



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2021-22

PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY
COMMUNITIES AND PROSPERITY
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17th FEBRUARY 2022

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

Agenda Item No. 7

**CURRENT BIODIVERSITY WORK IN
RCT**

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update members on current biodiversity work across the Council and to provide specific action feedback from the Public Service Scrutiny Committee of November 18th 2021.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that Members support the direction of biodiversity action and delivery identified in this report and the proposal that, in future, regular progress updates are reported to the Committee.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To ensure scrutiny of the Implementation of key elements of the Council's Biodiversity Duty delivery.

4. **BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 Due to a complex and fortuitous combination of historic land use, soils, topography and climate, RCT supports a complex wealth of habitats and species. Habitats are large in scale, complex in nature and connected, as a result many different species can not only flourish but can also move around the County Borough. In many cases high quality habitats also wrap around and encompasses our settlements and communities. Residents of RCT therefore live and work in environments which are wildlife rich. This is not a situation often found in Britain, and it is one of the reasons that makes RCT a great place to live. Many more people discovered this during the pandemic, when daily exercise had to be close to home.
- 4.2 In RCT, where there is already a fantastic ecology, our first two priority biodiversity actions are to protect our existing biodiversity and then where possible, enhance that biodiversity through sympathetic land management. The third action is to raise awareness of the RCT's natural wealth of habitats and species and develop public and community recognition, engagement, action and support. Recording and monitoring our habitats and species is a fourth key action. Biodiversity conservation requires long term, on-going action and planning, and appropriate provision of resources (both people and money).
- 4.3 With devolution, the approach to biodiversity has developed in Wales. The Welsh Government declared a Nature Emergency in 2021 and has recognised the close relationship with the climate emergency. The Council's biodiversity work has therefore expanded significantly, with requests for support from across the Council and although this is a hugely positive area of work it has inevitably brought pressures on a limited staff resource. Biodiversity work is based on evidence, and this relies heavily on local knowledge and expertise; from staff and our Local Nature Partnership, which includes local naturalists.
- 4.4 The current priority areas of biodiversity work are detailed in the paragraphs below.
- 4.4.1 The **planning process** is a key area of biodiversity work. This includes the Council's planning policy designations of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) which identify sites of County Borough nature conservation importance. SINC's are used strategically in the process of site allocation for the local development plan and also in the day-to-day assessment of planning applications. The Council's Local Development Plan nature conservation policy AW8 also sets out the ecological requirements for all planning applications.
- 4.4.2 **Ecological mitigation** secured through planning agreement is an area that RCT Council has a significant 'track-record' in delivering. Long-term habitat management agreements, usually through S106, have been used to secure large scale habitat mitigation and enhancement provision. As a result, a considerable hectareage (totalling in excess of a thousand hectares) of habitat management area has been negotiated. These include peatbog and upland habitat restoration on six upland windfarm sites and a National Grid sub-station site, the securing of a network of connected and managed grassland, marsh, and woodland habitats in

the south and north of the County Borough, and numerous other smaller management agreement sites. In some cases, the planning agreement measures have led to the Council's adoption of nature conservation land (with commuted management sums), on one occasion RCT's planning outcome secured Brynna Woods as a Nature Reserve adopted by Wildlife Trust for South and West Wales.

- 4.4.3 The **Local Nature Partnership** (LNP, formerly the Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership) continues to be the focus for biodiversity knowledge and expertise in RCT. It involves statutory and voluntary nature conservation partners as well as local community organisations and interested individuals, including many committed and knowledgeable naturalists. For the past three years (to March 2022), Welsh Government has grant funded all the LNPs across Wales, and during that time the RCTLNP has reviewed and updated the original 'Action for Nature' documents and developed a website to promote action. This is out for public consultation until 11th March 2022. <https://rctlnp.wixsite.com/rct-actionfornature>
- 4.4.4 **Council land ownership** includes significant areas of important biodiversity land and other areas that, with modest management changes, could become more biodiverse. Council ecological and biodiversity land management expertise is key to realising such opportunities.
- 4.4.5 The **Living Landscape Project** is a landscape scale project which aims to link together a network of biodiversity rich and sustainably managed sites throughout RCT with local communities. The first phase of the project is focussing on 29 sites (see appendix) in Council ownership, located across 23 of RCT's wards and includes countryside and parks, cemeteries and council adopted S106 sites, all of which provide crucial habitat connectivity for a range of priority species. Since September 2021, practical works on the Living Landscape sites is being delivered through management work and has been made possible by the appointment of a Graduate Ecologist and two dedicated Biodiversity Apprentices. The programme of works will be expanded in the spring and summer of 2022 to include community and Member engagement, interpretation and ecological survey and assessment.
- 4.4.6 In the next few years, there is huge opportunity to extend the Living Landscape Project to include more Council owned land, increase the number Wards with sites, and to bring forward Action for Nature partners sites and sites secured through planning agreements (see 4.4.2 above) into network of managed sites across the whole County Borough. The great majority of these opportunities being in close proximity to communities and people.
- 4.4.7 **Managing grasslands** is hugely important, both for biodiversity and carbon storage. Grass verges, open spaces and parks in RCT are often rich in native wildflowers and an increasing number of these are being managed through either conservation grazing, or 'cut and collect' management. The latter involves cutting the wildflower grass in the late summer or autumn and collecting the clippings. This collection of cut grass reduces the soil fertility and in doing so both reduces grass growth but encourages wildflowers. In addition, the collecting of the cut grass

allows wildflowers seed to germinate better and, increase their abundance and diversity.

Currently 39 of RCT's wards have areas for wildflower management, with Pontyclun, Brynna, Aberdare East and Aberdare West/Llwydcoed having the largest extent of these areas (see Appendix). The distribution of the current wildflower management areas across RCT results from a number of factors including ward size, the proportion of urban areas and the availability of suitable land. Topography is crucial as cut and collect management cannot be undertaken on sites which are too steep. On smaller or steeper sites, where cut and collect is not possible there is an opportunity for community 'Grab Your Rake' events where members of the public can get involved in raking up the grass cuttings.

Last year 'RCT Let's Talk Wildflowers' [Let's Talk Wildflowers | Let's Talk RCTCBC](#) encouraged members of the public to nominate areas which they thought should be considered for wildflower management. This data will allow us to identify areas which have potential to be included in the wildflower management programme, including in wards which currently do not have any of these areas.

- 4.4.8 The **Climate Change Cabinet Steering Committee** has received a number of biodiversity reports since its inception in 2019 and has been the focus for integrating biodiversity and climate issues. The report on Nature's Assets [Cabinet Report MTSP One4aLL LG \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#) resulted in an officer working group, meeting regularly to progress specific projects. Research on carbon storage in, and carbon loss from, **peatbogs** in RCT is currently underway.

Land-use is an emerging focus of the carbon calculator that all local authorities must complete for Welsh Government. Members will be aware of the pressure to plant trees. In a county such as RCT, which already has very high levels of woodland cover and extensive semi-natural habitats on undisturbed organic soils, this is likely to be counter-productive for storing carbon and very damaging for biodiversity, if existing important habitats are planted with trees. **Natural regeneration** or colonisation occurs widely in RCT and research is proposed to quantify the contribution this has made to increasing woodland cover on Council owned land.

Managing existing woodlands, in particular the Council's tree stock and increasing tree cover in built up areas, where there are the greatest carbon storage and amenity benefits for local residents, are advocated as priorities for RCT. Members will be aware of the threat posed by ash die-back which is affecting many Council managed trees and the additional resources needed to address tree management issues in general.

- 4.4.9 **Community Engagement** is essential to the success of the Council's Biodiversity Work. Through the delivery of the old Local Biodiversity Action Plan (published 2000) a programme of engagement based on talks, walks, newsletters and projects showed the appetite and importance of biodiversity for local residents, but only reached a small proportion of the population. The new 'Action for Nature' Plan,

with its web-based format, and series of innovative internet consultation /engagement (partly forced on it by the restrictions of covid) has shown the capacity to reach a greater audience. Many community groups and interested individuals, as well as ecology groups and agencies have been engaged. The RCT Lets Talk Wildflower Programme elicited a very promising public response.

The Local Nature Plan is a County Borough wide partnership process which has drawn together technical ecological expertise with issues and concerns, solutions and opportunities with public engagement into a strategic and focussed approach to biodiversity conservation in RCT. The continuity (over 20 years) and development of the Partnership from the old Local Biodiversity Action Plan to new Local Nature Plan have been significant features of the strategic Biodiversity approach by the Council.

4.4.10 The **Biodiversity Duty** draws together all aspects of the Council's biodiversity work. We are fortunate to be supported in this by the Council's corporate performance management system which includes a 'biodiversity question' in the annual Service Self Evaluation. This encourages consideration of biodiversity by each Service, reporting of progress made and can highlight new opportunities. The RCT approach is being used as one of a number of 'best practice' examples, by Welsh Government, in their training for public bodies.

4.5 **Challenges:**

4.5.1 Biodiversity and natural processes are based on intricate webs of interconnection, with living creatures (including people) dependant on functioning ecosystems that have evolved over millennia. These complex relationships between plants, animals, fungi, soil, rocks, water, weather, oceans and atmosphere can take a long time to develop but can be destroyed very quickly. Fixing the damage we have done is rarely straight forward or speedy.

4.5.2 The main drivers of biodiversity loss around the world (and in RCT) are land-use change, pollution, invasive non-native species, climate change and direct exploitation of organisms. The first priority has to be to protect the semi-natural habitats we still have and, as far as possible, allow natural processes to function as nature intended.

4.5.3 A separate report on the Council's approach to Japanese knotweed is being considered by this Committee, with a focus on the wider risks this poses for the Authority. The management of invasive species is also important from a biodiversity perspective. Japanese Knotweed is only one of a number of invasives that are locally significant.

4.5.4 The emergence of biodiversity as an important issue, both locally and nationally, has put considerable pressure on the small number of specialist officers employed by the Council. The appointment of a graduate ecologist and two biodiversity apprentices is a welcome, if short term development. The Council will need to consider how to meet these increased demands in the future.

5. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

- 5.1 There are no equality, diversity nor socio-economic 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 indicated above, biodiversity work in RCT is heavily dependent on the Local Nature Partnership for local knowledge and wildlife expertise. The Partnership aims to be welcoming to all who are interested in supporting, advising and informing their work and enjoying their local environment.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

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

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 9.1 No legal implications are anticipated. The Council's responsibilities are drawn from a diversity of Wildlife legislation as well the Acts mentioned in paragraph 4.3 above.

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

- 10.1 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.

- 10.2 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 to promote collaboration.

- 10.3 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.

11. **CONCLUSION**

- 11.1 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, as well as the increasing demands and opportunities in this vital area of work.