



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	<b>Council: Wednesday 27 October 2020</b>
Report Number	<b>Agenda Item No. 9</b>
Subject	<b>WODC Land Management Plans</b>
Wards affected	Witney North, Witney West, Witney South, Witney East, Witney Central, Carterton North East, Brize Norton and Shilton, North Leigh, Chipping Norton
Accountable member	Councillor David Harvey, Cabinet Member for Climate Change Email: david.harvey@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Rachel Crookes, Biodiversity & Countryside Land Management Officer Email: rachel.cookes@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	<p>This paper presents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information on the development of Land Management Plans across twelve key sites owned and/or managed by WODC.</li><li>• A proposed set of Land Management Plans be released to the public for engagement following Full Council approval, outlining changes to Ubico's management of the sites and longer-term projects that external funding could be sought for externally.</li><li>• A request for approval to allocate funding from the climate budget to deliver projects across the sites that will enhance their biodiversity value.</li></ul>
Annex	Annex I: Draft Land Management Plans for Public Engagement
Recommendation	a) that the Land Management Plans for public engagement and subsequent implementation from March 2022 be approved; and b) a sum of £11,800 be allocated from the climate budget for a variety of projects to enhance biodiversity across key sites under WODC's ownership and management in financial year 2021/22.
Corporate priorities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. To protect the environment whilst supporting the local economy</li><li>2. Working with communities to meet the current and future needs and aspirations of residents.</li><li>3. To provide efficient and value for money services, whilst delivering quality front line services.</li></ol>

Key Decision	Yes
Exempt	No
Consultees/ Consultation	<p>The WODC Land Management Plans have been developed by the Biodiversity &amp; Countryside Land Management Officer working in close consultation with key officers, stakeholder partners and colleagues within West Oxfordshire District Council and Ubico to inform the proposals within this report and Annexe. A Steering Group was set up at the start of the Land Management Plans' development, with representation from Estates, Climate and Contracts teams to guide this process and keep all parties informed. This document has also been the focus of consultation with the Council's cross-party Climate Action Working Group.</p>

## **I. BACKGROUND**

I.1 This paper presents:

- Information on the development of Land Management Plans across twelve key sites owned and/or managed by WODC.
- A proposed set of Land Management Plans be released to the public for engagement following Full Council approval, outlining changes to Ubico's management of the sites and longer-term projects that external funding could be sought for externally.
- A request for approval to allocate funding from the climate budget to deliver projects across the sites that will enhance their biodiversity value.

## **2. MAIN POINTS**

2.1 Following the Council's motion to declare a climate and ecological emergency on the 26th June 2019, a Climate Change Strategy was developed; a key theme was the Protection and Restoration of Natural Ecosystems. Several strategic objectives were also outlined within this theme, including "protecting existing biodiversity value and creating new opportunities for the restoration of natural ecosystems at sites under the Council's stewardship". This will be carried out with a new, dedicated biodiversity and countryside land-management staff member. Land Management Plans will be developed". This was then embedded into the Biodiversity Work Programme that was created and approved by Council on 28th July 2021; action within the work programme was the "creation of enhanced LMPs to improve habitat management and associated biodiversity".

2.2 The Council owns and manages around 106ha of green space across the District in the form of fields, commons, parks and public green spaces within estates. Twelve sites were selected for their current and potential value for wildlife:

- Deer Park Wood, Witney
- Deer Park South, Witney
- Deer Park estate, Witney
- Bathing Place estate, Witney
- Millers Mews, Witney
- Langel Common, Witney
- Bishops Farm Mill, Witney
- Madley Park, Witney
- Shilton Park, Carterton
- Kilkenny Country Park, Carterton
- North Leigh Common
- Rowell Way, Chipping Norton

2.3 A baseline assessment of these key WODC owned and managed public open green spaces was initially completed by Rachel Crookes, the Council's Biodiversity & Countryside Land Management Officer (BLMO), Climate Team, between March - June 2021. This established the current status and management practices for all of the selected sites, which include commons, parks, fields and public green spaces.

2.4 A Steering Group was set up with representation from Publica's Estates, Climate and Contracts teams at the start of the Land Management Plans' development process, with the aim of integrating the objectives and views of these key internal stakeholders. The Steering Group has guided the formation of the proposals, and all parties are fully on board and ready to incorporate the planned changes.

- 2.5 From the baseline position, the BLMO has gone on to develop five-year Land Management Plans containing:
- Biodiversity enhancements on a site-by-site basis to be incorporated as part of a revised grounds maintenance schedule being implemented by Ubico over the next five years. Changes to land management carried out by Ubico have been targeted as cost-neutral.
  - Longer-term biodiversity projects on a site-by-site basis, with schemes costed individually and including an allowance for five years' management.
- 2.6 A number of changes to land management have been given agreement in principle by Ubico following close consultation between the BLMO and Bob Lightfoot and Laurence Sutton from Ubico during August and September 2021. Examples of these include a reduction in the number of annual grass cuts across WODC estates, the creation of meadow areas with reduced grass cutting, the establishment of historical grass cutting regimes on floodplain meadows and additional support for volunteer groups managing some of the sites - full details of the proposals for each site are contained within Annex 1. Other WODC biodiversity professionals including Melanie Dodd, Biodiversity Officer, and Nick Dalby, Forestry & Landscape Officer were also consulted on the ecologically technical elements of the plans. Data analysis was carried out for the proposed management changes and confirm that fuel use, vehicle use, CO<sub>2</sub>e and Ubico staff man hours will not be negatively impacted by the proposed changes to grounds maintenance.
- 2.7 The changes are intended to be embedded as part of an updated grounds maintenance schedule for a contract renewal from April 2022. It should be noted that this is subject to formal agreement and incorporation as part of the contract.
- 2.1. Complementing the proposed changes to grounds maintenance by Ubico, and in addition to these changes, are also individually-costed biodiversity enhancement projects developed for the longer-term, for each site. These focus on the restoration and improvement of existing natural habitats and biodiversity value of a site and/or look to create new wildlife habitat increasing ecological value further. The longer-term projects are proposed to be resourced through external funding opportunities. The resource and finance required, both revenue and capital, have been considered for each individual work package and project developed for a five-year period.
- 2.8 As initial funding towards the longer-term biodiversity projects at the sites, a number of short-term one-year projects have been identified as best value for money. There is a focus on one-year projects currently as this corresponds with the remaining duration of the Fixed-Term Contract for the BLMO, a position currently funded through the Council's Local Recovery Plan. Funding from the existing climate budget is recommended for allocation to projects as outlined below.

Location	Project	Cost (£)
Housing estates	Wildflower meadow signs	1,000
Housing estates	Hedgehog highways campaign	1,200
Housing estates	Wildflower meadow seed enhancement	700
Housing estates	Hedgerow planting	800
Langel Common	Deadwood clearance on eastern bank	800
North Leigh Common	Woodland thinning	1,200
North Leigh Common	Tree planting	500
Deer Park Wood	Replacement tree planting for ash dieback	600

Deer Park Wood/North Leigh Common	Owl box installation	200
Deer Park South	Eastern glade orchard planting	200
Deer Park South	Woodland thinning	1,200
Kilkenny Country park	Public BioBlitz event with TVERC	1,000
Kilkenny Country park	Soil survey	100
Bathing Place estate	Artificial badger sett re-establish	300
Bathing Place estate	Balancing pond brush clearance	2,000
<b>Total cost</b>		<b>11,800</b>

- 2.9 The Land Management Plans are proposed to be made public for an online engagement exercise in November/December 2021. The public and other local groups and stakeholders will have the opportunity to review and provide feedback.
- 2.10 The Land Management Plans demonstrate that the Council is making meaningful changes across its estate to improve biodiversity in response to the climate and ecological emergency declared in 2019, and going beyond a business as usual approach to managing its estate. Implementing the Land Management Plans will also bring additional benefits to other natural capital assets that are intrinsically present across the estate, such as flood protection, carbon storage and pollination.

### **3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1. The changes to Ubico's management schedule have been demonstrated to be cost neutral, with no impact on the company's resources or time as a result of the proposals.
- 3.2. The longer-term projects are proposed to be resourced through external funding opportunities such as government grants. The resource and finance required, both revenue and capital, have been considered for each individual work package and project developed for a five-year period.
- 3.3. A sum of £11,800 has been requested for allocation from the climate budget to deliver a number of small, complementary biodiversity projects on WODC's land as well as information panels helping to raise public awareness to the changes underway.

### **4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1. There are no perceived legal implications associated with the proposals within this report.

### **5. RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 5.1. The Land Management Plans set out proposals for how the Council can improve the biodiversity value of its sites through both changes to Ubico's existing contract and longer term projects to be resourced through external funding. Ubico have agreed in principle to amend their work schedule to accommodate the changes on a cost neutral basis, and this can therefore be promoted as actions that will take place if the Land Management Plan's public engagement receives a positive response.
- 5.2. The longer-term projects currently do not have funding allocated to them for delivery, and are therefore to be communicated as aspirational projects dependant on funding. As such, there are no risks with noting these within the proposals despite the current lack of resources to support all projects incorporated.

## **6. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

- 6.1 The impacts of adopting and implementing new Land Management Plans for the Council will have equal impact on all services, customers and staff and there is a shared benefit to the objectives of this report and associated benefits from taking positive action to improve the biodiversity and value for nature across the sites the Council manages.

## **7. CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1. The proposals within this report will have a direct, positive impact on the Council's operations with regard to energy and resource efficiency, and associated carbon reduction. The creation of new habitats will also benefit those local priority species affected by the effects of climate change.

## **8. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 8.1. One alternative option is to take no action at all.

## **9. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 9.1. The following documents have been identified by the author of the report in accordance with section 100D.5(a) of the Local Government Act 1972 and are listed in accordance with section 100 D.1(a) for inspection by members of the public:

- Meeting minutes and motion agreed by the Council on 26 June 2019.
- Meeting minutes and motions agreed by the Council on 22 January 2020.
- Meeting minutes and report agreed by the Council on 29 July 2020.
- Meeting minutes and report agreed by the Council on 24 February 2021.
- Meeting minutes and report agreed by the Council on 28 July 2021.

- 9.2. These documents will be available for inspection at the Council Offices at Woodgreen during normal office hours for a period of up to 4 years from the date of the meeting. Please contact the author of the report.