

Agenda Item No. 13

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
Assembly Meeting - 16 January 2008**

Regional Biodiversity Strategy – Progress Report

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To inform the Regional Assembly of the progress regarding the implementation of the Regional Biodiversity Strategy for the West Midlands

2. Recommendations

That the Regional Assembly:

- 2.1 Notes the progress that has been made regarding the implementation of the Regional Biodiversity Strategy.
- 2.2 Continues to support the work of the West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership.

3. Background

- 3.1 In March 2005 the Regional Biodiversity Strategy for the West Midlands "Restoring the Region's Wildlife" was launched, setting out five key challenges for biodiversity in the region. A full copy of the Strategy is available from the WMBP web site at: www.wmbp.org.

- 3.2 The five key challenges are:

- Coping with the impacts of Climate Change.
- Re-connecting and integrating action for Biodiversity with other Environmental, Social and Economic Activity.
- Developing and Area Based Approach.
- Maintaining and Improving the Condition of Habitats, Species and Ecosystems.
- Monitoring the Condition of Habitats, Species and Ecosystems.

- 3.3 In the two and half years since the launch the Regional Strategy the West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership (WMBP) has been active in co-ordinating its implementation. Progress has been reported to the Regional Environment Partnership on two occasions, once in March 2006 and again in October 2007. Some work areas of the WMBP also form part of the REP work programme. A full 'Progress Report and Delivery Plan' is also available from the WMBP web site at:

www.wmbp.org. Copies of the Executive Summary will be made available at the meeting.

4. Coping with the Impacts of Climate Change

4.1 Climate change is considered to be the most important issue that drives the work of the WMBP now and into the future. Not only is it important to reduce carbon emissions but vigorous measures are also required to help wildlife adapt.

4.2 *Progress*

The WMBP has established a joint sub-group with the Climate Change Partnership run by Sustainability West Midlands to take forward a programme of work including:

- Production of Adaptation Principles Advice Note.
- Contribution towards regional Climate Change Action Plan.
- Developing an Advice Note for Local Authorities developing Climate Change Strategies and Action Plans.
- Participation in Natural England's national pilot project to investigate landscape scale action within the Shropshire Hills.
- Development of regional landscape scale working through the Landscapes for Living Project (see below).

5. Re-Connecting and Integrating Action for Biodiversity with Other Environmental, Social and Economic Activity

5.1 A high quality natural environment is not only compatible with economic success but is increasingly realised as a fundamental precondition for it in terms of attracting high quality businesses and skilled personnel. It is also an increasingly important factor in consumer decisions about food purchase and a strong attractor for visitors.

5.2 Furthermore, it is increasingly acknowledged that biodiversity and green space can provide very significant benefits in terms of mental and physical health and wellbeing.

In October 2006 the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act came into effect which places a duty on all public authorities to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity. This 'Biodiversity Duty' is seen as a key mechanism to help embed biodiversity into the work of all public authorities.

5.3 *Progress*

The response to this challenge is overseen by the WMBP Steering Group. Work this year includes:

- Increased engagement with a range of sectors and regional organisations.
- Expanding the membership of the WMBP.
- Responding to consultations on the Regional Spatial Strategy, West Midlands Economic Strategy, Regional Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Regional Climate Change Action Plan
- Assisting local biodiversity partnerships to develop programmes of work to promote the NERC Act 'Biodiversity Duty'.
- Presenting papers to the Regional Housing, Transport and Planning Partnerships concerning the Biodiversity Duty.
- Developing the 'West Midlands Biodiversity Pledge' which outlines the key issues that Local Authorities should consider to help embed the duty into their functions. A separate paper on this has been presented to the WMLGA for their endorsement.

6. Developing an Area-based Approach to Restoring Wildlife

6.1 This is now widely recognised as the main mechanism for protecting and enhancing biodiversity across the region. Our existing wildlife predominately survives on small isolated sites within a fragmented landscape. Landscape scale development of ecologically resilient landscapes is a key priority and is required to help wildlife adapt to the pressure of climate change. The Partnership needs to achieve wider recognition of this across the whole policy landscape and to secure the support and resource across all policy sectors. We also need to continue to develop local partnerships to take forward these major projects

6.2 *Progress*

The WMBP has established a new sub-group to oversee the delivery of this key challenge. The group is currently focusing on Landscapes for Living, an ambitious project to take forward landscape scale restoration within the West Midlands. This includes supporting the implementation of the Biodiversity Enhancement Areas and Strategic River Corridors policies. Work this year includes:

- Development of a regional 50 year vision for biodiversity.
- Producing a Regional Prospectus setting out the case for landscape conservation and its role in relation to other sectors(to be launched in early 2008).
- Developing a regional biodiversity and opportunity map for the region to contribute to the forthcoming Phase 3 RSS partial review of environmental policies
- Developing and assisting with mapping opportunities for biodiversity at a local level including work on Green Infrastructure.
- Producing planning guidance for BEAs, SRCs and relating these to local opportunity mapping for biodiversity.
- Assisting in developing implementation projects within BEAs.

7. Maintaining and Improving the Condition of Habitats, Species and Ecosystems

7.1 Protecting our existing wildlife resources and ensuring they are well managed is a priority to help wildlife cope with the future pressures including climate change. These sites will act as stepping stones to help wildlife move and as a seed source for future restoration of our landscapes.

7.2 Progress

The partners working at a local level are key to successful delivery of this challenge particularly those working with their Local Biodiversity Partnerships supported by their local coordinator. Key achievements include;

7.3. Overseeing funding applications under the SITA Enriching Nature Programme, Distributed over £850,000 towards delivery projects across the region including:

- Creation of a 160 ha RSPB flagship nature reserve at Middleton Lakes.
- Restoration of ancient woodlands within Herefordshire.
- Installation of green roofs in Birmingham for Black Redstarts.
- Re-establishing Water Voles in the catchment of the River Monnow.
- Research into management techniques for conserving a range of priority species within the Wyre Forest.

7.4 In addition to the SITA projects outlined above the partners and LBAPs have been instrumental in delivering projects that help to restore and create priority habitats across the region. Major examples include:

- Heathland purchase and restoration in Shropshire and Staffordshire.
- 216 ha of wetland creation of 216 ha. across the region under Environmental Stewardship.
- 27 ha. of grassland restoration across the region under Environmental Stewardship.
- 170 ha. of new woodland planting under grant aid from the Forestry Commission.
- Expansion of pasture woodland in Staffordshire.
- Restoration of 120 ha farmland nature reserve in Worcestershire including grazing marsh and reedbed.
- Coordination and reintroduction of grazing on over 100ha of important grasslands sites in Herefordshire.

8. Monitoring the Condition of Habitats, Species and Ecosystems

8.1 Sound data is a prerequisite to guiding future action and for monitoring progress. Better baseline information is required as there are still huge gaps in our knowledge of the region's wildlife.

8.2 *Progress*

The WMBP has established a sub-group to oversee a variety of work in this area, the partnership also participates and advises the Regional Environment Monitoring sub-group and is also a member of the Regional Observatory (Environment and Natural Resources Topic Group). The group is engaged in a number of areas of work including:

8.3 Local Record Centres - Supporting the continued development of the network of Local Record Centres across the region. These are key to the improvement and maintenance of a sound reliable data base.

8.4 Regional Habitat Data Project - Completion of the first stage of this project and the develop of the second stage of the project. The project intends to create an single regional resource showing the location of all priority habitats across the region utilising national, regional and local data sets. This new resource will be made available to the Regional Assembly and the Regional Observatory and through them to all decision makers for use in future strategies and for monitoring purposes.

Contact:

Jeff Edwards

West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership

Regional Biodiversity Coordinator

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