

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CLIMATE CHANGE CABINET STEERING GROUP

18TH NOVEMBER 2019

BIODIVERSITY DUTY

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR PUBLIC HEALTH, PROTECTION & COMMUNITY SERVICES IN DISCUSSION WITH THE CABINET'S CLIMATE CHANGE CHAMPION (COUNCILLOR RHYS LEWIS)

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Members on progress in discharging the Council's Biodiversity Duty and to seek approval to submit the required update report to Welsh Government.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Steering Group:

- 2.1 Consider the proposed report to Welsh Government on the actions undertaken to further the 'Biodiversity Duty' by Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, and
- 2.2 Subject to any amendments, recommend to Cabinet the submission of the update report to Welsh Government.

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The Council is required, by the provisions of s.6 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, to report to Welsh Government on action to comply with the Biodiversity Duty, every three years, with the first report due at the end of 2019.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 contains a new Biodiversity Duty (s.6) which states that public bodies, including Local Authorities:

"...must seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity in the exercise of functions in relation to Wales, and in so doing promote the resilience of ecosystems, so far as consistent with the proper exercise of those functions".

4.2 The Biodiversity Duty Report

4.2.1 A report setting out proposals for the implementation of the new Biodiversity Duty in Rhondda Cynon Taf was prepared in 2017, in consultation with the Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership. The biodiversity duty was discussed with the Council's Senior Leadership Team in October and was considered by the Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee in December 2017.

4.2.2 The Report includes a description of the biodiversity of Rhondda Cynon Taf and its contribution to local well-being as well as its national and international value. The report then considers the main impacts of Council services on biodiversity, highlighting areas of good practice and scope for improvement under the following themes:

- public engagement,
- planning,
- estate management,
- water management,
- education,
- advice to the public,
- corporate planning,
- working with neighbours and statutory bodies

4.3 The Council's response to Net Zero – The Committee on Climate Change

4.3.1 Climate change and biodiversity are interdependent. Many of the underlying drivers of climate change also affect wildlife, for example pollution and land use change. Also, as the climate changes habitats and species need to adapt or move if they are to survive. Biodiversity makes an essential contribution to natural processes such as carbon storage in plants and the movement of water through the landscape. Biodiversity is central to 'ecosystem resilience', which is the focus of both the Environment (Wales) Act and the Resilience Goal in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

4.3.2 Following the recommendations of the Cabinet (18/06/19), further work on biodiversity and climate change is proposed within the context of the new draft Corporate Plan. This will build on current programmes, such as the restoration of extensive peat-bogs and upland heath through planning agreements with windfarm developers. For example, the joint working with Neath Port Talbot at the Penycymoedd wind farm has recently attracted additional funding from The Heritage Lottery for the 'Lost Peatlands' project. The Healthy Hillside project is another

example of a successful project, piloted in Rhondda Cynon Taf, which may now receive additional funding from Welsh Government, allowing further sites in RCT and elsewhere to be brought into conservation management. The project, which is co-ordinated by the Wildlife Trust has been targeted at sites with a history of wild fire and involves the Council, the Fire Service, specialist organisations such as Butterfly Conservation and PONT (conservation grazing) and other landowners such as Llantrisant Town Trust.

4.3.3 The County Borough is one of the most wooded in Wales, with approximately one third of the area wooded. In recent historical terms, woodland cover has increased significantly and much of this has been through natural woodland regeneration. The County Borough has unusually high levels of urban tree cover (in gardens, parks, transport corridors etc.) at 18.5% compared with a Wales average of 16.3%. The management of much of this woodland falls within the Council's remit, providing not only carbon storage, landscape, wildlife and aesthetic benefits but also shade and shelter for residents as the climate warms and water interception and storage if rainfall increases. The impact of increased storminess due to climate breakdown is also a management consideration.

4.3.4 The important role of undisturbed soils and natural vegetation in storing carbon has been recognised by the Council. Delivering natural carbon storage solutions, such as those provided by trees, peatbogs, heathlands, dry and marshy grassland and other natural habitats across the County Borough will help to reduce the impact of greenhouse gasses and enhance air quality. Understanding and working with natural processes, including natural woodland regeneration, will help the Council to achieve both climate and biodiversity benefits through an approach which will be cost effective, sustainable and multi-outcome.

4.4 The Action Plan Spreadsheet

4.4.1 An Action Plan spreadsheet has been set up to monitor progress against the proposed actions. The actions include matters identified in the 2017 report and actions arising from the Service Self Evaluation process (see below). A number of new opportunities have also been included.

4.4.2 Members will be aware that as part of the Council's performance management arrangements a Service Self Evaluation (SSE) is undertaken by each Council service in the autumn to inform the Service Delivery Plans for the forthcoming year. The inclusion of a 'Biodiversity Duty' question in 2017 provided a baseline and some initial priorities for the Action Plan. The follow up question, in the SSE 2018, provided additional information.

4.4.3 The actions are grouped under the themes listed above. Each Action is classified as either a 'project' or 'on-going' and the lead officer identified. Columns provide for the start date, progress 17/18, progress 18/19, progress 19/20, comments and completion date to be recorded.

4.4.4 A copy of the Biodiversity Duty Action Spreadsheet (A3) is appended to this report.

4.5 Statutory Report to Welsh Government

4.5.1 Subject to members' approval, the 2017 Biodiversity Duty Report (appendix 1) and the 2019 Biodiversity Duty Action Plan Spreadsheet (appendix 2) will comprise the Council's first submission to Welsh Government with regard to the provisions of S6 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

4.6 Review of the Biodiversity Duty Report and Action Plan Spreadsheet

4.6.1 Following submission to Welsh Government, the Biodiversity Duty Report will be published on the Council's website.

'Action for Nature: the Local Biodiversity Action Plan for Rhondda Cynon Taf' is currently being reviewed by the Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership. The plan can be viewed at the following link:

<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Resident/PlanningandBuildingChange/Countryside/Biodiversity/ActionforNature.aspx>

This work will provide an opportunity for members of the public, wildlife and community organisations, and public bodies to contribute their projects and ideas for the conservation of wildlife across Rhondda Cynon Taf. Additional themes or actions that come forward, which are relevant to the Council's Biodiversity Duty, will be considered for inclusion for the next 'Biodiversity Duty' reporting round. A further report will be brought to Members in this regard.

5. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

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

6. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

6.1 The initial input from the Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership, Scrutiny Committee and the Senior Leadership Team, together with the

Service Self Evaluation process has enabled a wide range of interests and expertise to contribute to the Biodiversity Duty Action Plan and reporting process. The views of this Scrutiny Committee will inform the deliberations of Cabinet.

- 6.2 The review of the Biodiversity Duty Plan and the next three year reporting round will reflect the results of a wider public involvement in the review of *Action for Nature* described in para 4.5 above.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 7.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report. However, financial implications may arise in association with the actions the Council undertakes to comply with the Duty and these will be considered as and when necessary.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 8.1 The Council has a statutory duty to prepare a plan of action regarding the Biodiversity Duty and to report to Welsh Government, as set out in S.6 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

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

- 9.1 The Biodiversity Duty contributes to a number of the Wellbeing Objectives within the Council's Corporate Plan 2016-2020. In the Corporate Performance Reports, Biodiversity is a cross cutting theme. This reflects the ways of working promoted in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

10. CONCLUSION

- 10.1 The Council is required to report progress in the discharge of its biodiversity duty to Welsh Government. The report and the action plan presented at Appendix 1 & 2 present the current position and Members are asked to consider and approve this report for submission to Welsh Government.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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COMMUNITY SERVICES IN DISCUSSION WITH COUNCILLOR ANN
CRIMMINGS, CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT, LEISURE AND &
HERITAGE SERVICES**

Background papers:

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