

Cabinet – 20 June 2012

Birmingham and the Black Country Nature Improvement Area

Portfolio: Councillor Harris, Leisure and Culture

Service: Greenspace Services

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Summary

- 1.1. To inform Cabinet of a successful application by the Birmingham and Black Country Biodiversity Partnership for Nature Improvement Area (NIA) status and funding for the area. Walsall Council is a member of the partnership.
- 1.2. The Birmingham and Black Country NIA has been awarded £594,750 over three years from April 2012. The Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust is the accountable body for the NIA, whilst a Memorandum of Understanding with each other partner will enable them to apply for NIA funding for projects.
- 1.3. NIA status and funding will help to raise the profile of the area, enhance local biodiversity and geodiversity, secure further funding and investment, involve communities and neighbourhoods in improving the environment in which they live and work, and improve health and wellbeing.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. Note and welcome the Birmingham and Black Country Nature Improvement Area status and funding.
- 2.2. That the Head of Greenspaces is authorised to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding to cover membership of the Nature Improvement Area partnership and to access funding.
- 2.3. That the Head of Greenspaces is authorised to submit applications for funding to the Nature Improvement Area partnership and for match funding to other external grant bodies.
- 2.4. That in the event of applications being successful the Council enters into grant agreements with the funding bodies and that the Head of Greenspaces is

authorised to agree the terms of the same and sign the agreements where appropriate.

- 2.5. To note and endorse that no scheme will be allowed to commence unless an approval from the funding provider has been received to ensure that there will be no unbudgeted call on council mainstream resources.

3. Report detail

- 3.1. The Natural Environment White Paper (2011) commits Government to assist partnerships of local authorities, local communities, landowners, private sector and conservation organizations to establish Nature Improvement Areas based on a local assessment of opportunities for restoring and connecting nature on a significant scale.
- 3.2. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), through Natural England, made £7.5m available for 12 pilot NIAs across England from 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2015. Defra held a competitive bidding process in which over 70 projects initially applied – the Birmingham and Black Country Biodiversity Partnership submission reached the final 15.
- 3.3. Caroline Spelman MP (Secretary of State for the Environment) visited Moorcroft Wood Local Nature Reserve on 27 February 2012 to announce that the Birmingham and Black Country application was successful.
- 3.4. The Birmingham and Black Country Biodiversity Partnership consists of 47 organisations e.g. Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust (BBCWT), Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton Councils, British Waterways, Environment Agency, Natural England, EcoRecord, Birmingham and Black Country Geodiversity Partnership, friends groups and other voluntary organisations. There is potential for other partners to join.
- 3.5. Covering some 60,000 hectares, the Birmingham and Black Country NIA (BBCNIA) is one of the largest and, with a population of over two million people, is the most urban.
- 3.6. The BBCNIA aim is “To achieve long-term environmental gains for the wildlife and people of Birmingham and the Black Country by delivering targeted, on the ground, biodiversity projects at a landscape scale”.
- 3.7. The five Key Objectives of the BBCNIA are:
 - Bigger – increase the amount of wildlife habitat in the NIA
 - Better – enhance the value of existing habitats across the NIA
 - More – increase the number of sites with wildlife value across the NIA
 - Joined – target action on corridors and stepping stones for biodiversity
 - People – involve local communities in the above work

- 3.8. The BBCNIA has six delivery themes, each with an allocated budget for the three years and a set of priority actions.
- Woodland – management and enhancement of recently established woodland
 - Grassland – restoration and linking of long-established grassland
 - Heathland – restoration and linking of long-established heathland
 - Corridors – improving quality, linkage and bridging gaps
 - Geology and Geomorphology – linking geodiversity and biodiversity
 - Community Engagement – involving people
- 3.9. For each delivery theme, a subgroup has been established to confirm priority actions and inform which types of projects will be eligible for NIA funding. Project outcomes will relate principally to biodiversity and geodiversity, but projects need to have socio-economic benefits and to demonstrate sustainability beyond 2015.
- 3.10. A Project Board is being formed to represent the partnership. Its roles will include:
- Monitoring NIA progress against the business plan and funding agreement
 - Financial monitoring
 - Reviewing the Risk Register
 - Approving the allocation of funds to projects
 - Providing expertise and advice on the future development of the NIA programme
- 3.11. Applications for NIA funding will be invited from June 2012. These will be assessed by the appropriate delivery theme subgroup and presented to the Project Board for approval, with the aim that the first projects start in late summer/early autumn 2012.

4. Council priorities

4.1 The BBCNIA will make a positive contribution to the Corporate Plan's vision for the borough "Walsall will be a great place to live, work and invest".

4.2 Communities and Neighbourhoods

Potentially, everyone living and working in or visiting the area will benefit from the NIA and its outcomes. 'People' is one of five key objectives of the BBCNIA, whilst 'Community Engagement' is one of six delivery themes and will feature in all of the other themes.

Each partner is responsible for ensuring that it has in place appropriate policies and procedures, particularly with respect to Health and Safety, Equal Opportunities and Protection of children and vulnerable adults.

The BBCNIA will make positive impacts on the biodiversity, geodiversity and environment of Birmingham and the Black Country at both local and landscape scales.

Walsall's Area Partnerships, friends groups and other local voluntary organisations will be involved in applications for NIA and other funding and in delivering successful projects.

Walsall's vision for green spaces is "To have excellent, well used and valued green spaces that are safe, accessible and welcoming at the heart of all local communities that meet the needs of current and future generations". The Green Space Strategy, which is currently being revised, outlines how we will work towards that vision, including a detailed action plan for the next five years. Community involvement is at the heart of the strategy, both in terms of its review and implementation.

Household surveys conducted during the development of Walsall's Green Space Strategies showed that parks and green spaces are the most valued leisure and cultural facilities in Walsall. All green spaces are considered of high importance, whilst in terms of the levels of satisfaction with each type of space, parks and gardens and natural greenspace were regarded as high. Both household surveys showed that passive uses of green spaces were most popular, with walking or jogging, to relax or for peace and quiet, and for wildlife or nature the top responses.

It is recognised that open spaces must be safe and secure places for all members of the community to use and all relevant safety issues must be addressed in management and maintenance plans and implemented on the ground. Any concerns that arise will be addressed promptly, with particular attention to equipment and facilities, security, anti-social behaviour, staff visibility, dog fouling, litter and vandalism, health and safety policies and service standards.

Securing and maintaining Green Flag Awards for more of Walsall's green spaces is a target within the Greenspace Strategy. Delivering BBCNIA projects will improve the chances of achieving this.

4.3 Economy

The BBCNIA will enhance the environment of the Borough, helping to retain and attract the workforce required to develop our economy. It will also encourage economic investment and attract new businesses into the area.

Community engagement in NIA projects will provide opportunities for volunteering, which will help develop transferable skills. There will also be opportunities for Forest Schools and environmental education activities, as well as formal training sessions through the partnership between Walsall Countryside Services and the Open College Network.

4.4 Health and Wellbeing

'Corridors' is one of six delivery themes of the BBCNIA, which will improve links between sites and initiatives, both for the benefit of wildlife and to encourage people to explore the wider countryside.

NIA projects will benefit local residents and site users, provide high quality, well maintained green space facilities and services, which meet local need, provide a safer environment and contribute greatly to the well being and quality of life of the local community. One of the Council's pledges is to "... ensure more parks staff are present and visible in public places". Successful BBCNIA projects will help deliver this aim.

Information recorded through the BBCNIA will be used to assess the quality of the environment and to produce interpretive material to assist our collective understanding and enjoyment of the environment.

Over 25% of the funding allocated to the delivery themes is for woodland, especially the management and enhancement of recently established sites. Sustainable management is a core principle for enhancing all of our green spaces, but our woodlands in particular will be managed with a view to producing locally-produced timber, fuel and other products and to help to reduce our carbon footprint.

5. Risk management

5.1 The BBCWT will use the same management model as it has done for the last three years for its Black Country Living Landscapes project, which received Natural England funding.

5.2 The BBCWT will maintain a risk register and risk management plan identifying key risks which could affect the delivery of the NIA. Each partner would be responsible for notify the BBCWT of any risks or dependencies it becomes aware of which may affect the delivery of the NIA.

5.3 The BBCWT would also keep and maintain appropriate records for at least seven years and each partner would need to do likewise with regards to its own activities within the NIA.

5.4 The key risks to the project are:

- Failure to obtain match funding for NIA projects.

This is considered to be a low risk as the NIA status and funding has been awarded and is likely to influence other funding sources.

- Failure to sustain improvements made through the NIA projects.

This risk is considered medium on the basis that resources to guarantee the long-term sustainability will be identified before the improvements takes

place. Additional revenue resources may be sought to complement the capital project or revenue funding may be redistributed internally to maximise efficiency and guarantee the sustainability of the project. The management plan will enable limited resources to be managed more efficiently and effectively by focusing directly inline with customer needs.

- Unsuccessful bids for NIA and other funding

This risk is considered to be low to medium. Due to competition from partners, it is possible that the NIA Project Board and other funders could reject applications.

6. Financial implications

6.1 Defra allocated £7.5m to fund the 12 pilot NIAs across England for three years from April 2012. The BBCNIA has been awarded £594,750.

6.2 Notional budgets have been allocated to each delivery theme:

• Woodland	£108,000
• Grassland	£ 45,000
• Heathland	£ 36,360
• Corridors	£138,440
• Geology and Geomorphology	£ 18,000
• Community Engagement	<u>£ 54,700</u>
Total	£400,500

A further £40,500 is available for the Project Board to allocate to targeted survey work that will contribute to project development and delivery. The Wildlife Trust will receive £153,750 to undertake project monitoring and evaluation, education, communication and administration. The final budget allocations will be determined by the Project Board.

6.3 It is anticipated that 20 to 30 projects costing c£5-10k each will be delivered each year, plus perhaps one or two larger projects. An estimated £80k will be available for each local authority area.

6.4 About £600k is required as match funding, which can include volunteer effort, but not statutory duties e.g. health and safety. The NIA status will increase opportunities to attract further grant aid; indeed, it is likely that it will influence certain funding sources e.g. Government and Lottery.

6.5 The BBCWT is the Accountable Body for the NIA. The corporate Grants Manual will be followed with regards to applications for NIA and other funding for Council projects. Financial monitoring of any projects approved for Walsall will be undertaken by the council's finance team in conjunction with the relevant accountable budget manager and will be accounted for separately from other funds to ensure accurate and reliable financial information is available.

- 6.6 No Council scheme will be allowed to commence unless an approval from the funding provider has been received and sufficient match funding available to ensure that there will be no unbudgeted call on mainstream resources.

7. Legal implications

- 7.1 The BBCWT is the Accountable Body for the NIA. A Memorandum of Understanding with each other partner will enable them to apply for NIA funds.
- 7.2 Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act (2006) requires all public bodies to have regard to biodiversity conservation when carrying out their functions – commonly referred to as the ‘biodiversity duty’. The aim of the biodiversity duty is to raise the profile of biodiversity, so that the conservation of biodiversity becomes properly embedded in all relevant policies and decisions made by public authorities.
- 7.3 Officers managing the funding stream will need to ensure that compliance with any terms of the grant is strictly adhered to so as to prevent any risk of claw back. Compliance with the Council’s Constitution, and in particular the Contract Rules, will also need to be maintained when spending the grant funding. Finally, any allocating of grant funding by way of a grant by the Council of the funding to any third party organisations will need to be done by way of a contract passing through liability for compliance with the main grant terms and recovery in the event of claw back.

8. Property implications

- 8.1 There are no property implications arising from the proposals in this report.

9. Staffing implications

- 9.1 The BBCWT will provide secretarial and administrative support for the NIA.
- 9.2 Greenspace Services and Regeneration officers assisted with each stage of the application process and will continue to be involved in the Partnership, including potentially serving on the Project Board. Officers will also liaise with Walsall’s Area Partnerships, friends groups, other local voluntary organisations, etc regarding applications and projects.
- 9.3 Successful Walsall Council projects will generally be implemented by Greenspace Services.

10. Equality implications

- 10.1 Walsall’s greenspaces play a key role in bringing people together on common ground. Sites can unite diverse communities through activities, education, celebrations, cultural events and engagement. They are open to all,

regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, and as such represents a democratic forum for the citizens of Walsall.

- 10.2 As part of the Greenspace Strategy, an Access Audit was undertaken across 23 parks and countryside sites, with various recommendations made for improving access, etc. Reasonable improvements will be included in BBCNIA projects and applications for match funding.
- 10.3 Further targeted consultation with marginalised groups will be carried out as projects are developed, which will help to refine access improvements.

11. Consultation

- 11.1 Officers within Greenspace Services and Regeneration have been consulted on the proposed NIA and proposed expressions of interest for projects and for serving on the Project Board.
- 11.2 Walsall's Area Partnerships, friends groups and other local voluntary organisations will be involved in applications for NIA and other funding and in delivering successful projects.
- 11.3 In September 2008, GreenSTAT was launched for Walsall. This online system gives local residents the opportunity to comment on the quality of their open spaces and how well they feel they are being managed and maintained. It allows site managers to compare the results with others up and down the country to give a truly national voice of what we think about our open spaces.

Background papers

None

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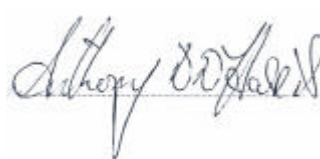
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Jamie Morris



Executive Director
7 June 2012

Councillor Harris



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7 June 2012