

REPORT TO: CABINET

DATE: 4 NOVEMBER 2021

TITLE: TREE PLANTING AND BIODIVERSITY
MANAGEMENT

PORTFOLIO HOLDER: COUNCILLOR ALASTAIR GUNN, PORTFOLIO
HOLDER FOR ENVIRONMENT

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This is a Key Decision
It is on the Forward Plan as Decision Number I012853
Call-in Procedures may apply
This decision will affect no ward specifically.

RECOMMENDED that:

- A** The tree planting programme for winter 2021/22 as set out in Appendix A is approved with a commitment to develop a medium term (3 – 5 years) tree planting strategy by March 2022 which is then reviewed on an annual basis.
- B** The approach to woodland management as set out in Appendix B is agreed.
- C** The approach to grassland management as set out in Appendix C is agreed including the increase in wildflower planting from four strips in 2021 to a minimum of eight in 2022 with the final locations to be agreed by the Portfolio Holder for Environment.
- D** Cabinet agree to end the use of single use plastics in all of its tree planting and bio-diversity work with effect from the 2022/23 winter programme.

REASON FOR DECISION

- A** To agree the implementation of the successful Local Authority Treescape Fund bid.
- B** To develop a strategic approach to the Council's work on bio-diversity. As a planned New Town, Harlow benefits from networks of open spaces which contribute to the biodiversity of the district, conserve habitats of local significance and enable the appreciation of wildlife. Helping to protect and

enhance biodiversity is one of the fundamental aims of national policies and guidance, to halt the overall decline in biodiversity. Through this report Harlow Council commits to playing its role in delivering against this national agenda. The Council will also commit to identifying and implementing a monitoring regime to measure, as far as is possible, the impact that the Council's measures are having on bio-diversity within the town.

- C** In 2020 the Government published its Environment Bill which sets out policies, plans and targets for improving the natural environment and to combat the climate crisis. The bill proposes targets for improving air quality, reducing residual waste and for improving bio-diversity. In terms of the latter, there are specific targets to restore 75% of protected sites to a favourable condition and also creating or restoring 500,000 hectares of wildlife rich habitat. The work that Harlow Council does in the both the short term and also in setting longer term targets will have to be set in this context.

BACKGROUND

1. Biodiversity refers to the richness of types of life on earth or in a particular habitat. The word itself is a contraction of “biological diversity” and strictly refers to every living thing including viruses, bacteria, fungi, insects, plants, animals, and humans. A habitat which is “biodiverse” has a very wide range of species living together and interconnected in a highly complex way
2. Biodiversity is important because all lifeforms exist and interact with one another in a complex network or ecosystem which relies on its diversity to function. Removing parts or the network starts to make it break down and cease to function. From a human perspective, everything that we do, all of the food that we eat, the stability of our weather, relies in some form on the rest of the living world, and so functioning ecosystems are ultimately essential to human life.
3. Generally intense human activity degrades natural biodiversity. Conversely some forms of traditional land management create environments that support relatively rich ecosystems with many species that we have come to regard as “native”. While in a relatively small area like Harlow, reduced biodiversity is not a threat to human life globally, it is increasing recognised that species and habitats are being lost in the UK as development increases, and that there are opportunities within developed areas to counteract those losses and offset losses from areas where less opportunity exists.
4. In June 2021 the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee released its report ‘Bio-diversity in the UK: Bloom or Bust’. This identifies that the world is experiencing a “colossal decline in global bio-diversity”. In the UK, 15% of all species are threatened with extinction. These changes to the ecosystem will have significant impacts on economies, livelihoods, food security and quality of life. The report identifies that there is a need for a plan of action to counteract the current trends and that there is still an opportunity to do this.

5. Increasingly in national policy this opportunity is recognised, and reflected in the views of increasing numbers of residents. As well as being of value in its own right, and in the contribution it can make to protecting the future of human life, and in helping to deliver national policy; supporting biodiversity can create richer landscapes that are a pleasure to visit, and opportunities to volunteer which can have significant social benefits. Formally, the Council also has a duty to have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of its policy formation and decision making.
6. Despite Harlow being relatively intensely developed there are a number of sites in the area that have inherited something of the diversity that depended on traditional land uses, such as meadow land or ancient woodland, where the Council can work to protect or enhance their heritage. Further there is a great deal of open space in the district in parks, greens fingers and wedges; and while this has to serve many purposes, so that a balance must be set, there may be opportunities to manage this land over to enhance biodiversity without too much compromising its other functions. No doubt the Council's approach will evolve over time with experience and developing understanding. However, the remainder of the report aims to give an overview of the current activity in this area and highlight some potential for enhancement over coming years.

Future Developments

7. Harlow will see a significant amount of development activity in the coming years. The Council will use its powers to protect the natural environment and where possible to enhance this and the town's biodiversity assets. Policy PL8 in the Harlow Local Development Plan on Biodiversity and Geodiversity assets sets out the policy framework.
8. Development should contribute to and enhance these assets. The potential harm caused by development on these assets and their surroundings will be assessed based on the harm caused by the development. Development must meet the following criteria: -
 - a) It creates new biodiversity assets and creates links to existing assets
 - b) It includes the protection and enhancement of existing biodiversity assets
 - c) Where it can be demonstrated that protection and enhancement of existing assets is not possible, appropriate measures must mitigate the negative effects on these assets
9. The Council will also set out further details on its policies to protect the natural environment, including a requirement to deliver bio-diversity net gain through new developments, via the production of an Open Space Supplementary Planning Document that will be presented to Cabinet in December by the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Growth.

Conservation Volunteering

10. The importance of volunteering to Harlow's biodiversity work cannot be overstated. It is costly to support and facilitate volunteering groups who look after parts of the landscape with the Council. The work of approximately 1.5 full-time equivalent officers with modest associated revenue budgets is largely devoted to this purpose. However the investment is repaid manifold when the value of the work that volunteers do is considered, without accounting for the social value of the activity. A summary of the volunteering activities is given at Appendix D.

Tree planting

11. Some of the open land in Harlow is suitable to receive more trees. However, it is not practicable for the Council to reproduce ancient woodlands by planting, and some caution is required as trees can have adverse effects on structures particularly on shrinkable clay soil. Nonetheless there is potential for planting that will enhance the connectivity between woodland habitats and increase tree cover which can combat global warming.
12. The Council has recently involved the community tree planting exercises and with some learning from that plans to do more planting of whips, and in addition plant some semi mature parkland and street trees this year, with the support of the Local Authority Treescape Fund and the Essex Forest Initiative, which will contribute to our work to achieve Queens Green Canopy objectives. More information on the proposed tree planting programme is set out in Appendix A.
13. The Council is also now embarking on a programme to inspect and map every significant tree in the town. This is being procured through HTS and will take three years to complete. This will enable a more strategic and proactive approach to be taken to tree maintenance, rather than the current reactive approach. This work will also, as it progresses from this autumn, enable the Council to take a longer term view about its tree planting strategy and set some future targets. These will need to be based on facts about what we already have and where we think gaps may be. It is recommended that the Council set a tree planting target by March 2022 which is then reviewed annually.
14. The longer term tree planting target will be part of a tree planting strategy that will be developed along the lines promoted by the Woodland Trust. This is set out for information in Appendix A.

Ancient Woodland

15. Ancient woodland is not natural but is a historical form of labour intensive land management that at one time produced valuable products including timber from standard trees through posts and poles to brushwood and charcoal. To produce this variety of products, areas were cyclically coppiced [cut to stumps] or pollarded [cut at above grazing height to the trunk] and allowed to regrow. This produced a patchwork with trees at different stages so a variety of habitats that

supported a rich variety of species from fungi through insects and birds of larger mammals.

16. Some of the most important ancient woodlands in the country are formally recognised as Sites of Special Scientific Interest [SSSIs]. Council-owned woods at Parndon Wood and nearby Hospital and Risdens Woods are such SSSI s. The Council operates Parndon Wood as a nature reserve with much help from volunteers and maintains in partnership with local charity ECCO a visitors' centre there. It has in recent years achieved Green Flag status for this site. More information about Parndon Wood, and other woodland sites across Harlow, is given Appendix B which sets out the approach that will be taken to the management of these sites. The management plan for Parndon Wood at is attached at Appendix E.
17. The Council has a responsibility to maintain these sites as protected Ancient Woodland and to employ appropriate conservation techniques to achieve this and ensure the town's woodlands remain protected but usable spaces. The works involved in this are set out in Appendix B. In summary, this comprises:
 - a) A coppicing programme to increase the diversity of habitats and the numbers of fauna and flora at Parndon Wood;
 - b) Removal of some trees to achieve the above and also to provide timber for environmental improvement projects; and
 - c) Creation of sustainable woodland produce such as firewood and charcoal, the income from which helps to support the volunteer programme.

Grassland

18. Wildflower Meadows are another relic of traditional landscape management that no longer has economical value. Where these sites remain in public hands in Harlow they are often recognised as wildlife sites or local nature reserves, and the Council manages them as effectively as practicable with available resources. Much of the open space in Harlow is laid to grass in one form or another, but does not have the same biodiversity recognised wildlife sites having been regularly mown short for most its history. It is unlikely that all of the grassland in Harlow could be managed as wildflower meadow, even if this met with the needs of all residents. However there are approaches that may be viable to improve biodiversity, including modified mowing regimes for some areas and seeding to create floral verges for which a broader debate will be required in terms of desirability and resources. More information on the current approach to grassland management is given in appendix C.
19. In 2021 the Council, through HTS, extended its wildflower programme through the planting of four wildflower strips in prominent locations in the town – Mark Hall Park, Second Avenue, Third Avenue and Southern Way. These were seen to be very successful and received significant public support with requests to increase the level of planting next year. It is now proposed to at least double the

number of locations across the town for planting in 2022. Potential locations are currently being identified for suitability with final locations to be agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Environment by December 2021.

Single Use Plastics

20. As part of the climate emergency declared in July 2019, Harlow Council committed to eliminating the use of single-use plastics across all public council buildings by January 2020, ahead of the national implementation date of April 2020.
21. In December 2019 the Biodiversity team trialled the use of non-plastic and fully biodegradable tree guards: 100 trees were planted and protected using standard plastic guards alongside 100 biodegradable alternatives in the 2018/19 coppice area of Parndon Wood. They stood up to the first test of usability and durability while planting with 0% breakages verses 2% breakages of their cheaper plastic alternatives. Tree growth and condition of the guards have since been monitored as the young trees have become established. It was noted after the following summer, many of the non-plastic guards had started to fail through sagging, losing 50% of their height. The low browsing pressure is reflected in similar success rates for both trials at around 80% despite no aftercare.
22. A new approach being put forward by the Woodland Trust, as it recently announced in July 2021, that it is aiming to stop using plastic tree guards by the end of the year. Plastic tree guards have been used since the 1970's to protect trees from being eaten by animals. Where locations of trees are in areas with very high levels of damage by grazing animals such as deer and rabbits, plastic alternatives are to be used. In other areas research found that it was better to lose a certain percentage of saplings than to use plastic guards to protect them. On average, 85% of trees with shelters survive, while 50% survive if no shelter is used.
23. Plastic tree guards generate significant carbon emissions from their manufacture. The plastic guards are rarely collected after use, they break down into microplastics, polluting the natural environment and harming wildlife.
24. It is proposed to continue with the current tree planting plans for 2021/22 using plastic tree shelters, but to continue with trials for non-plastic alternatives and commit to going plastic free for any future tree planting thereafter – from the 2022/23 programme. Where practicable, the Council will also from 2022/23 replace existing plastic tree guards with sustainable alternatives when these are available.

IMPLICATIONS

Environment and Planning (Includes Sustainability)

The management of the town's environmental assets is of critical importance to the future of the town. These assets are enjoyed by local people, and visitors to the town, and the Council has a duty to maintain and enhance these assets within the

resources it has available. The Council will use its planning powers to protect these assets, but this report sets out, for the first time, the Council's strategic objectives on bio-diversity. This will also be a contributory factor in the Council's work on combatting climate change.

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Finance (Includes ICT, and Property and Facilities)

As set out in the report and appendices.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy to the Chief Executive and Director of Finance

Housing

As outlined in the report.

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Community Wellbeing

As contained in the report.

Author: Jane Greer, Director of Communities and Environment

Governance (Includes HR)

None specific.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Tree Planting

Appendix B – Woodland Management

Appendix C – Grassland Management

Appendix D – Conservation Volunteering

Appendix E – Parndon Wood Management Plan

Background Papers

None.

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

SSSI – Sites of Special Scientific Interest