

Committee: **Community Services Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **15 November 2021**
Report Subject: **Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) 2020/21 annual report**
Portfolio Holder: **Cllr J. Wilkins, Executive Member Environment**
Report Submitted by: **Clive Rogers, Head of Community Services**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
13/10/2021	21/10/2021	04.11.21			15/11/2021	15.12.21		

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on how the Council is meeting its statutory duties under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.
- 1.2 As Members are aware the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) was passed by Full Council in October 2019. The biodiversity and ecosystem resilience duty under Section 6 of the Act requires that “a public authority must seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity in the exercise of functions in relation to Wales, and in so doing promote the resilience of ecosystems, so far as consistent with the proper exercise of those functions.”¹

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 In order to comply with the Environment (Wales) Act the Council has produced a Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) (Appendix 1).
- 2.2 This report gives the overview of annual progress against the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) for 2020/21.
- 2.3 The actions identified within the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) prioritises actions, to maintain and enhance biodiversity and promote the resilience of ecosystems. Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, by 2022, aims to:
- Reduce overall resource use; reuse where possible and recycle everything recyclable.
 - Increase biodiversity and ecosystems understanding in the council staff and councillors through appropriate channels including Service Area Environment Champions and the Councillor Nature Champion role.

¹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2016/3/section/6/enacted>

- Embody the challenge of integrating the Decarbonisation Plan, Active Travel, Well-being of Future Generations, Planning and Environment Acts to encourage sustainability in the ways we live, work and play.
- Promote responsible use of natural resources in Blaenau Gwent by working in partnership with others to initiate positive action and behaviour change.
- Maintain and enhance biodiversity and improve ecosystem resilience on council owned land, particularly with regard to priority species and habitats.
- Support the Blaenau Gwent & Torfaen Local Nature Partnership.

2.4 The three delivery mechanisms, for implementing activities, are Service Area Action Plans; Environment Champions network and advice from the Natural Environment team. However, Covid-19 has restricted activities since March 2020. As a result, there is a cross over in reporting.

2.5 **Summary of Progress**

Progress in 2020/21 by Service Area against the delivery mechanisms and activity plan for 2021/22 is shown in Appendix 2 (2020/21 Progress and 2021/22 Activity Plan).

Area of activities 2020/21

Governance & Partnerships:

- PSB is overseeing the development of a Green Infrastructure Strategy for Blaenau Gwent
- Significant progress with climate change work, including the Blaenau Gwent Climate Assembly, where key recommendations were made around nature and green space, particularly its protection and improvement.

Commercial Services:

- Further development to streamline processes and reduce the use of paper
- Communication to be electronic. However, it was impacted by Covid19, therefore a delay to completely paperless regarding staff communication
- Introduction on new Hybrid mail system

Social Services:

- Adult services have prioritised supporting the delivery of essential services and a number of non-regulated services as a result of Covid-19
- Made progress with the garden at one of the establishments, including bird boxes and wild flowers

Regeneration & Community Services:

- The Resilient Greater Gwent (RGG) has several work streams delivering on maintaining & enhancing biodiversity and improve ecosystem resilience

- a) Blaenau Gwent Urban Hedgehog project was launched in October 2020. This was to give away 60 hedgehog packs to Blaenau Gwent Residents. Schools and community groups. It was received well as initially there were over 400 people interested in participating. In May 2021 Tai Calon further supported by giving away another 40 packs to Tai Calon residents. The RGG looked at our approach, with partners implementing similar schemes across the whole of Gwent.
- Supported the Local Nature Partnership
 - a) Working with the Blaenau Gwent & Torfaen Local Nature Partnership Coordinator, several projects have been developed that has directly benefited community groups. For example, hedgerow management at Beaufort Hill Ponds and Woodlands, Hedgerow planting at Cwmtillery and grass cutting equipment and training provided to Sirhowy Woodlands community group.
 - b) Supported the Local Nature Partnership Coordinator with making changes to the grass cutting regimes on verges and meadows. Working with Alun Watkins in Neighbourhood Services. For example, A4046- Cwm bypass junction, A467-Llanhilleth Park Traffic lights, a relaxed mowing regime was implemented in the grounds of Rhos Y Fedwen Primary school. In the first year of doing so, a bee orchid was recorded for the first time.
- Supported community groups running events, but with restrictions, and assisted with promotional material for a virtual Wales Nature Week in June 2020

Education:

- Engagement with schools via educational sessions, SLA with Natural Environment Team and eco-councils had to be adapted because of Covid-19. A blended delivery style of online engagement and outdoor classroom.
 - a) 17 schools are signed up to the SLA. The Urban Hedgehog project was also delivered to eight Blaenau Gwent schools (Beaufort Hill Primary, Coed-Y-Garn Primary, Deighton Primary, Rhos y Fedwen, Sofrydd, St Illtyds, St Joseph's RC Primary and Willowtown Primary). The eight schools expressed an interested in participating in a national trial project to become Hedgehog Friendly School. All eight schools were successful in being selected to take part.

2.6 There have been four quarterly Environment Champions meetings, with ten champions in the network representing all Service Areas and Councillors. Meetings were held virtually via Microsoft Teams and at Parc Bryn Bach. Topics included resource use, developing a youth Nature Ambassadors across the school network, developing an educational action plan/policy and urban wildlife.

- 2.7 From the review of progress, the Forward Plan (2019-22) has not been changed. Minor amendments have been made to accurately reflect the Service Area structure, recognising that Organisational Development sits within Commercial Services.
- 2.8 The annual report and Forward Plan do not cover statutory duties included in the Rights of Way, Planning or Active Travel Acts but is connected to these through the Welsh government's commitment to sustainable development as the best way to improve the well-being of Wales now and for future generations.

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 Options Appraisal

- **Option 1: Preferred option** Members to approve the annual report 2020/21 and activity plan recommended for 2021/22 to meet the Section 6 Duty.
- 3.2
- **Option 2:** Members to comment on the annual report 2020/21 / the activity plan for 2021/22 and suggest areas of improvements to be included.
- 3.3 *Approval of the annual report*
Goes beyond the minimum to show a proactive approach to meeting the duty; embeds the consideration of biodiversity and ecosystems into business planning and enables an efficient mechanism for reporting and meeting the requirement to report to Welsh Government.

4. Evidence of how does this topic support the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

4.1 Corporate Plan Priority:

Continued efforts to meet the aims of the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) primarily contributes to meeting the following priority:

- 4.2 Strong and Environmentally Smart Communities
- To improve the access to and quality of open spaces for the benefit of our communities, businesses and visitors.

4.3 Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

Continued efforts to meet the aims of the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) meets all of the well-being plan objectives:

- The best start in life for everyone
- Safe and friendly communities
- To look after and protect the environment

- To forge new pathways to prosperity
- To encourage and enable people to make healthy lifestyle choices in the places that they live, learn, work and play

4.4 Benefits provided by resilient ecosystems across the well-being goals are shown in appendix 7.2 of the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan 2019-2022 (Appendix 1).

4.5 **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**

4.6 Continued efforts to meet the aims of the Forward Plan directly contributes to actions needed for the 'resilient Wales' goal:

"A nation which maintains and enhances a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems that support social, economic and ecological resilience and the capacity to adapt to change (for example climate change)"

4.7 By implementing the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 the Local Authority will maximise its contributions to the Well-being Goals.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 *Impact on Budget*

There has been a cost neutral impact on budgets, 2020/21 from implementing the Forward Plan. Officer time was funded through existing revenue budgets as shown in Appendix 3 (Impact on Budget).

Actions in 2021/22 will have a cost neutral impact on budgets. Officer time will be funded through existing revenue budgets. Additional external revenue and capital funding to deliver further biodiversity and ecosystem resilience related schemes of work as shown in Appendix 3 (Impact on Budget).

5.2 *Risk*

The main risk is that failure to meet the aims of the plan will result in the Authority failing to meet its statutory duty and miss out on funding opportunities for delivery of the council corporate objectives and Blaenau Gwent well-being plan.

5.3 *Legal*

The legal implications of failing to meet the Section 6 Biodiversity and Resilience of Ecosystems Duty of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 are currently unknown.

5.4 *Human Resources*

The ways of working that will develop by working towards the aims of the Plan will contribute to staff health and well-being. For example, by raising awareness of the nearest Local Nature Reserves to council buildings.

6. Supporting Evidence

6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

Is gathered quarterly through business plan reporting.

6.2 **Expected outcome for the public**

Biodiversity underpins the health and resilience of all of our ecosystems. In turn, these ecosystems support all life on Earth. This means that taking positive action for biodiversity and ecosystem resilience in Blaenau Gwent will enhance the natural resources the public utilise such as clean water, air and food production including pollination services. The natural environment is also a vital resource to enhance mental and physical health and well-being.

6.3 **Involvement** (*consultation, engagement, participation*)

Activities that meet the aims of the Plan are undertaken between the Natural Environment team and other service areas.

6.4 **Thinking for the Long term** (*forward planning*)

The Plan covers the 2019-22 period and will be revised and renewed in line with up to date policy, legislation and evidence. Meeting the duty enables support for long term management of Green Spaces.

6.5 **Preventative focus**

Contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity and ecosystem resilience will help to mitigate and adapt to climate change and provide positive opportunities to maintain and build mental and physical health and well-being.

6.6 **Collaboration / partnership working**

The work on the Environment Act duty fits with the Blaenau Gwent well-being plan and ways of working could be shared with members of the Blaenau Gwent Public Service Board. Support for the Blaenau Gwent & Torfaen Local Nature Partnership will assist with a strategic approach to environmental and ecological management in both boroughs.

6.7 **Integration** (*across service areas*)

Access to a healthy natural environment has many benefits to all service areas. Integration will be driven by Environment Champions.

6.8 **Equalities Impact Assessment**

A brief Equality Impact Assessment was submitted with the Forward Plan and has not needed to be updated as the Plan has not changed.

All service area business plan objectives and actions will take into account each of the protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. They are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

The Environment Champions network will be open to all and will strive to be representative of employees across the Council.

7. Monitoring Arrangements

- 7.1 The identified delivery mechanisms will continue to be monitored quarterly by the Governance and Natural Environment teams in the 2021/22 Financial Year.
- 7.2 A report will be submitted to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee in the second quarter of the 2021/22 Financial Year summarising progress of progress made, action planned for 2021/22 and any updates on the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan 2019-2022.
- 7.3 The Forward Plan should be revised and approved by March 2022 for the next agreed period.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- *Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022)*
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
- <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2016/3/contents/enacted>
- <https://gov.wales/docs/desh/publications/160321-frequently-asked-questions-en.pdf>
- <https://gov.wales/docs/desh/publications/150512-biodiversity-and-resilience-of-ecosystems-duty-en.pdf>
- <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/Nature%20and%20mental%20health%20infographic.pdf>
- <https://www.wcva.org.uk/about-us/news/2017/04/doing-your-bit-for-a-resilient-wales>

Glossary

- 9.1 Biodiversity - means 'biological diversity' which refers to all the variety of life on Earth (plants, animals, fungi and micro-organisms) as well as to the communities that they form and the habitats in which they live.
- 9.2 Ecosystem - dynamic network of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their non-living environment interacting as a functional unit.
- 9.3 Ecosystem Resilience - is the ability of an ecosystem to maintain its normal patterns of nutrient cycling and biomass production after being subjected to damage caused by an ecological disturbance, for example extreme weather events caused by climate change, outbreak of disease or human exploitation.