

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE15 JUNE 2015REQUEST FOR THE CREATION OF AN IN-HOUSE ECOLOGIST/BIODIVERSITY OFFICERREPORT OF HEAD OF LANDSCAPE AND OPEN SPACESContact Officer: SUSAN CROKER Tel No: 01962 848419RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The purpose of this report is to request permission and resources to appoint a permanent full time Ecologist/Biodiversity Officer within the City Council.

Currently, the City Council has no in-house ecological expertise which raises a number of issues for the Council.

The creation of an in-house ecologist would resolve the majority of these issues and would be of benefit to a number of departments within the Council including Landscape and Open Spaces, Development Management, Strategic Planning and Housing.

This post will be at least cost neutral and likely to save the Council a small sum going forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That approval is given to the findings of this review and specifically for:
 - (i) the creation of an Ecologist/Biodiversity Officer (Scale 5);

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE

15 JUNE 2015

REQUEST FOR THE CREATION OF AN IN-HOUSE ECOLOGIST/BIODIVERSITY OFFICER

REPORT OF HEAD OF LANDSCAPE AND OPEN SPACES

DETAIL:

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Winchester District has an exceptional natural environment, rich in wildlife habitats and species of international, national and regional importance, set within diverse landscapes. However this natural environment is under continuous and considerable threat as identified within the Winchester Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) updated in 2013.
- 1.2 Biodiversity provides a range of benefits for those who live, work and visit the area including health and wellbeing, flood prevention, local character and distinctiveness, provision of essential products and materials and contributes to a stronger local economy.
- 1.3 Winchester City Council has a legal duty “... *in exercising its function, to have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity*” Section 40: Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.
- 1.4 This requires the City Council to show that:
 - I. Biodiversity conservation and enhancements are appropriately integrated throughout all departmental policies and activities.
 - II. All staff, managers and elected members understand how biodiversity issues relate to their own decisions and actions.
 - III. WCC take appropriate account of legislation with regard to protected species and habitats within our decision making process in terms of forward planning and land and buildings under our ownership and management.
- 1.5 The value of biodiversity and the need for WCC to take account of it is recognised within the proposed Portfolio Plan – The Neighbourhoods and Environment Portfolio Plan 2015/16. This recognises “*the need to maintain and protect all aspects of our environment that impact upon not only our health and wellbeing and enjoyment of the*

District but also its economic vitality.” One key objective within this Plan is to “Ensure that the quality of place we enjoy is maintained and enhanced”.

CURRENT ARRANGEMENTS

- 2.1 The City Council has no in-house ecological expertise. In order to meet our legal and other obligations, the City Council buys in services from other providers. We purchase development management support from Hampshire County Council, and land management and forward planning advice from private consultants.
- 2.2 This raises a number of issues for the City Council:-
- I. Our current approach is segmented and disjointed, as ecological support is gained from various sources with little cross boundary working.
 - II. The Council has limited control over the skills and experience of the ecologists employed and is unable to help develop their skill base to suit our needs.
 - III. The Council is reliant upon external individuals to provide advice, which often delays and complicates decision making. For example when providing ecological comments on development management applications, Winchester City Council is required to work to the timescales dictated by Hampshire County Council and often responses are more detailed than required, resulting in the need for additional discussions before a final decision can be reached.
 - IV. The Council has little flexibility within the current arrangements to respond to ecological priorities and to ensure that our current resource is directed to greatest need.
 - V. Many of our Council owned sites are falling short of providing effective ecological provision and opportunities to protect and enhance biodiversity are being missed. This leaves the Council open to criticism regarding the management and use of its open spaces and parks.
 - VI. Winchester City Council currently has little control over future costs for ecological support, and is dependent on external organisations’ pricing policies. The current support through HCC is by far the cheapest within the commercial sector and if HCC are unable or unwilling to provide support, the cost to WCC is likely to increase significantly.

3. PROPOSED SOLUTION.

- 3.1 In order to resolve many of the issues identified in 2.2, it is proposed that a 1 FTE in-house ecologist is appointed who will be based in the Landscape and Open Spaces Team and work across a number of teams including development management, housing and strategic planning.
- 3.2 There will still be a need at times to bring in additional support, for example when undertaking bat surveys of City Council owned properties, but it will be possible to utilise the knowledge of the in-house ecologist when appointing suitable consultants and undertaking the work.

4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The post, if approved, will be a Scale 5 ie £31,644 to £39,653 (including on-costs) as of April 2015. This post went through the Job Evaluation process in May 2015.
- 4.2 Appendix i sets out the financial implications of this proposal. This shows that the post will be at least cost neutral and likely to save the Council a small sum going forward.
- 4.3 Some of the funding is coming from the Landscape and Open Spaces district budget and some from the town budget. The division of funding reflects the expected distribution of work by the ecologist/biodiversity officer across the whole of the Winchester area.
- 4.4 It is important to note that there will still be a need to fund additional ecological support for example when commenting on in-house housing projects and the funds provided by the various departments allows for this.
- 4.5 In addition, this post will be the only ecological officer available within the Council and there will be no cover for holiday or sickness. However, it is anticipated that this can be managed to minimise any impact on business need.

5. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- 5.1 There are no risk management issues identified.

6. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- 6.1 None.

7. APPENDICES:

Appendix 1: Appointment of an in-house ecologist – Budget Sheet 1

Ecologist / Biodiversity Officer				Salary Incl. On-Costs						
Financial Year				2015/16	2015/16	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	top of grade 2019/20
Post				Grade	SCP	£	£	£	£	£
FTE										
New Post										
	Ecologist / Biodiversity Officer	new	1.00	5	34	20,812	37,588	39,011	40,547	42,195
	Essential Car User Allowance					823	1,410	1,410	1,410	1,410
Total Cost / (Savings)			1.00			21,635	38,998	40,421	41,957	43,605
Funding	Rubbish Clearance - Landscape & Open Spaces					(6,934)	(11,886)	(11,886)	(11,886)	(11,886)
	Grounds Maintenance Reactive - Landscape & Open Spaces					(3,208)	(5,500)	(5,500)	(5,500)	(5,500)
	HCC Ecological Advice & Support - Development Management					(12,133)	(20,800)	(20,800)	(20,800)	(20,800)
	New Homes Delivery					(2,333)	(4,000)	(4,000)	(4,000)	(4,000)
	Strategic Planning					(1,167)	(2,000)	(2,000)	(2,000)	(2,000)
Total Available Funding						(25,775)	(44,186)	(44,186)	(44,186)	(44,186)
(SURPLUS) / DEFICIT			1.00			(4,141)	(5,188)	(3,765)	(2,229)	(581)
				Cumulative		(4,141)	(9,329)	(13,094)	(15,323)	(15,904)
Assumptions										
New post budgeted at mid point and assumed in WCC LG pension scheme										
Salary costs include on costs, with 1% year on year inflation increase, and incremental progression where applicable										
Employers NI rate increase as from 2016/17										
Essential car user (ECU) commitments included										
To be confirmed										