

ENVIRONMENT AND LIVING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 February 2015

PRESENT: Councillor Hunter-Watts (Chairman); Councillors Mrs J Blake (in place of Fealey), Mrs Bloom (in place of Mrs Brandis), Mrs Chapple, Foster, Mrs Russel, Stuchbury, Takodra and Winn. Councillor Mordue attended also.

APOLOGIES: Councillor Mrs Brandis, Fealey, Sir Beville Stanier and Vick.

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2014 be approved as a correct record.

2. BIODIVERSITY TEAM UPDATE 2015

The Committee received a report setting out the key achievements and central work carried out by the Council's Biodiversity Team over the last year or two. The Biodiversity Team had provided a similar update in February 2012 and had attended the scrutiny committee in September 2013 to present a report on Farming and Wildlife.

The report set out the central areas of work that the Biodiversity Team delivered to meet growth agenda, health and well-being and community engagement objectives. It also set out how the Biodiversity Team scrutinised planning applications to ensure there was no net loss and where possible net gains to biodiversity in accordance with National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

The Committee was also provided with an addendum, circulated at the meeting, which clarified some of the changes that had occurred in the planning system and which emphasised that the focus and priorities for the biodiversity input into the planning process was being concentrated on those developments which had the greatest impact on the environment, economic growth and communities. It was the responsibility of applicants to ensure that they complied with the appropriate legislation regarding biodiversity, i.e. protected species that might be affected by a development, and AVDC biodiversity officers would continue to make contact with applicants to offer a service for screening for protected species.

It was further explained that Natural England had the primary responsibility for issuing a licence where protected species were found. The new process would enable the focus of Council resources to be placed on those developments where there was a risk of protected species being affected and would still ensure that the Council had regard to the impact on biodiversity where there were protected species on the site and the requirement of the Habitats Directive in taking decisions on planning applications.

The Biodiversity Team oversaw many species and habitat projects including the North Bucks Bat Group, AVDC Great Crested Newt Project, Water Vole and Otter Spotter Project, Peregrine Falcon Project, Swift Group, Vale Countryside Volunteers, UK Black Poplar Conservation Group and Local Wildlife Sites Project. All these groups were created by AVDC and were now run by volunteers and supported with advice from the Biodiversity Team. They contributed vast amounts of time towards the protection and

expansion of the species or habitat they dealt with generating huge amounts of community input.

Together, the groups made the largest contribution to community engagement in the council, with 2,800 volunteer days generated in 2015, covering activities including practical conservation work, biological surveys, liaison with landowners and scientific studies. The volunteers played an important role in carrying out work that the council would otherwise have to pay for, such as the conservation management of AVDC's parks and open spaces through planting wildflower meadows, hedges and trees as well as hedge laying. Information on individual projects was provided as follows:-

- Barn Owl Project (now known as Bucks Owl and Raptor Group (BORG) – the group was largely overseen by volunteers and supported by AVDC with seed funding from HLF and WREN. The group was largely now self sufficient and contributed 330 days of volunteer time annually. It was the second largest Barn Owl project in the country.
- North Bucks Bats Group – the group continued to grow in capability and recognition. A grant of £46,000 from HLF had enabled the group to purchase specialist equipment and engage a larger number of people for the benefit of Bat conservation. The group had been invited to talk about its research projects nationally and internationally.
- Vale Countryside Volunteers – had contributed over 450 days worth of volunteering in 2014. The group's work enabled the Biodiversity Team to carry out conservation initiatives at minimal cost to the council, for example, over 8,000 trees had been planted in 2014.
- UK Black Poplar Conservation Group – AVDC would be organising and hosting a national conference in 2015. A national clone bank for the species had been established in Aylesbury. Thousands of trees generated from the bank had been planted in the Olympic Park, in every London Borough, The Royal Parks, Arla development and many other sites in Aylesbury Vale and the UK. This was good conservation for this UK priority species and generated income for the council.
- Peregrine Falcon Project – was in its fifty year and had been used as a case study on how to encourage urban wildlife in the Bat Conservation Trust publication, "Landscape and Urban Design for Bats and Biodiversity". AVDC had been invited to present at the European Symposium for Urban Wildlife Design. Breeding had been successful for a fourth year and the web cameras attracted interest and attention for AVDC globally.

AVDC had been commissioned to draw up two Higher Level Stewardship schemes (HLS) which included specialist ecological surveys. A new HLS agreement had negotiated for 3 AVDC green spaces in 2014 which paid for beneficial management and ecological enhancement measures for these sites. In partnership with a number of conservation organisations and Natural Environment Partnership (NEP) AVDC had also contributed to the updating of the Bucks Biodiversity Action Plan. The plan set future targets for biodiversity gains in the county for the next five years.

Berryfields Farmland Bird Scheme had been negotiated by the Biodiversity Team to compensate for ecological impacts of the Berryfields development. In 2014, three agreements with local landowners had been established with two more waiting to be ratified. 36 hectares of wildflower meadow had been sown using seed from local wildlife sites with 7 new ponds created. The forthcoming schemes would include 1km of hedge planting, 30 new ponds and a further 10 hectares of wild flower meadow. The

project was entirely funded by developer contributions and covered the cost of AVDC officers on this project.

Details were provided of the Kingsbrook Development, relating to 2450 homes to be built at Broughton Stocklake by the developers Barratts. Through strong and informed ecological scrutiny of the planning application the Biodiversity Team had negotiated with Barratts and the RSPB to effectively get them to change their policy regarding the large development. It had now been transformed into a ground breaking scheme that would also provide 120 hectares of wetland nature reserve created by the RSPB at no cost to the Council, substantial visitors centre managed by the RSPB, a national Black Poplar train, native trees throughout the development, Sand Martin bank, over 50 new ponds, fruit trees in over 50% of the gardens, fencing designed to be permeable to wildlife, and wildlife crossings under roads and gardens designed to be wildlife friendly.

Lessons learnt from this development had influenced input into the Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan and neighbourhood plans. The emergence of the biodiversity impact assessment calculator (part of the biodiversity offsetting process) had provided case law and a mechanism to ensure future development in the Vale could deliver similar biodiversity benefit.

The Biodiversity Team's approach to planning advice had been recognised as best practice by the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Chartered Institute for Ecologists and Environmental Managers. The team had responded to increased financial pressures by contracting their specialist expertise to other LAs and NGOs. In 2014 this had generated over £30,000 income for the council. The Pre application screening service had scrutinised over 1000 applications and generated a further £6500.

More detailed information on biodiversity and the planning process was included in Appendix 1 to the Committee report. The biodiversity team would still be consulted during the application process for those developments where ecological reports were submitted. The process to be followed for this was outlined in Appendix 2 of the Committee report.

Councillor Mordue, Cabinet Member for Leisure, attended the meeting and responded to questions from Members as follows:-

- (i) that Kingsbrook would be managed by the RSPB, who could potentially also look to adopt some of the open space in time. Barratts were also looking at initiatives that might be incorporated into the development to help make in self-financing.
- (ii) that the Biodiversity team was working with the Forward Plans team to ensure that consideration of biodiversity was embedded into future planning policy.
- (iii) that Barratts were looking to sell biodiversity as a 'concept' for the Kingsbrook development. While conditions could not be imposed on people to maintain the biodiversity features such as local fruit trees and permeable fencing, people would pay a 'premium' for these and it was hoped that they would continue to value them over time.
- (iv) that local trees would be incorporated into the Kingsbrook development, provided through the Heritage Fruit Tree Company.
- (v) that the RSPB was confident that the site identified in the Kingsbrook development for a sand martin bank was a suitable one.

- (vi) that large development schemes could actually impact positively on biodiversity, if the scale of them allowed projects such as the Kingsbrook development to come to fruition.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the Biodiversity Team be thanked for attending the meeting, and for their continued efforts at promoting biodiversity across the District.
- (2) That the key achievements in relation to supporting biodiversity and planning be noted.

3. PARKS AND OPEN SPACES: MANAGEMENT, RECENT WORK AND ACCREDITATIONS

The Committee received a report and update on the management and improvement of AVDC parks and open spaces by the Community Spaces Team. The team had provided a similar update in September 2011 and Appendix 1a to the Committee report included updated information on performance and progress achieved since then against the Improvement Plan 2011/12 – 2014/15. Current and future actions were detailed in Appendix 2 to the Committee report.

Value for Money

The team had continued to make substantial year on year savings and income generation through continuous improving and the New Business Model programme. Since September 2011 there had been continued efforts to secure external funding with a total of £4,360,312, which included the following contributions:-

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| £4,274,507 | Section 106 developer contributions for leisure infrastructure across the district. (A 10% project management fee is claimed on projects carried out by AVDC officers to cover officer time and resources). |
| £35,000 | SITA Trust towards Cottesloe Green ball court. |
| £32,000 | WREN towards Bridge Street play area. |
| £10,000 | Sport England towards irrigation of Alfred Rose Park's cricket pitch. |
| £ 8,805 | England & Wales Cricket Board towards Alfred Rose Park's synthetic cricket wicket. |

Year on year saving of £200,000 had been achieved through the merging of the street cleansing and horticulture contracts, which ran from January 2013 to January 2020. This had included a full review of the teams aims and objectives to ensure officers were focussing on delivering the horticulture and street cleansing contract and project management of improvements to parks and open spaces. A value added item of the horticulture and street cleaning contract had provided a review of sports pitch provision by the Institute of Groundsmanship. This had led to a temporary reduction in our specification and achieved much needed savings.

The previous Recreation Officer post had been replaced with a more flexible Projects Officer post, who was able to undertake a variety of tasks and not focus on just play area improvements. The main influence of this change was the completion of the play area replacement programme in 2013.

The ongoing development of the tender evaluation methodology was being used to procure parks infrastructure and to ensure the most economically advantageous tenders were identified. The focus had also been increased on maintaining existing infrastructure rather than allowing them to deteriorate to the point of costly replacement.

A review of sports pitch provision had been undertaken to ensure supply aligned with demand and to improve cricket provision at Alfred Rose Park by removing football pitches from that site. Transferring the booking of sports pitches to the contractors on-line system had freed up a significant amount of officer time and led to one post being made redundant.

The team continued to work to identify opportunities to generate income including liaising with the Communities Team on fees for events and supporting them to enable AVDC events such as the National Playday, parkrun, and sports activities, and working closely with Legal and Estates Services to enable the license, lease and sale of AVDC land, where this was appropriate.

Working in partnership with Bedgrove Residents' Association through 2014 saw the installation of a wheelchair accessible picnic table & benches in the play area. A memorial bench was also installed in Bedgrove Spinney, both funded by the Residents' Association. Unfortunately the Residents' Association funded wooden youth shelter had been relocated to Bedgrove Junior School due to ongoing vandalism and repair costs to the Council.

New Business Model

In addition to delivering the Action Plans, the team had worked on a number of initiatives as part of the New Business Model programme, which included:-

- converting the Vale Park bowls green to 2 floodlit third generation synthetic sports pitches. The new pitches were saving the Council in maintenance costs as well as generating additional income. The sports pitches were managed and maintained as part of the Aqua Vale Leisure Centre.
- reviewing the contribution made to the planning service when commenting on planning applications that include recreation facilities. Rather than providing each developer with detailed comments a generic response was provided that covered the relevant guidance and advised that the developer consider it. Unless it was in the Council's interest to do so then developers were being advised that open space would not be adopted, which avoided an increase in costs and liabilities.
- how total staff numbers had been reduced in response to the review of current workloads. The reductions had taken place in areas including the merging of the Green Spaces Delivery Team and part of Contract Services, Park Warden service, Park Gate keeper roles, monitoring of the Horticultural and Street Cleansing contracts., fly tipping and market operatives.
- a number of initiatives and savings associated with the new Horticultural and Street Cleansing contract. A review was also being undertaken of sports pitch provision and consideration of providing flood lit full size third generation synthetic pitches instead of costly grass pitches.

- reviewing AVDC amenity land ownership with a view to leasing land in rural areas where ownership was limited, there was no development potential, and where Parishes were already successfully maintaining their own amenity land.

The team continued to engage with local Members and stakeholders such as residents groups, PCSOs and adjacent land owners, to inform them about major or sensitive project proposals before they commenced so they have the opportunity to pass comments. Installation of play areas in the Coppice, Aylesbury and Bridge Street, Buckingham were good example, where the feedback from consultation had then been included in the design process. This led to greater community support for the projects and the communities taking more ownership of their spaces. This was demonstrated through less incidents of vandalism.

A number of press releases had been issued over the past 3 years which highlighted the Council's achievements in parks and open spaces. These include:

- Green Flag Awards.
- Play area improvements.
- Vale Park LED lighting (joint press release with Bucks CC).
- Vale Park drainage.
- Vale Park 3G synthetic pitches.
- Alfred Rose Park & Cottesloe Green ball courts.
- National parkrun events at both Riverside Walk, Aylesbury and Buckingham
- Annual reminders on who was responsible for grass cutting in different areas.

Green Flags Awards were a national accreditation that set the benchmark for parks and open spaces. The annual judging process of parks alternated from year to year between a formal visit by judges and a 'mystery shopper' visit. The aim of the unannounced 'mystery shopper' visit by judges ensured that quality was maintained throughout the year and not just for a preannounced judges visit. Two sites were entered annually and this required detailed management plans for each site. Subsequently, Green Flag ceremonies had been held at Vale Park and Bedgrove Park with the flags being raised by the Chairman and attended by all involved in contributing to the quality of the sites.

Bedgrove and Vale Parks had been awarded a Green Flag Award since 2008, with the exception of 2012 when we failed to secure an award for Bedgrove Park, as the judge considered the management plan to be in need of a thorough review.

All newly installed AVDC play areas had a Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) post installation inspection and subsequent annual RoSPA inspections. Contractors also carried out weekly inspections. RoSPA also risk assessed all of the Council's larger open spaces. Throughout all these processes, any identified risks were assessed and acted upon.

The Community Spaces Team continued to work with colleagues from across the council to support events hosted by both AVDC and the community including the National Play Day in Vale Park, and weekly 'parkrun' at both Aylesbury's Riverside Walk and Buckingham's Heartlands. Their role also ensured sites were in good order and provided officer or contractor support required to enable events.

Healthy relationships had been developed between parish/town council clerks and other external organisations, e.g. RAF, throughout the district through the administration and advice provided in relation to section 106 funded projects. The

team also continued to work with the Community Safety Team to improve the safety of our parks and open spaces, and community events.

Councillor Mordue, Cabinet Member for Leisure, attended the meeting and responded to questions from Members. The Committee was informed that the Cabinet Member and Officers were aware of the continuing car parking problems being experienced at Bedgrove Park associated with scheduled football games. The Council had met and talked with Football Clubs and park users on a number of occasions about the issues and would continue to do so. It was possible that the pitches would be removed and replaced with 3G synthetic pitches with floodlighting. However, full consultation would be undertaken with local people, sporting clubs and park users before any decisions were taken.

The Cabinet Member for Leisure also updated Members on the current position of the pavilion at Embleton Way, Buckingham. The Scouting Group had received planning permission for an extension to the building some time ago and were required to start building works by September 2015. The Group had been fundraising for the last 3-4 years and had recently tendered for the works. As part of any works, the Group would also need to ensure that the original building was maintained in a reasonable condition.

Lastly, Officers stated that they believed that, overall, the instances of vandalism of AVDC play areas/equipment had decreased over the last few years. This was in part due to the work the Community Spaces Team had done to inform and consult with park users, in particular young people. Contractors carried out weekly inspections to ensure that all play areas and equipment were safe to use.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the Community Spaces Team be thanked for attending the meeting, and for their continued efforts at managing and improving AVDC's parks and open spaces.
- (2) That the achievements of the Community Spaces Team over the last 3 years against the actions in the Improvement Plan 2011/12 – 2014/15 be noted.
- (3) That the content of the Improvement Plan 2015/16 to 2017/18 be noted, including the improvements planned for key services.

4. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their work programme for the period up until the 2015 elections, and items that might be passed on for consideration following the election. The work programme included a Recommendations Tracker, to assist the Committee in monitoring recommendations and the implementation of actions agreed at previous meetings, and to help in questioning decision makers.

RESOLVED –

That the work programme be agreed, as submitted at the meeting.