



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2021-22

**PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY – COMMUNITIES AND PROSPERITY SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

18th NOVEMBER 2021

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, PUBLIC HEALTH , PROTECTION & COMMUNITY
SERVICES**

BIODIVERSITY AND THE LOCAL NATURE PARTNERSHIP IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update members on the work of the Council and the Local Nature Partnership in relation to biodiversity in RCT and the future direction of this work.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that members of the Scrutiny Committee:

- 2.1 Note the progress made in RCT in recent years and the increasing importance of biodiversity conservation in the Council's work.
- 2.2 Consider whether they wish to scrutinise in depth any further matters.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 In 2019 the Wales Government introduced a Biodiversity Duty for all Local Authorities in Wales. The biodiversity duty sets out how the Council aims to incorporate biodiversity considerations into all aspects of its business. This process has become embedded in the corporate performance culture of the Council and whilst much of this is routine, it is also encouraging some innovative projects.

An example is the Pen-y-Cymoedd wind farm which began in 2010 as a cross border planning application with implications for peatbogs, a priority habitat. Local Development Plan Policy AW8 allowed the Local Planning Authority to pursue mitigation from the developer for the impacts and resulted in a 25 year peatbog restoration programme, funded by the developer and managed by an environmental management group including NRW, the developer and both RCT and Neath Port Talbot (NPT) Councils. This led to a successful Heritage Lottery bid by NPT on behalf of both Councils to engage the surrounding communities via the 'Lost Peatlands' project. Following the successful development phase, the full four year programme commenced in summer 2021, with additional funding. The detailed survey work that has been undertaken on the windfarm site has revealed a previously undiscovered population of water voles. These are one of Wales' rarest mammals and appear to be thriving in our wet upland habitats. They have suffered severe population declines in their traditional lowland haunts due to habitat loss and predation by mink. An LNP funded project has also been tracking the migration of nightjar, another rare species that nests in this area. Recently, the value of peatbogs for water and carbon storage has been more widely recognised and Pen-y-Cymoedd is a potential demonstration project for peatbog restoration elsewhere both within RCT and more widely.

- 3.2 Changes to Planning Policy Guidance from Welsh Government (from PPW10 onwards) has also raised the profile of biodiversity in the planning system. This includes new requirements for Green Infrastructure, encompassing biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, that the Council will consider as part of the ongoing review of the [Local Development Plan](#).
- 3.3 In 2020 a [Nature's Assets report](#) was presented to the Council's Cabinet Climate Change Committee and this has led to a number of on-going projects associated with peat-bog restoration opportunities, the carbon storage, water management and biodiversity potential of Council owned land, schools, ancient woodlands and trees more generally. This is in addition to the implementation of the Wildflower Grassland Management Policy and the associated promotion through [Let's Talk Wildflowers | Let's Talk RCTCBC](#) during the summer. Since September, the Council's Ecologist has been supported by a graduate who has already provided invaluable additional capacity to deal with the ecological requirements and components of the planning regime and other important Council work.
- 3.4 The biodiversity work undertaken by the Council, across many departments, draws on the knowledge and expertise of the Council's Ecologist, Parks and Countryside Services as well as statutory bodies like Natural Resources Wales. But it is also heavily dependent on local naturalists and the voluntary conservation sector who provide a wealth of local information, observations and insights that are essential to a sound evidence base. For many years, these organisations and individuals have been contributing to the Local Nature Partnership which was formerly known as the Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership.
- 3.5 The new name originated with new funding from Welsh Government via the ENRAW programme which, in part, replaced former Countryside Council for Wales funding. This funding, to 24 Local Nature Partnerships across Wales (Local Authority or National Park areas), was for three years from April 2019 to March 2022 and is administered by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) for the Wales Biodiversity Partnership (WBP). The funding supported the appointment of Local Nature Partnership Co-

ordinators for each area to reinvigorate community engagement with nature, together with a small project fund to assist with actions on the ground. In RCT we share an officer with Neath Port Talbot LNP who has brought a wealth of expertise and has supported the Partnership to attract new members and to continue to develop. <https://www.facebook.com/NPTWildlife>

- 3.6 One of the main tasks of the RCT LNP has been to update the 'Action for Nature' plan first produced in 2000 and updated in 2009. Although most meetings have been held on-line, a monthly schedule of species and habitat discussions have drawn on the assembled expertise and we are on schedule to produce a draft for wider consultation in the next few months. Members of the partnership are responsible for a wide range of positive action for biodiversity in RCT including management of special sites, public engagement and training and monitoring and recording.
- 3.7 The project funding that was initially intended to spend on public events associated with the production of the 'Action for Nature' plan has been redirected to support small scale partners projects. This includes bird nesting and survey projects run by the local BTO group, equipment for use by the LNP such as bat detectors and camera traps, a Nightjar migration monitoring project and support for the Welsh Government Woodland Estate project.
- 3.8 From the outset Welsh Government has expressed an interest in the work the Partnerships across Wales were undertaking and from April 2020, allocated capital funding under the name 'Local Places for Nature' for specific 'modest measures' as laid out in the manifesto of the First Minister, to promote biodiversity in communities. The table below shows the capital allocations to the RCT LNP and the projects it has been spent on.

Year	LNP outturn	Environmental Growth on your Doorstep Plan	Greening the Public Estate Plan	Examples of capital assets acquired in year	Examples of the natural assets, created, restored or enhanced.
20/21	£ 87,003	Enhance nature on at least 70 hectares of wildflower meadow, wetland, open space and grass verges incl. 10 ha of grassland, much of which is small, urban or roadside grassland spaces which are more difficult to access by traditional machinery.	The Trees for Parks project will facilitate the planting of trees in 17 appropriate parks and cemeteries across RCT.	1 Amazone cut and collect machine. 350 trees	350 trees planted. 120 hectares of wildflower grassland now managed.
21/22	£145,000 capital plus £20,000 revenue (additional staff time from staff hosted with NPT Council)	Green Roof Classrooms; delivering up to 8 Green roof classrooms on school sites with little or no access to nature	Let Nature Grow; Community growing area in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park and a cut and collect machine to expand on last years project	Additional cut and collect machine. Up to 8 green roof classrooms.	Additional hectareage of grassland managed for biodiversity. Green roofs in schools.

This Fund has played a major role in enabling RCT to deliver its wildflower grass management policy through the purchase of two Amazone ‘cut and collect’ machines over the last two years thus allowing more verges and grassed areas to be added to the list of sites managed for wildflowers. The smaller equipment is complementary to an existing machine which had been purchased through grant funding several years earlier. We have also been able to purchase and plant over 300 trees in our parks, cemeteries and recreation grounds in 2020 throughout RCT as well as current work on delivering a community garden project at Ynysangharad War Memorial Park and green-roofed outdoor classrooms for schools with little access to greenspace.

- 3.9 This fund aims to drive significant change in the way public services work, ensuring that meaningful changes are made to improve the local environment for people and nature, driving a green recovery. The funding is intended to support Councils and other public bodies to make significant changes and be aspirational in delivery, particularly through capital works and looking at delivering multiple benefits (e.g. air quality improvements, drainage, biodiversity) for people and nature. The projects that have been taken forward in RCT have demonstrated the multi-disciplinary collaboration, cross departmental working, acceptance that there will be ongoing responsibilities for sustaining positive outcomes.
- 3.10 Whilst we cannot foresee what Welsh Government propose for future funding, their Programme for Government following the election, their declaration of a Nature

Emergency and the recent statement on 'biodiversity and Local Places for Nature' by the Minister for Climate Change to the Senedd [Senedd.tv - Plenary - 12/10/2021](https://www.senedd.tv) suggest this remains a priority.

- 3.11 The current ENRAW funding for the LNP co-ordinators ends in March next year and in addition, RCT will lose the support of our experienced co-ordinator in advance of this as she has secured a role with NPT CBC. This will leave the RCT LNP in a difficult position with regard to any possible future funding that may be announced later this year. The current LNP co-ordinator will be able to provide support to develop a possible bid but not to follow through and implement it if funding is forthcoming.
- 3.12 The Cabinet has recently approved an outline of the pilot of 29 sites for a [Living Landscapes](#) project in Rhondda Cynon Taf that can be delivered either within existing resources or in anticipation of any potential funding opportunities that may arise and require spending over a short period of time. The Living Landscape project provides a mechanism for linking sites of nature conservation value to their local communities, with the support of the statutory and voluntary conservation organisations. The appointment of two biodiversity apprentices from September 2021 provides an opportunity to undertake practical works on these sites utilising supervision and training input from established staff, including the LNP co-ordinator and the graduate ecologist.

4. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

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

5. WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no Welsh language implications arising from this report.

6. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

- 6.1 The function of the Local Nature Partnership is to engage and involve all those with an interest in nature conservation in Rhondda Cynon Taf. The Co-ordinator's post and the support from WCVA and the Wales Biodiversity Partnership has been instrumental in diversifying and developing the range of participants and the ways in which they can become engaged.
- 6.2 This is of benefit to the Council, as well as the participants and the natural world. Our knowledge and evidence base improves, the concerns and aspirations of a diverse range of stakeholders are better understood and a huge amount of practical work is taken forward.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 8.1 No legal implications are anticipated.

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

9.1 This report contributes to a wide range of the Council's priorities as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan for 2020 to 2024. Specifically, it contributes to investing in our greenspaces and to 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.

9.2 It also reflects the five ways of working in the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Biodiversity work must be based on long-term considerations and is focused on preventative and precautionary action. It seeks to integrate biodiversity and ecosystem resilience (including carbon, water and community benefits) into projects across the Council to realise multiple benefits for local residents and wildlife. The Local Nature Partnership provides a valuable mechanism for involving all the relevant stakeholders and promote collaboration.

9.3 Biodiversity work contributes specifically to the Resilience and Global Responsibility goals of the Act but in the longer term it could have implications for all the goals

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 Consideration of biodiversity has become an important and cross cutting component of the work of this Council. This report draws Members attention to the progress that has been made to date by the Local Nature Partnership in facing increasing demands and opportunities in this vital area of work.