
Report to

Cabinet Member (City Development)

10th January, 2008

Report of

Director of City Development

Title

PETITION : CITY ECOLOGIST

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To recommend a response to a petition from Friends of the Earth calling upon the City Council to reinstate the post of City Ecologist. The petition states: *"the role of a dedicated, independent ecologist is central to strategic planning, planning control and greenspace management. It ensures that Protected Species and important sites avoid neglect or unnecessary damage and promotes biodiversity. This post also ensures wide and valuable links between Council departments, developers and the local community."*

2 Recommendations

- i) To note the Friends of the Earth petition to reinstate the post of City Ecologist.
- ii) To note the ongoing joint work on the Warwickshire, Coventry, Solihull Habitat Biodiversity Audit (HBA) Partnership and Wildlife Sites Project.
- iii) To commend the new Service Level Agreement (SLA) from December 1st 2007 that has been established with Warwickshire County Council Museum Field Services, to provide ecological advice to the Local Planning Authority in respect of:
 - a. Individual proposals;
 - b. Review of planning policy
 - c. The supply and maintenance of a Protected Species dataset for the City.
- iv) To agree that in the light of the New SLA which will provide expert ecological advice to the City Council within the existing joint working framework that the position of City Ecologist is not filled

3 Information/Background

- 3.1 A petition bearing 688 signatures was presented at Council by Councillor Mrs Dixon which had been collated by the Coventry branch of Friends of the Earth to reinstate the Post of Ecologist.
- 3.2 In this context, The Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act came into effect in October 2006. Section 40 requires that *"every public body must, in exercising its*

functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity." Over the last decade or so, the City Council has made significant progress in addressing concerns about conserving and enhancing biodiversity. Initiatives now include:

Warwickshire, Coventry & Solihull Habitat Biodiversity Audit (HBA) Partnership

The Warwickshire sub-regional Habitat Biodiversity Audit (HBA), a field by field/boundary by boundary survey of Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull's biodiversity habitats, was initiated in 1995 and continues to remain active and supported by Coventry City Council. It has collected habitat data for the whole sub-region, held in a Geographical Information System, which provides digital mapping and an associated analytical database. This ground-breaking initiative is being used by all the unitary, county and district authorities in the sub-region for influencing policies and for subsequent monitoring in development control, forward planning, biodiversity action plans, mineral extraction, land restoration/creation plus agri-environment schemes.

The HBA partnership currently comprises Coventry City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, North Warwickshire Borough Council, Rugby Borough Council, Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council, Stratford-on Avon District Council, Warwick District Council and Warwickshire County Council, plus English Nature and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust. A targeted programme of re-surveying keeps the resource up-to-date and accurate, which needs continuing funding from partners. In 2006, the HBA Audit was cited by the European Union Committee of the Regions as an *"Example of Good Practice on Biodiversity Preservation and Restoration."*

Linked to this partnership, the Warwickshire Biological Record Centre (WBRC), run by Warwickshire County Council, maintains the most comprehensive set of data on habitats, sites and species in Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull. The WBRC acts as an umbrella body for recording in the sub-region and maintaining the relevant data.

The Warwickshire, Coventry & Solihull Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP)

The Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) outlines how landowners, land managers and policy makers will protect the characteristic wildlife and landscapes of our sub-region. The plan currently contains 26 Species Action Plans for our threatened plants and animals. There are 24 Habitat Action Plans covering our farmland, woodlands, wetlands, grasslands, urban areas and post-industrial land. Coventry is home to a number of European and national protected species including the otter, water vole, great crested newt and bat species.

The LBAP is the sub-region's strategy to protect local wildlife and link up with what is happening elsewhere in the UK. It was launched in 2003 and outlines how everyone and anyone from homeowners and landowners to policy makers can get involved to conserve priority species and habitats for the future. The action plans have been written by local experts and adopted by the LBAP Steering Group whose members include representatives from local authorities, businesses, industry, farmers and conservation bodies.

Local authorities throughout the region have signed up to the LBAP through their County Strategic Partnership Plan and Community Strategies. A Steering Group comprising of officers from local authorities, together with representatives from the Wildlife Trust, Natural England, the Environment Agency, and the RSPB currently oversee the plan. The

information has also helped to inform the draft *Climate Change Strategy for Coventry*, following the signing of the Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change by the City Council in 2006.

The LBAP for Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull provides a local response to the UK's National Biodiversity Action Plan for priority species and habitats, i.e. those that are in urgent need of protection. It outlines how the county's landowners, land managers and policy makers will seek to achieve this and establishes hard targets to work towards. There is currently an ongoing survey of Water Voles being undertaken along the water courses of Coventry by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust in partnership with Coventry City Council.

The *Warwickshire, Coventry & Solihull Parish BAP – A Biodiversity Action Plan for Local Communities* is an adaptation of the county's LBAP and the first of its kind in the country. Completed in July 2006, its 24 action plans for habitats and 26 for species outline how wildlife and wild spaces can be conserved for the future. It has been designed to translate these conservation priorities into practical action for biodiversity on the ground. It contains those action plans most relevant to small communities, adapted to encourage the involvement of people at a local level in improving their environment.

Ecological Services - Service Level Agreement

- 3.3 From 1 December 2007, a Service Level Agreement has been established with Warwickshire County Council Museum Field Services, to provide ecological advice to the Local Planning Authority in respect of individual proposals; in relation to the review of planning policy; and also to provide a Protected Species dataset. This will now be consistent with other districts in the sub-region.
- 3.4 This approach allows the City Council to continue the strong working partnership that already exists and to tap into a body of expert advice. The County Council are recruiting additional staff to ensure that they can meet their commitments under the SLA

1. Ecological Advice to Local Planning Authority

To cover the weekly list and subsequent advice to provide recommendations on relevant planning applications and decision notices. This advice will incorporate all biological information within the Warwickshire Biological Record Centre (WBRC). This includes information on Protected Species and Habitats, UKBAP and LBAP species (where available) and wider ecological concerns noted in Planning Guidance. In essence the service will be:

First Level Response: Scan online our weekly list from an electronic listing that contains an accurate grid reference, noting any recommendations of predetermination surveys, comments or request to see further details on applications where biodiversity could be under threat.

Second Level Response: Detailed study of the plans or ecological surveys accompanying the proposal that can be viewed on-line. This may require site visits. This level may require direct discussions with planning officers and the applicants or their agents advising them on the actions we recommended in order to properly assess their application. This usually results in final recommendations and/or conditions.

Third Level Response: Detailed recommendations on any reserve matters, or the discharge of ecological conditions that will increase the biodiversity of a proposal. These may include the appropriate species mix for its location, water balancing features, public open space

layout and maintenance plans, and wildlife corridors through the site and boundary enhancement. This may include being present at meetings.

Other Services: e.g. providing advice in respect of ecology in relation to appeals and potentially providing an Expert Witness.

Ecological appraisals will be provided for other parts of the City Council (fees to be negotiated separately in accordance with current Warwickshire Museum Fees and Charges Policy at either Commercial or Concession Rates dependent on the length of prior notice of the work and subject to available resources, as clarified in the Service Level Agreement). It is noted that if regular work is required by other directorates, then this will require further negotiation and may be the subject of another formal agreement.

2. Protected Species dataset

To supply ecologically Protected Species data in an agreed format on a 6 months basis, (subject to dataset provider's agreement) after initial work to interpret, validate and digitise the current WBRC data, plus acquiring additional data from local amateur expert recorders where necessary. This will be carried out under an initial contract to prepare the data by 31 March 2008, followed by an annual Licence Agreement for the management of this dataset.


3.4 This agreement whilst targeted at the planning authority does provide an opportunity for the organisation to buy expert advice at set rates.

4 **Proposal and Other Option(s) to be Considered**

4.1 For many years the City Council has, as local planning authority, as well as working in partnership on updating records, sought, when required, expert advice from local consultants in respect of the ecological implications of proposals. Such consultants have been small companies whilst others have been engaged through the Jacobs arrangements.

5 **Other specific implications**

5.1

	Implications (See below)	No Implications
Area Co-ordination		
Best Value		
Children and Young People		
Climate Change and Sustainable Development		
Comparable Benchmark Data		
Corporate Parenting		
Coventry Community Plan		
Crime and Disorder		
Equal Opportunities		
Finance		
Health and Safety		

	Implications (See below)	No Implications
Human Resources		
Human Rights Act		
Impact on Partner Organisations		
Information and Communications Technology		
Legal Implications		
Property Implications		
Race Equality Scheme		
Risk Management		
Trade Union Consultation		
Voluntary Sector – The Coventry Compact		

6 Finance

The cost of these services in 2007/2008 : £7917 a quarter and for 2008/2009 £8671 a quarter

In addition, the cost of the preparation work and supply of the Protected Species data set will be £7106.40 and will be completed by March 31st 2008. This will be carried out under an initial contract to prepare the data followed by an annual Licence Agreement for the management of this dataset at approximately £1,000 per annum. This is funded through the green infrastructure growth points award

7 Monitoring

7.1 The effectiveness of these revised arrangements will be regularly reviewed

8 Timescale and expected outcomes

8.1

	Yes	No
Key Decision		√
Scrutiny Consideration (if yes, which Scrutiny meeting and date)		√
Council Consideration (if yes, date of Council meeting)		√

List of background papers

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Papers open to Public Inspection

Description of paper

Location

Petition

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