

# **Cherwell District Council**

## **Executive**

**4 January 2021**

## **Community Nature Plan 2020-2022 – A natural environment for people and wildlife**

### **Report of Assistant Director - Wellbeing**

This report is public

### **Purpose of report**

To seek approval for the 2020-2022 Community Nature Plan and its approach to addressing the Council's statutory biodiversity duty. The report also highlights the resource implications of the Environment Bill in terms of nature and biodiversity and seeks recognition for the vital role of the Council's key biodiversity partners in delivering the Plan.

### **1.0 Recommendations**

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To approve the 2020-2022 Community Nature Plan and its approach to addressing the Council's statutory biodiversity duty.
- 1.2 To instruct officers to investigate the resource implications of the provisions of the Environment Bill in terms of nature and biodiversity and develop recommendations.
- 1.3 To recognise the essential role of key partners in the delivery of the Community Nature Plan.

### **2.0 Introduction**

- 2.1 The key purpose of the Community Nature Plan (see Appendix 1) is to demonstrate the Council's fulfilment of its statutory biodiversity duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, a duty that will be strengthened by the Environment Bill. Section 40 of the NERC Act 2006 states that - "Every public body must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as it is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity". Biodiversity is a term used to describe the variety of life including all plants, animals, their habitats and the natural systems that support them.

2.2 The Community Nature Plan sets out aims, actions and targets relating to a number of themes:

- A key function of the Council in terms of the biodiversity duty is its role as a local planning authority. The Council has legal obligations relating to important wildlife sites, habitats and species; and requirements under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) relating to conserving and enhancing the natural environment
- The importance of the natural environment for community health and wellbeing, specifically access to green space and connection with nature
- The value of land (natural capital) and the services it delivers (ecosystem services) for people and the local economy
- The contribution of the management of land and buildings to the protection and enhancement of the natural environment
- The important role of natural carbon management for climate change adaptation and resilience

### 3.0 Report Details

3.1 The Community Nature Plan's vision is 'To work with partners to protect and enhance Cherwell's natural environment for its intrinsic value, the services it provides, the health and wellbeing of people; its contribution to climate change adaptation and resilience, and the economic prosperity that it brings'. Contributions to the delivery of these multiple benefits are made by a wide range of Council services and workstreams including Planning Policy and Development Management, the Wellbeing team, the Bicester Garden Town Programme, the Healthy Place Shaping Programme, the 2020 Climate Change Action Framework and the Street Scene and Landscape Services team. Of particular note currently is the importance of access to green spaces and connection with nature, for physical and mental health and resilience, which has been starkly highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.2 The key purpose of the Community Nature Plan is to demonstrate the Council's fulfilment of its statutory biodiversity duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, a duty that will be strengthened by **the Environment Bill**. Part 6 of the Bill (nature and biodiversity) is just one of several sections that will apply directly to local government and includes provisions to:

- Strengthen the duty on public bodies to conserve and enhance biodiversity. Publication of biodiversity reports will be required to review the actions taken by the local authority to comply with its duties for nature and biodiversity
- Make it mandatory for housing and development to achieve at least a 10% net gain in value for biodiversity, a requirement that habitats for wildlife must be left in a measurably better state than before the development

- Require the local preparation and publication of Local Nature Recovery Strategies to support better spatial planning through the identification of priorities and opportunities for conserving and enhancing nature. This will include the establishment of a Nature Recovery Network (NRN) which maps existing nature assets, including protected sites and wildlife-rich habitats.
- 3.3 In October 2019, Executive endorsed seeking a minimum of 10% biodiversity net gain through engagement with the planning process; and approved biodiversity net gain guidance (produced by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) and other related professional bodies). Confirmation of this approach has been beneficial as it is informing the consideration of planning applications and enabling the Council to use a consistent and measurable process as well as providing some clarity for developers. It will also inform the Cherwell Local Plan Review 2040.
- 3.4 The **Oxfordshire Plan 2050** (OP2050) is progressing and its emerging spatial strategy is being influenced by the Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Network (NRN). The concept of a NRN is simple in that it should extend and link existing sites of wildlife value. Building on mapped Conservation Target Areas, the NRN has been prepared by a partnership of three of the council's biodiversity partners (BBOWT, TVERC and Wild Oxfordshire) who have secured extensive buy in across the County's environmental sector through a broader Working Group, consultation events in 2019 as well as validation from the Oxfordshire Biodiversity Advisory Group. A potential policy approach has also been submitted to the OP2050 team including ensuring that the NRN is given significant weight in planning decisions. The NRN will also help inform the Cherwell Local Plan Review, guide key policies relating to biodiversity net gain and develop a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). This Strategy, which will be required by the Environment Bill, can use the NRN to map out important habitats and opportunities for the local environment to be improved, linking communities' knowledge/priorities with national environmental objectives. In August 2020 Natural England announced funding to develop five pilot NRN/LNRS areas indicating that Oxfordshire's progress to date is noteworthy.
- 3.5 The continuation of this vital work will be led by a responsible authority yet to be decided but likely to be at a County level and involving a Local Nature Partnership (LNP) or its equivalent. Oxfordshire does not currently have a LNP but significant progress is being made towards establishing one with the support of funding from the Growth Board. The ambition for LNPs is that they will help their local area to manage the natural environment as a system and to embed its value in local decisions for the benefit of nature, people and the economy. To do this effectively they will need to be self-sustaining strategic partnerships of a broad range of local organisations, businesses and people with the credibility to work with, and influence, other local strategic decision makers.
- 3.6 In February 2020, CEDR (CDC/OCC) approved a report on the "Environment Bill and possible financial implications" which included the recommendation 'to consider the implications of the Bill for biodiversity net gain and co-ordination across the County with a view to a jointly commissioned report exploring the development of a Local Nature Partnership (LNP)'. As outlined in 3.5, significant progress is being made towards developing an Oxfordshire LNP and the aim is for the LNP to be established by April 2021.

3.7 The Environment Bill provisions relating to nature and biodiversity will require additional

approaches and increased ecological advisory capacity to ensure that housing and development achieves at least a 10% net gain in value for biodiversity compared to the pre-development baseline; to contribute to a Local Nature Recovery Strategy;

and

produce more comprehensive biodiversity reports. The resource implications of this work will require further consideration and investigation.

3.8 The delivery of the Community Nature Plan would not be possible without close partnership working with key organisations as well as the contribution of a network of local conservation and community groups: (see also Appendix 2, Community Nature Plan 2018-2020 Project Review)

- **The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)** supplies high quality, up to date habitat, species and site data that is required as an evidence base for the Local Plan process and for the ecological assessment of planning applications.
- **Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT)** provides land management advice to Local Wildlife Site (LWS) owners/managers, sites that are protected by planning policy. The advice helps to improve site value and maintain the robustness of the LWS designation. BBOWT also leads on the well-established Wild Banbury Project and more recently launched Wild Bicester Project which are all about enhancing habitats for wildlife and bringing people into contact with nature.
- **Wild Oxfordshire** supports community wildlife groups and activities as well as citizen science projects and events. It also leads on partnership work to focus on the maintenance and improvement of the District's Conservation Target Areas which are used as a planning focus for wildlife improvement; and to develop an Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Network and Strategy
- **RSPB** owns, manages and encourages access to the flagship Otmoor Nature Reserve which includes national priority habitat and other habitats supporting birds and other wildlife which are national priority species
- **Warriner School Farm** delivers a programme of primary school and youth group visits about the importance of the natural environment as a food source, for its health benefits and for its intrinsic value.
- **OPFA** (Oxfordshire Playing Fields Association) engages with local community organisations to promote and support the provision, retention and viability of community outdoor recreation space which meets local needs, including opportunities for habitat improvements
- Local conservation projects and community groups play an important role in protecting and enhancing the District's natural environment and providing access to nature. For example, with the help of local people throughout the District, the **Cherwell Swift Conservation Project** successfully continues to find, monitor and create new nest sites with the help of local people and enlightened developers such as Cherwell Build; and **Muddy Feet Training** is

enabling young people to access, connect with and learn from their natural environment

## **4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1 Restoring and enhancing the natural environment and green spaces for the benefit of people and wildlife is a crucial element of important development and economic decisions. Failure to recognise and assess the multiple benefits of the natural environment will affect community health and wellbeing, important habitats and species and future economic growth. This report presents an updated Community Nature Plan to demonstrate how the Council is addressing its statutory biodiversity duty; and seeks approval for recommendations that support plans, projects and partners that will assist the Council to protect and enhance the District's natural environment and help to contribute to healthy outcomes for people and wildlife.

## **5.0 Consultation**

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Community Nature Plan endorsed in December 2020. Members requested an update on the progress of the Community Nature Plan 2020-2022 for Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2021; and a biodiversity and planning workshop prior to the next iteration of the Community Nature Plan

The following CDC Officers have been consulted about the Community Nature Plan (CNP):

Nicola Riley, Assistant Director: Wellbeing  
CNP approved

David Peckford, Assistant Director: Planning and Development  
Comments received and being addressed

Sharon Whiting, Principal Planning Officer: Planning Policy, Conservation and Design  
Minor editing required which has been included in the CNP

Sarah Stevens, Interim Senior Manager: Development Management  
Awaiting comments

Charlotte Watkins, Ecology Officer: Development Management  
CNP approved

Rosie Rowe, Healthy Place Shaping Lead: Wellbeing Directorate  
Highlighted issues of new developments and the importance of integrating green infrastructure/protection of biodiversity/supporting climate resilience; and the inequality of access. Additional text included in the CNP

Dean Fischer, Interim Bicester Delivery Manager: Bicester Team  
Awaiting comments

Paul Almond, Manager: Street Scene and Landscape Services  
Minor editing required which has been included in the CNP

Sam Thomas, Sustainability Project Officer: Bicester Delivery Team

Minor editing required which has been included in the CNP

## **6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

- 6.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: To reject the Community Nature Plan 2020-22 and the recommendations in the report.

This is not proposed as, without the Plan, the Council would not be able to clearly demonstrate that it is meeting its NERC Act biodiversity duty and complying with its obligations relating to important wildlife sites, habitats and species under European and national legislation as well as the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

Option 2: To amend the Community Nature Plan 2020-22 and the recommendations in the report

## **7.0 Implications**

### **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 7.1 The Community Nature Plan 2020-2022 can be delivered within existing budget but it must be noted that this report does recommend an investigation into future resources in relation to the provision of the Environment Bill in terms of nature and biodiversity.

Comments checked by:

Kelly Wheeler, Finance Business Partner, 01295 221570, [kelly.wheeler@cherwell-dc.gov.uk](mailto:kelly.wheeler@cherwell-dc.gov.uk)

### **Legal Implications**

- 7.2 There are statutory requirements that the Council must meet and which are set out in the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and related legislation, including a duty under Part 3 of the 2006 Act to have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of its functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity. A Community Nature Plan should enable the Council to demonstrate that these requirements are being met. Failure to do so will leave the Council open to challenge.

Comments checked by:

Richard Hawtin, Team Leader – Non-contentious, Email: [richard.hawtin@cherwell-dc.gov.uk](mailto:richard.hawtin@cherwell-dc.gov.uk); Tel 01295 221695

### **Risk Implications**

- 7.3 Community Nature Plan progress and delivery will be affected should insufficient resources, both financial and professional, be available. These risks will be managed as part of the operational risk register and escalated as and when necessary to the leadership risk register.

Comments checked by:

Louise Tustian, Head of Insight and Corporate Programmes 01295 221786

[Louise.tustian@cherwell-dc.gov.uk](mailto:Louise.tustian@cherwell-dc.gov.uk)

## 8.0 Decision Information

**Key Decision N/A**

**Financial Threshold Met: No**

**Community Impact Threshold Met: No**

**Wards Affected**

All wards

### **Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework**

The Council's Business Plan 2020/2021 includes the strategic priorities 'leading on environmental sustainability' (a key component being the protection of our natural environment and delivery of our commitment to be carbon neutral by 2030); healthy resilient and engaged communities (the importance of access to green spaces and connection with nature for physical and mental health and resilience has been starkly highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic); an enterprising economy with strong and vibrant local centres (a healthy and stable natural environment is vitally important to economic prosperity and the District's desirability as a place to live, work and visit).

The adopted Cherwell Local Plan (2011-2031) (Part 1) includes policies specifically relating to Protecting and Enhancing Biodiversity and the Natural Environment (ESD 10), Conservation Target Areas (ESD 11) and Green Infrastructure (ESD 18). Conservation and enhancement of the natural environment are also key strands of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 (Part 1) Partial Review-Oxford's Unmet Housing Need.

The Wellbeing Team Service Development Plan 2020-2021 includes key themes relating to healthy places (develop Wellbeing service strategies and plans to link into healthy place shaping, the Local Plan, Oxfordshire 2050 plan) and partnerships (working with partners to improve the services we provide for our residents and communities).

The Healthy Place Shaping Service Development Plan 2020-2021 includes the following priorities: continue to increase internal awareness, understanding and action to embed healthy place shaping into delivery of CDC services; sustain healthy place shaping in Bicester; deliver the *K5 Better Together* healthy place shaping programme in Kidlington and surrounding villages; commence healthy place shaping in Banbury.

The 2020 Climate Action Framework recognises the importance of natural carbon management in its commitment to be net carbon neutral from its operations and

activities by 2030

## **Document Information**

### **Appendix number and title**

- Appendix 1 Community Nature Plan 2020-2022 – A natural environment for people and wildlife
- Appendix 2 Community Nature Plan 2018-2020 – Project review

### **Background papers**

None

### **Reference Documents**

Conservation Target Areas and draft Nature Recovery Network –

<https://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/>

Natural capital mapping in Oxfordshire, 2019: Alison Smith, Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford

Local Wildlife Sites Project –

<https://www.bbowt.org.uk/wildlife/wildlife-conservation/local-wildlife-sites>

Wild Banbury - <https://www.bbowt.org.uk/wildlife/living-landscapes/wild-banbury>

TVERC - <http://www.tverc.org/cms/>

RSPB Otmoor - <https://ww2.rspb.org.uk/groups/oxford/places/278487/>

Warriner School Farm - Welcome to the Farm -

<https://www.thewarrinerschool.co.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=1502&type=pdf>

### **Report Author and contact details**

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