

Biodiversity Action Plan Update

Final Decision-Maker	Heritage, Culture and Leisure Committee
Lead Head of Service/Lead Director	Director of Regeneration and Place
Lead Officer and Report Author	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

Maidstone's Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) was adopted in 2011 to collate knowledge on priority species and habitats and provide an action plan to conserve and protect these for the future.

Following adoption of the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy Action Plan and the Parks and Open Spaces 10 year Plan, it is now an appropriate time to carry out a refresh of the LBAP.

This report outlines the key changes to national and local policy, the projects carried out and the options going forward.

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That the Committee agrees to carry out a refresh of Maidstone's Biodiversity Action Plan funded from the underspend from the Parks and Open Spaces 2017/18 budget.

Timetable	
Meeting	Date
Heritage, Culture and Leisure Committee	Tuesday 30 January 2018

Biodiversity Action Plan Update

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Biodiversity (or biological diversity) describes the variety of life around us; both between and with ecosystems and habitats and including the variety of different species and the genetic variation within species. It is considered the most important indicator of the state of our environment.
- 1.2 Biodiversity became a global agenda in 1992 when 150 governments around the world signed the Convention on Biological Diversity at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Since then the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP) was launched, followed by regional (SEEBF) and local plans (LBAP) all identifying actions to conserve and enhance priority habitats and species.
- 1.3 Having started the work in 2007, Maidstone formally adopted its Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) in 2011 and covered the period 2009-2014. It was jointly produced by the Council's Parks and Leisure Team and Medway Valley Countryside Partnership (MVCN).
- 1.4 The original objectives of the LBAP were:
 - To develop and consolidate a sound biological knowledge base.
 - To consistently translate national biodiversity targets into effective action at the local level.
 - To examine local biodiversity status and issues, and identify conservation targets for locally important habitats.
 - To develop sustainable local partnerships to help deliver programmes for biodiversity conservation, education and environmental stewardship.
 - To increase public awareness of, and participation in, conserving biodiversity locally.
 - To ensure that opportunities for biodiversity conservation and enhancement are identified and fully considered via all statutory and local processes and initiatives.
 - To provide a basis for measuring and monitoring progress in biodiversity conservation at a local level, and contributing to national efforts.
- 1.5 In order to achieve this, the LBAP was split into separate plans based around the national priority habitats found within the Borough:
 - Lowland and Dry Acid Grassland and Heath
 - Lowland Meadows
 - Lowland Beach and Yew Woodland
 - Wet Woodlands
 - Lowland Wood Pasture and Parkland
 - Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland
 - Traditional Orchards
 - Ponds
 - Rivers
 - Urban Green Space

- 1.6 The full LBAP is included as a background document for information.
- 1.7 A number of projects have been delivered since 2011, including the creation of a biodiversity database. The table below highlights key initiatives which have also been carried out by Maidstone's partners.

Project	Date initiated	Current status
Old Chalk New Downs (KCC)	January 2017	3 year project restoring chalk grassland habitats
Save Our Magnificent Meadows (MVCN)	May 2014	Completion October 2017. New phase project 2020-2024
Natural Flood Management (KCC/EA/MVCN)	2015	KCC projects. On-going
Invasive Species Control (MVCN)	1995	New project Past Plants Future Flora in place for 3 years from 2016
Kent Wildlife Trust landscape scale projects (KWT)	Various dates	Numerous on-going and in development
Woodland Web (MKD)	In development	Possible start Jan 2019
Men in Sheds programmes	2015	On-going

- 1.8 Conserving and promoting biodiversity remains a key objective of the 10 year Parks and Open Spaces Plan which was adopted in 2017, as well as Maidstone's new Local Plan.

New Policy Drivers

- 1.9 Over the past 10 years there have been significant changes to the approach to conservation management and the political environment. Most significantly, LBAPs are no longer part of the national approach to managing biodiversity. In general, conservation management at a borough level has been subsumed as an appendix to or as part of local plans and other statutory documents.
- 1.10 Appendix A shows a summary of a number of underlying policy drivers which have impacted the way biodiversity and habitat conservation is managed in the UK.

Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy Action Plan

- 1.11 In December 2017 the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy Action Plan was adopted by Strategic Planning, Sustainability and Transportation Committee (SPS&T). The Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy itself is part of the evidence base for the Local Plan with regard to the Council's focus on maintaining public open spaces and conserving biodiversity across the Borough.

1.12 A theme within this action plan is "*Maintaining and enhancing biodiversity, waste and air quality*" which includes a number of actions and reference to the LBAP:

- Identify sites to address quantified shortage of public open spaces
- Avoid the loss of ancient woodland and veteran trees and encourage landowners to manage and restore these areas
- Protect the spring line along the southern edge of the Kent Downs AONB from pollution particularly from highway and agricultural run-off
- Review and update the Maidstone Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

Review of LBAP

1.13 The LBAP has not been updated since 2014. This is predominately due to timing as there was a desire to await the outcome of the new Local Plan and adoption of the 10 year Parks and Open Spaces Plan before reviewing the LBAP. With both the Local Plan and Parks and Open Spaces Plan now adopted, it is timely to review the LBAP.

1.14 Medway Valley Countryside Partnership has recently undertaken a scoping exercise on behalf of the Council to determine the level of work required to refresh the LBAP. It is estimated this would cost in the region of £25,000 and would include updating the policy drivers, engaging with communities, Members, officers and other key stakeholders, reviewing the objectives, GIS programming, updating database and identify new projects funded through S106 money.

2. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 2.1 Maidstone's LBAP was seen as a "*leading and novel approach at local authority level*" when it was originally adopted. Although there is no statutory requirement to have an LBAP anymore, it is referenced in the Local Plan and is a key document for highlighting the importance of biodiversity in Maidstone. The Council could decide to retain and refresh the LBAP to reflect the current policy drivers and priorities in Maidstone. However it is unlikely that this could be completed within the Council's existing resources and therefore there would be a cost implication of approximately £25,000 to deliver the 9 month project.
 - 2.2 Alternatively the Council could decide to do nothing and leave the LBAP as a historical reference document and cease to have an action plan focused on biodiversity. However this would conflict with the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy Action Plan and would result in a loss of the knowledge collected over a number of years.
 - 2.3 The final option is for a new approach to be identified to replace the LBAP. This would take a considerable amount of work and is likely to have a significant financial impact as most of the original mapping using GIS systems would require a complete revision. The benefit of retaining the LBAP structure is that the work can be tracked over time and is produced in a consistent structure.
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3. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 It is recommended that a refresh of the LBAP is carried out as set out in the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy Action Plan. This will ensure that conserving and promoting biodiversity remains a central policy for Maidstone Borough Council and will tie together the objectives of the G&BIS Action Plan, Local Plan and 10 year Parks and Open Spaces Plan surrounding biodiversity.
 - 3.2 The original concept for the LBAP was to show how the Council leads and is directly involved in protecting and enhancing the Borough's biodiversity and raising awareness of the issues. This is as relevant now as it has always been and therefore it is not recommended to do nothing and resign the document to historical reference.
 - 3.3 A refresh of the LBAP will help support the Council's priority for "*keeping Maidstone an attractive place for all*" through the conservation of the environment and protection of priority species and habitats.
 - 3.4 Although there is a cost associated with the refresh, it is proposed to fund this from the Parks and Open Spaces underspend in 2017/18. This has been agreed with the Director of Finance and Business Transformation.
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4. RISK

- 4.1 There are no identified risks associated with carrying out a refresh of the LBAP.
 - 4.2 If the Committee does not agree with the recommendation and decides to do nothing, as there is no statutory requirement to do so, there is a risk that the Council will fail to protect biodiversity going forward. Without an action plan, projects may not work collaboratively and will not generate the level of benefits to biodiversity, species conservation and habitat management in the Borough as the LBAP would.
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5. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 5.1 Consultation on the refresh of the LBAP will be carried out as part of the process.
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6. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 6.1 If the Committee supports the recommendation, it is proposed that the Parks and Open Spaces Manager will work with Medway Valley Countryside Partnership to deliver the refresh as have been involved throughout and remain a valuable partner to the Council.

- 6.2 It is anticipated that both Members and Officers will have an active role in shaping the future LBAP and therefore will be consulted with during the process.
- 6.3 The final revision will be brought back to Heritage, Culture and Leisure Committee for adoption.
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7. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	Accepting the recommendations will materially improve the Council's ability to achieve keeping Maidstone an attractive place for all. We set out the reasons other choices will be less effective in section 2.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Risk Management	There are no identified risks associated with carrying out a refresh of the LBAP.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Financial	The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation. The proposal will be funded from the underspend in the Parks and Open Spaces budget for 2017/18.	Section 151 Officer and Finance Team
Staffing	We will need access to extra expertise to deliver the recommendations, as set out in section 3.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Legal	There is no longer a statutory requirement to have an LBAP, therefore there are no legal implications of the recommendation.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Privacy and Data Protection	There is no anticipated impact.	Head of Environment and Public Realm

Equalities	The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment	
Crime and Disorder		
Procurement	<p>The Parks and Open Spaces Team would prefer to work with their current partners Medway Valley Countryside Partnership on this refresh as they have been a fundamental part of the LBAP since the beginning.</p> <p>Therefore a waiver will be sought to continue this work. If this is not possible, three quotations will be received from similar groups and the contract will be awarded on quality and price.</p>	Head of Environment and Public Realm

8. REPORT APPENDICES

- Appendix A – Underlying Policy Drivers
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9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Maidstone's Local Biodiversity Action Plan 2009-2014