

REPORT TITLE: ECOLOGICAL SITES

5 DECEMBER 2023

REPORT OF PORTFOLIO HOLDER: Cllr Kelsie Learney, Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency

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WARD(S): N/A

PURPOSE

In declaring the Nature and Climate Emergencies, the council acknowledged the importance of environmental and ecological issues.

The council owns and manages sites specifically for biodiversity due to their ecological importance. There is a challenge to meeting the cost of creation, management and monitoring of the district's sites of ecological importance, aimed at conserving and enhancing habitats and species, within the resources available to council. Sites with high ecological value do not deliver financially, but the benefits are significant in terms of providing natural capital assets such as biodiversity, flood alleviation, air quality, carbon sequestration, localised cooling and benefits to our health and wellbeing.

The council's recognition of the nature emergency also supports its Greener Faster objectives. Therefore, consideration is required regarding the long-term maintenance and management of its green spaces with a full appreciation and valuation of these spaces in terms of what they provide compared to other potential land-use types such as residential development.

There are several current and imminent drivers and factors, including mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), the introduction of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and the council's declaration of a Nature Emergency. All of which means that it is an appropriate time to review the way in which the council manages ecological sites and how this is resourced.

This report aims to briefly update on delivery of the council's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which is the mechanism by which ecological projects are planned and monitored. Intrinsically linked to this is a brief update on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) which has been introduced via the Environment Act 2021 and is now expected to

become mandatory for planning projects to deliver an uplift in biodiversity value of a minimum of 10%, from January 2024.

This report includes:

- a summary of how ecological sites are currently managed.
- the identification of a need for review of how ecological sites are managed.
- the request for input from the Committee on what to include in policy principals on how to manage ecological sites.

Next steps will be to:

- consider a strategic approach supported by structured processes and procedures to guide future ownership and management of ecological sites.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Policy Committee are asked to comment on:

1. Council's approach to the management of its green spaces and sites of ecological importance. Including how it should respond to opportunities to take on ownership and or management of new or additional ecological sites.
2. The proposal for a Nature Improvement Plan for the district that can be devised to tie into Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Biodiversity Net Gain.
3. The proposal to establish guidelines and criteria for undertaking a strategic assessment of potential new or additional ecological sites as and when they arise.

1 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 1.1 Section 2.2 below outlines the current management of council ecological sites. It costs approximately £100,000 for the management of ecological sites, and this includes c£30,000 for the specialist contract management of the national sites, and c£14,000 on a service level agreement (SLA) with Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre.
- 1.2 Current ecological improvements via changes in management of council green spaces are budgeted for within the existing Natural Environment and Recreation Team (NERT) reactive grounds maintenance budget. In practice one of the main changes in management relates to grass cutting regimes as where amended grass cuts have been introduced (cut and collection of arisings) this improves biodiversity and abundance of wildflowers. The maintenance contract with IdVerde means that these management amendments are difficult to agree as they can involve the need for changes in equipment and staffing. Some of the grass cuts have been included in a pilot called the “wildflower verge project”. Any further changes in management or the addition of areas of ecological value will have impacts on both resources and contract arrangements.
- 1.3 The current staffing resource consists of a Principal Ecologist and Biodiversity Officer post and an Ecologist and Biodiversity Officer post. Consideration will need to be given to how to resource the imminent increase in ecological workload due to come in January 2024 because of mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) becoming part of planning consideration. It is anticipated that the monitoring work associated with BNG will increase workloads, but this cannot be predicted at this time. New burdens funding is anticipated from Defra for January 2024 onwards, but this has not yet been confirmed. Should workloads increase with no new burdens funding then the BAP will need to be adjusted to ensure we work within our resource parameters.
- 1.4 Mandatory BNG will only apply to “major” applications (over 10 dwellings or above 1,000sq m) from January 2024, then from April 2024 it will apply to applications including 1-9 dwellings. Therefore, resourcing needs will be reviewed at the end of March after a three-month period processing BNG-related planning applications has been completed, and then again at the end of June.

2 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

- 2.1 The Policy Committee are asked how the council should respond to opportunities to take on management of new and or additional ecological sites. The Nature Emergency and Climate Emergency highlight the value given to ecological sites in the Winchester district and it is important therefore that there is suitable management and enhancement plans for ecological sites.

2.2 Council land

The council's portfolio of green spaces can be classified in a hierarchy in relation to its type of designation or classification (see examples Table 1 below) including Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA), Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC). As well as these designations, there are classifications of green spaces including Fields In Trust (FIT).

2.3 Table 1 below lists the ecological sites owned and under management by the council, and what type of site they are (plus the River Itchen and the Hamble Estuary as examples of internationally-designated sites – but not owned or under management by the council). These sites are included in the BAP, which focuses on four habitat types (chalk river, trees and woodland, species-rich grassland, and hedgerows and arable field margins) and 22 species which rely on these habitats (including hazel dormouse, stag beetle and slow worm).

Table 1. Ecological sites owned and managed by the council.

Site name	Designation /classification	Statutory / Non-statutory	Site classification	Classification Level
<i>River Itchen</i>	SAC	Statutory	<i>Chalk River</i>	<i>International</i>
<i>Hamble Estuary</i>	SPA	Statutory	<i>Estuary</i>	<i>International</i>
Abbots Barton	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Bar End roundabout	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Chilcomb Rec	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Garrison Ground	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Gordon Avenue	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Greenacres	None	None	Pond / scrub	N/A
Hilliers Haven	None	None	Woodland	N/A
Ivy Close	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Joyce Gardens	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Land opposite Stanmore Rec	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Magdalen Hill Cemetery	None	None	Chalk grassland	N/A
Otterbourne Common	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Pitt roundabout	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Sainsbury roundabout	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
St Cross roundabout	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
St Faith's Meadow	SSSI	Statutory	Lowland meadow	National
St Giles Hill	None	None	Grassland / woodland	N/A
St Matthews Field	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A

Site name	Designation /classification	Statutory / Non-statutory	Site classification	Classification Level
Thurmond Crescent	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
Topfield	FIT (tbc)	None	Grassland / woodland	National
Water Lane	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A
West Hill Cemetery	SINC	Non-statutory	Chalk grassland	County
Whiteshute Ridge	SINC	Non-statutory	Chalk grassland	County
Winnall Moors	SSSI	Statutory	Wetland	National
Winton close	None	None	Species-rich grassland	N/A

2.4 Current Management

Following the hierarchy of designation/classification:

- a. the Internationally classified sites are covered by relevant legislation and policy which means they are heavily protected and the council's management input comes via the implementation of the planning process which governs this.
- b. the nationally classified sites are also protected under relevant legislation and policy and the council's management input is often via contracting specialists (in this case Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust) to undertake the specific management.
- c. the county-level classification (or local-level) sites are protected, but this is by way of policy control rather than legislation. Management of SINC sites owned by the council have targets set and measured by regular ecological surveys by Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC).
- d. Sites which are not designated at County/local level can still be important, especially as stepping stones or links between other designated sites. An example is Top field, Kings Worthy where a site was transferred to the council as part of a housing development. This site had some inherent ecological value and now with suitable management the council has improved and enhanced this site in terms of biodiversity.

2.5 Proposals

To prioritise or rationalise the approach to management of ecological sites a Nature Improvement Plan could be formulated to tie into Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LRNS) and Biodiversity Net Gain, which are nationally led schemes. A Nature Improvement Plan would update the BAP and amalgamate the Green Infrastructure plans with LNRS.

- 2.6 A Nature Improvement Plan would tie-in with Defra's Environmental Improvement Plan- 2023, and would focus on the council's strategic priorities, set our targets for taking actions that will help us restore nature, reduce

environmental pollution, and increase the prosperity of our district. By implementing the Environment Act 2021, including Local Nature Recovery Strategies to identify areas to create and restore habitat, and Biodiversity Net Gain to enhance the built environment, we will be able to deliver nature improvements.

- 2.7 Climate emergency mitigation can be achieved in tandem with nature improvements. A focus on carbon reduction and how our management of ecological sites (including tree planting and species-rich grassland creation) offers benefits to nature improvement as well as other benefits such health and wellbeing through access to nature, and flood alleviation.
- 2.8 Mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain is due to commence in January 2024, and NERT are now entering into discussions and forming working groups (established by HCC in October 2023) to progress LNRS. These national initiatives can form a significant part of the council's Nature Improvement Plan and we are dependent on them to a degree to understand the direction and extent of our nature improvement plans. With mandatory BNG it is hoped that there will be new burdens funding from January onwards to resource this work, or the BAP would have to be adjusted to accommodate new mandatory tasks
- 2.9 Potential opportunities to take on additional ecological sites come via planning when developers look to hand-over open space to the council. It is the council's overall approach at present not to take on these areas of open space and to encourage the parish councils to take them (Decision Record - Review of management/maintenance of Open Space procedure - 19.03.21). There have been numerous occasions where parish councils have not wanted to do so and, in these instances, the city council has been approached by the developer / landowner to discuss the possibility of taking on the new open spaces. Examples include Lovedon Fields in Kings Worthy and historic open space adoptions in Badger Farm.
- 2.10 Clear guidance on how to consider and to respond to requests for taking on ecological sites is needed for the strategic assessment, appraisal and planning for the delivery of nature improvements on council land to be undertaken. This would further facilitate the delivery of the BAP and CNAP.
- 2.11 If and when a potential new or additional ecological site becomes available as an option for the council to own and/or manage, a strategic assessment could be undertaken to ascertain whether this would fit policy and delivery of biodiversity/carbon targets. Critical to this will be the cost increase implications and how this can be resourced.
- 2.12 An assessment could take into account:
 - Habitat (and how these fit BAP priorities)
 - Location (strategic significance in relation to wider habitats)

- Cost of management and monitoring
- Potential to deliver carbon targets (i.e. sequestration)
- Potential to deliver BNG (and possible habitat banking)
- Other benefits (including public access, recreation)

Future Policy

- 2.13 As BNG policy evolves, there may be a need to amend council strategy with opportunities to monetise open spaces via a “habitat bank” approach. This could involve taking payments from developers who are unable to meet their BNG targets on their own land and delivering this for them through open space management. This “offsetting” will require significant investigation into the mechanism of taking payments for land management and the capacity (in relation to biodiversity units) that the council currently has within its land ownership. Future policy within the Local Plan will need to reflect these aims and the direction of movement for the council.
- 2.14 We are currently awaiting secondary legislation and guidance from Defra in relation to BNG and this will be published at the end of November.

3 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 3.1 One option is to halt all management of ecological sites and revert to previous management practices. For example, to cease the wildflower verge project cuts and revert to the previous pattern of grass cutting. This would result in a net loss in terms of biodiversity and is not acceptable nor in line with the council’s Greener Faster and Nature emergency declaration. HEP previously supported the proposal to continue the wildflower verge project (Biodiversity Grass Verge Management, pilot road verge project, HEP028) and this is upheld so the option of abandoning suitable management for ecological sites has been rejected.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:-

Previous Committee Reports:-

Biodiversity Grass Verge Management, pilot road verge project, HEP028 – 04 October 2022.

Other Background Documents:-

Decision Record - Review of management/maintenance of Open Space procedure - 19.03.21

APPENDICES:

None