversity Action Plans are among the elements local authorities should build upon when preparing Community Strategies (Section 2.4 of the guidance);
 - Local Area Agreements (LAAs) provide an opportunity for local authorities to take action to deliver positive outcomes for biodiversity, cross cutting with health, community cohesion and education (Section 2.5); and
 - Green Infrastructure (the multi-function and benefits of greenspace in concert with land development as distinct from open space planning) can play a positive role in achieving the objectives of clean air, water, soil and biodiversity conservation (Section 2.7)
8. Integration of biodiversity fully into the Community Strategy is an objective being pursued by Herefordshire Environment Partnership, upon which this Council is represented. Protection of the environment is identified as a key local issue under the Community Strategy theme ‘Safer and Stronger Communities’ and the Herefordshire Biodiversity Action Plan is referred to.
9. Reference is made in the DEFRA guidance to the possibility of drawing up local priority biodiversity targets for inclusion within LAAs. Since publication of this advice, however, Government has commenced a process of reducing the number of national indicators to less than 200 from which each local strategic partnership can pick up to 35. A draft list has been issued for consultation and it includes a national indicator (reference - NI197) for “*Improved local biodiversity – active management of local sites*”. The definition of what this will encompass is expected at the end of November and should this advice be received in time, the committee will be advised verbally. It is expected that even if this indicator is not chosen as one that should be monitored as part of the negotiated LAA it will have to be reported on and may influence any Corporate Area Assessment for the Council.

10. Green infrastructure is an emerging concept whereby a range of environmental land uses and designations are looked at in a comprehensive study, which forms the basis for an integrated green infrastructure strategy to be implemented, primarily, through the Local Development Framework. Government Office for the West Midlands is funding such a study for Herefordshire as part of the work considered necessary following the 'growth point' designation. The study phase should be completed in February 2008 and followed then by the development of the strategy.
11. The strategy defines a monitoring system to measure effectiveness and performance. One target for each objective is specifically highlighted. It is also suggested that service plans, strategies and guidance be monitored. These should also indicate whether the appropriate level of resources is available to meet the strategy and, more particularly the Council's obligations under the new biodiversity duty. Should the strategy be agreed, discussions will take place with those services directly responsible for specific actions and projects to determine the most appropriate way of reporting regularly on progress to the Environment Scrutiny Committee.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the

- a) **The draft Biodiversity Strategy is amended to make reference to the work being undertaken to prepare a green infrastructure strategy as part of the evidence basis and approach to the Local Development Framework.**
- b) **Subject to any amendments the Committee may wish to make the Committee recommend the Cabinet Member (Environment and Strategic Housing) approve the Biodiversity Strategy 2007 - 2010; and**
- c) **The Cabinet Member (Environment and Strategic Housing) agree and implement reporting arrangements upon progress towards achieving the actions, projects and targets within the Biodiversity Strategy, following discussions with relevant services**

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Herefordshire Council Environment Scrutiny Committee Report -12th March 2007
- Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006
- Guidance for Local Authorities on Implementing the Biodiversity Duty – DEFRA, May 2007
- Guidance for Public Authorities on Implementing the Biodiversity Duty – DEFRA, May 2007
- The Community Strategy for Herefordshire – The Herefordshire Partnership, 2006
- Herefordshire's Biodiversity Action Plan – Herefordshire Biodiversity Partnership, 2005
- Planning to Halt the Loss of Biodiversity – British Standards Institute, 2006
- The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships – DCLG, October 2007