

**REPORT TO:** Urban Renewal Policy and Performance Board

**DATE:** 25 November 2009

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director, Environment

**SUBJECT:** Biodiversity Initiatives

**WARDS:** Borough-wide

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 There have been a number of important new initiatives implemented and research projects undertaken in Halton in connection with its natural environment. This report summarises these developments and sets out proposals to hold a seminar, designed to inform elected Members, Council Officers and other stakeholders about the developments and their importance for the area's biodiversity.

**2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the Board comments on the proposal to hold a Biodiversity Initiatives Seminar.**

## **3.0 BACKGROUND**

3.1 In addition to the regular exchange of biodiversity information and the sharing of expertise, between the Mersey Gateway Team and Landscape Services, there are a number of new initiatives that have either been implemented or are in the process of being implemented, concerning biodiversity in Halton.

### **Artery of Life Project**

3.2 The successful 6 year project, Wild About Halton, has drawn to a close, and is being replaced by a new project called Artery of Life. The project will create an Upper Mersey Estuary nature reserve with access and interpretation facilities for local people to enjoy. It is a joint project with Warrington Borough Council and extends up to the tidal limit of the estuary at Howley Weir in central Warrington. The partnership approach will assist in developing links to other major initiatives connected to the estuary, including the Mersey Gateway Project, Mersey Forest and the Mersey Waterfront Regional Park. The project is due to start during the summer, with the appointment of a project officer, and will be managed by Landscape Services.

### **Mersey Gateway Nature Reserve**

3.3 The Artery of Life project will benefit from the biodiversity mitigation proposals, developed as part of the Mersey Gateway Project. The mitigation package includes establishing a new 28.5 hectare nature

reserve in a 200m zone either side of the new bridge on the saltmarsh on both sides of the estuary. The management of the saltmarsh is designed to increase its nature conservation value through the creation of scrapes and the re-introduction of grazing by traditional cattle. Although public access will be restricted to the saltmarsh, the project will present opportunities for educational and research initiatives to be developed, via the Artery of Life project.

### **Establishment of a Charitable Trust**

- 3.4 The cost of the Mersey Gateway Nature Reserve will be a fixed cost item, to be included, as part of the Mersey Gateway procurement package and its delivery over the period of the concession has been recognised as potentially challenging for the concessionaire to implement. An approach, which will create a dedicated Trust to manage and deliver the mitigation plan has, therefore, been adopted.
- 3.5 The use of a Trust, to be set up under the guidelines of the Charities Act 2006, will offer a number of advantages:
  - a. The Trust could attract new Community Investment Funds (CIF), a type of trust fund for charities that is not available to local authorities.
  - b. It would allow continued Halton Borough Council support through the appointment of appropriate Trustees, including Councillors, in the trust's administration
  - c. It could make the most of established contacts with local environmental community groups and statutory agencies that have a stake in the long-term vision for the area.
  - d. It could tie in with the third sector in recognising the increasingly important role the third sector plays in both society and the economy, including the design and delivery of public services.

### **Partner activities**

- 3.6 In parallel with the Council led initiatives, there are a number of partner activities that are coming forward through the Halton Natural Environment Roundtable (NER). Since 1996, the NER has become firmly established as a community led body working with the local authority on all biodiversity issues in the borough. There are good examples of recent research on Halton's environment carried out by the School of Environment Sciences at Salford University, the findings of which can be considered when reviewing the Council's policies and programmes in the Natural Assets Strategy and complementary documents. In particular, some emerging research comparing breeding bird changes over a 20 year period for Halton and Warrington is being developed by Professor David Norman and Dr Philip James with the prospect of some encouraging results in comparison to the

rest of Cheshire. This is likely to be presented as a major piece of research at an academic conference during 2010.

- 3.7 Other research projects that are coming to their final stages include work on the ponds in Halton, the landscape ecology of the borough and the ecological value of the New Town structure planting. Other activities, that do not always get wide recognition, are the practical tasks undertaken by the NER including butterfly recording, bumblebee surveying, litter picking at Sunnybank Park and building bird nesting boxes.

### **Proposed Seminar**

- 3.8 To ensure that Members, Officers and partner organisations are made aware of these recent developments, it is proposed to hold a half day seminar, for about 40 delegates, targeted at people and organisations that have an interest in the borough's biodiversity programmes. The Council's Chief Officers Management Team has endorsed the plans to hold the Seminar.
- 3.9 The agenda for the 3 hour event will include presentations on the Artery of Life, the Mersey Gateway Nature Reserve proposals and the research by Professor Norman and Dr James, followed by three or four specific studies by Salford University students. The costs associated with the event will be limited to the hire of a room and a light buffet lunch and is expected to be under £500 from the Mersey Gateway budget.

### **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 These activities contribute to the action programme of the Natural Assets Strategy, which documents the progress of both Borough Council-led and partner biodiversity activities. In particular, within the Corporate Plan, 2006-2011, the value of enhanced local nature reserves is recognised under Halton's Urban Renewal Area of Focus 12. Examples of future planned activity include "Creating local nature reserves and wild spaces that support the Council's efforts to deliver urban renewal and a better quality of life in Halton."
- 4.2 Such wider biodiversity activities are also reported as part of the CAA process by Corporate & Policy Services, KLOE 3.1 - use of natural resources.
- 4.3 The emerging development plan documents recognise the value of creating an upper Mersey Nature reserve.

### **5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act places greater responsibility upon public sector bodies to consider biodiversity in the work they do.

## **6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

- 6.1 **Children and Young People in Halton.** There will be opportunities under the new Artery of Life project to contribute to Key Objective E: To ensure that all children and young people in Halton have positive futures after school by embracing life-long learning, employment opportunities and enjoying a positive standard of living.
- 6.2 **Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton.** There will be an indirect contribution to Key Objective B: To develop a culture where learning is valued and to raise skill levels throughout the adult population and in the local workforce.
- 6.3 **A Healthy Halton.** There will be opportunities for biodiversity activities to contribute to Key Objective C: To promote a healthy living environment and lifestyles to protect the health of the public, sustain individual good health and well-being, and help prevent and efficiently manage illness.
- 6.4 **A Safer Halton.** There will be opportunities to contribute to Key Objective C: To create and sustain better neighbourhoods that are well designed, well built, well maintained, safe and valued by the people who live in them, reflecting the priorities of residents. For instance, The Artery of Life project will be targeted towards certain postcode areas, as demanded by the application guidelines.
- 6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal.** There will be opportunities to contribute to Key Objective E: To enhance, promote and celebrate the quality of the built and natural environment in Halton. Objective E also addresses tackling the legacy of contamination and dereliction to further improve the Borough's image. In particular, in Area of Focus 12, examples of future planned activity include "Creating local nature reserves and wild spaces that support the Council's efforts to deliver urban renewal and a better quality of life in Halton." The Mersey Gateway nature reserve and the Artery of Life project will be a main delivery mechanism for this Area of Focus.

## **7.0 RISK ANALYSIS**

- 7.1 Any risks associated with staging the event will be managed as part of the Stadium's health and safety policies and procedures.

## **8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

- 8.1 Biodiversity initiatives provide an opportunity to improve accessibility to services, education and employment for all.

**9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

<b>Document</b>	<b>Place of Inspection</b>	<b>Contact Officer</b>
Natural Assets Strategy	Picow Farm Road	Paul Oldfield
Files maintained by the Mersey Gateway Project Team	Priority Sites, Widnes	Paul Oldfield