

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 27<sup>th</sup> February 2024

Start Time: 6:00pm

End Time: 7:40pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

**Present:** Members: Councillors; R Broom (Chair), A Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), J Brown, B Facey, C McGrath, A McGuinness, S Mead, C Parris, E Plater and G Snell.

The following Members were also in attendance: Forhad Chowdhury, Nazmin Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Maureen McKay, Carolina Veres and Anne Wells.

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### 1. APOLOGIES OF ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies of absence were received by Councillors Baroness Taylor of Stevenage OBE CC and Chris Howells

There were no declarations of interest.

### 2. PRE-SCRUTINY POLICY DEVELOPMENT OF THE UPDATED BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager provided a presentation to the committee around the topic of Biodiversity, including: biodiversity in Stevenage; chalk streams and approach to environmental strategies for Tree and Woodland Management and the Green Space Strategy.

#### **Biodiversity in Stevenage:**

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager, Julia Hill and the Conservation Manager for Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, Tim Hill explained the timeline for biodiversity in the local area which included as context: the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action plan was written by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) in 1998. Stevenage Biodiversity Action Plan was created in 2005; Revision of Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan in

2006; Biodiversity Action Plan for Stevenage was reviewed in 2010 and again in 2017.

It was explained in the last 50 years 76 species became extinct in Hertfordshire; more than three species every two years, 35 were invertebrates, 26 were plants, 13 were vertebrates and two were lichens. 1,446 species are currently threatened with extinction in Hertfordshire. This includes over 1,000 invertebrates and 260 plants.

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager, Julia Hill, explained that SBC was still the only district Council in Hertfordshire with a Biodiversity Action Plan; it is understood that Three Rivers District Council now have a draft plan, but Stevenage has led the way in this area for years.

In 2011 the Council secured a joint funding bid with HMWT for a Wild Stevenage fund to support Biodiversity. This led to work to engage with local community and kick started the local Green Space Volunteers in Stevenage. More recently there has been progress by Stevenage being the first local authority in Hertfordshire to secure funding via Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) from planning permission granted for building developments in the area. In the last 13 years there has been a 1500% increase in meadow grassland with now up to 33 hectares in Stevenage. The change in grass cutting regimes has allowed wildflowers to grow up. The Council has created up to 2 hectares of new woodland at Memorial Wood and Fairlane Wood in Fairlands Valley Park. Shackledell Grassland is the only known site in Hertfordshire to find the Great Green Bush Cricket, the UK's largest insect. The Council has created 10 community orchards since 2011.

The Council doesn't have a specific identified budget to support the delivery of the Biodiversity Action Plan. Delivery is largely through Green Space Volunteers supported by SDS officers, and supported by national funding bids, and local Member support through their Local Community Budgets (LCBs).

### **Draft Biodiversity Action Plan:**

The HMWT Conservation Manager, Tim Hill explained the objectives of the action plan is to be realistic and achievable but remaining ambitious within the capacity of Stevenage Borough Council and partners, to be compatible with and complement the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), to be accessible in language terms to the wider Stevenage community, to prioritise protecting those sites already important to wildlife and/or identifying sites that could lose potential for wildlife if works are not delivered within the next 2-8 years.

The HMWT Conservation Manager stated the natural resource of Stevenage is 130 ha woodland (5% of the borough), 448 ha grassland (17% of the borough), 10 ha wetlands (0.38% of the borough), 20 ponds 0.3 ha and 4.6km of rivers and streams. The next steps would be to receive approval via Executive Committee in July 2024, provide a ward breakdown of actions/estimated costs, establish a Nature Recovery Officer through BNG funding, further support Green Space Volunteers, look for opportunities for delivery, develop Partnerships. Potentially to consider development of a Nature Engagement Officer in future via BNG funding.

### **Chalk Streams:**

The HMWT Conservation Manager explained Hertfordshire holds 10% of chalk streams globally. Stevenage Brook is a tributary to the river Beane, which is a chalk stream. The biggest challenge within Stevenage is that the brook is overgrown with trees which limits light accessing the brook, which in turn lack of light does not allow plants to be able to grow which would encourage insects and fish to flourish creating rich biodiverse habitats.

### **Environmental Strategies:**

The Officer explained the timeline of the Tree and Woodland Strategy and the Green Space Strategy

- November – December 2023: Phase 1 Public Consultation
- February 2024: Focus Groups
- March – May 2024: Develop draft strategy documents
- June 2024: internal consultation on draft documents
- Phase 2 public consultation
- September 2024: finalise documents
- Autumn: draft document to Environment and Economy Select Committee
- Winter 2024/25: approval of documents by exec

It was explained the proposal for the Phase 2 consultation is to deliver 6-7 focus group sessions which will invite community participants to highlight strengths. Issues and opportunities within a range of green spaces within an area. Meetings will take place in community buildings located in each area. There will be a separate focus group for Fairlands Valley Park.

Members asked a series of questions:

A Councillor queried if it is solely based on the habitat in green spaces or are you looking at everything such as facilities and activities? It was explained the team are looking into everything such as organised team sports activity, , outdoor gym facilities or quiet spaces for relaxation.

A Councillor believed giving residents of Stevenage the opportunity to comment or give ideas at an early stage would be beneficial, instead of giving them finalised plans to comment on.

A Councillor asked if there will be a social media approach? In the original consultation it was promoted through social media and digital posters around the town centre, but officers will find a range of ways to inform people.

A Member asked about the way budgets for Biodiversity Net Gain would work. Officers stated that once a site has been identified within the S106 Agreement it is protected for 30 years and will require a management plan to deliver the works. Members asked how much control do we have of what comes our way, are we able to state we would like to use the biodiversity net gain for a specific reason or area? The Officer stated that Planning colleagues have already been stipulating that BNG be allocated within Stevenage to ensure that the local area benefits from the biodiversity gain rather than it being delivered elsewhere in the country.

A Councillor stated that they understood that losing 76 species is not good, but queried why it was not mentioned how many new species have been discovered in areas such as the return of the sparrowhawk, peregrine and red kites? Is there a natural turnaround with new species, how does the council deal with non-native invasive species? It was explained there were actually now 77 species which were extinct, but the area is gaining new species such as ravens and several species which are coming up from the south due to climate change but nonetheless losing 77 species should not be ignored due to change or loss of habitats. Through engagement with Green Space Volunteers work has been undertaken to tackle non-native species such as the Spanish Bluebell in Monks Wood and Himalayan Balsam along Stevenage Brook.

It was queried why the 1446 species were threatened? It was explained there were a combination of factors, including loss of habitat, human activity, fragmented habitats etc. HMWT were working with the Herts Natural History Society, who have records of all of the known species in the County. The HMWT were working with all of the experts to see what we can do to positively affect their habitats.

A Member asked were the Council making room for biodiversity within the local plan? The Officer explained they believe the council are.

A Member requested that thought be given to how young people could be engaged in the strategy consultation process and there was a suggestion that an approach be made to the Junior and Senior schools that are close to the Fairlands Valley site to see what their views were on the strategies. The Environmental Policy & Development Manager stated that the original consultation had been sent out via the Schools Educational Trust to provide an opportunity for young people to be heard. but they would consider this suggestion and also engaging with the Youth Council but cautioned that there

is a very small officer team delivering this work so there needed to be realistic expectations about what can be achieved.

The Chair thanked all of the contributors and stated that he was most encouraged to hear about the concept of Biodiversity Net Gain 'Green' banking.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Draft Biodiversity Action Plan and the timeline and approach for the Tree and Woodland and Green Space Strategies be noted.

**3. URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

**4. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

**5. URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**CHAIR**