

What should Swansea Council do to maintain and enhance its natural environment and biodiversity, and, in so doing, promote the resilience of eco-systems?



Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry Panel
City and County of Swansea - Dinas a Sir Abertawe



January 2019

Why This Matters by Councillor Peter Jones (Convener)



‘There should be environment in every policy and every policy in environment’ (WLGA Neville Rookes)

When I was elected – to my surprise – in May 2017, I came onto the Council with one overriding ambition: to facilitate and encourage delivery of the biodiversity and eco-system duties and responsibilities for public bodies as set out in the Welsh Government’s Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 and Environment (Wales) Act 2016. Before retiring in August 2016, I had previously worked for more than fourteen years as Sustainable Development Officer for RSPB Cymru, latterly involved from 2013 to 2015 with helping to draft what became the Well-Being of Future Generations Act, notably the well-being goal for A Resilient Wales. I also contributed to the thinking behind the Environment (Wales) Act.

I was pleased when the Scrutiny Programme Committee agreed to my suggestion for an Inquiry into ‘what should the Council be doing to maintain and enhance its natural environment and biodiversity and, in so doing, promote the resilience of eco-systems’. I realised from the outset that this would be an extensive undertaking, touching on all areas of the Council’s work – the aim was nothing less than to give to the natural environment and biodiversity the same level of importance and priority already accorded to the economy, welfare, housing, education and so on – a cultural revolution, no less.

Early on, the Inquiry Panel identified as a key priority that biodiversity and the environment should be written into the Council’s Corporate Plan as a sixth well-being objective, and this would have been the Panel’s principal recommendation. However, and much to our delight, this key recommendation was pre-empted by the Council in October 2018 adopting just such an objective, ie ‘Maintaining and enhancing Swansea’s Natural Resources and Biodiversity’; I believe that the work of the Inquiry contributed to its adoption. This, of course, built upon the ‘Working with Nature’ challenge set out in the Public Services Board Local Well-being Plan.

We understand that we are now one of the leading public authorities in Wales in thinking through and exploring how best to deliver on the Welsh Government environmental and sustainability legislation, evidenced by the then Environment Minister choosing Swansea Council as her first port of call in November 2018 to learn about what we are doing. Our task now, of course, is to meet with her expectations and to deliver on and embed the requirements of the legislation, and that is what this report, with its conclusions and recommendations, seeks to do. However, the Panel is clear that delivery will be difficult without financial support to meet, in particular, additional staffing requirements.

We live in dangerous and difficult times; to quote from David Attenborough’s recent statement to the December UN climate change conference in Poland ‘If we don’t take action, the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon’. This is as much true for Swansea as for the rest of the planet, so we must act and do what we can – this report is a contribution. To recall the slogan from many years ago of Friends of the Earth – ‘Think global, act local’. Biodiversity

loss, habitat degradation and climate change impacts are the most serious challenges facing our species, and we must rise above our preoccupations with short-term considerations to address the potentially catastrophic future facing the planet and our children and grandchildren, who will have to live with the consequences of any failure on our part to do now what we know needs to be done.

Biodiversity and the natural environment are of innate importance – we alone as a species have the capacity to drive other species to extinction – but it is also the case that we depend upon the natural world for everything. Agriculture and food production are of fundamental importance, but so too are air and water quality and local flood risk management – the planting of trees and other vegetation plays a key role in this regard; moreover, the sowing of native wild flowers supports bees and other flying insects, so necessary to plant pollination and reproduction. Green infrastructure is rightly recognised by the Council as a necessary part of city centre redevelopment.

This report concentrates on biodiversity loss and how we, as a Council, can and must set about halting and reversing this process, not least to meet the 2020 target set by the Welsh Government which aims to halt the loss of biodiversity and take steps toward recovery. Early on, we decided with regret that we could not adequately address the issue of climate change within the scope of this inquiry, albeit that this process impacts as much upon wildlife as it does upon our species. However, we should not lose sight of this overriding challenge – I commend the work on renewable sources of zero-carbon energy for Swansea being undertaken by the Council but, of course, as we all know, much more needs to be done.

I would like in conclusion to say that the cross party Panel has worked extremely well, and I would like to pay tribute to the ideas and contributions of all members. I would also, of course, pay tribute to and thank both the Council Officers who met with the Panel and responded to its, often, difficult questioning, and to the many representatives of outside ‘green’ and voluntary bodies who attended our meetings and gave evidence. I would especially wish to thank Deb Hill, Team Leader of the Council’s Nature Conservation Team, who was unstinting in her help and advice to the Panel; and to Bethan Hopkins, the Scrutiny Officer responsible for supporting the Inquiry, and for all her enthusiastic hard work, good advice, initiatives and ideas.

There’s much work to be done – let’s get on and do it!

Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

Below is a summary of conclusions and recommendations which the Panel reached. Detail can be found in the body of the report.

What should Swansea Council do to maintain and enhance its natural environment and biodiversity, and, in so doing, promote the resilience of eco-systems?

Conclusions

1. Create an environmental corporate priority to embed biodiversity in business and strategic planning to meet requirements.
2. Raise the profile of the Natural Environment and Biodiversity internally and externally.
3. Maintain and increase the specialist and high quality work which is currently delivered.
4. Recognise the benefits of 'nature based' prevention projects, such as to limit air pollution and for flood risk management etc.
5. The need for and costs of providing additional resources to maintain the natural environment should be recognised and shared throughout services
6. The authority should work co-productively with external partners on a strategic scale.
7. Recognise, encourage, maintain and expand commitment from voluntary groups, Community Councils and the public in maintaining and enhancing the Council's green spaces.
8. There should be more cross departmental working, with the shared aim of maintaining and enhancing the natural environment and biodiversity, together with their eco-system benefits.
9. There needs to be a commitment to natural environment education in schools.

Recommendations

1. Development and implementation of a Corporate Biodiversity Action Plan.
2. Ensure the Action Plan links with other relevant cross organisational policies at a strategic level, for example, the Local Well-being Plan and Area Statements.
3. Develop a clear and enthusiastic vision and message for maintaining and enhancing biodiversity to ensure a consistent 'buy-in' from each service.
4. Embed the new corporate priority by developing and delivering relevant training.
5. Make information available to the public to encourage participation and understanding, including continuing to develop the Natural Environment web pages.
6. Complete and publicise the ward mapping exercise. This would provide each ward and the Councillor Representatives with information specific to that ward. It would include information about important species, protected sites and other relevant ecological information as well as potential opportunities for improving biodiversity within the ward.
7. Recognise, encourage, maintain and expand commitment from voluntary groups, Community Councils and the public in maintaining and enhancing the Council's green spaces.
8. Insert a relevant biodiversity clause into service level agreements, licences etc which relates to land use and land management and ensure that the importance of these clauses is made clear to the land managers and the implications of not meeting them are highlighted.
9. Assess the verges in Swansea that can stop being mowed and sprayed. Give these over to nature and allow for self-seeding, which will encourage native plants and pollinator species.
10. Where appropriate, plant native wildflowers and trees. Non-native species do not benefit pollinators to the same extent as native species.
11. Encourage green projects for well-being such as gardening projects, outdoor green-space activities and volunteering opportunities for adults and children across all relevant services.
12. Employ a Section 6 Officer to co-ordinate, support and promote the consideration and delivery of a range of environmental projects across Swansea and also ensure the Council are meeting the requirements of the Environment Act (Section 6).
13. Employ an additional Planning Ecologist/Ecological Enforcement Officer to work with Council services with a specific duty to help ensure the environmental conditions and section 106 obligations on planning consents are met, whilst also

contributing to maintaining biodiversity, and meeting the requirements of the new Sustainable Drainage System legislation.

14. Share natural environment and biodiversity costs across services.
15. Renew the South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBRc) service level agreement for 2019/20 (with a plan in place to achieve this in subsequent years)
16. Continue to nurture good working relationships with external agencies and encourage other services to do the same.
17. Invite environmental voluntary group and Community Council representatives to regular liaison meetings e.g. Friends of parks and wildlife sites. This would allow them some support and access to some specialist advice from relevant officers.
18. Create environmental link Governors on school governing bodies who can take relevant information and projects to their school.
19. Encourage better use of school grounds and local wildlife sites for biodiversity.
20. Employ a dedicated outdoor learning officer who can provide the tailored support, training and delivery that will enable Swansea schools to fully realise the potential of outdoor learning, to deliver educational and wellbeing benefits, from the varied natural resources which Swansea possesses.

Contents

		Page
	Foreword	2
	Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations	4
1.	Why We Produced This Report	8
1.1	Overview	8
1.2	Selecting the Topic	8
1.3	Intended Contribution	8
1.4	Equalities and Engagement	9
1.5	Use of Key Words and Phrases	9
2.	Evidence	11
2.1	Evidence Collected	11
3.	General Comments	11
4.	Conclusions and Recommendations	13
4.1	Create an environmental corporate priority to embed biodiversity in business and strategic planning to meet requirements	13
4.2	Raise the profile of the Natural Environment and Biodiversity internally and externally	14
4.3	Maintain and increase the specialist and high quality work which is currently delivered	15
4.4	Recognise the benefits of 'nature-based' prevention projects such as to limit air pollution and for flood risk management etc	17
4.5	The need for and costs of providing additional resources to maintain the natural environment should be recognised and shared throughout services	19
4.6	The authority should work co-productively with external partners on a strategic scale	21
4.7	Recognise, encourage, maintain and expand commitment from voluntary groups, Community Councils and the public in maintaining and enhancing the Council's green spaces	23
4.8	There should be more cross departmental working with common environmental objectives	25
4.9	There needs to be a commitment to natural environment education in schools	26
5.	Recommendations – Short/Medium/Long Term	29
6.	Acknowledgements	31
7.	Further Scrutiny Needed	32
8.	About the Inquiry Panel	33

1. **WHY WE PRODUCED THIS REPORT**

Overview

- 1.1 In examining this topic and producing this report we acknowledge the current work that is being undertaken by Swansea Council to maintain and enhance the natural environment and biodiversity whilst, of course, seeking to identify potential areas for improvement. There are two major pieces of recent legislation: the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. These impose duties and responsibilities on all public bodies to protect and enhance the resilience of ecosystems, and to consider this in all Council activities and projects from their earliest planning and design stages.

Selecting the topic

- 1.2 The topic was chosen for scrutiny because the recent legislation requires adoption and delivery of the biodiversity and eco-system duties by all Welsh public authorities, and there is an appetite in Swansea to ensure that its substantial natural resources are protected and enriched for both the current and future populations of the city.

It is also important to recognise that Swansea is going through a period of substantial change. Major development and regeneration projects in the City Centre, in particular, will see the biggest infrastructure shift in 70 years. This gives us a once in a lifetime opportunity to place green infrastructure at the heart of the development and make radical changes for the benefit of the environment and the people of Swansea.

Intended contribution

- 1.3 As a Panel we believe that we can make a valuable contribution to the sustainable management of the natural environment in Swansea. We recognise, however, that the challenges are deep seated and often complex. We also believe that, while no one has all of the answers, success will only come from a conversation that everyone is able to contribute to. It is in this spirit that our conclusions and recommendations are offered.

Specifically this report aims to contribute to this vital debate by:

- Drawing together some general principles for the maintenance and enhancement of the natural environment.
- Offering proposals for improvement in the short, medium and long term.
- Providing a Councillor perspective on how well services are working.
- Pointing to good practice examples.
- Sharing the views of different people involved in thinking about and working for the natural environment.

We are also happy to recognise the limitations of the Inquiry. Given the complexity of the topic and the time that we had, this report necessarily provides a broad view. We simply did not have the time to go into issues in more depth. Moreover, we have not addressed the challenge of climate change which, of

course, is already impacting significantly on wildlife, and Councils will need to do so with increasing intensity as we go forward.

Finally, many of our conclusions are in line with the Council’s current direction of travel and these are noted in order to provide reassurance. Others may be either additional or contrary to what has already been agreed. These are intended to offer challenge and to stimulate debate. Where we have made recommendations these are intended to help improve the work of the Council.

Equalities and Engagement

1.4 The Council is subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty (Wales) and must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Our Equality Impact Assessment process ensures that we have paid due regard to the above.

When planning this Inquiry, we considered which groups might be particularly affected and how we might engage with them. As a result, we published a blog and survey asking for feedback and ensured that this was available in alternative formats; this was sent to forums that represent people with protected characteristics.

Use of key words and phrases

1.5 For clarity and benefit of the lay person the report uses a number of terms, which are explained as follows:

Aderyn	The Biodiversity Information and Reporting Database of Local Environmental Records Centres Wales
Biodiversity	Biodiversity is defined as: "the variability amongst living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems."
Ecosystem	A dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their non-living environment interacting as a functional unit. An ecosystem includes all of the living things (plants, animals and micro-organisms) in a given area, interacting with each other, and also with their non-living environments (weather, earth, sun, soil, climate, and atmosphere).

Ecosystem Services	Ecosystem services are the many and varied benefits that humans freely gain from the natural environment and from properly-functioning ecosystems. Ecosystem services are grouped into four broad categories: provisioning, such as the production of food and water; regulating, such as the control of climate and disease; supporting, such as nutrient cycles and oxygen production; and cultural, such as spiritual and recreational benefits.
Ecosystem resilience	A resilient ecosystem is one that is healthy and functions in a way that is able to address pressures and demands placed on it, and is able to deliver benefits over the long term to meet current and future social, economic and environmental needs.
Ecological Connectivity	Physical links that allow organisms to move between habitats, populations or assemblages that are isolated in space.
INNS	Invasive Non Native Species
Natural Environment	The natural environment encompasses all living and non-living things occurring naturally. It includes all plants, animals, micro-organisms, soil, rocks, air, water, and atmosphere.
NRW	Natural Resources Wales
Pollinator Species	A pollinator is an animal that causes plants to make fruit or seeds. They do this by moving pollen from one part of the flower of a plant to another part. This pollen then fertilizes the plant. Only fertilized plants can make fruit and/or seeds, and without them, the plants cannot reproduce
Ramsar	A Ramsar Site is a wetland site designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention (an intergovernmental environmental treaty established in 1971 by UNESCO)
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SAC	Special Areas of Conservation. These are strictly protected sites designated under the European Union Habitats Directive
SEWBRcC	South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre
SDS	Sustainable Drainage System
SINC	Site of Importance for Nature Conservation
SPA	A Special Protection Area (SPA) is a designation under the European Union Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
WLGA	Welsh Local Government Association

2. EVIDENCE

Evidence Collected

- 2.1 Evidence was collected between March 2018 and November 2018 in order to gather a range of perspectives on this topic. This included:
- a. Overview – Corporate Performance Manager
 - b. Service Policy Briefing – Strategic Planning and Natural Environment Manager and Nature Conservation Team Leader
 - c. Trallwn and Brynhyfryd Primary School visits to observe RSPB education sessions
 - d. Roundtable Session – External Organisations (NRW, RSPB, SEWBReC, Plant Life, WWT, Swansea Biodiversity Partnership/Swansea Environment Centre, Forest School Swansea Neath Port Talbot)
 - e. Roundtable Session – ‘Friends of’ Volunteer Groups – Swansea Botanical Complex, Swansea Vale, Rosehill Quarry, Pentyla Playing Fields (Ganges), Kilvey Hill and Woodland, Morryston Park
 - f. Meeting with Development Conservation and Design Manager
 - g. Service Overviews – Corporate Building Services and Corporate Property Services
 - h. Legislation Session – NRW, Future Generations Office, WLGA
 - i. Findings Session – Input from Nature Conservation Team Leader
 - j. Cabinet Member Input
 - k. Head of Service Input

For full details of how the evidence was gathered, including details of the findings from each session, please see the findings report. This can be downloaded at <http://democracy.swansea.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=610&MId=8272&Ver=4&LLL=-1> .

3. GENERAL COMMENTS

- 3.1 The key question for the Inquiry was: ‘What should Swansea Council do to maintain and enhance its natural environment and biodiversity, and, in so doing, promote the resilience of eco-systems?’
- 3.2 The environment is high in the public’s awareness at present locally and globally. From the reduction of single use plastics to the melting of Polar ice, people everywhere are becoming more and more aware of the impact we are having on the natural world and how these impacts are beginning to have a direct effect on people’s lives. This message has filtered all the way down to a local level and from Westminster to Welsh Government to local Councils the

message is clear – the environment matters. Waste and CO2 reduction targets are becoming more stringent. Green infrastructure is developing rapidly, and being more sustainable is at the top of concerns. Swansea Council has a major role to play in delivery and prevention, and in responding to the challenges set.

- 3.3 One of our overriding conclusions is that the breadth and depth of work already being undertaken to protect and enhance Swansea's natural environment is substantial. For many years, committed teams have striven to maintain and enhance the County's biodiversity, and the relationships that have developed and the local knowledge accumulated are outstanding. The Cabinet Member who has overall jurisdiction for this area of work is Councillor Mark Thomas, and it is clear that he is committed and passionate about the issue. This, along with increasing recognition of the importance of Swansea's outstanding natural assets, has driven the natural environment to be a key priority for Swansea Council.
- 3.4 The fact that the Council has a dedicated team to manage nature conservation shows that it is already committed to the issue long term, and this, of course, is in line with the requirements under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. The delivery of the Scrutiny Inquiry also supports the thinking that Swansea is 'ahead of the game' when it comes to the environment, and is looking at how it can take the current good work and build on this to be a leading Council in Wales for the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity.
- 3.5 It is clear that, for the general public, biodiversity is important. The Inquiry 'Call for Evidence' had a number of responses; with public and professionals alike making contact to contribute to the Inquiry and to be part of the effort to improve Swansea's natural environment. The volunteers who came to give evidence were committed, experienced and enthusiastic about the relationship between the public and the Council, and how this needs to be maintained, encouraged and supported to ensure the good work continues.
- 3.6 We were particularly heartened that almost every organisation we contacted was more than happy to contribute to the Inquiry, and provided a range of information to assist the Panel. They were incredibly generous with their time, offering to follow up on any issues and to submit further information if required. It is clear that there is no shortage of organisations willing to work with Swansea Council to achieve the goal of an enhanced environment and a successful green infrastructure approach, and these opportunities for collaboration need to be grasped.
- 3.7 Whilst all of the right foundations are in place for Swansea to have a thriving natural environment, it is now time to ensure this is built in early to all plans and projects and is recognised by all services. This will be essential for Swansea's future success both locally and globally.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These are the Panel's conclusions together with full recommendations on how we feel the issues of complying with Welsh Government legislation and maintaining and enhancing the natural environment and biodiversity in Swansea could be addressed.

4.1 Create an environmental corporate priority to embed biodiversity in business and strategic planning to meet requirements

4.1.1 Although a new Corporate Well-being Objective 'Maintaining and enhancing Swansea's Natural Resources and Biodiversity' was approved by the Council during the course of the Inquiry, we felt it important to note how much of a positive step this is. The Panel feel that the Scrutiny Inquiry has contributed to this and we welcome its adoption and thank all those who were involved. The difficulties caused by not integrating the natural environment with other Council priorities has been highlighted not just by external providers and the public but also Council service providers themselves.

4.1.2 Throughout the course of the Inquiry, the Panel agreed that there needs to be a strategic approach to the natural environment, in order to ensure that the importance of the issue is highlighted and meets legislative requirements. The natural environment needs a significant commitment from within the organisation at all levels.

4.1.3 Although Welsh Government are wanting adherence to the requirements set out in the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, there is little advice on how exactly these requirements should be implemented. However, guidance for Section 6 of the Environment Act, the 'Biodiversity and Resilience of Ecosystems Duty' states that 'To follow the S6 duty public authorities should embed the consideration of biodiversity and ecosystems into their early thinking and business planning, including any policies, plans, programmes and projects, as well as in their day to day activities.' This requires the environment to be considered at the earliest stages of all Council activities. The Panel agreed unanimously that the only way to achieve this is to include it in the Corporate Plan, as now enacted by Council.

4.1.4 It is not just the Panel who feel that more senior officer commitment is necessary for success. During the roundtable discussion with external environmental providers, it was stated that 'senior management need to be involved and for the issue to be taken seriously at the highest level'.

4.1.5 There is also a feeling that a lack of definition around the importance of the issue is causing conflict. Volunteers echoed this, saying 'Council departments have differing priorities, some financial and some environmental'. They felt that whilst there is much support from particular teams, this dedication was not harmonious throughout the whole organisation.

- 4.1.6 This issue is not limited to external organisations and volunteers. During evidence gathering with Council services, the Panel found that this same lack of consistency causes practical problems. Corporate Property services highlighted that the policy conflict between financial and environmental issues can cause problems, and outcomes had been determined by negotiation rather than from a corporate commitment to delivering our biodiversity responsibilities. Some services also felt that a corporate priority for the environment would allow the good work already happening to be recognised and encouraged. Corporate Building Services stated that they would like to see a top down approach to biodiversity to ‘...ensure that the message is filtered through the organisation in the same way other important messages are’. It is clear that internally, there is a definite commitment from staff to enhance the environment, but there also needs to be a strong and consistent organisational message in order to achieve measurable outcomes.
- 4.1.7 As Neville Rookes from the Welsh Local Government Association advises - ‘There should be environment in every policy and every policy in environment’. This will involve mainstreaming the environment and biodiversity across all Council services, together with raising awareness, a culture shift and appropriate procedural changes.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Development and implementation of a Corporate Biodiversity Action Plan to take this forward (Medium Term)

Recommendation 2: Ensure the Action Plan links with other relevant cross organisational policies at a strategic level, for example, the Local Well-being Plan and Area Statements (Medium Term)

Recommendation 3: Develop a clear and enthusiastic vision and message for maintaining and enhancing biodiversity to ensure a consistent ‘buy-in’ from each service (Quick Win)

4.2 **Raise the profile of the Natural Environment and Biodiversity internally and externally**

- 4.2.1 Notwithstanding the introduction of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, the profile and understanding of the natural environment is not as high as it should be. This applies both to Council staff and to the wider public.
- 4.2.2 This issue is not specific to Swansea. We heard from the Future Generations Commissioner’s Office staff that ‘A Resilient Wales’ well-being goal was regularly misinterpreted in the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Instead of championing the importance of biodiversity, resilience was being used to mean economic, community or often social resilience. This misrepresentation reduces the amount of ecological attention and delivery under the goal.

- 4.2.3 Internally, during the Inquiry, each Head of Service was sent a questionnaire asking about the biodiversity duty and how they feel their service contributes to it. Interestingly, of the 11 responses received only 6 were aware there was a biodiversity duty, 2 admitted they were not aware and 3 did not answer the question. This highlights that more knowledge and awareness around the biodiversity duty is needed. This will then make it easier to embed biodiversity and develop projects across other service areas.
- 4.2.4 However, despite a lack of knowledge around the duty, there is definitely an appetite to increase information for the services and to undertake tasks to enhance the natural environment and biodiversity. Heads of Service were asked if they had ideas about how to work differently to enhance biodiversity at work and 7 of them had ideas that they would like to implement, but insufficient budgetary provision was the main constraint to implementing these ideas.
- 4.2.5 Externally, there are some very committed residents and organisations who have an interest in biodiversity, and the large public response and support for the natural environment shows that there is substantial knowledge in the community. However, there is still plenty of scope for awareness raising, with a desire to learn more and integrate biodiversity into the Council's functions. The following recommendations would promote the natural environment in general, thereby promoting ecosystem resilience.

Recommendations

Recommendation 4: *Embed the new corporate priority by developing and delivering relevant training. The Nature Conservation Team could roll out training at the appropriate level and could undertake a service appropriate assessment with ideas and input coming from that service to encourage involvement. (Medium Term)*

Recommendation 5: *Make information available to the public to encourage participation and understanding, including continuing to develop the Natural Environment web pages e.g. explain why some verges are wild or why projects which have a green aspect are taking place. Public promotion is vital. (Quick Win)*

4.3 **Maintain and increase the specialist and high quality work which is currently delivered**

- 4.3.1 Swansea Council do a lot of preventative and proactive day to day work, including policy development. The dedicated Nature Conservation Team (FTE 5 staff), along with complimentary teams such as The Countryside Access Team (5 staff), the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Team (AONB) (2 staff) and Strategic Planning Team (7 staff) work together to enhance, maintain and promote awareness and appreciation of Swansea's natural environment. However, it appears these teams are stretched to full capacity.

- 4.3.2 Despite the majority of the county being rural and having some form of environmentally important status, these teams provide the only nature based resource to Swansea Council. They deal with a wide range of work including policy and strategy development, planning ecology, community projects, access improvements, awareness raising, land management and enhancement and partnership working.
- 4.3.3 Other organisations such as Natural Resources Wales, Swansea Environmental Forum and SEWBReC, all praised the work of the Council's Nature Conservation Team, and said that working in collaboration with them has benefited Swansea. The work being delivered by the team directly contributes to the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity at both an operational and strategic level. Senior representatives from organisations highlighted that the behind the scenes work of policy development, mitigation recommendations and input into strategic planning is often what stops the Council from breaching its duties under relevant Acts and facing potential legal issues.
- 4.3.4 The members of various voluntary groups in Swansea also said the work currently being done is highly regarded and in demand. Volunteers often request extra time where possible with the team, to benefit from their expertise and make the work carried out by these groups more effective and appropriate.
- 4.3.5 The Local Authority owns a significant amount of land that is of ecological importance including
- Special Areas of Conservation, Ramsar Sites, SPAs.
 - Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Nature Reserves
 - Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation.

The Authority has a duty to manage its estate in accordance with the relevant biodiversity legislation. A pilot project is underway to map biodiversity assets and opportunities at a ward level to inform place based decision making.

The Nature Conservation Team is responsible for the management of 6 Local Nature Reserves and a number of Council owned SAC's, SSSI's and SINC's. It also provides advice to other Council staff with land management responsibilities. This involves the preparation of management plans and agreements, practical site management and maintenance work, tackling invasive non-native species (INNS), managing contractors and supporting community and volunteer participation in biodiversity delivery.

Recommendations

Recommendation 6: Complete and publicise the ward mapping exercise. This would provide each ward and the Councillor Representatives with information specific to that ward. It would include information about important species, protected sites and other relevant ecological information as well as potential opportunities for improving biodiversity within the ward. A link to the ward mapping should appear on planning applications when completed. This would help when it comes to planning applications and empower ward councillors and residents to be able to respond to issues which threaten these special features of their ward and encourage maintenance of biodiversity. It would also contribute to the enforcement activity of the Council. (Long Term)

Recommendation 7: Maintain support for volunteers, Community Councils and groups managing both Council owned and non-Council owned land. There are important areas of natural environment in Swansea that may be managed by trusts or owned privately. The links to these areas need to be maintained to ensure best practice is shared and any relevant information/policy can be applied across Swansea, improving nature-based connectivity overall. (Long Term)

4.4 **Recognise the benefits of 'nature-based' prevention projects, such as to limit air pollution and for flood risk management etc**

4.4.1 One of the recurring messages to come out of the Inquiry was that there is a move to look at nature based solutions to deal with problems which previously would have been rectified with hard engineering solutions. During the evidence gathering process, Neville Rookes a Policy Officer for Environment from WLGA, highlighted that other Councils were starting to implement nature based solutions for issues such as flooding and doing so with great success. A project on the River Taff was given as an example, which aimed to achieve flood defence and prevention through the development of a wildlife pond and a cycle path.

4.4.2 One of the Swansea projects that was referenced by organisations including Plant Life, Swansea Environmental Forum and Natural Resources Wales as a huge success, was the Marram Grass Scheme used in the sand dunes at Swansea Bay. This innovative, nature based project was a collaboration of services including nature conservation, highways, drainage, parks and Natural Resources Wales. A specialist study concluded that the most sustainable way to control windblown sand between the beach and promenade was to construct sand trapping fences, with subsequent marram grass planting to stabilise and increase existing dunes and establish new ones. This has been successful and should set the tone going forward.

- 4.4.3 The Panel heard that there is scope to look to green solutions for many existing and potential problems. The suggestion of not mowing some verges, planting trees to alleviate flooding, planting native wildflowers and using 'green' initiatives to enhance well-being are all realistic and money saving options as far as the Panel is concerned. There is already evidence of community gardening projects having positive effects on users engaged with social services, and there is a raft of evidence produced by various organisations highlighting the benefits to both physical and mental health to being outside and engaged in green projects.
- 4.4.4 The Well-being of Future Generations Act requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as climate change. WLGA advise that, as a Council, we must use the 5 ways of working to shape the strategy and policy of everything that we do. Ecological resilience should be incorporated at the start of projects. In the short and medium term, there is a risk of reputational damage and possible legal infractions and failure to meet EU requirements; in the long term, it will be infraction of whatever UK law is in place after Brexit, if the latter goes ahead. The Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales' representative agreed with these points.
- 4.4.5 An easy and cost effective way of achieving results is to include a clause in any service level agreement for land that is owned by the Council but managed on a day to day basis by another group or individual. Up to now, there has not been a biodiversity clause to remind land users of their obligation and to highlight the importance of the issue. Following discussion within this Inquiry, a clause has now been inserted into the service level agreement for community groups managing green spaces. The Panel felt that this was an easy way of highlighting and legally requiring the maintenance and enhancement of the environment of these pieces of land. There should be more detailed clauses in other agreements e.g. those agreements relating to grazing sites, and also in those entered into with external event organisers which require Council consent before certain activities (e.g. clearing land) are undertaken, to prevent loss of biodiversity.

Recommendations

Recommendation 8: *Insert a relevant biodiversity clause into service level agreements, licences etc which relates to land use and land management and land use and ensure that the importance of these clauses is made clear to the land managers/occupiers and the implications of not meeting them are highlighted. (Quick Win)*

Recommendation 9: *Assess the verges in Swansea that can stop being mowed and sprayed. Give these over to nature and allow for self-seeding, which will encourage native plants and pollinator species. This can also save money as less frequent mowing is required. There could be signs erected to highlight the project to help change the culture. (Medium Term)*

Recommendation 10: *Where appropriate, plant native wildflowers and trees. Non-native species do not benefit pollinators to the same extent as native species. (Long Term)*

Recommendation 11: *Encourage green projects for well-being such as gardening projects, outdoor green-space activities and volunteering opportunities for adults and children across all relevant services. This includes linking with Community Councils. Communities can make use of the 'Community Green Space Toolkit' which can be found online at <http://swanseacommunitygreenspaces.weebly.com> (Long Term)*

4.5 **The need for and costs of providing additional resources to maintain the natural environment should be recognised and shared throughout services**

4.5.1 External providers, including NRW and Welsh Government, have commented on the level of expertise and passion in the Council's Nature Conservation Team. However it seems that the people and organisations who know of their activities are those who work most closely with them. There is very little publicity being undertaken around the work of the team, whether internally or externally. The Panel feel that if the work that is being undertaken were to be publicised more, other Council staff and the public would realise both the importance of the issue and the breadth of work currently being delivered. There is an obvious difficulty here, publicising work takes time and resource, which is scarce in this team as it is, and highlighting activity could lead to an influx of demand which the team is not resourced to deal with. This has been an ongoing issue for some time and, although the new corporate priority has not created more work than the team can presently deliver, demand for support is expected to increase as biodiversity becomes embedded. This highlights just how vulnerable they are to resource reduction through loss of grants and unsustainable temporary posts e.g. Temporary Planning Ecologist Post.

4.5.2 This problem is not specific to this team, particularly during such a difficult financial climate; however, the Panel feels there does need to be some rethink over how this service is funded. During the roundtable session with providers, Natural Resources Wales stated that 'The best examples of funding are when the budget comes from each Council department which impacts or benefits from the natural environment and biodiversity'. Echoing this sentiment, RSPB Cymru commented that 'estates, parks, planning and regeneration all need to be on the same page when it comes to biodiversity and nature conservation'. In agreement with both of these comments, the Panel feels that there are many services in the Council which benefit from having a thriving natural environment, not least tourism. However, despite the selling point of Gower and the green spaces in Swansea and the money that is made, for example from car park charges or grazing licences, none of this income is received by the Nature Conservation Team (along with complimentary teams such as Countryside Access and AONB). The Panel feels that this is unreasonable, considering specific services need the environment to be in a good state for them to be as successful as they are. Services that see benefit from a thriving and healthy Swansea should contribute to its upkeep.

The Team has identified and secured some income from charging for its services for example school visits, and tendering for commercial biodiversity contracts (e.g. ecological surveys, management plans, interpretation etc.), but this can only be expanded with additional staff capacity.

- 4.5.3 One of the issues identified during the Inquiry was a lack of knowledge amongst professional officers, who are not ecologists, of the specifics of how environmental conditions attached to planning consents should be implemented, (e.g. how and where to install bat boxes and the most appropriate design, how to create habitats for mitigation, etc.). Despite the legislation there is no statutory requirement to employ an ecological enforcement officer. The Panel question how effective any legislation can be if there are insufficient enforcement resources available – legislation becomes a suggestion rather than a direction. The Planning Ecologists explained that they cannot ensure that the environmental requirements that are conditioned within planning consents are fully delivered/realised due to a lack of staff capacity within the service to monitor and enforce conditions. Therefore, we cannot be sure that we have complied with our legal duties under the Environment Wales Act, and the Planning Act. There is a risk that less responsible and more cynical developers could take advantage of this. There is a substantial need and requirement for an additional ecologist with specific responsibilities for monitoring compliance with environmental conditions attached to planning permissions. Such an officer would benefit and support a range of services including planning, and would promote a zero tolerance message to anyone who was breaching the law and causing Swansea's biodiversity to be damaged.

Recommendations

Recommendation 12: *Employ a Section 6 Officer to co-ordinate, support and promote the consideration and delivery of a range of environmental projects across Swansea and also ensure the Council are meeting the requirements of the Environment Act (Section 6). This includes the development of a Corporate Natural Environment Working Group. This should stop us breaching the legislation and potentially facing fines/restricted grant access/reputational damage. (Quick Win)*

Recommendation 13: *Employ an additional Planning Ecologist/Ecological Enforcement Officer to work with Council services with a specific duty to help ensure the environmental conditions and section 106 obligations on planning consents are met, whilst also contributing to maintaining biodiversity, and meeting the requirements of the new Sustainable Drainage System legislation. (Quick Win)*

Recommendation 14: *Share natural environment and biodiversity costs across services. Much of the work completed in relation to biodiversity is funded by a single team's budget. Considering both the Council as a whole, and certain specific services, benefit from a thriving environment, it seems appropriate that other services should be contributing financially to this work. (Long Term)*

4.6 **The authority should work co-productively with external partners on a strategic scale**

4.6.1 There is an assumption from Welsh Government that public authorities and other agencies will link together on common projects and develop solutions based on their combined knowledge. From strategic decisions to day to day activities, the input from other relevant organisations should help lead to the best outcomes. The Inquiry Panel agrees that this is the best way forward, and the contribution of agencies and the public to the Inquiry strengthened the idea that many heads are better than one. Hearing different perspectives and experiences led the Panel to conclude that more knowledge with shared aims leads to better decision making. This is not a new idea but one which is in the process of being embedded, with work being delivered under the Public Services Board (PSB) with this exact ethos at its heart. The purpose of the PSB is to work collectively to improve the local social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being in a local authority area. Working in isolation is no longer an option.

4.6.2 All of the agencies who contributed to the evidence gathering of the Inquiry expressed an interest and discussed the benefits of strategic collaborative working. It is not enough that one or two staff members have good links with an organisation; all of the services which have any involvement in the environment in Swansea need to be developing and regularly contributing to these conversations and actions. Services such as Corporate Property and Highways and Transportation need excellent relationships with organisations like SEWBRc, NRW, Plant Life and the Swansea Environment Forum, so the best decisions can be made for the environment. We already as a Council work closely with the aforementioned organisations, along with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Cymru (RSPB) and the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, and these relationships should be nurtured and expanded.

We spoke to all of the groups that attended and asked what their advice for the Council would be. They said:

- 1. Biodiversity has to be maintained and improved for the future generations in line with the Act.*
- 2. Sign up to the Service Level Agreement with SEWBRc to access important mapping/species data for projects.*
- 3. Stand by the policies it already has.*
- 4. Work in partnership to achieve projects, this will reduce costs and bring in expertise.*
- 5. Improve communication within departments and challenge those (including external organisations) who are not doing what they should be.*
- 6. Develop links with the right staff and consult at the right stage.*
- 7. Do not ignore the lower Lliw Valley.*
- 8. Take responsibility for developing plans and getting departments to work together not against each other.*

9. *Senior management need to be involved and this needs to be taken seriously at the highest level.*
10. *Value volunteers and volunteer co-ordinators – some money and effort has to be put in.*

- 4.6.3 One of the important collaborative projects that the Panel supports is access to biodiversity data via the South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBRc) Service Level Agreement. The role of SEWBRc is to collect, verify, digitise and share species and habitat data with public, private and third sector organisations and individuals. These data are gathered by professional ecologists and specially trained volunteers and the public, and can then be accessed to assess the impact of projects which are being proposed. This includes planning applications, development schemes and conservation activities. Swansea Council did not access this information between 2004 and 2017 due to lack of funding and are at a disadvantage without it. So much of Swansea has important species that it is unlikely anyone can undertake a project without having an impact under the provisions of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and/or the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. The SEWBRc information can be used to complete full audits of sites and create buffer zones around projects. Information is sent to officers via Aderyn (The Biodiversity Information and Reporting Database of Local Environmental Records Centres Wales) and ensures that better decisions are made around ecology, land management and development. This is the kind of strategic partnership work which needs to be included in wider departmental activities with funding of the SEWBRc Service Level Agreement being shared between relevant services.
- 4.6.4 Strategic partnership working does not only make sense in terms of delivering the best and practical solutions, it is a requirement that may have financial impacts if not achieved. Not meeting these collaborative requirements under the Acts will have impacts on access to future grants e.g. the Welsh Government Enabling our Natural Resources and Well-being Grant, which has emphasis on joined up, cross sector working. Considering that the current financial outlook for the public sector is bleak, further limiting access to financial aid is not a risk the Panel feels the Council should take.

Recommendations

Recommendation 15: *Renew the South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBRc) service level agreement for 2019/20 (with a plan in place to achieve this in subsequent years) the approximate cost is between £8,000 and £10,000 per annum. The relevant departments (Development Management, Highways, Corporate Buildings and Corporate Property) should be contributing to the costs of accessing this information, using this resource regularly and, where necessary, asking the Council's ecologists to interpret the data. (Quick Win)*

Recommendation 16: *Continue to nurture good working relationships with external agencies and encourage other services to do the same. This should not be limited to national organisations but should also include local ones such as Swansea Environmental Forum, the Swansea Biodiversity Partnership and the Swansea Environment Centre. (Long Term)*

4.7 **Recognise, encourage, maintain and expand commitment from voluntary groups, Community Councils and the public in maintaining and enhancing the Council's green spaces**

4.7.1 Swansea has a significant number of volunteer groups, working unpaid to maintain a range of community spaces: some of these are community centres and some are green spaces such as parks and gardens and wildlife sites. The Panel met with and gathered evidence from these groups to explore the extent and the nature of the work being undertaken. The opportunity to contribute raised considerable interest, with 8 group leaders being invited to give evidence and present information on their work. The message from all of the groups was the same - the support they currently receive from the Nature Conservation Team is excellent, but they need more contact and information and more ways of linking in with the projects of biodiversity relevant to their areas. More support and advice could be provided, but again the limiting factor to this is the lack of capacity within the Nature Conservation Team. The other major recurring issue was the need to make strong links with schools. Children should be enabled to make better use of the spaces around them and have this built into the education curriculum. This also links in with a wider issue around using green spaces to improve and increase well-being.

Some of the main comments made in the voluntary group session are listed below:

- *Groups rely on specialist expertise like the Nature Conservation Team to support their projects.*
- *There should be two main points of contact for the groups;*
 1. *A horticulture/environmental specialist*
 2. *An Education Officer linking schools to the spaces*
- *Records (for example ecology surveys/protected sites) need to be accurate to ensure decisions made are based on correct information.*
- *Neath Port Talbot Council have a scheme where road verges are designated as 'wild' and mown/maintained differently – Swansea should do the same and help change the public perception.*
- *Some people will complain that 'wild' areas are neglected but there needs to be a culture change.*
- *Would like to list the flora and fauna in the park but cannot because the groups do not have the expertise to do this.*
- *The Council departments seem to have differing priorities from each other – some financial, some environmental, these need to be reconciled.*
- *Ecological reports which are submitted for planning applications should be accurate and impartial.*

- *Groups want the Council to recognise the importance of sites to people and the environment.*
- *Having a link to liaise with schools is essential as it encourages learning and involvement in the area.*
- *Public signs advertising the areas would be beneficial so people know the sites are there for visiting.*
- *Groups are desperate for expertise and the planning and identification of existing biodiversity.*
- *Initiatives don't come with maintenance plans or budgets to keep projects sustainable.*
- *Working between departments can be difficult as they have differing agendas.*
- *Groups are able to pull in funding if they apply properly.*

4.7.2 The Panel issued a public survey asking for submissions from interested parties. We had 37 responses from the public along with 3 full submissions. This is an excellent response for a scrutiny call for evidence and shows the substantial interest that the public has in the issue of environmental conservation. However, the public and volunteer interest in the whole issue of biodiversity is not limited to the work of this Inquiry, indeed the Cabinet Member for Environment and Infrastructure Management has recognised that this issue has substantial public support.

There are far too many responses from the public to include in this report and there was a mixture of praise and criticism. Below is a selection of comments from both sides:

Positives

- *'The parks are beautiful and everybody loves the summer flowers'*
- *'The Gower coastline'*
- *'Have a good team in the Council despite being underfunded'*
- *'I love the wildflowers and City parks'*
- *'Planting of wildflowers along the roadways and verges: looks great and is good for bugs'*
- *'Promoting use of rights of way, environment sites etc, small team based efforts e.g. highways staff'*
- *'The team do a good job maintaining nature reserves and running education/awareness raising activities'*
- *'Leaving areas in parks with uncut grass'*
- *'Swansea is becoming better aware of its fabulous natural setting, our hills, the bay and the Gower'*
- *'Nature Conservation Team very knowledgeable and works well stabilising dunes, making paths'*
- *'The Lower Swansea Valley project – that was improving the natural environment at its finest'*

- *‘Wild flowers, having an Environment Centre and Swansea Environment Forum’*

Room for Improvement

- *‘A joined up approach that expects actions from all teams not just those in ‘environmental’ roles’*
- *‘I am a bee keeper in the Uplands and it is detrimental that you are still spraying bee killing stuff. I am aware that to sow summer flowers you actually treat the ground every year with pure poison. Why? Is there not a natural way – just dig it like any other gardener does’*
- *‘Applying policies when taking planning decisions. Shocking lapse when permitting housing development to destroy a site which the Council itself had protected’*
- *‘Car free days. Plant trees, hedges, rooftop gardens on public buildings to counteract pollution and assess effectiveness against pollution levels in urban areas’*
- *‘Don’t cut down mature trees work round them, plant native trees and shrubs, reduce hard surfaces’*
- *‘Look after the shoreline for birds’*
- *‘Raise the profile of the natural environment and biodiversity in Swansea’*
- *‘Reduce pollution, clean local beaches, look at reducing plastic pollution, more nature reserves’*
- *‘I am aware that Singleton Park has done a lot to promote wildflowers STOP SPRAYING then, because honey bees and single bees are killed with the spraying of weeds’*
- *‘Control of invasive non-native plants’*

Recommendations

Recommendation 17: *Invite environmental voluntary group and Community Council representatives to regular liaison meetings e.g. Friends of parks and wildlife sites. This would allow them some support and access to some specialist advice from relevant officers (e.g. Parks Team, Nature Conservation Team, Education Link Officer), whilst allowing them a forum to discuss concerns and success. The loss of these groups would have a severely detrimental impact on the management of Council land and finances, so there needs to be ongoing and meaningful engagement and support from the Council. (Medium Term)*

4.8 **There should be more cross departmental working, with the shared aim of maintaining and enhancing the natural environment and biodiversity, together with their eco-system benefits.**

4.8.1 During the evidence gathering, it became clear that the Council has some conflicting policies when it comes to the natural environment. Corporate Property Services referred to the fact that there is a clash in priorities between making money and maintaining the environment.

The public have also alluded to this issue:

- *[The Council needs...] ‘ A joined up approach that expects actions from all teams not just those in ‘Environmental’ roles’*
- *‘The Council departments seem to have differing priorities from each other – some financial, some environmental’*

4.8.2 Whilst the legislation is the same for all of the Council and applies to all services equally, applying the legislation in line with existing internal policies can be problematic. The Panel felt that the battle between these issues can be difficult, especially for staff when they are trying to apply and deliver other corporate priorities. It can be frustrating for staff to have to negotiate internally processes which are required legally, and push for standards that are being frustrated by internal dynamics. The Panel feels that whilst there should always be a balance between economic regeneration and the environment, development should not come at the expense of the environment.

4.8.3 The public have commented that when contacting different services they do not get a consistent response on the Council’s approach to the issue of biodiversity and the environment. Whilst it is reasonable for the Nature Conservation Team to deal with specialist public queries on the environment, the issues which are directed to a different service such as parks, estates or highways for example should have the same response. There needs to be a consistent and Council wide position on the issue of the environment. This can only be achieved if the message and delivery of our legislative duty is the same across the board. The Panel feels that whichever department you contact, the response and approach to an environmental question should be the same: common objectives and a strong and consistent message will achieve this. The establishment of a corporate biodiversity working group, as provided for in the Corporate Plan, will help to address and improve this.

4.9 **There needs to be a commitment to natural environment education in schools**

4.9.1 During the Inquiry, the Panel members visited local primary schools to see how they manage the issue of the natural environment and how this feeds into pupil’s education. Whilst it was generally accepted that most schools do pay particular attention to the natural environment and include it as part of the curriculum, its delivery is patchy and inconsistent from school to school. It is evident that some schools are at an advantage due to their geographical suburban location, whilst others are almost completely urban with very little or even no green space. However, the feedback from those involved in environmental education is that no matter how small the green space is in a school, biodiversity can still be encouraged and learned about. The Panel, many of whom are School Governors, feel that there is an inconsistency in how the natural environment is prioritised, with some schools celebrating achieving ‘Green School’ status whereas for some others the natural environment is only of passing interest in children’s education.

4.9.2 The current curriculum requires pupils to use and develop their skills, knowledge and understanding, by investigating how animals and plants are independent yet rely on each other for survival. Panel members observed a very successful scheme run by RSPB Cymru called the 'Schools Outreach Project', delivered by RSPB Project Officer Sarah Reed. This project saw 5849 pupil connections made in the academic year 2017-18; the delivery and impact in Swansea has been substantial and has proved very popular with staff and children alike. During the visits and observation sessions it was clear that the pupils really enjoyed being outside and when asked said they thoroughly enjoyed the activities.

During the school visits, the pupils (primary) were asked questions about nature and their responses were noted. The questions and some of the responses are captured below:

1. Do you like learning about nature? Why?

- *'Yes it is interesting to learn about it in school and is fun to learn about all the animals'*
- *'Yes because it's calm and interesting'*
- *'Helps us help the environment'*
- *'It makes me feel amazed'*
- *'You get to go outside'*
- *'We can learn what the grass is made of'*

2. Do you think Swansea should have more nature?

- *'Yes and no. No because animals can come over and [we would] be in more danger, yes because nature helps you live, like the trees have oxygen and oxygen helps us live'*
- *'Yes!'*
- *'Yes because hedgehogs are becoming extinct'*
- *'Yes because we don't have anything'*
- *'People will appreciate nature more'*
- *'It will help insects and our planet'*
- *'Yes because nature is beautiful and no-one goes outdoors that much anymore so if there was more nature people would want to go out even more'*

3. Why is nature important?

- *'Because it helps the environment'*
- *'Because it helps animals'*
- *'It is part of our circle of life. Plants = medicine'*
- *'It makes the world go round'*
- *'We have an ecosystem, nature gives us oxygen'*
- *'Animals keep us company'*
- *'It helps our earth go on and helps our health and gives us food and life'*

4. How does being around nature make you feel?

- *'It makes us feel happier and healthier. It also makes us feel relaxed, calm. Feels like my own world and satisfying because I hear the birds tweeting'*
- *'Happy, satisfied, calm, interested, relaxed, freedom'*
- *'Happy collecting flowers and seeing baby chicks being born'*
- *'Nature makes me happy when I'm around it and relaxed!'*
- *'Happy, excited, bored, fascinated, mesmerised, relaxed'*
- *'It makes us feel bored because there is no Wi-Fi'*

4.9.3 The Nature Conservation Team supports schools to deliver outdoor learning, including for example at Bishop's Wood Local Nature Reserve, Caswell, where around thirty schools visit each year. Where resources have allowed, officers have also delivered activities on other sites as well as supported schools to carry out activities or biodiversity-enhancement projects within their school grounds.

4.9.4 Evidence shows that schools value and require the support of experienced outdoor learning professionals to help them embed outdoor learning in the curriculum. The Nature Conservation Team are currently working on an NRW-funded project to pilot an approach to support and enable twenty primary schools to deliver outdoor learning in their grounds and using local green infrastructure.

4.9.5 The Panel applauds these examples of excellent good practice, but recognises that they are almost entirely reliant on external funding and are unlikely to be sustained beyond the short-term. For outdoor learning to become embedded throughout all schools there needs to be dedicated resources provided.

Recommendations

Recommendation 18: *Create environmental link Governors on school governing bodies who can take relevant information and projects to their school. They can also report back on a school's activities and this can be used to contribute to the 3 yearly section 6 report to Welsh Government on the Council's performance. (Medium Term)*

Recommendation 19: *Encourage better use of school grounds and local wildlife sites for biodiversity. For example, gardens, growing schemes, tree planting, wildlife ponds and habitat creation. This can be done by linking in with relevant organisations such as RSPB and sharing good practice with schools who are already doing such activities. 'Making the Most of School Grounds' guidance booklet. (Long Term)*

Recommendation 20: *Employ a dedicated outdoor learning officer who can provide the tailored support, training and delivery that will enable Swansea schools to fully realise the potential of outdoor learning, to deliver educational and wellbeing benefits, from the varied natural resources which Swansea possesses. (Medium Term)*

5. RECOMMENDATIONS – SHORT/MEDIUM/LONG TERM

5.1 The Panel recognises that the Authority:

- (a) will need to ensure that any subsequent actions are legal and meet the requirements of any relevant legislation;
- (b) has a responsibility to make the best use of limited resources and that any additional costs will need to be considered carefully as part of the annual budget setting process.

The Panel has kept these principles in mind in the course of its investigations.

The Panel commends Cabinet to consider all issues and ideas raised by this Inquiry and, in particular, the recommendations set out below.

Quick wins (within 6 months)

- Q1. Develop a clear and enthusiastic vision and message for maintaining and enhancing biodiversity to ensure a consistent 'buy-in' from each service.
- Q2. Make information available to the public to encourage participation and understanding, including continuing to develop the Natural Environment web pages.
- Q3. Insert a relevant biodiversity clause into service level agreements, licences etc which relates to land use and land management and ensure that the importance of these clauses is made clear to the land managers and the implications of not meeting them are highlighted.
- Q4. Renew the South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBReC) Service Level Agreement for 2019/20 (with a plan in place to achieve this in subsequent years).
- Q5. Employ a Section 6 Officer to co-ordinate, support and promote the consideration and delivery of a range of environmental projects across Swansea and also ensure the Council are meeting the requirements of the Environment Act (Section 6).
- Q6. Employ an additional Planning Ecologist/Ecological Enforcement Officer to work with Council services with a specific duty to help ensure the environmental conditions and section 106 obligations on planning consents are met, whilst also contributing to maintaining biodiversity, and meeting the requirements of the new Sustainable Drainage System legislation.

Medium term improvements (6-12 months)

- M1. Development and implementation of a Corporate Biodiversity Action Plan.
- M2. Ensure the Action Plan links with other relevant cross organisational policies at a strategic level, for example, the Local Well-being Plan and Area Statements.

- M3. Embed the new corporate priority by developing and delivering relevant training.
- M4. Invite environmental voluntary group and Community Council representatives to regular liaison meetings e.g. Friends of parks and wildlife sites. This would allow them some support and access to some specialist advice from relevant officers.
- M5. Create environmental link Governors on school governing bodies who can take relevant information and projects to their school.
- M6. Employ a dedicated outdoor learning officer who can provide the tailored support, training and delivery that will enable Swansea schools to fully realise the potential of outdoor learning, to deliver educational and wellbeing benefits, from the varied natural resources which Swansea possesses.
- M7. Assess the verges in Swansea that can stop being mowed and sprayed. Give these over to nature and allow for self-seeding, which will encourage native plants and pollinator species.

Long term challenges (12 months+)

- L1. Complete and publicise the ward mapping exercise. This would provide each ward and the Councillor Representatives with information specific to that ward. It would include information about important species, protected sites and other relevant ecological information as well as potential opportunities for improving biodiversity within the ward
- L2. Maintain support for volunteers, Community Councils and groups managing both Council owned and non-Council owned land.
- L3. Where appropriate, plant native wildflowers and trees. Non-native species do not benefit pollinators to the same extent as native species
- L4. Encourage green projects for well-being such as gardening projects, outdoor green-space activities and volunteering opportunities for adults and children across all relevant services.
- L5. Share natural environment and biodiversity costs across services.
- L6. Continue to nurture good working relationships with external agencies and encourage other services to do the same.
- L7. Encourage better use of school grounds and local wildlife sites for biodiversity.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Panel is very grateful to everyone who contributed to the Inquiry.

We would like to thank the staff and especially the pupils at Brynhyfryd Primary School and Trallwn Primary School for allowing us to observe their RSPB session and for being welcoming and open to questions and queries.

Special thanks go to everyone who took the time to respond to the public call for evidence. These responses allowed the Panel to understand how the residents of Swansea feel about this important issue and informed the direction of much of the Panel's thinking. Every response was read and considered. The culture change we are trying to achieve would not be possible without such passionate and involved people.

We would also like to recognise the input of the Council staff involved in this inquiry – Paul Meller, Strategic Planning and Natural Environment Manager, and Deb Hill, the Nature Conservation Team Leader, along with their teams, have provided a wealth of information to allow the Panel to understand the current processes and projects. We must also mention the ongoing support of Mark Thomas, the Cabinet Member for Environment and Infrastructure, who has supported the case for the natural environment for some time.

The Panel would like to record its thanks to the following people who came and gave evidence to us:

Colin Cheeseman	Plant Life
Heather Galliford and Chris O'Brien	RSPB Cymru
Nigel Ajax-Lewis	South-West Wales Wildlife Trust
Adam Rowe	South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBRc) Limited
Max Stokes and Kerry Rogers	Natural Resources Wales
Steve Bolchover	Swansea Biodiversity Partnership/Swansea Environment Centre
Chris Dow	Forest School SNPT
Christian Servini	Change Maker, Future Generations Commissioners Office
Neville Rookes	Policy Officer – Environment, Welsh Local Government Association
Neil Barry	Swansea Community Green Spaces Project Officer

Pamela Morgan	Past Chair of Friends of the City of Swansea Botanical Complex
Neil Jones	Swansea Vale/Swansea Friends of the Earth
Rosemary Harvard-Jones	Rosehill Quarry/Friends of Ganges
Phil Stockton	Pentyllia Playing Fields (Ganges)
Linda Summons	Kilvey Hill Woodlands/Friends of the Earth
Marian Francis	Kilvey Community Woodland
Steffan Phillips	Chair of Friends of Morrision Park
Christine Thomas	Coed Bach Pontarddullais
Sarah Reed	RSPB Cymru Project Officer

7. FURTHER SCRUTINY NEEDED

As well as our recommendations for Cabinet, we have also identified a number of issues that we believe may require further scrutiny. We propose to the Scrutiny Programme Committee, therefore, that future scrutiny work programmes examine:

- Glyphosate and its use by the Council for spraying – this was initially explored as part of the Inquiry, but the issue was too complex and contentious to include in an already substantial subject area.
- The management of common land
- The management of the marine environment
- Tackling Climate Change
- Management of the Gower Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

8. **ABOUT THE INQUIRY PANEL**

The Natural Environment Inquiry Panel is a team of Councillors who are not members of the Cabinet. Their role is to examine a strategic issue of concern and to make recommendations about how policies and services can be improved.

Members of the Panel:

- Peter Jones (Convener)
- Wendy Fitzgerald
- Louise Gibbard
- Paxton Hood-Williams
- Yvonne Jardine
- Jeff Jones
- Irene Mann
- Hazel Morris
- Sam Pritchard
- Will Thomas

For further information contact:

Bethan Hopkins
Scrutiny Officer
City and County of Swansea
scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk
 01792 637732