

Report Title:	Biodiversity Action Plan
Contains Confidential or Exempt Information	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Stimson, Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Sustainability
Meeting and Date:	15 December 2022
Responsible Officer(s):	Andrew Durrant – Executive Director Place Services Chris Joyce – Head of Infrastructure Sustainability and Economic Growth
Wards affected:	All

## **REPORT SUMMARY**

*The Council declared an Environment and Climate emergency in 2019 and published its Environment and Climate Strategy in 2020. A key action within that strategy was the development of a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) for the Borough.*

*The Plan has been written by a Council ecologist with support of key community groups and the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust. The draft BAP was shared with the community at a public engagement event in November 2021, through the Member's Bulletin all Members received draft copies of the Plan in October 2021 and February 2022 and a draft was presented to the Rural Forum in May 2022.*

*It was the intention to adopt the Plan at Cabinet in June 2022 however it became clear that the Plan required further work was required. The Plan has since been reviewed and improved along with further with a new commitment to work with the Rural Forum to develop the action plan for improving biodiversity across farmland.*

*The headline aim of the Plan is to provide 30% of land in the Borough as a space for nature by 2030. This is a target set by BBOWT and the Council is committed to playing its part in achieving this target and delivering against its Corporate Plan priority of improving the nature environment. The current baseline is 23.48%.*

*The overarching vision for the Plan is to 'To reverse the decline in our natural environment and through better data, partnerships and direct action to increase biodiversity across the borough'*

## **1. DETAILS OF RECOMMENDATION(S)**

**RECOMMENDATION:** That Cabinet notes the report and:

- i) Approves the Biodiversity Action Plan 2021-2026**

## **2. REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S) AND OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

## Options

**Table 1: Options arising from this report**

Option	Comments
The Biodiversity Action Plan is approved <b>This is the recommended option</b>	This ensures the Council's plays its part in BBOWT's 30% of space for nature by 2030
The Biodiversity Action Plan is not approved	The Council would not deliver a key action in the Environment and Climate Strategy.
The Biodiversity Action Plan is put out to further public consultation	This would delay implementation and make it difficult to achieve the targets set out.

- 2.1 The Council made a commitment to delivering a Biodiversity Action Plan in its Environment and Climate Strategy, published in 2020. This Plan delivers against that promise.
- 2.2 In addition to the Environment and Climate Strategy, the Council's Corporate Plan made clear that a key priority is improving the natural environment. The specific goal of increasing biodiversity across the borough, supporting the BBOWT vision for 30% of land for nature by 2030 is also included in the Corporate Plan.
- 2.3 Initial work undertaken has identified that currently 23.48% of land could be categorised as for nature in the Borough. This is made up of;

Designation	Hectares
Sites of Special Scientific Interest	1663
Local Nature Reserves	186
Wetlands (RAMSAR)	126
Local Wildlife Sites	1610
Farms in a stewardship scheme	953
RBWM Owned Nature Reserves	110

- 2.4 Once we start the engagement process, we expect to find this number is higher. Many farmers not in the stewardship scheme are planting trees, laying hedges, and setting aside areas for natures. Similarly, but on a much smaller scale, 10% of our borough is made up of resident's gardens, and work will begin to establish what percentage of those are set aside for nature.
- 2.5 The Plan supports the local wildlife trusts aim and has been created collaboratively with key local community partners. This included regular bi-weekly/monthly meetings to ensure input from the community at every stage of

development. All actions included in the Plan were jointly identified and prioritised by the Council and local 'Wild' groups. BBOWT worked intensively with the Council in the latter stages of development to ensure the Plan supported their overall vision. Feedback from the Rural Forum has helped shape the final document with the aim of making it practical and inclusive.

- 2.6 The Plan sets out an action plan for covering the next 4 years. Using the data that will be collected through that period, a new Plan can be created covering the period up until 2030.
- 2.7 As part of the Environment Act 2021, the Council will be required to prepare and maintain a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). The Plan will play an important role feeding into that Strategy and puts the Council in a strong position to move the LNRS forward.
- 2.8 This Plan features the following Habitat Action Plans (HAPs) covering broad habitat types. These were developed and agreed in partnership with our key stakeholders and community groups:
  - Woodland HAP
  - Grassland HAP
  - Farmland HAP
  - Waterways HAP
  - Standing Water HAP
  - Urban HAP
- 2.9 Each Habitat Action Plan has been broken down into actions under each of three themes set out in the strategic framework.
  - Those related to data collection and evidence gathering.
  - Those with a direct benefit to biodiversity/nature conservation.
  - Those that relate to stakeholder engagement, relationship building or partnerships
- 2.10 The HAPs provide a comprehensive list of practical actions to be undertaken to improve biodiversity in the Borough. Nearly half of all actions are related to stakeholder engagement, relationship buildings and partnerships recognising the need for the whole Borough to be involved and act.
- 2.11 The HAP for farmland is unique in that it's a commitment to creating an action plan for farmland in partnership with local farmers/landowners, utilising the Rural Forum to progress.
- 2.12 The overarching vision for the Plan is 'To reverse the decline in our natural environment and through better data, partnerships and direct action to increase biodiversity across the borough'
- 2.13 The Plan recognises the need for the role of communications to significantly increase the understanding of biodiversity in the Borough and enable residents to act themselves. The Council will work to deliver effective communications to residents regularly with the intention of engaging the wider community.

**3. KEY IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1 The headline target of the Plan will deliver on the Council’s specific Corporate goal to increase biodiversity across the borough, supporting the Berks, Bucks and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust vision for 30% of land to be designated and protected for nature by 2030.
- 3.2 The Council is a major landowner in the Borough and already maintains a network of 23 wildlife areas across the Borough. There will be a need to look at other land owned by the Council such as parks and open spaces to ensure they deliver biodiversity improvements whilst still providing valuable amenity space.
- 3.3 Although the Council has control over its own land, there will be a requirement, if we are to succeed, to engage and influence other partners to act. Without this, it will be difficult to achieve the biodiversity gains the Borough is targeting.
- 3.4 The Council will track its progress against delivering the habitat actions plan and ensure all actions are delivered, in partnership where relevant, by the dates set out in the plan.
- 3.5 Delivery of the Plan will play an important role in ensuring we deliver thriving communities and inspiring places for residents in the Borough.
- 3.6 The Plan will also deliver on many of our objectives in the Environment and Climate Strategy. The Plan includes a section on monitoring and we will report on its progress annually as part of our wider monitoring report for the Environment and Climate Strategy.

**Table 2: Key Implications**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Unmet</b>	<b>Met</b>	<b>Exceeded</b>	<b>Significantly Exceeded</b>	<b>Date of delivery</b>
Increase biodiversity across the borough, supporting the Berks, Bucks and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust vision for 30% of land to be designated and protected for nature by 2030.	<30% of land for nature.	30% of land for nature.	>30% of land for nature.	>30% of land for nature in advance of the date of delivery.	31st December 2030.

#### **4. FINANCIAL DETAILS / VALUE FOR MONEY**

- 4.1 The financial and economic impact of not tackling the biodiversity crisis is likely to be far greater than the costs of implementing measures. We have recognised there will be a role to secure external funding to fund larger projects and will work to secure money when available.
- 4.2 The Council recognised the need for an increase in the Officer's available to deliver the ambitious plans set out in the Plan. A new Natural Environment Team based out of the Braywick Nature Centre has therefore been created to deliver the Biodiversity Action Plan. This team is currently funded from existing revenue budgets and no further increase is required. The team includes;  
  
Natural Environment Manager  
  
Natural Environment Officer  
  
Nature Reserves Ranger  
  
Education Manager (Groundwork South)
- 4.3 Data collection makes up around 1/6 of the actions, 2/3 will have a direct benefit to biodiversity and half are related to community engagement. The larger team will enable delivery of actions which fall under the themes.
- 4.4 The team also have a Natural Environment budget to deliver work across the Council's many nature reserves and the wider Borough. This is again included in the existing budget and no increase is expected to be required.
- 4.5 The Council will work closely with existing partners such as Groundwork South and community groups to deliver the BAP and will ensure it enables others to act by providing support and the loaning of equipment where required.
- 4.6 The Plan will provide the Council a framework for biodiversity improvements and will enable the Council to identify projects for funding during future funding rounds.

#### **5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 A Biodiversity Action Plan is not a statutory requirement.
- 5.2 The Council does have responsibilities under the Environment Act 2021 as the responsible authority to prepare and maintain a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Whilst this will be a separate piece of work, the Plan will support the creation and roll out of a future LNRS.
- 5.3 The legal implications of projects will be assessed on a case by case basis.

## 6. RISK MANAGEMENT

**Table 3: Impact of risk and mitigation**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Level of uncontrolled risk</b>	<b>Controls</b>	<b>Level of controlled risk</b>
<b>Stakeholders have a key role in supporting and delivering the strategy, without this support the delivery is at risk</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Nearly half of all actions in the Plan are on engagement and partnership working. The Natural Environment Team will work closely with stakeholders throughout the delivery phase</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Delivery will require local landowners to play an important role to creating space for nature</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>The Natural Environment Team has been created to provide resources to enable pro-active engagement</b>	<b>Low</b>

## 7. POTENTIAL IMPACTS

- 7.1 Equalities. Equality Impact Assessments are published on the council's website. The negative impacts of the biodiversity crisis are likely to fall unequally and reinforce existing inequalities. The Plan looks to improve the natural environment in the Borough, providing access to nature for all residents. A full EQIA is not required at this stage.
- 7.2 Climate change/sustainability. The purpose of this Plan is to deliver biodiversity improvements in the Borough with the aim of ensuring 30% of land in the Borough is designated and protected for nature. This will have a significant impact in reversing biodiversity decline in the Borough. The Plan will improve the data available to the Council and partners to ensure future projects can be prioritised to maximise the biodiversity benefits. The habitats that have been included in the Plan, which will be a focus of the work are Woodlands, Grasslands, Farmland, Waterways, Standing Water and Urban. There are likely to be benefits to carbon sequestration which will have a direct impact on the climate crisis.
- 7.3 Data Protection/GDPR. Adopting the Plan will not have any associated data protection issues.

## 8. CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Plan has been jointly developed with local 'Wild' groups and regular bi-weekly/monthly meetings were held with them throughout the Spring/Summer

2021. A list of possible actions was created and these were jointly prioritised by the Council and the 'Wilds'. These actions were used as the basis for the Habitat Action Plans.

- 8.2 BBOWT were included throughout the development process and provided intensive feedback during Winter 2022 to ensure the document was ambitious but achievable.
- 8.3 Two virtual public engagement sessions were organised to allow input from the wider community in November 2021.
- 8.4 All Members were provided with a draft copy of the document, via the Members Bulletin newsletter, in October 2021 and February 2022 to enable them to provide comment and representation
- 8.5 The Council presented the initial Biodiversity Action Plan to the Rural Forum in May 2022 and then again after the improvements were made in November 2022.
- 8.6 The Cabinet Member has engaged with a dozen farmers and landowners across the borough, Georgia Craig and Ben Gibbons of the National Farmers Union, Christopher Price of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, and has also spoken to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice about this issue.
- 8.7 The Council's Ecologist supported the Duke of Edinburgh Conservation Farming Awards scheme in 2022, visiting 6 farms in the Borough and judging the best environmental scheme.
- 8.8 With food security issues high, and diesel and fertiliser prices having risen exponentially, farmers are under pressure. We have spoken about how we can all help each other and will continue this throughout the engagement of the biodiversity action plan.

## **9. TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

- 9.1 Implementation date if not called in: Immediately. The full implementation stages are set out in the Plan itself.

## **10. APPENDICES**

- 10.1 This report is supported by 2 appendices:

- Appendix A – Biodiversity Action Plan
- Appendix B – EQIA Screening

## **11. CONSULTATION**

<b>Name of consultee</b>	<b>Post held</b>	<b>Date sent</b>	<b>Date returned</b>
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<i>Mandatory:</i>		<i>Statutory Officers (or deputies)</i>	
Adele Taylor	Executive Director of Resources/S151 Officer	<b>10/11/22</b>	<b>21/11/22</b>
Emma Duncan	Director of Law and Governance	<b>10/11/22</b>	<b>16/11/22</b>
<i>Head of Service</i>			
Chris Joyce	Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth	<b>10/11/22</b>	<b>16/11/22</b>

Confirmation relevant Cabinet Member(s) consulted	Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Sustainability	Yes
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## REPORT HISTORY

<b>Decision type:</b>	<b>Urgency item?</b>	<b>To follow item?</b>
Key Decision	No	No

Biodiversity Action Plan Author: Rebecca Anderson, Ecologist Report Author: James Thorpe, Sustainability and Climate Change Lead
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