

Climate Emergency Advisory Committee



Report Acting Deputy Chief Executive – Transformation and Operations

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Wards affected: All

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To: CEAC

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Biodiversity Working Group

Recommendation(s)

(a) For Committee to recommend to Cabinet the establishment of a joint South and Vale member and officer Biodiversity Working Group to assist the Council in scoping Corporate Plan 2020-24 biodiversity projects to tackle the climate emergency which are currently subject to future discretionary growth.

Purpose of Report

1. To present the rationale and proposed terms of reference for a Biodiversity Working Group

Corporate Objectives

2. Vale has prioritised nature protection and nature recovery and climate emergency related environmental sustainability in its Corporate Plan 2020-24. Indeed, the plan is based on a vision of all council activity being shaped by the need to operate within ecological boundaries:

Vale of White Horse District Council aims to help build and support thriving local communities, where everyone can enjoy the opportunity to live a happy and fulfilling life. We will do all we can to contribute to making that a reality in the Vale, within the ecological constraints of our physical environment. We will ensure that our council and our district play their part in tackling the Climate Emergency.

3. The corporate plan includes a range of biodiversity commitments including:

Include in the council's Open Space Strategy opportunities to increase biodiversity, increase tree cover, and consider carefully the use of our open spaces.

Develop a Biodiversity Net Gain Targeting Strategy and contribute to a Nature Recovery Network for Oxfordshire.

Explore setting up a Habitat Bank to deliver biodiversity offsetting requirements and facilitate tree planting.

4. This commitment is further reflected in the decision to appoint a cabinet member with a portfolio for climate and environment.

Background

5. The framework for the development of Climate Action Plans for the councils includes the development of long-term Biodiversity Plans (2021-2030). Increasing carbon storage and sequestration through biodiversity enhancement will be an essential element of achieving the councils' carbon neutral targets.
6. The Insight and Policy team are currently leading the development of a new Tree Policy and Tree Strategy for the Councils. This will progress the corporate plan action to: *Develop a tree-planting strategy and work with partners to plant more trees across the district.*
7. There are advanced plans to establish an Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership and the Oxfordshire Growth Board is setting up an Environmental Advisory Group. The planned Ox-Cam Arc includes a set of environmental principles that are seeking to achieve a *"doubling of the area of land managed primarily for nature"* and *"delivering a minimum 20% biodiversity net gain from all forms of development"*. South Cambridgeshire District Council for example has recently published a Doubling Nature Strategy. This is in line with the corporate plan action to: *Take an active role in the Oxford-Cambridge arc to influence the inclusion of sustainable growth and environmental policies.*
8. It is expected that the statutory duties of local authorities in relation to biodiversity and the natural environment will be strengthened in the forthcoming Environment Bill. (The Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 currently includes a duty on public authorities to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity). This includes duties to establish a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and to deliver 10% Net Biodiversity Gain from new developments.
9. The councils currently lack dedicated resources to ensure effective delivery of corporate biodiversity objectives and were not in a position to allocate new resources in the latest budget round (21/22). The lack of capacity means that we are limited to a somewhat ad hoc and reactive approach. There is understandable shared frustration - from residents, community groups and Members - that the Councils have not yet been able to make significant progress in this area. Significant officer time is currently absorbed in managing this. Dominic Lamb and Andy Egan in consultation with Michelle Wells and Suzanne Malcom have developed a proposal for a Biodiversity Working Group as a positive way forward.

Main subject of report

10. Given that much current strategic development of biodiversity and nature recovery work is taking place on a county wide basis, it makes sense from both an ecosystem and strategic perspective to consider how we can best take forward and deliver on our biodiversity commitments on a joint South and Vale basis. With this area very much being one where cross sector partnership working is required, it will be helpful to our partners to adopt a joined-up approach.
11. A single joint member and officer working group that can report to the South CEEAC and Vale CEAC seems to be the best approach given:
 - our limited capacity to manage and service multiple groups;
 - the advantages of developing a shared understanding between key members and officers
 - providing a streamlined process to channel the high level of Member interest in this area
12. The proposed purpose of the Biodiversity Working Group is:
To advise and help shape the delivery of the Councils' corporate plan biodiversity, nature protection and nature recovery objectives.
13. The proposed remit is to:
 - Advise on the development of a biodiversity strategy and plan
 - Consider the councils' approach to nature protection and recovery
 - Identify the resource requirements for the effective delivery of corporate plan biodiversity objectives.
 - Consider the potential for carbon offsetting to contribute to the Councils' carbon neutral targets
 - Act as a sounding board for specific schemes such as: nature recovery networks, habitat banking and a tree planting policy and strategy
 - Make recommendations to the South CEEAC and Vale CEAC with respect to their role to *"advise Cabinet on matters relating to the climate emergency and ecological crisis"*
 - Consider and review the potential biodiversity impacts of major new initiatives such as Oxfordshire Plan 2050 and the Ox-Cam Arc.
 - Consider the implications for the Councils of new duties and obligations as proposed in the Environment Bill.
14. It is proposed that the membership of the Biodiversity Working Group is:
Core members:
 - Three Councillors from each district; nominated by the Cabinet leads for environment
 - SMT representative: Suzanne Malcom
 - Insight and Policy Manager: Michelle Wells
 - Planning Policy Manager: Lucy Murfett
 - Specialist Planning Team Leader: Dominic Lamb
 - Climate Action Lead: Andy Egan
Occasional members: will be invited where they are relevant items on the agenda e.g. from Property, Legal, Parks/ Grounds maintenance

15. It is anticipated that meetings will be held every two months for first six months and then quarterly thereafter.

Options

16. There are a number of different options of how best to progress the council's biodiversity work. The option of a joint South and Vale and joint member and officer working group has been identified as the most effective and efficient way to make progress given the very limited capacity we currently have. Other options would be to have two separate working groups and/or an officer only group. An alternative approach would be to wait until the council is able to recruit a Biodiversity Lead or similar post before initiating this work. This would be subject to a growth bid in a future budget round.

Climate and ecological impact implications

17. The implementation of the Council's ecological emergency declaration is explicitly designed to achieve positive ecological, climate and sustainability impacts. It is understood that embedding consideration of ecological impacts across all Council decision making and project development is an important step towards making meaningful progress in protecting and restoring the natural world in South Oxfordshire.
18. The Council currently employs 2 full time ecologist's whose primary role is dealing with ecological issues within the planning system, managing the Great Crested Newt District Licence scheme and managing the councils Countryside Sites. Only very limited capacity is currently available for developing new biodiversity projects or delivering the aims of the ecological emergency declaration.
19. Consideration should be given to the creation of a Biodiversity Lead role that could provide leadership and co-ordination this area of work, given the level of commitment to it in the Council's Corporate Plan 2020-24.

Financial Implications

20. Any council decision that has financial implications must be made with the knowledge of the council's overarching financial position. For Vale, the position reflected in the council's medium-term financial plan (MTFP) as reported to Full Council in February 2021 showed that the council is due to receive £2.6 million less in revenue funding than it plans to spend in 2021/22 (with the balance coming from reserves including unallocated New Homes Bonus).
21. This funding gap is predicted to increase to over £5 million by 2025/26. As there remains no certainty on future local government funding, following the announcement of a one-year spending review by government, and as the long-term financial consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic remain unknown, this gap could increase further. Every financial decision made needs to be cognisance of the need to eliminate this funding gap in future years.
22. The Biodiversity Working Group will identify the costs associated with the projects prioritised for implementation. Before proceeding with any options, a financial evaluation will be undertaken to assess these costs, before recommendations are made to the Cabinet.

23. As work develops and funding is required, projects and activities will be subject to individual business cases as appropriate, and financial scrutiny.

Legal Implications

24. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. Legal implications may arise in respect of individual projects included within the subsequent work programme as they are scoped, approved by Cabinet and implemented. These will be subject to identification and appropriate action as required.

Risks

25. There is a significant reputational risk for the Council in not taking action and not allocating or aligning resources to fulfil its Corporate Plan objectives for the environment and nature.

26. There is an overriding risk that the state of nature and biodiversity will continue to deteriorate in the district unless the Council takes decisive action to ensure effective nature protection and recovery.

Other implications

27. None.

Conclusion

28. This report has presented the rationale for the establishment of a Biodiversity Working Group as the best option to ensure a joined-up approach in progressing the biodiversity commitments in the corporate plan.

29. The CEAC is therefore invited to make a recommendation to Cabinet to approve the establishment of a joint South and Vale member and officer Biodiversity Working Group

