

North Somerset Council

Report to the Transport, Climate and Communities Policy and Scrutiny Panel

Date of Meeting: 30/11/23

Subject of Report: Green Infrastructure Strategy Update

Town or Parish:

Officer/Member Presenting: Esther Coffin-Smith

Key Decision: No

Reason: This report is for informational purposes

Recommendations

To note the progress made on the Green Infrastructure Strategy action plan and review progress annually hereafter.

1. Summary of Report

Well planned and managed, functioning green infrastructure is crucial for people, places and nature and is a key component in tackling the nature and climate emergency. The 2021 Green Infrastructure Strategy Action Plan covers strategic short-term, medium-term and long-term actions in order to take forward the recommendations and deliver the vision, aims and objectives of the strategy. The Action Plan is a live document which will be reviewed annually which this report details.

2. Policy

The Green Infrastructure Strategy and Action Plan supports the Corporate Plan vision to be 'green' through leading our communities 'to protect and enhance our environment' and priority of being a 'thriving and sustainable place.'

3. Details

The GI Strategy covers 6 theme areas: Access Networks, Biodiversity and Habitats, Development Integration, Greenspace Stewardship, Trees and Woodland and Flood Risk and Water Quality. The action plan contains 54 separate actions of which only those due in the shorter term will be covered in this report. The theme of flood risk and water quality will also be brought separately to the Panel.

Access Networks

There are 2 short-term actions – to publish the Rights of Way Improvement Plan and overlay the PROW network with the GI opportunity areas to identify gaps in the ROW network. The ROWIP 2022 was approved by Executive in December 2022 and will be online shortly and the gap identification has been included within the ROWIP action plan.

Biodiversity and Habitats

In this section of the action plan there are numerous short-term actions, some of which have been grouped here due to interdependencies. An update on progress is detailed below.

- *Prepare a strategic plan for improving biodiversity in the North Somerset Nature Park and Develop improved habitats for greater horseshoe bats.*
 - We have commissioned the University of the West of England Bat Lab to identify the best locations for these Nature Parks to best support the protection and enhancement of land for the benefit of bats.
 - We are in the process of updating the North Somerset and Mendip Bats SAC Guidance on Development: Supplementary Planning Document to take account of the new North-Somerset-wide habitat and connectivity modelling and made reference to the areas of specific importance for these sites within the Local Plan.
 - We are also embarking on our first land purchase to create the first Nature Park and discussing the inclusion of Nature Parks within strategic developments where habitat and connectivity for greater horseshoe bats have the potential to be improved.

- *Delivering Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG).*
 - We have drafted and are consulting on a new supplementary planning document (SPD) on Biodiversity which includes the new mandatory BNG requirements.
 - We have assessed NSC-owned land for the potential to create BNG units
 - We have engaged legal support on the creation of mechanisms (section 106 agreements) through which to secure BNG with developers and also to pursue the ambition of creating a Habitat Banking Vehicle through which NSC could sell the BNG units generated on its own land.
 - We will recruit an additional Ecology Officer to manage the increased workload of assessing the BNG Plans submitted through the planning process once the legislation becomes mandatory (January 2024).

- *Create a citizen science project with the University of the West of England (UWE) to improve understanding of bat populations across North Somerset.*
 - For the past 2 years we have worked in partnership with UWE to enable the public to use our static bat detection equipment to collect bat data that will be used to continually update our knowledge and datasets, ensuring our policies remain relevant in terms of Planning and other purposes. This data has also been used to inform the new habitat and connectivity modelling.

- *Natural Capital Valuation tools.* This has not been progressed.

Development and Integration

There are 3 short-term actions from this section of the action plan including mainstreaming green infrastructure and the inclusion of Building with Nature Standards within the Local Plan and creating North Somerset Nature Parks for strategic bat mitigation. The green infrastructure objectives and North Somerset Nature Park principles have been included in the Local Plan and the Building with Nature Standards are encouraged through the draft Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document.

Greenspace Stewardship

- *Complete an open space access assessment.* This has not yet been completed due to staff capacity.
- *Rewilding champions lottery project.* This £100,000 grant funded project with Avon Wildlife Trust, delivered between July 2021 and November 2022, saw residents volunteering to measure biodiversity to determine the success of the council's rewilding efforts. The project delivered 30 public engagement sessions, attended by 372 people and 70 survey sessions, attended by 139 volunteers totalling around 300 volunteering hours. 10 Rewilding Champions were recruited and are leading volunteers at some of our rewilding sites.
- *Worlebury hillfort lottery project.* NSC applied for this funding but was unsuccessful. S106 monies have been secured from National Grid to undertake a smaller scale level of ash removal and ride creation. It is proposed to submit a new lottery application in 2024, subject to staff capacity.
- *Infrastructure survey of parks and open spaces.* To carry out a condition survey of parks an open spaces infrastructure to be completed by August 2022. All survey protocols have been completed and a management system is being installed. Proactive inspections will commence in January 2024 following successful installation of the management system.
- *Parks improvement plan.* Develop a strategy for our parks and play areas which reflects contemporary needs, enhances community engagement, considers new ways for delivery and raises more income to be completed by December 2024
- *Green Social Prescribing project.* A UKSPF funded Ranger starts in November 2023 who will be seeking opportunities to bring green social prescribing providers into NSC parks and open spaces on NSC-led activities such as scrub clearance, tree planting, wildlife surveying, etc. for the benefit of wildlife and health and wellbeing.
- *Great lakes project.*
 - Weston super Mare Marine Lake project is complete.
 - The MARLENS improvements and Pier Trust projects are complete.
 - There has been a delay in addressing the gig club storage and slipway improvements both of which should be finalised by February 2024.
 - Portishead Lake Grounds improvements have been made to The Esplanade and Lake surround. An aerator has been installed to improve water quality. A project is underway, to be completed by summer 2024 to improve the café.

Trees and Woodlands

- *Publish and deliver the Ash dieback action plan.* This is complete with the Action Plan being published in September 2022.
- *New orchard planting.* The Defra-funded Wildlife and Woodland Expansion Officers are investigating opportunities for orchard planting as part of ongoing efforts to meet our 25% increase in canopy cover target by 2030.
- *Iconic trees; protecting our levels and moors trees.* An initial piece of work has been completed identifying these trees and using s106 funds we are hoping to progress

this with the Forest of Avon Trust to contact the landowners with advice on grants amongst other things.

4. Consultation

We consulted on the original GI Strategy and this led to the development of the action plan. We have consulted on relevant individual items as they arose, such as the Biodiversity SPD.

5. Financial Implications

There are no implications from this update report.

Costs

N/A

Funding

N/A

6. Legal Powers and Implications

N/A

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

The Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy provides the framework for improving the connectivity, quality, and overall provision of GI, in order to maximise environmental, social and economic benefits and address diverse policy requirements including health and wellbeing, biodiversity and climate change.

8. Risk Management

Risk is considered for each individual action.

9. Equality Implications

None.

10. Corporate Implications

The delivery of the Green Infrastructure Strategy action plan will support a range of council services including: Natural Environment Team, Parks and Open Spaces, Health and Wellbeing and Sustainability.

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Appendices:

None

Background Papers:

Green Infrastructure Strategy