Biodiversity First Consideration Report (Agenda item 7)

1. Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin
This paper is really welcome and shows a wide range of positive activities taking place.

On pages 28 and 29 there is mention of grounds maintenance and specifically that staff and volunteers have engaged in educational activities to increase in understanding and enable more holistic thinking / approaches to biodiversity. This prompted me to wonder how such initiatives (and others mentioned throughout the paper) will be sustained and, particularly, how to ensure ongoing education and awareness so that those who have benefited from specific training and awareness raising might be encouraged to pass on that knowledge.

Answer:

The green space team runs a biennial volunteer recognition event where volunteers, volunteer groups, other council departments and organisations are invited to display the work they do and share knowledge. The last event had John Heathcott talk about the importance of ancient woodlands.

The green space team promotes all the work done by the team and our amazing volunteers through regular social media posts and annual newsletters. The green space team and other departments have built up relationships with a wide range of organisation, such as the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, Cotswold National Landscape, and the Gloucestershire Orchard Trust, and we share the good work they do.

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust is undertaking their HabiMapping project on council land using local volunteers. This is a citizen science project which gets volunteers engaged in nature to survey habitats in our green spaces. We facilitate schools in using our green space to help promote the nature environment and we engage schools in planting projects and bat walks etc. We work with local groups to develop online material, as well as on site interpretation panels and posters to promote the work we do and the different habitats we have in our green spaces.

The green space team are passionate about biodiversity and the environment and continuously researches best practices, partnerships, and training opportunities. All these elements ensure that ongoing education and awareness is embedded in what we do, helping pass on knowledge to the next generation.

2. Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin
The biodiversity actions relating to the Climate Emergency Action Plan (mentioned on page 30) talk about developing opportunities for Natural Flood Management Schemes to help mitigate flooding. How much of this flooding needs mitigation owing to issues that have been created through previous building and development work not having been fitted with adequate drainage facilities rather than climate change per se?

Answer: Flooding and floodplains are a naturally occurring phenomenon, but there is no doubt that the issue has been exacerbated by human intervention throughout history. This is not limited to just buildings as it includes modification to watercourses (Mill channels, culverts, bridges, diversions, and squeezing of the naturally occurring floodplain), roads and rail infrastructure altering runoff and flowpath topography, and draining of land for agricultural or recreational purposes.

Historically flood risk management involved draining water as quickly and efficiently as possible, which in most cases increases risk to those downstream.

Similar to other aspects that have contributed to the climate emergency, best practice has thankfully changed, and it is now recognised internationally that we need to hold back and make space for water. Whilst changes and weather patterns can often be attributed to climate change, it would be extremely difficult to quantify how much of the resulting flood level on the ground is due to climate change and land use. It should be noted that the drainage design of many historic buildings and infrastructure does not meet modern standards for sustainable drainage and therefore betterment is required whenever brownfield development proposals come through planning.

Similarly, we are doing a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) as part of the new Local Plan process.

Outside of planning, flooding issues are investigated on a case-by-case basis by the Risk Management Authorities and where feasible nature-based solutions are recommended to be retrofitted into the existing environment.

Member Questions on Grants Policy (Agenda item 8)

1. Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin

I really welcome this policy because it's important that the awarding of grant funding is scrupulously fair and transparent. I fully support the reasons for preparing this, ie maximising outcomes, minimising risk and delivering the greatest benefit to our communities.

What are the key benefits that you see being delivered that the previous policy/practice did not address? What areas of risk have been mitigated?

Answer : The biggest benefit that will be derived from this policy is that it will ensure that the council is operating within a good governance framework, being open and transparent around its decision making and carrying out appropriate due diligence before giving money to third parties. It will also provide a solid platform on which we can build any future grants processes and introduce effective monitoring so that the council can be sure that funding delivers the required outcomes.

The policy mitigates a number of risks but at a high level it mitigates the risk of the council incorrectly awarding and/or spending grant funding due to error, omission, fraud, or poor budgetary controls resulting in financial loss and reputation damage.

2. Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin

How is the impact of grant funding measured and what has been learned from previous practice that has informed this policy and any new practices associated with it?

Answer: For many grants there is limited data available which would enable the council to effectively assess the impact grant funding has had. This policy introduces clear guidance around effective monitoring and evaluation of all grant funding which means that moving forward we will be able to provide detailed reports on the outcomes and outputs that our funding delivers.

3. Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin

What support is there for applicants who may be new to bidding for funding and how accessible is the process generally in terms of plain English, accessibility of documents, alternative format provision, opportunities for face to face support, etc?

Answer: The toolkit which will sit alongside this policy will provide a suite of documents in an accessible and plain English format. Copies can be made available in alternative formats as required. The intention is to make the application process as simple and easy to follow as possible, however, when developing schemes officers will be required to give to consideration to additional support provision.

4.   Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin
There are clear guidelines about who should be involved in the decision-making processes for assessing bids received. To what extent is effort made to ensure that those involved represent as diverse a range of people as possible (in terms of various protected characteristics)?

Answer: The final make up of the decision making panel will depend upon the type of grant funding available. Officers will be required to ensure that there is appropriate diversity.

5.   Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin
To what extent does providing grants for particular community activities mask the need for more sustainable funding for some of those activities and, if repeat applications are sought (and this is noticed) for an activity, what actions might be taken to support/advise the bidders in seeking longer term funding?

Answer: The challenge of any one-off or short-term grant funding is that it is not always conducive to creating a long term sustainable product or service. Repeatedly awarding funding to the same groups can mask the issue of sustainability and this is something that the council should consider as part of its decision making process. The policy doesn't seek to address this issue, however there is a broader piece of work required in this area and we hope to bring this forward next year.

Member questions on Scrutiny Task Group – Tackling Multiple Deprivation – progress report (Agenda item 9)

1.   Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin

The sheer amount of activity (and associated effort) outlined in this paper, in answer to the recommendations of the scrutiny sub-committee, are testament to the hard work and commitment of a range of colleagues across the council, working in partnership with community members and other local (and national) organisations to tackle a whole range of issues. Indeed, the paper provides a fantastic record of current practice.

Some of the activities are clearly (or ideally) integrated into the existing work of various council departments. Others have been initiated, more specifically, as a result of the investigation and recommendations of the sub group. My question is regarding next steps.

What will become (or already is) "business as usual" for some areas of this work? Which aspects are complete? Which need further energy / funding - and how will that be provided? Indeed, how do we know which of the many initiatives have had the biggest impact and which, therefore, might need to be focused upon, now, and continue to be measured?

Answer:

Thank you for question about next steps. As you have noted, the report illustrates that there is a significant amount of work being undertaken across the organisation to support our communities. But as the report was requested as an update, it does not make any recommendations about next steps.

It would be relatively easy to identify what activities are business as usual, but any discussions about priorities and the allocation of resources would need to be led by relevant cabinet members**.**

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