

AVDC ECOLOGIST UPDATE 2016

1 Purpose

This report provides information and an update on the changes since the 2015 report, identify species which are protected, in need of management, at risk of decline, show how the council is managing protected species, and how AVDC policy is enabling habitat conservation.

2 Recommendations/for decision

That the Committee:

- 2.1 Notes the contents of the report and key achievements in relation to supporting biodiversity and planning and the benefits to the vale from the work undertaken.

3 Executive summary

- 3.1 This report sets out the key areas of work that the AVDC Ecologist delivers to meet the growth agenda, health and well-being, and community engagement objectives. It sets out how the council protects species and habitats through the planning process to ensure no net loss and where possible net gains to biodiversity in accordance with National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Discusses how species and habitats are further enhanced and protected through the various partnership projects that exist through the support of the ecologist.
- 3.2 AVDC plays an important role in seeking maximum possible benefits for biodiversity are achieved from each development and our most important sites for nature are protected.

4 Update on AVDC Ecology since 2015

- 4.1 There is currently one ecologist whose key responsibility is to provide advice in relation to all planning applications that have an impact on ecology, covering a wide remit of applications from householder two storey extensions up to major developments and infrastructure projects such as HS2. The AVDC Ecologist reviews almost 1,000 planning applications every year.
- 4.2 In addition to this Development Management casework, the Ecologist has also provided guidance on policy formulation to ensure the ecology sections of the Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan provide robust protection for nature across the Vale in development to meet the growth requirements. Further progress is being made within the county conservation forums such as the Natural Environment Partnership to ensure the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Biodiversity Action Plan is embedded in AVDC policy.
- 4.3 There have been a number of recent notable planning successes in relation to ecology including identifying and conserving 60 protected species sites, the routine provision of bat and bird roosting sites, and priority habitat creation in appropriate new development.
- 4.4 The most notable success was the negotiation and design of the Kingsbrook development (Land East of Aylesbury). This scheme will set a new benchmark for housing development for integrating and delivering biodiversity enhancement through development. Through discussions with officers the developer, Barratt's are now working in close partnership with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) towards biodiversity enhancement. It is expected that Kingsbrook will become the exemplar for sustainable biodiversity in the UK and has already received national recognition by winning a prestigious 'BIG Biodiversity Award' hosted by the Construction Industry Research and Information Association. The first show homes will be open early September 2016 with novel and unique ecological features

inserted into the design of the buildings and surrounding areas. Plans are progressing for the 100ha nature reserve which will come on line in 2024.

- 4.5 A number of volunteer groups work with the AVDC Ecologist to further protect nature conservation. These groups are flourishing, but still require support from the AVDC Ecologist and include the following: 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. All these groups contribute vast amounts of volunteer time towards the protection and expansion of the species or habitat they deal with generating huge amounts of community input and engagement.

5 Protected Species

- 5.1 The table below lists the protected species which are most common within the District:

Protected Species	Key Sites
Badger	Spread across the district
Bats	Common species such as Pipistrelle and Brown Long Eared spread across the district woodland specialists such as Bechstein's and Myotis in wooded areas in the Claydon's
Birds	Farmland bird species under pressure from development across the district. Wetland specialists along river corridors and around large wet areas such as Tring Reservoirs.
Black Poplar	On wet meadows along the river and canal corridors
Black and Brown Hairstreak	Butterfly's found in scrub and wooded areas in the Thame catchment and The Claydon's area.
Dormouse	Small populations left in the Chilterns
Great Crested Newt	Across the district
Otter	Along the river corridors of the Great Ouse and Thame
Noble Chaffer	Beetle associated with orchards in the south-east of the district
Reptiles and amphibians	Across the district for common species and pockets of heath in the east on the Greensand Ridge, important for adder and Palmate Newt
Water vole	Riparian habitats especially along the River Ouse around Tingewick
White Clawed Crayfish	Isolated populations in Aston Clinton area

6 Protecting species and habitats through Development Management

- 6.1 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) supports the conservation and enhancement of ecology through the planning function, specifically through paragraphs 7, 9, 109, 118 and 152 of the NPPF, which detail the need for developers to help improve biodiversity, move from a net loss to net gain for nature, minimise impacts on biodiversity, and to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- 6.2 By screening applications at validation, AVDC Development Management ensure that all applications which may affect ecological assets are referred to the Ecologist for expert input.
- 6.3 Those submitting applications that have a reasonable likelihood of protected species or habitats being impacted are required to provide an ecological report, demonstrating what species and habitats are present to determine what the impacts of the proposed development are. Applicants are required to mitigate these impacts through the provision of ecological enhancements.
- 6.4 Our Ecologist is able to provide a fee-paid service to householders to prepare the assessment on their behalf if they request this. In these cases the Ecologist will recommend necessary mitigation measures and request that these are conditioned as part of the application process.

- 6.5 For schemes where the applicant provides their own report, our Ecologist scrutinises the applicant's report and comments on the suitability of the mitigation measures provided.
- 6.6 If applications are approved, mitigation methods detailed are secured by condition(s) imposed as part of the planning permission to ensure the works are completed satisfactorily.
- 6.7 In addition to input into individual planning applications, the Ecologist also plays an important role in assessing ecological mitigation for major infrastructure projects such as HS2 and East West Rail as part of the select committee process.

7 Protecting species and habitats through Planning Policy

- 7.1 Support has been provided to the Forward Plans Team in respect of the draft VALP. The policy detailed in the ecology section of the emerging plan still at an early stage in the plan making process. This policy will form the core to nature conservation across the Vale in respect of the proposed planning requirements the Vale will be experiencing.
- 7.2 In addition to VALP, there are also a number of other local and regional policy documents our Ecologist is providing input into.

8 Protecting species and habitats during Major Development

- 8.1 AVDC has a good track record in securing net ecological gains from large developments. Berryfield's and Kingsbrook are two of the highest profile examples where ecology gains are beginning to come to fruition.
- 8.2 Berryfield's Farmland Bird Scheme aims to compensate for ecological impacts of the Berryfield's development. In 2016 three agreements with local landowners have been established with two more waiting to be ratified. 36 hectares of wildflower meadow have been sown using seed from local wildlife sites and 7 new ponds created. This project is entirely funded by developer contributions. Further landowners have been identified and enhancements in line with the agreement will be brought on line over the next 6 years.
- 8.3 The Kingsbrook scheme evolved over time through negotiation and working collaboratively with the developer, and forging links with the RSPB to become the ground breaking scheme it is now. Measures include:
 - 120 hectares wetland nature reserve created managed by the RSBP
 - A substantial visitor centre managed by RSPB servicing the nature reserve
 - A national Black Poplar trail
 - Native trees throughout the development
 - Integrated bat and bird boxes in all appropriate buildings
 - 70% of the development will be green space primarily managed for nature conservation
 - A Sand Martin bank
 - Over 50 new ponds
 - Biodiversity Acton Plan priority habitat created throughout
 - Ground breaking Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems designed to be functional and benefit biodiversity
 - Fruit trees in over 50% of the gardens
 - Fencing designed to be permeable to wildlife
 - Wildlife crossings under roads
 - Gardens designed to be wildlife friendly.
- 8.4 Units are now being built on site and the link road is almost fully operational. The species mitigation areas have been created for village 2 and preparation is underway for village 3.
- 8.5 Progress on the design for the 120 hectares nature reserve RSPB will be managing on completion is underway along with a unique link up with a integrated bird box supplier which will enable one in four houses to have a swift box within the fabric of the building. Major

events are being organised to show case this nationally important development and the link up the developer RSPB and our Ecologist have created.

9 Protecting Species and Habitats with Volunteer Support

- 9.1 The groups that work with the AVDC Ecologist make one of the largest contributions to community engagement of the council, with 2,800 volunteer days generated in 2015.
- 9.2 The different groups undertake practical conservation work, biological surveys, liaison with landowners and scientific studies.
- 9.3 Our Ecologist has created and facilitates or advises 10 separate conservation groups who deliver significant conservation gains to the District.
- 9.4 Whilst these groups are designed to be relatively independent they rely on the guidance and support of the AVDC Ecologist to provide a conservation network through the Vale which enable us to maximise our effectiveness. For example, if a landowner enquires about improving their land for wildlife the AVDC Ecologist can conduct a survey to highlight the current situation and potential of the site. The landowner can then be put in contact with a group to deliver conservation gain. The involvement of the AVDC Ecologist ensures that the highest conservation standards are employed and all efforts are coordinated with current Bucks Biodiversity Action Plan targets.
- 9.5 Volunteers play an important role in carrying out work for which the council would otherwise have to pay, such as the conservation management of AVDC's parks and open spaces through planting wildflower meadows, hedges and trees as well as hedge laying. Benefiting not only conservation, but also direct users of our parks and open spaces and indirect users who live nearby, travel past, or work near our such sites.
- 9.6 Recent projects in Aylesbury have highlighted this along Riverside Walk and The Coppice where wild flower plants, hedge management, and planting have all been carried out by volunteers and community groups. These works links in with the Community Spaces Team who provide the grounds maintenance services.
- 9.7 Our Ecologist secured Higher Level Stewardship schemes (HLS) for three AVDC green spaces which pays for beneficial management and ecological enhancement measures for these sites which is partially achieved through the works of the volunteer effort applied to the site.
- 9.8 The Barn Owl Project (originally set up by AVDC with external funding) is now largely overseen by volunteers and supported by AVDC. The group is now known as the [Bucks Owl and Raptor Group \(BORG\)](#) and is entirely self funded. The increased autonomy of this group maintains their effectiveness and reduces time implications for AVDC staff. The group contributes over 330 days of volunteer time to this project annually and has become the second largest Barn Owl project in the country.
- 9.9 [North Bucks Bat Group](#) continues to grow in capability and recognition. A grant of £46,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) secured by AVDC has enabled the group to purchase specialist equipment and engage a larger number of people for the benefit of bat conservation. The group has been invited to talk about its research projects nationally and internationally.
- 9.10 One of the most important voluntary groups is [Vale Countryside Volunteers \(VCV\)](#), which has now been running for 13 years and whose volunteers go out most weeks throughout the year. Over 450 days were provided by VCV delivering practical conservation action such hedge laying, tree planting, wildlife surveys, pond restoration, otter holt construction, wildflower collection, and sowing. Work of the group enables the AVDC Ecologist to carry out conservation initiatives at minimal cost to the council. They are also providing key links to nature conservation organisations such as the National Trust and the Local Wildlife Trust by

linking AVDC projects with theirs such as Coronation Meadow at Heartlands Park Buckingham.

- 9.11 In 2015 our Ecologist organised and hosted the [UK Black Poplar Conservation Group National Conference](#) and has established a national clone bank for the species in Aylesbury. Thousands of trees generated from this clone bank have been planted in the Olympic Park, every London Borough, The Royal Parks, Arla development, and plans for Europe's largest Black Poplar wet woodland at the Kingsbrook development are under way. A link with a local plant nursery has seen cuttings being grown in a more commercial manner with funds from each plant being sold coming back to the council. A new clone of Black Poplar has been grown on by The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew as part of the national Seed bank. Seed was provided by the AVDC Ecologist to the project and specimens will be gifted to AVDC to further complement the clone banks in the district.
- 9.12 The [Peregrine Falcon Project](#) is in its sixth year and was used as a case study on how to encourage urban wildlife in the [Bat Conservation Trust publication 'Landscape & Urban Design for Bats and Biodiversity'](#). AVDC was invited to present a talk at the European Symposium for Urban Wildlife Design. Breeding has been successful for a sixth year and the web cameras attract interest and attention for AVDC globally. This project is supported by the Local Wildlife Trust and Bucks Bird Club, the latter fund the web streaming video of the peregrine nest. The former co-ordinating watch events with BORG in the town centre to further promote Aylesbury as a destination.
- 9.13 Our Ecologist has forged links with Plantlife and Bucks, Berks, and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) to establish the counties coronation meadow in Buckingham. Two hectares of wildflower meadow is being created at Heartlands open space Buckingham at no cost to the council. This meadow will become a lasting legacy for the town and will in time provide seed that can be used to create other new wildflower meadows our Ecologist is trying to secure through the planning gains needed through the planning process.

10 Resource implications

- 10.1 AVDC ecology staffing is provided entirely within the existing budget of Development Management through the fee income generated by planning application work, and with additional funding for schemes provided through Section 106 legal agreements in relation to new development.
- 10.2 In addition to these, there is also the potential in the coming years for funding to recover any costs arising from work related to HS2. We will continue to seek opportunities for income generation and work in a commercial environment.
- 10.3 Whilst the provision of support to community conservation groups is not directly funded, the net benefit to the Council in terms of the number of volunteer days and ability to implement policy in relation to ecology and biodiversity are considerable. This enables many of the planning gains required under the current National Planning Policy and in the VALP to be fully achieved.

11 Response to Key Aims and Objectives

11.1 The work contributes to the Corporate Plan targets as follows:

- Improve participation in leisure and cultural activities across the Vale
- Support the voluntary and community sector through advice information, training and funding
- Encourage greater community ownership and involvement in our local environment
- Encourage higher environmental standards in new development
- Manage and protect designated wildlife sites and AVDC land

- Provide technical support to major infrastructure projects such as HS2 and East West Rail.
- Identify the infrastructure required to support new development and wider Vale needs
- Deliver innovative new services that customers value
- Contribute AVDC news and updates to local newsletters and local area forums
- Consider how best we can help people get involved in their local community

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