

Nature Conservation Strategy for Central Bedfordshire

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This report relates to non-Key Decision

Purpose of this report

1. The purpose of the Nature Conservation Strategy (NCS) is to identify the overall aims, objectives and priorities for the conservation of biodiversity in Central Bedfordshire and bring them together within a single document.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive is asked to:

1. **adopt the Nature Conservation Strategy to provide the framework on which the Council will take action for the conservation of biodiversity and the natural environment in Central Bedfordshire; and**
2. **delegate authority to the Director of Regeneration and Business, in consultation with the Executive Member for Regeneration, to make minor amendments and updates as required.**

Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

2. The Nature Conservation Strategy was considered by Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee on the 18 June. The committee endorsed the draft document and recommended that the Executive adopt the Nature Conservation Strategy.

Background

3. The purpose of the Nature Conservation Strategy (NCS) (Appendix 1) is to identify the overall aims, objectives and priorities for the conservation of biodiversity in Central Bedfordshire and bring them together within a single document.
4. This reflects the Council's duties under various Acts of Parliament, including the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006), known as the NERC Act. This states that all public bodies, such as the Council, when 'exercising their functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity'.
5. Since 1994 there have been many changes to the statutory framework regarding nature conservation, most recently with the publication of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Our knowledge of the biodiversity within Central Bedfordshire and the opportunities for it to be enhanced in the future has also increased.
6. The NCS forms a key component of the Council's wider Environmental Enhancement Strategy. The Environmental Enhancement Strategy will summarise and collate priorities from the range of natural environment, open space and sustainability strategies, plans and evidence documents that the Council has already produced, to provide a comprehensive overview. The Council's intention is to consult with the public on the Environmental Enhancement Strategy, and use this consultation to support planning policy relating to environment and broader sustainability issues.

Aims of the Nature Conservation Strategy

7. The NCS will act as the reference document for anyone working within Central Bedfordshire, embedding the conservation of biodiversity within all areas of the Council's work, including those contracted out to other organisations. The aims of the NCS are as follows:
 - a. To identify and protect species and habitats across Central Bedfordshire and ensure their management is correct.
 - b. To identify and promote opportunities for enhancing the wildlife resource of existing areas, and for the provision of additional wildlife habitat.
 - c. To protect and enhance the biodiversity network across the urban area including stepping stones and linear habitats.
 - d. To identify and monitor Central Bedfordshire's natural resources and the policy background to nature conservation in a single subject document.

- e. To provide a framework for the activities of the Council, local groups and other organisations that may impact on the natural environment.
- f. To generate interest in biodiversity and the environment and to encourage community involvement in the creation and management of sites. Also, to make areas of wildlife interest accessible to all people within Central Bedfordshire.

Benefits of this approach

- 8. Biodiversity and the ecosystems that it makes up are often undervalued by conventional economic analysis and decision making, although they are critically important to our well-being and economic prosperity.
- 9. The provision of a better environment through the sympathetic management for biodiversity has direct benefits to the local economy. It creates an image which is attractive to employers and employees who are already in the area and also helps to attract more investment into Central Bedfordshire. It is, therefore, a subject of importance to the promotion of economic development. Nature conservation also helps to enhance Central Bedfordshire's overall "sense of place" and attraction which will help to increase visitor numbers and tourism in general.
- 10. Ecosystems provide a vast range of services which enable us to survive, from producing food, controlling water supplies and regulating the climate, to providing opportunities for recreation and contact with nature which research has shown promotes long term health and happiness (Natural England 2012).
- 11. The NPPF requires the Council, as a Local Planning Authority, to have a responsibility to promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species populations. These are linked to national and local targets, and identify suitable indicators for monitoring biodiversity.
- 12. In addition, the planning system, through the outcomes it helps deliver, can contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by minimising impacts on biodiversity and providing net gains in biodiversity where possible. This contributes to the Government's commitment to halt the overall decline in biodiversity, which includes the establishment of coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures.
- 13. The NCS will help guide planning and strategic decisions by demonstrating the value of linking wildlife areas / corridors, for example the Nature Improvement Area (NIA) and aspirations within the Forest of Marston Vale.

14. The issues covered by the NCS are vital when considering threats to biodiversity, pressures from areas of strategic development and helping protect the fragile connections to relatively isolated sites by directing development to other, less sensitive areas. The NCS will also help direct schemes of habitat creation to areas where this would be of most benefit by linking them up within the biodiversity network.
15. Central Bedfordshire's geology and surrounding landscape means that there are already many high quality wildlife habitats close to where people live and work, as well as scope for further enhancement. These provide many benefits such as regulating environmental functions like air pollution, to providing a positive 'sense of place' and promoting health and wellbeing.
16. The NCS also provides clarification as to how national nature conservation policy and strategy is being addressed in Central Bedfordshire. For example the National Pollinator Strategy (2014) urges councils to make a number of adjustments to existing planting and management to improve the quality and extent of habitats suitable for pollinators.
17. The NCS stresses the need for co-operation and co-ordination of such strategies to ensure Council departments, local organisations and statutory bodies work together. The NCS contains an Action Plan defining programmes and initiatives to support the aims.

Council Priorities

18. A high quality natural environment underpins all of the Council's priorities. Specifically the Nature Conservation Strategy will support delivery of the following Council priorities;
 - a. enhancing your local community – protecting our countryside
 - b. promote health and well being – access to a healthy environment.

Corporate Implications

19. **Sustainability implications:** Human development and wellbeing is dependent on the health of our natural environment – which the NCS addresses. We use natural resources to power our economic and social development and rely on numerous 'ecosystem services' to ensure a continuously healthy planet - from a clean supply of air, water, food and raw materials, to disease regulation and space for recreation.

Legal Implications

20. The NCS reflects the Council's duties under various Acts of Parliament, including the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006), known as the NERC Act, which requires all public bodies to 'in exercising their functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity'. The NCS also covers "Species and Habitats of Principal Importance" as identified in section 41 of the NERC Act together with nationally protected species covered by the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) and European species under the Habitats Directive (1992).

Financial Implications

21. The NCS does not seek any additional budget for implementation. The recommendations made in the Strategy will be taken forward through continued collaborative working across departments, with partners and through organisations such as the Local Nature Partnership.

Equalities Implications

22. None.

Risk implications:

23. There are not many particular risks with regard to the NCS itself, but the adoption and implementation of the NCS will mitigate the risks of the Council not discharging its statutory responsibilities and also of not achieving its objectives.

Conclusion and next Steps

24. The NCS will support cross directorate working, encouraging a coordinated approach towards the care, management, disposal and acquisition of natural spaces across Central Bedfordshire. This will help to ensure that the Council meets its duty in having regard for biodiversity, and therefore contribute towards securing a sustainable environment which benefits both residents and the wider population who choose to live, visit and work in Central Bedfordshire.
25. The NCS forms a key component of the Council's wider Environmental Enhancement Strategy. This Strategy will summarise and collate priorities from the range of natural environment, open space and sustainability strategies, plans and evidence documents that the Council has already produced, to provide a comprehensive overview. The Council's intention is to consult with the public on this Environmental Enhancement Strategy, and use this consultation to support planning policy relating to environment and sustainability issues.

Appendices

The following Appendix is attached:

Appendix 1: Draft Nature Conservation Strategy for Central Bedfordshire

Background Papers

None