

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Report By: Director Of Environment

Wards Affected

County - wide

Purpose

1. To note progress upon the preparation of the Council Biodiversity Strategic Framework and actions in hand to support related activity.

Financial Implications

2. There are no direct financial costs arising from this report. A number of actions described in the report do however have financial implications but these have been covered within existing budgets, through partnership funding or utilising agreed processes for funding approval.

Background

3. Your meeting on 6th June 2005 received a report setting out the strategic objectives which should form the basis of a framework for the Council's work in relation to biodiversity conservation. These are:
 - 1) To work in partnership with other organisations to add value to all our biodiversity conservation activities at regional, sub-regional and local levels.
 - 2) To ensure that biodiversity conservation is integrated into the Community Strategy (Herefordshire Plan).
 - 3) 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.
 - 4) To set an example to others through managing as much of our land as possible for the benefit of biodiversity.
 - 5) To provide a high quality advisory service enabling planning and other regulatory systems to be operated responsibly and effectively.
 - 6) To maintain effective recording, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, including contributing to regional commentaries.
 - 7) To provide access to information upon the priority biodiversity habitats and species occurring in the County

- 8) To promote the benefit of biodiversity conservation and associated actions to local communities throughout the County.
4. Work is progressing upon preparing the Framework Statement. However it has been delayed by other work, more specifically efforts to take advantage of funding opportunities and to assess the implications of new advice in relation to biodiversity conservation. These are described in this report.

Working in Partnership

5. Regular meetings continue to be held with English Nature and Herefordshire Nature Trust upon a range of matters including progress in relation to Herefordshire Biodiversity Action Plan, Herefordshire Biological Records Centre, Habitat and Special Wildlife Site Surveys, and specific projects. The strategic framework will provide for these meetings to continue, especially as they have led to a greater understanding between all parties and benefited partnership working.

Biodiversity Conservation and the Community Strategy

6. Following the publication and circular 04/2001 (DEFRA – Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000) the Government identified Local Biodiversity Action Plans as one of the plans that can be subsumed into Community Strategies, as part of the rationalisation of local authority plans. The Environment Ambition Group and Environmental Co-ordinator will undertake this task. English Nature has contributed to the costs of the Environmental Co-ordinator post, partly upon the basis that this should be one of the tasks undertaken by the post holder and the process and actions for achieving integration within the Community Strategy will be a crucial component of the strategic framework.

Maintaining and Implementing a Local Biodiversity Action Plan for Herefordshire.

7. Herefordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (HBAP) was published in 2000 and a summary of the Council's contribution to this was set out in a previous report to this Committee. An updated HBAP with new targets is soon to be published by Herefordshire Biodiversity Partnership. This takes into account regional habitat restoration targets for the West Midlands that have recently been published.
8. The appointment of a Biodiversity Partnership Co-ordinator for a 3-year period has been agreed with English Nature, who have entered into a partnership funding arrangement with this Council. The post holder will be charged with completing the review of HBAP and facilitating the implementation of its actions. This proposal extends the Council's contribution to the Biodiversity Action Plan process and should ensure more effective compliance with Audit Commission advice expressed in their Library of Local Performance Indicators.

Managing Council Land For Biodiversity

9. The previous report on biodiversity conservation referred to the Corporate Plan indicator relating to 'land owned or managed by the Council, that does not have any nature conservation designation, but is managed for biodiversity purpose'. One of the tasks for the Biodiversity Partnership Co-ordinator, when appointed, will be to work with colleagues within the relevant Divisions of the Council to help them

increase the amount of land within this category. A target has been set to increase the extent of the land managed in this way from the present 2.49% to 3.3% in 2009 and the Strategic Framework will incorporate this as a primary task to be approached on a corporate basis.

Biodiversity and Planning Advice

10. Government has just issued a new Planning Policy Statement (PPS9) on Biodiversity and Geological Conservation. It has also issued an associated circular (ODPM 06/2005): 'Biodiversity and Geological Conservation - Statutory Obligations and their Impact within the Planning System'. The full implications of these have yet to be assessed. However it is clear that biodiversity will have a higher profile as a material consideration in planning decisions. A report will be prepared for the Cabinet Member for the Environment upon the staff implications arising from this and also on monitoring requirements (see para. 13 below) in the light of the new Government provisions in relation to Local Development Frameworks.
11. Interpreting and disseminating the new Government guidance to relevant officers, agents and the public in general will be crucial if efforts to protect biodiversity are to be successful. The Strategic Framework will need to indicate how the Council proposes to tackle this issue. An interim Supplementary Planning Document on Biodiversity has been approved and this will need to be reviewed in the light of PPS9 and Circular 06/2005. Work to develop a training event for planning officers within the Council is also in hand.

Recording, Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms

12. This Council and English Nature jointly fund Herefordshire Biological Records Centre (HBRC). The development and maintenance of such centres on a County basis is a priority for the national agency. Herefordshire's record centre is in the third year of its establishment phase and a report is being prepared upon its future development and operation.
13. Under the new planning framework, the Council has to monitor the impact of development upon (inter-alia) biodiversity within an Annual Monitoring Report. The matters it should report upon include:
 - 1) Change in priority habits and species (by type): and
 - 2) Changes in area designated for their historic environmental value including sites of international, national, regional, sub regional and local significance.

Collecting the relevant data will have resource implications and the Cabinet Member will need to be briefed upon this.

Access To Information On Priority Biodiversity Habitats And Species.

14. The Herefordshire Biological Record Centre is developing as the primary source of information upon habitats and species within the County. It relies for such information upon voluntary recorders, local nature conservation groups and organisations such as Herefordshire Nature Trust and English Nature. The information is used for research and monitoring purposes. However, one of its key

purposes is to provide information to inform planning and development decisions. Accessibility by all concerned in the development process is important. The relationship between information providers and those requiring data from the record centre is a complex one. The provisions of the Environmental Information Regulations add to this complexity. The strategic framework will set out the Council's approach to making information as freely available as possible and how it would wish to see accessibility improved.

Promoting Biodiversity To Communities

15. Promoting and enabling communities, be they local communities or interest groups, to support biodiversity projects and actions will be the key to ensuring that we maintain all those wildlife and natural features that are so important to the distinctive character of this County. The Strategic Framework will look to set out the basis for the role to be undertaken by this Council in relation to these activities. The Council recently completed the "Herefordshire Lifescapes" project, which was a pilot project funded substantially from external sources (LEADER+ and English Nature) to investigate how biodiversity and landscape potential might be promoted to local communities. Local groups are continuing some of the initiatives instigated through the project. Wider opportunities for habitat creation and enhancement have been mapped and details will be circulated to parishes in due course. The Forestry Commission in their regional forestry work is supporting this approach and other groups are also looking at it with interest. The Strategic Framework intends to take this approach on board so far as it might be possible.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT subject to any comments the Committee may wish to make the report on the issues being considered for inclusion in the Biodiversity Conservation Strategic Framework be noted.

Background Papers

- Biodiversity Conservation Within Herefordshire – Report to the Environment Scrutiny Committee, 6th June 2005.
- Herefordshire Biodiversity action Plan – Herefordshire Biodiversity Partnership, 2000
- Draft Review of Herefordshire Biodiversity Action Plan 2005-10, Feb 2005.
- A Development Plan for Herefordshire Local Biological Record Centre, June 2001.