

WOKINGHAM DISTRICT'S BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

The Wokingham District Biodiversity Action Plan is the result of an ongoing partnership between the Council, the local statutory agencies (English Nature, Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency), local Wildlife Trust (Berkshire Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust) and the local community through the Wokingham Biodiversity Forum.

The Council sees the maintenance of this partnership through Wokingham Biodiversity Forum as the key to the successful implementation, monitoring and future review of the Wokingham District Biodiversity Action Plan.

Aims

This document sets out to build upon the achievements of the first Wokingham District Biodiversity Action Plan, which was produced in 1997. The Plan sets out the Council's policies and actions for protecting and conserving biodiversity and forms an integral part of the council's first Community Strategy, Building on Success. The Wokingham District Community Strategy identifies biodiversity as one of a number of crosscutting themes, which runs right through the strategy and need to be incorporated into plans for future action.

This Action Plan aims to:

- * Identify the extent of the wildlife resource in the District and to establish policies for its protection, management and enhancement;
- * Raise awareness of the issues affecting biodiversity;
- * Encourage community involvement and action;
- * Promote "good practice" and encourage management sympathetic to wildlife;
- * Outline targets and actions for improving our biodiversity.

This Action Plan is divided into four parts:

Part One: Introduction and background
Part Two: Legislation and Protective Policies
Part Three: Habitat Action Plans
Part Four: Species Action Plans

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

What is biodiversity?

Put simply, biodiversity is concerned with maintaining the variety of life forms. A more complex definition in Article 2 of the Biodiversity Convention defines biological diversity as 'the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are a part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems'.

Why is biodiversity important?

On a global scale, the decline in biological diversity brought about by human activity poses a threat to our future survival. To put this into context it is estimated that up to 50% of species could become extinct during the next thirty years, unless urgent steps are taken to halt this decline. At a local level, Wokingham District's natural environment has also been heavily modified by human activity, and habitats constantly reduced.

Origins of the biodiversity initiative

International concern for biodiversity originates from the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 when 150 countries, including the UK and the European Community signed the Convention on Biological Diversity. This Treaty aims to conserve the diversity of flora and fauna at a global, national and local scale.

To meet its obligations under the Treaty, the Government published Biodiversity - The UK Action Plan in 1994. This document was followed by Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report volume 1: Meeting the Rio Challenge in 1995 and the Government Response to the UK Steering Group Report on Biodiversity in May 1996. This latter document sets out broad objectives for agriculture, forestry, transport and planning. To date a total of 391 national Species Action Plans and 45 national Habitats Action Plans have been produced as part of the UK Biodiversity process.

The UK Action Plan

The main objectives of the UK Action Plan are as follows:

1. To conserve and enhance:

- * wildlife habitats;
- * internationally important habitats and species;
- * habitats and species characteristic of local areas;
- * natural and semi natural areas that have declined in recent years.

2. To increase public awareness and involvement.

3. To contribute to the conservation of biodiversity on a European and global scale.

The UK Action Plan has adopted a target based approach and priority habitats and species have been identified at a national and regional level. Whilst these targets should influence Local Biodiversity Action Plans, the Government has stated that habitats and species characteristic of local areas are equally important. The 1995 UK Biodiversity Group (UKBG) report also emphasised the importance of Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAP) to complement the national strategy. The stated aim of the UKBG is to achieve 100% LBAP coverage for the UK.

The County Perspective

Between 1999 and 2001 the Berkshire Nature Conservation Forum produced 4 Habitats Action Plans for Berkshire, Heathlands, Lowland Unimproved Grassland, Standing Open Water and

Associated Habitats, and Rivers and Associated Floodplain Habitats. Berkshire Habitat Action Plans for Woodland and farmland are in preparation. In 2003 the Berkshire Nature Conservation Forum established county steering groups to oversee the implementation of the published county Habitat Action Plans.

The Local Perspective

Wokingham District Council has a history developing policies to protect the environment including the 1996 Environmental Strategy, the first Wokingham District Biodiversity Action Plan in 1997 and the Community Strategy - Building on Success. The new Wokingham District Biodiversity Action Plan aims to build upon both the achievements of these documents and to contribute to targets outlined in the county Habitat Action Plans, South East Regional targets and ultimately the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

The Council acknowledges that the successful implementation of this initiative can only be achieved by working in partnership with businesses, developers, the voluntary sector and the community. To this end the Council was instrumental in setting up the Wokingham Biodiversity Forum in March 2000.

Implementation of this Biodiversity Action Plan has been identified as a proposed action within the Wokingham District Community Strategy – Building on Success.

Quality Of Life

Biodiversity is a key component of sustainable development and there is a direct relationship between a high quality and wildlife rich environment and a vibrant local economy. Wokingham District's environment is under threat from intense development pressures and residents have stated that they want us to maintain and enhance the districts environment for future generations.

Many people value our countryside for quiet enjoyment (be it walking, wildlife watching, cycling or climbing), spiritual refreshment and general well being. National surveys have shown that birds and wildlife were the primary reason influencing the decision of 59% of visitors to the Countryside.

Research is also showing that biodiversity influences our quality of life in more subtle ways. Mere visual contact with "nature" can reduce our stress levels, promote well being and even increase patient recovery rates in hospitals.

Wokingham District's Local Strategic Partnership identified a number of Key themes within the Community Strategy – Building on Success including : -

"The quality of life afforded by Wokingham district residents is highly valued because of the balance between job opportunities, the standard of living and the quality of the natural environment of the area."

PART TWO: LEGISLATION AND PROTECTIVE POLICIES

Legislation

There are two pieces of government legislation that relate to Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs), the Countryside and Rights Of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act) and the Local Government Act 2000. The CRoW Act introduced two new duties, (1) a new conservation duty on public bodies and statutory undertakers to “*to take reasonable steps, consistent with the proper exercise of your functions to further the conservation and enhancement of Sites of Special Scientific Interests’ special interests.*” (2) a new duty on Government Ministers and Departments “*to have due regard to the purpose of the conservation of biological diversity in the exercise of their functions.*”

The Section 4 of the Local Government Act 2000 contains a mandatory requirement that every local authority produces a strategy, known as a “*Community Strategy*”, for promoting or improving the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their area and “*contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK*”. The DETR circular on the Countryside and Rights Of Way Act 2000 (04/2001) issued in February 2001, states that “*Local Biodiversity Action Plans are amongst the elements local authorities should build upon when preparing the overarching Community Strategy required by section 4 of the Local Government Act 2000. Local wildlife sites will be important components within Local BAPs*”

Protective Policy

Planning Policy Guidance 9: Nature Conservation (PPG 9) sets out the Government's policy for the treatment of nature conservation issues in development plans and the protection of designated sites. The requirements of the European Habitats Directive as well as the protection of species under the Countryside and Rights Of Way Act 2000 are also mentioned.

The District Council has liaised closely with English Nature to ensure that the Local Plan meets the requirements of PPG 9 and current wildlife legislation.

Berkshire Structure Plan

The District Council supports the policies EN 8 and EN 9 of the current Berkshire Structure Plan 2001-2006. However the Joint Services Planning Unit (JSPU) for Berkshire is currently developing a Policy for Biodiversity as part of the Deposit Draft Berkshire Structure Plan 2001-16.

Wokingham District Local Plan -The role of the District Council

The local planning authority can make an important contribution to the conservation of biodiversity through its land use planning policies. The plan contains the following relevant policies

WOS3	Development Control Principles
WCC3	The Central Berkshire Forest
WNC1	Special Protection Areas and Sites of Special Scientific Interest
WNC1A	Local Nature Reserves
WNC2	New Nature Reserves
WNC3	Protected Species Conservation
WNC4	Protection and Management of Wildlife Heritage Sites
WNC5	Nature Conservation in the Wider Countryside
WNC6	The Protection, Enhancement or Creation of Wildlife Corridors
WNC7	Creating New Habitats through development

To achieve these policy objectives, the District Council works very closely with English Nature, the Forestry Authority, and the Environment Agency, as well as the many voluntary sector organisations involved.

PART THREE: HABITAT ACTION PLANS

Wokingham District's Biodiversity Action Plan is by definition a work in progress, it will change and develop as more information becomes available. Wokingham District's Biodiversity Action Plan covers the entire District not just land in the ownership of the council and is a challenge to the whole community.

It currently consists of the following Habitat Action Plans ; -

(1) Town, Villages and People

(2) Woodlands

(3) Grasslands

(4) Wetlands

(5) Heathlands

In the future it will be necessary to add a number of Species Action Plans. Species will be selected upon the following criteria:

- rarity defined at the European, National and county scale.
- recorded decline
- indicator species.
- Species associated with a mosaic of habitats
- Species requiring specific action

Monitoring

It is essential that the Action Plan is monitored at regular intervals to:

- * ascertain the gross changes to habitats;
- * determine the population of target species;
- * assess the effectiveness of the District Council's management plans.

To achieve these objectives the District Council will work in partnership with agencies, voluntary organisations, local groups and individuals. The key to effective monitoring is for all parties involved to use agreed monitoring methods and to set up appropriate biological records to a nationally agreed format. It is anticipated that the recently established Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre will take a lead role in monitoring progress towards both national, regional, county and local biodiversity targets.