

## **BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION WITHIN HEREFORDSHIRE**

**Report By: Director of Environment**

### **Wards Affected**

County-wide

### **Purpose**

1. To consider the actions taken in relation to biodiversity conservation and proposals for the development of a related strategic framework directing the future work of the Council upon this activity.

### **Financial Implications**

2. There are no additional costs arising from this report. A further report is called for which may need to address financial matters when the matter is considered again.

### **Background**

3. Biodiversity means the variety of plant and animal life. One of the Council's key objectives is to enhance the quality of life and conserving biodiversity makes a considerable contribution to this. Biodiversity also contributes to the distinctive character of the County, which is one of its major assets.
4. A number of important factors now need to be taken into account that should influence the Council's activities in relation to biodiversity conservation. These include:
  - i) A review of the Herefordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) was started in 2004 and is close to reaching completion.
  - ii) ODPM has issued a consultation on Planning Policy Statement (PPS9) - biodiversity and geological conservation (to replace PPG9).
  - iii) The draft PPS9 was accompanied by a draft circular: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation – Statutory Obligations and their Impact within the Planning System.
  - iv) The West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership, in association with the West Midlands Regional Assembly, has launched the "Regional Biodiversity Strategy for the West Midlands".
  - v) A review of the Herefordshire Plan has commenced. Biodiversity was previously an element within that plan, and is expected to continue to be so.
5. In addition, and most importantly, advice has been received that biodiversity activities by the Council will be audited within the Environment Block of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).

6. Recent achievements by the Council in the area of biodiversity conservation include:
- i) The adoption of Supplementary Planning Guidance on biodiversity.
  - ii) The completion of the second year of the 3-year establishment phase for the Herefordshire Local Biological Record Centre (HLBRC):
    - Over 200 requests for information have been received over the past twelve months from agencies, consultants, researchers and individuals.
    - Regional links have been developed and HLBRC will be working with the Forestry Commission on regional data supply to inform their Forestry Strategy.
    - Voluntary recorders have provided data sets on fungi, botanical information and mammal records.
    - Volunteers assist in transferring the data onto a computer database, but at the moment the amount of records are increasing faster than the ability to transfer them to the computer database.
  - iii) Assistance was given to the preparation of the Herefordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) in 2000, and the Council is now contributing to its review:
    - The Council is lead partner in undertaking some 101 actions within the County BAP, of which 89 are either complete or underway.
    - An example of one of the Council's activities was to survey the presence of 'black poplar' as part of a 'Species Action Plan'. Black poplar was historically an important species in wet woodland habitat. Some 152 such trees were located through the survey of which only 5 were female trees. Herefordshire Nature Trust is now propagating some 300 new trees to be planted on selected sites, including 5 areas of wet woodland in order to contribute to a provisional target set out in the BAP review.
    - The Council is also a partner to a further 112 actions, of which 96 are completed or underway.
    - The completion of the BAP review is awaiting the appointment of a replacement BAP Officer.
  - iv) The Council has contributed to the carrying out of a Phase 1 Habitat Survey for the County by Herefordshire Nature Trust, and the data is now being placed on the Council's GIS system:
    - There are five 'natural areas' defined by English Nature that cover the County. Data has been transferred onto the GIS for the Wye valley, Malvern Hills and Clun and North West Herefordshire Hills. That for the Black Mountains is in the process of being transferred, leaving information for the Herefordshire Plain still to do.
    - The information will then be available through the HLBRC for various purposes, including supporting bids under the new environmental

stewardship scheme, and to inform planning decisions. It should also assist with any review of Special Wildlife Sites, which will be needed for the preparation of the Local Development Framework.

- v) A pilot project entitled "Herefordshire Lifescapes" within the LEADER+ area is reaching a conclusion:
- This project, funded substantially by LEADER+ and English Heritage is a mapping exercise to assist local action in terms of landscape and biodiversity.
  - It has assisted work on Parish Plans, supporting four consultation events (Kingsland, Luston Group, Stapleton Group and Kings Caple).
  - So far local groups have been established in Stapleton and Kingsland to undertake environmental projects.
  - Pond restoration works and permissive footpath creation have been undertaken in Stapleton.
  - A group in Kingsland proposes a biodiversity audit of the Parish.
  - The project is being promoted regionally (West Midlands Biodiversity Strategy) and nationally (English Nature publication; presentation to a conference in Manchester) as an example of good practice.
- vi) The Council has adopted a biodiversity conservation performance indicator relating to "land owned or managed by the Council, that does not have any nature conservation designation, but is managed for biodiversity purposes". This is included in the Corporate Plan.
- A baseline figure of 2.49% has been estimated from highway land, school playing fields, commons, smallholdings, parks and open space, and cemeteries and crematoriums. This proportion equates to 695.882ha from a total of 27,946.554ha of such land.
- vii) The Council's draft Environmental Strategy includes an aim to protect and enhance the County's biodiversity:
- This draft strategy includes the objective to protect and enhance the County's biodiversity assets. In addition to the vi) above, indicators will cover the status of land covered by the SSSI designation; progress in relation to Biodiversity action Plans; and the issuing of appropriate guidance for planning and other purposes.
- viii) A successful Local Voluntary Recorders (Biodiversity) event recently took place to promote greater involvement through the Local Record Centre:
- Some 90 ecological and natural history recorders attended this event. They comprise a major intellectual resource in terms of measuring the ecological health of the County, possessing some 90% of records maintained on the issue.

- ix) The Director of Environment is the Local Government representative on “Sustainability West Midlands” which produced “A Regional Sustainable Development Framework” for the West Midlands Regional Assembly. A Regional Biodiversity Strategy for the West Midlands has also been produced as a supporting document and this was launched at the beginning of March.
  - x) Regular meetings are held at a high level with representatives of English Nature and Herefordshire Nature Trust to discuss strategic matters and projects.
  - xi) A system of defining “Roadside Verge Nature Reserves” is in place:
    - Some 2.532 ha out of a total of 973.554 ha of highway verge has been designated Roadside Verge Nature Reserves. This is an informal local designation although the verges concerned have to meet certain ecological criteria to qualify for this status. The purpose is to retain the particular characteristics that exist through a particular management regime. Appendix 1 to this report sets out the criteria for determining whether a verge qualifies for the designation, together with some examples of the plant species which have been found in the verges concerned.
    - The areas concerned are monitored and reported upon annually by Herefordshire Nature Trust so that any changes in management can be introduced where necessary.
  - xii) Pressures on the regulatory regimes are increasing as a consequence of the CROW (Countryside and Rights of Way) Act and other regulations.
    - The number of planning applications where detailed ecological comments have been necessary has averaged 90 per annum over the past three years although the numbers show a slight increase year on year.
    - Since 2000, some 105 Hedgerow Removal Notices (total length – 7994m) have been received. Of these 73% by length (5804m) have been retained. The majority of removals have been permitted on highway safety grounds.
7. The Council has a number of roles and responsibilities in relation to biodiversity conservation, including the need to promote work in partnership with other organisations and agencies. It now needs to draw these together within the form of a strategic framework. The Cabinet Member for the Environment has agreed that the following strategic objectives should be used as a basis for developing such a framework.
- i) To work in partnership with other organisations to add value to all our biodiversity conservation activities at regional, sub-regional and local levels.
  - ii) To ensure that biodiversity conservation is integrated into the Community Strategy (Herefordshire Plan).
  - iii) To promote co-ordinated action to benefit nature conservation by taking a lead role in developing, maintaining and implementing a Local Biodiversity Action Plan for Herefordshire.

- iv) To set an example to others through managing as much of our land as possible for the benefit of biodiversity.
  - v) To provide a high quality advisory service enabling planning and other regulatory systems to be operated responsibly and effectively.
  - vi) To maintain effective recording, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, including contributing to regional commentaries.
  - vii) To provide access to information upon the priority biodiversity habitats and species occurring in the County.
  - viii) To promote the benefit of biodiversity conservation and associated actions to local communities throughout the County.
8. The next stage will be to develop a programme of actions and systems to support these objectives within the resources available. This should involve consultation with partners and other appropriate organisations. It is proposed that the strategic framework and associated action plan will be considered at the next meeting of this Committee.

## RECOMMENDATION

### THAT

- a) **the Committee notes the changes that are taking place in relation to biodiversity conservation and the Council's achievements to date;**
- b) **the Committee comment on the proposed objectives, as set out in paragraph 7, that should form the strategic framework for future work by the Council;**
- c) **the Cabinet Member for the Environment is asked to report further upon the next stage in the development of the Strategic Framework at the next meeting of this Committee.**

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Herefordshire Biodiversity Action Plan; Herefordshire Biodiversity Partnership, 2000.
- Consultation on PPS9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation; ODPM 2004.
- Draft Government Circular: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation – Statutory obligations and their impact within the planning system; DEFRA, Sept 2004
- Restoring the Region's Wildlife – Regional Biodiversity Strategy for the West Midlands: West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership, 2005.
- The Herefordshire Plan – Revised Plan 3; The Herefordshire Partnership, Sept 2003.