



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

18TH OCTOBER 2021

LIVING LANDSCAPES PROJECT

REPORT OF DIRECTOR – PUBLIC HEALTH, PROTECTION & COMMUNITY SERVICES IN DISCUSSIONS WITH CLLR RHYS LEWIS, CABINET MEMBER FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES, WELL-BEING AND CULTURAL SERVICES

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Cabinet on progress with the Living Landscapes Project and seek approval for the future progression of the Project to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Consider current progress of the Living Landscapes Project and the work highlighted in this report to further enhance the countryside and natural habitats of Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 2.2 Approve the list and delivery of the 29 sites identified by the Living Landscapes Project and associated funding arrangements.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To enable the Cabinet to consider the progress of the Living Landscapes Project and approve the proposals to promote the sustainable management of natural resources on Council owned land and to engage local communities in the project. The report also highlights to Cabinet where the issues raised could have implications for future Council policy, priorities and expenditure.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The landscape and wildlife of the South Wales Valleys are unique in Southern Britain, boasting a huge diversity of habitats and species occurring in close proximity and accessible to a large urban population. The biodiversity rich landscapes of Rhondda Cynon Taf lie at the centre of these riches, greatly valued by local people and a fundamental part of our shared sense of culture, place and community^{1, 2}.
- 4.2 In November's 2020 'Natures Assets' report to the Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group, a number of priorities for the Council to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies were proposed. This report deals specifically with the 'Landscape Strategy Linking Nature Conservation and People' and 'Living Landscape' project described in that report. The project forms an important part of the emerging review of 'Action for Nature', which members will recall is the Plan produced by the Local Nature Partnership to protect and enhance the wildlife and biodiversity of Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 4.3 A Nature's Assets officer group has been set up to take forward actions from the earlier report to the Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group. This Group has been instrumental in developing the project and ensuring that the carbon storage and water management elements are addressed, as well as the original biodiversity management and community engagement considerations. The potential funding mechanisms have also been considered by this group.
- 4.4 Landscape Strategy linking nature conservation and people (The Living Landscape Project)
- 4.4.1 Rhondda Cynon Taf is a fantastic treasure trove of landscapes, habitats, flora and fauna. A biodiversity that has a rich cultural basis and is strongly tied to the complex geology and geomorphology of the County Borough. RCT is also a place with many expert, self-taught naturalists, local historians, and environmentally concerned and active people and groups. In RCT, people and communities live within and surrounded by wildlife-rich habitats (the backdrop to our daily lives) and for everyone in RCT nature is only a short walk or stroll from their doorstep. An initiative that is currently being developed aims to link people and groups into a network of biodiversity rich sites, and to engage with people to visit, enjoy, record, and help to manage these sites to maximise their biodiversity and promote active communities. The development of a 'landscape scale' project provides opportunities to access external funding, this being subject to application and approval processes. Initial discussions between Council staff, the Wildlife Trust, Butterfly Conservation and number of local groups has established support for the idea.
- 4.4.2 Through the implementation of its planning function, the Council has secured a significant network of ecological mitigation sites across the County Borough. Some of these sites are Council adopted and have land management funding associated (from S106 agreements), while others are developer or management company owned but have specific S106 biodiversity management commitments and requirements. There is also a network of Council-owned and managed countryside and parks, cemeteries and land

reclamation sites, together with partnership owned nature reserves and Community Council sites. When viewed on a map these commitments and opportunities form a network of often closely adjacent sites, linking communities with the wider countryside. It is a very significant resource of both wildlife-rich habitats and an amazing opportunity for people to become actively involved in helping to look after, care for, understand and interpret their own environment. We already have community groups with interest in a specific site who would welcome the opportunity to share expertise and volunteers with similar groups both locally and across RCT. In addition, there is a network of local people with a keen interest in engaging in both their local patch and the 'bigger picture'.

A priority 'Action for Nature' action is the development of a pilot 'Living Landscape Project' within RCT. If successful, this would see a major new approach to biodiversity conservation and community engagement in RCT with long-term sustainability and continued biodiversity improvement.

4.5 Project proposals

- 4.5.1 As its name suggests, this is a landscape scale project proposal that links together a network of biodiversity rich sites, with local communities through sustainable land management and environmental awareness raising and engagement. In RCT the key habitats which support our rich biodiversity are also the same habitats which provide stable, long-term stores of soil carbon and contribute to water management in the landscape. The opportunity exists therefore to manage and look after our key biodiversity resource, engage, and work with local people in their management, and in doing so secure and improve carbon sequestration and water management through better land management and care.
- 4.5.2 The proposed pilot project selects a number of sites from the overall network as a suggested starting point. This would allow a demonstration of the potential for sustainable land management with community involvement, whilst minimising the risk of over-extending staff resources. The pilot will enable the Local Nature Partnership to engage local interest groups and the voluntary Nature Conservation NGOs in practical projects and establish their enthusiasm for on-going involvement. The proposed pilot focuses on capital works to enable the sites to be brought into sustainable management. It also includes basic interpretation to identify the sites as part of the network. The overall objective of the pilot is to demonstrate that long term sustainable management of Council owned land can be undertaken in partnership with community groups and at the same time deliver biodiversity, water management, soil conservation and carbon storage benefits to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies. If the approach is successful, further sites can be added to the network as resources become available.
- 4.5.3 The list of pilot sites has drawn on work by Corporate Estates to identify Council owned land with potential for carbon storage and biodiversity enhancement (and also potentially for water management).
- 4.5.4 For these 29 sites, a schedule of activities has been identified that can be delivered during 2021-22 through seeking external funding and/or from

existing Council resources. These actions are summarised in Table 1 below and include actions that are therefore deliverable in that period together with the potential cost implications.

4.5.5 Beyond this, in the future some additional works may be considered for the 29 sites, as part of future development programme and opportunities for grant aid applications. These may include:

- Small grant aid to help support long-term conservation grazing.
- Provision of mains water connection and drinking troughs on conservation grazing sites as part of summer drought reliance provision.
- Re-wetting of sites through ditch blocking e.g. peatbogs.
- Path and access improvements.
- Invasive species control.
- Developing a Living landscape web page.
- On-going litter removal and disposal.

4.5.6 A number of the chosen sites already have funding for management works from S106 planning agreements. These have not been included in the costings but the sites form an integral part of the network and will be included in all community engagement work.

Table 1- Living Landscapes Project- Proposed Schedule of Works and Estimated Costs

Sites	Signage/ Interpretation	Fencing	Wildflower/ Rhos Pasture Management	Tree/ Woodland Management	Bird/ Bat Boxes	Total	Comments
Llanharan Cemetery	£2,000		£500			£2,500	
Parc Eirin (s106)						£0	No cost to project, funded through S106 Agreement
Llanharry Quarry (s106)	£2,000				£420	£2,420	
Ynysddu	£2,000					£2,000	
Pontyclun Park	£2,000					£2,000	
Pant Marsh (s106)	£4,000					£4,000	
Cefn yr Hendy (s106)						£0	no cost to project, funded through S106 Agreement
Cefn y Parc Cemetery	£2,000		£1,000			£3,000	
Parc Dowlais	£2,000	£800		£500		£3,300	
Llantwit Fardre Marsh	£2,000	£6,400				£8,400	
Cwmfields	£4,000	£14,650		£1,000		£19,650	
Parc Nant Celyn	£2,000	£1,600		£1,000	£700	£5,300	
Ty Rhiw woods, Cemetery and Recreation Ground	£4,000			£1,500	£700	£6,200	
Ynysangharad War Memorial Park	£6,000				£700	£6,700	
Craig yr Hesg Nature Reserve	£2,000			£1,500		£3,500	
Blaenrhondda Park	£2,000			£1,500	£700	£4,200	
Glyncornel	£4,000			£1,500	£700	£6,200	
Darran Park	£4,000			£1,300	£700	£6,000	
Clydach Vale Country Park	£4,000			£2,500		£6,500	
Melin yr Hom	£4,000			£1,500		£5,500	
Cefn Don Recreation Grounds	£2,000			£500		£2,500	
Blaennantygroes Recreation Ground	£2,000					£2,000	
Peace Park	£2,000					£2,000	
Penrhiwceiber Recreation Ground	£2,000			£1,000		£3,000	
Park Lane, top of Aberdare Park						£0	
Dare Valley Country Park	£4,000	£29,200		£1,500		£34,700	Conservation grazing area
Aberdare Cemetery	£2,000		£500			£2,500	
Llwydcoed Crematorium	£4,000		£1,000			£5,000	
Hirwaun Cemetery	£4,000		£500			£4,500	
TOTAL	£76,000	£52,650	£3,500	£16,800	£4,620	£153,570	

4.6 The proposed pilot sites

4.6.1 Sites in the South of the County Borough. The core of the selected sites are part of the closely connected network of Council owned Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) and one is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). These sites collectively support and provide vital habitat connectivity for a range priority species, including orchids, marsh fritillary butterflies (and many other insects), bats and dormice. These sites are also close to where people live and are part of the countryside 'on your doorstep'. Some well used sites in the Taf Valley are the focus for biodiversity enhancement. Some sites are already funded via S106 contributions from developers but for the others, the proposed works are currently un-funded or extra funding is sought for specific unfunded activities.

- Llanharan Cemetery, Llanharan – wildflower rich grassland in the heart of the Community.
- Parc Eirin, Tonyrefail – rhos pasture habitat, fencing to allow conservation grazing is funded by an existing S106 agreement.
- Llanharry Quarry, Llanharry – a species rich woodland and grassland limestone quarry open space adjacent to new housing development. Works to improve public access, manage woodland and grassland is available from S106 developer contribution, however extra funding sought for signage.
- Ynysddu, Pontyclun – rhos pasture habitat near the River Ely.
- Pontyclun Park – wildflower rich grassland and butterfly habitat which forms part of this popular community centred park.
- Pant Marsh, Talbot Green – species rich floodplain grassland and wet woodland funded by existing S106 agreement, but cost of signage included in this project.
- Cefn Yr Hendy, Pontyclun – woodland and grassland management funded by S106 Agreement.
- Cefn y Parc Cemetery, Llantrisant – an important flowery meadow within the cemetery managed for the rare green-winged orchid.
- Parc Dowlais, Llantwit Fardre – rhos pasture and woodland adjacent to the R Clun.
- Llantwit Fardre Marsh – rhos pasture and peat bog habitat adjacent to the Church Village by-pass community route.
- Cwm Fields, Llantwit Fardre- rhos pasture near Cwm Colliery Beddau.
- Parc Nant Celyn, Efail Isaf – rhos pasture adjacent to housing in Efail Isaf.
- Ty Rhiw woods, cemetery and recreation ground, Taffs Well – woodland and grassland habitats.
- Ynysangharad War Memorial Park, Pontypridd – enhancement of the 'wildzones' in the Park.
- Craig yr Hesg Local Nature Reserve, Pontypridd - ancient woodland and grassland in close proximity to Graigwen.

4.6.2 Sites in the North of the County Borough fall into two groups, those in Rhondda and those in Cynon. Again, the sites are all SINCS or SSSIs close to

existing built-up areas and provide important habitat connectivity for pollinating (and other) insects, songbirds and bats. They are also accessible countryside areas close to homes and workplaces.

- Blaenrhondda Park – ‘Wild Zone’ area of woodland and grassland within the Park, home to the rare forester moth.
- Glyncornel Local Nature Reserve – ancient Woodland Site of Special Scientific Interest with flower rich meadows adjacent to The Terraces, Llwynypia.
- Darran Park, Ferndale – one of the largest ancient woodland areas in the Rhondda Fach.
- Clydach Vale Country Park, Tonypany – countryside park on former land reclamation scheme with important coal spoil habitats
- Melin yr Hom, Pentre – wildflower rich ‘Wild Zone’ on the fringes of a recreational ground.
- Cefn Don Recreation Ground, Hirwaun – wildflower ‘Wild Zone’ alongside a football pitch.
- Blaennantygroes Recreation Grounds, Cwmbach – species rich Wild Zone in the park.
- Peace Park – a large area of flower rich floodplain grassland between Mountain Ash Hospital and the Wildlife Trust Reserve, Pwll Waun Cynon
- Penrhiwceiber Recreation Ground – diverse ‘Wild Zone’ within a recreation grounds area.
- Park Farm, Aberdare – Wild Zone with rhos pasture integrated around a former football pitch which is now used as a kickabout area.
- Dare Valley Country Park (conservation grazing area), Aberdare – superb rhos pasture, and wet grassland managed by conservation grazing area within the Country Park
- Aberdare Cemetery - species rich rhos pasture, with potential for marsh fritillary butterflies on the east side of the cemetery.
- Llwydcoed Crematorium - areas of species-rich wet grassland within the crematorium grounds
- Hirwaun Cemetery – wildflower rich habitat next to important marsh fritillary butterfly habitat.

4.7 Type of works proposed in the pilot project

- 4.7.1 A common feature of the proposed works is signage and interpretation. This will allow each site to be identified as part of the network and will describe the key habitat features and biodiversity value.
- 4.7.2 Where sites are proposed for conservation grazing, fencing, stock handling and water provision are essential requirements. Field gates and kissing gates are also required to maintain access.
- 4.7.3 On a number of sites, woodland management works are required for public safety, tree health, hedgerow management and to protect fence lines.

- 4.7.4 On cemetery sites where wildflower grassland management is being introduced, purpose designed composting facilities are an important aesthetic component of the project. At a number of sites, bird boxes are proposed to increase nesting opportunities for specific species.

5. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

- 5.1 There are no equality or diversity implications as a result of the recommendations set out in the report.

6. WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no welsh language implications arising from this report.

7. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

- 7.1 As mentioned before, the Living Landscape project has been developed by the Local Nature Partnership as a means of achieving biodiversity management and community engagement across a wide range of linked sites. The partnership includes representatives from public bodies such as NRW, Health Improvement Wales and Transport for Wales as well as wildlife NGOs like the Wildlife Trust, Buglife, Glamorgan Bird Club and Butterfly Conservation and local community groups and individuals. The Partnership is currently supported by Welsh Government funding for a part-time Co-ordinator (to March 2022), shared with Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council. The Partnership will be central to successful implementation.
- 7.2 The voluntary sector non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are a key resource of specific expertise and local knowledge. We are fortunate in RCT that there is an active and knowledgeable volunteer naturalist community. The involvement of the NGOs provides an opportunity to use the project sites to engage more people, especially those who live locally or use the sites for recreation and develop the skills of the next generation of local naturalists.
- 7.3 Existing community groups, some very informal, are associated with a number of these sites. The Cambrian Trust is an example of a formal group leasing land at Clydach Vale Country Park. They are keen to become involved in biodiversity activities in other areas of the Park. At Parc Nant Celyn, some local residents have become informal 'stock checkers', keeping an eye on the cows.
- 7.4 The pilot sites are all in Council ownership but there is potential for the network to expand. Sites would remain the responsibility of the owner but joining the network could provide access to shared expertise and community participation. The S106 sites in developer ownership are a particular example, where the developer is committed by the planning agreement to biodiversity management works on the site for, typically, 25 years. Inclusion in the network would help the developer/management company to meet their obligations with the support of local groups and the wider partnership. The Wildlife Trust and

Community Councils might also have sites that would contribute to the network.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 8.1 Funding for the active management of Council owned land for biodiversity has been severely limited since the direct grant from the Countryside Council for Wales ceased and austerity reduced budgets and staffing levels. The Climate and Biodiversity Emergencies have highlighted the need for countryside management and this is supported by the Environment (Wales) Act's focus on the sustainable management of natural resources and in particular the 'Biodiversity Duty' for public bodies including the Council.
- 8.2 The total estimated cost of the pilot is £154k and it is proposed to fund the work identified through external funding, and where required, from within existing Council resources,
- 8.3 With regard to external funding opportunities, in 2020/21, Welsh Government made funding for Green Recovery projects available at short notice and with a compressed expenditure timeframe. It is possible that similar funding may be available this year (2021/22) and the costs associated with this project may be funded by that grant if the opportunity arises. The types of work proposed are all deliverable during the second half of the 2021/22 financial year if required.
- 8.4 The Heritage Lottery provides another opportunity for funding, over a longer timeframe, which the Council may wish to explore. In addition to the capital works identified here, this may provide an opportunity to fund works with a longer lead-in or seasonal timing, and develop the community engagement aspects of the pilot, such as training, skills sharing, equipment, volunteering, support for local groups, networking, social media etc.
- 8.5 Following the consideration of the Nature's Assets report by the Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group last year, Cabinet has already approved additional funding for the Countryside and Ecology Service and the Council has successfully recruited an ecology graduate and two biodiversity apprentices, who commenced in September 2021. These posts will support the delivery of the Living Landscape Project as well as expanding the wildflower grassland management programme and the implementation of the Council's Biodiversity Duty (s.6 Environment (Wales) Act).
- 8.6 Grant aid is often restricted to capital funding and the Council will need to consider the longer-term revenue implications and further reports outlining any such implications will be prepared for Cabinet consideration as required. Future revenue funding may be particularly important for engaging local communities, developing events and practical works programmes and providing training for volunteers.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 9.1 The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 is relevant. Part One covers the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and includes the Biodiversity Duty (S6). This part also sets the context for policy and action for the Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales. Part Two considers climate change and informs Welsh Government policy in this regard.

10. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

- 10.1 The proposed Living Landscape pilot considered in this report contributes to the Council's priorities as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan for 2020 to 2024. Specifically, it contributes to 'People' by Encouraging all residents to lead active and healthy lifestyles and maintain their mental wellbeing and to 'Places' by Getting the best out of our parks by looking after and investing in our greenspaces and specifically. Delivering natural carbon storage solutions such as those provided by trees, peat bogs, marshy grassland and other natural habitats across the County Borough to enhance air quality and reduce the impact of greenhouse gasses.
- 10.2 It also reflects the five ways of working in the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Sustainable management is based on long-term considerations and is focused on preventative and precautionary action. The pilot project aims to involve all the relevant stakeholders and to integrate the biodiversity, carbon, water and community benefits in the proposed works. It will contribute specifically to the Resilience and Global Responsibility goals of the Act, but in the longer term it could have implications for all the goals.

11. CONCLUSION

- 11.1 The Nature's Assets Officer Group convened by the Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group has made significant progress in developing the Living Landscapes Project proposal. The Project has identified key programmes of work across 29 potential locations that will be of significant benefit to promoting the biodiversity of areas of Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 11.2 Cabinet is asked to consider the work undertaken to date for this Project and give approval for Officers to progress appropriate external funding applications related to the Pilot areas and deliver the Pilot phase of the Project as set out in the report.

References:

1. Biodiversity tour of Rhondda Cynon Taf
<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Resident/PlanningandBuildingControl/Countryside/Biodiversity/relateddocs/BiodiversityTourofRCTDocument.pdf>

2. Cwm Taf Well-being Plan evidence base
<http://www.ourcwmtaf.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=181&mid=444&fileid=37>

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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