Biodiversity Policy for Milton-under-Wychwood (MUW) Parish Council

Rationale for having a policy

Under the 2021 Environment Act, public authorities (including parish councils) operating in England must consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

Government guidance published on 17 May 2023 clarifies that, as a public authority, parish councils must:

- consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity
- agree policies and specific objectives based on their consideration
- act to deliver their policies and achieve their objectives.

Parish councils are not obliged to publish a report on their actions, but the Government guidance required all public authorities to complete their first consideration of what action to take for biodiversity by 1 January 2024. In that respect MUW took steps in its 2023 Neighbourhood Plan to establish a Biodiversity Monitoring and Action Group which started work in earnest in the Autumn of 2023 and established an initial set of activities to be pursued.

Parish Councils must agree their policies and objectives as soon as possible after that first consideration and must reconsider the selected actions within five years of completing their previous consideration, or more frequently if they choose.

To comply with the guidance it seems sensible for MUW PC to:

- have biodiversity as an agenda item at each council meeting
- have one councillor to take the lead on biodiversity for the PC
- develop a policy document which sets out MUW's approach to biodiversity and has an action plan to guide the work of the PC and the wide range of people who want to get involved in promoting biodiversity.

The action plan can provide a focus for:

- reviewing what biodiversity or nature recovery plans are already in place from adjacent parishes, WODC and OCC e.g. potential for jointly-supported wildlife corridors
- making contact with local voluntary groups working on nature conservation (eg the North East Cotswolds Farmer Cluster)
- carrying out a biodiversity audit of council landholdings and potentially the whole parish, possibly by auditing specific areas in a planned sequence rather than tackling the whole parish in one go
- gathering expert advice on possible actions in support of biodiversity, such as from Caring for God's Acre and the Eco Church initiative in respect of churchyards and cemeteries.

In addition, whatever action is agreed, as a minimum MUW PC should ensure they address biodiversity concerns, where relevant, when commenting on planning applications.

Model biodiversity policy

Context

In accordance with the duty imposed on town and parish councils by Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, updated by Section 102 of the Environment Act 2021, Milton-under-Wychwood Parish Council (MUW PC) must from time to time consider what action it can properly take, consistent with the proper exercise of its functions, to further the general biodiversity objective.

This duty also means that MUW PC can spend funds in conserving biodiversity.

Definition

According to Defra (Biodiversity 2020), biodiversity is the variety of all life on Earth. It includes all species of animals and plants – everything that is alive on our planet. Biodiversity is the building block of our 'ecosystems' that in turn provide us with a wide range of goods and services that support our economic and social wellbeing. These include essentials such as food, fresh water and clean air, but also less obvious services such as protection from natural disasters, regulation of our climate, and purification of our water or pollination of our crops. Biodiversity also provides an important social and cultural service, helping to enrich our lives.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this policy is to work towards conserving and enhancing the biodiversity of the parish of Milton-under-Wychwood, while recognising that the core elements of biodiversity (insects, plants, animals and other organisms like fungi) do not recognise parish boundaries. We therefore need to work with adjacent parishes, the district and county councils and other organisations like Wild Oxfordshire in pursuit of that aim.

MUW PC will consider biodiversity, and indeed sustainability and environmental impact, when making decisions and will develop and implement appropriate policies and plans.

In particular, MUW PC will aim to improve the biodiversity of the parish in the following ways:

- consider the potential impact on biodiversity of planning applications
- manage its land and property using environmentally friendly practices that will promote biodiversity
- support local businesses in the adoption of low impact / nature positive practices.
- encourage and support other organisations within the parish to manage their areas of responsibility with biodiversity in mind.
- support residents and local organisations in activities to enhance and promote biodiversity.

ACTIONS

Planning applications

MUW PC will:

- when commenting on planning applications, support site and building design that benefits biodiversity through the conservation and integration of existing habitats or provision of new habitats
- support protection of sensitive habitats from development and will consider whether the development would mean the loss of important habitats in respect of all applications
- consider carefully what contribution each proposed development might make in terms of biodiversity net gain
- at the appropriate time review policies in support of biodiversity within the neighbourhood plan.

Land and property management

MUW PC will:

- conduct a biodiversity audit of its landholdings
- consider the conservation and promotion of local biodiversity with regard to the management of its open spaces. This will include adopting beneficial practices with regarding to cutting and removal of vegetation, application of chemicals and timing of maintenance work, paying attention to the Government's regulations for plant protection products
- take special care in the specification of grounds maintenance contracts to ensure that the work, whilst reaching acceptable standards, does not harm the natural environment
- source sustainable materials when procuring supplies for the Council's use
- consider biodiversity issues and the implementation of changes when managing its buildings (bus shelter and Recreation Ground pavilion?).

Local community

MUW PC will:

- raise public awareness of biodiversity issues, including through its website and newsletters
- engage with local businesses and residents regarding biodiversity in the community and how members of the community can assist and make a difference
- where feasible, involve the community in biodiversity projects on its land including for example tree planting, wildflower meadows, birdbox making
- seek to have the Nature Recovery Network (NRN) boundaries in the parish more logical and reflect more closely the blue-green corridors specified in the Neighbourhood Plan.

Partners

MUW PC will work in partnership with other organisations such as the Sustainable Wychwoods Action Group and Nature Recovery Networks to protect, promote and enhance biodiversity within the council area, including liaison with WODC and OCC on their biodiversity policies and plans.

It will review any local nature recovery strategies, species conservation strategies, or protected site strategies (for example in respect of local Sites of Special Scientific Interest) and consider how it may become more involved in implementing the strategies' recommendations.

MONITORING

This policy was adopted at the Parish Council meeting on 20 March 2024 and will be reviewed as legislation dictates and, in any event, annually at the council AGM, if possible through a summary of how the policy has been implemented and with reference to the original biodiversity audit to show progress where this is possible.

The action plan below will continually evolve, but shows the status of planned actions as at March 2024.

People responsible for actions:

Pat Ward – PW

Rod Blackman – RB

Graham Smith – GS

Peter Rawlins – PR

John Pratt – JP

Jeff Haine – JH

Chris Trotman – CT

Elaine Brittan – EB

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Action Plan

Site or objective	Action	Outcome sought	Activities under way or planned	Timescale	Responsibility
Whole council area	Raise local awareness of biodiversity through social media, website, newsletters such as the BMAG newsletter which includes the annual Springwatch, farm visits, "birding walks" and other activities', and personal contacts	Gain local support for action. Increased response to the website, social media, and activities organised by BMAG and other organisations	• BMAG established • Extend BMAG network • Publish newsletters • Annual Parish Meeting as a focal point • Liaison with SWAG • Annual Springwatch currently being planned	• Completed • Ongoing • Quarterly • June 12, 2024 • Ongoing • Spring 2024	• EB/PW • EB/PW • GS & parish council • PW/ EB and volunteers
	The art project at 5 sites will have a biodiversity element as well as a cultural one.	Usage of the web site to look at information about the flora and fauna		• Autumn, 2024?	• GS/PW/EB and volunteers
Protect and support biodiversity	Encourage suitable planting to support biodiversity Conduct a biodiversity audit, initially on parish council land but eventually extending to the whole parish	Connect & diversify habitats to meet the needs of a variety of wildlife species Give a baseline understanding of existing biodiversity and a basis for prioritising activities	• Proposal to rationalise the NRN boundaries • Proposal for further planting alongside Littlestock Brook to stabilise the banks and reduce erosion • Mapping of key areas planned including birds in the new Eco area	• 31/07/24 • Autumn 2024 • 31/12/24	• EB/JP • GA/CT • JP/EB/PW
Cemetery & churchyard	Additional planting for wildlife Maintain and renew bird boxes as required? Adopt a plan to support wildlife and diversity whilst maintaining the site	Increased diversity of habitats and food sources Encourage nesting/breeding Increased cover for invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians , small mammals and insects	Repeat of butterfly and moth count in churchyard which has been happening since 2022	Annually May to September	• RB/Fiona Bates

Site or objective	Action	Outcome sought	Activities under way or planned	Timescale	Responsibility
	in a way which enables visitors to experience quiet and calm remembrance. Leave leaf litter and dead vegetation wherever possible as a habitat for invertebrates.	 Encouraging insects particularly butterflies and bees.			
Recreation ground	Sympathetically maintain hedging. Leave some areas unmown? Only use environment friendly pesticides where absolutely necessary and only in ideal weather conditions.	Food sources and cover for birds Encourages insects. Sustain and enhance natural habitats.	TBC Possibly include in the Hedgerow Heroes project	TBC	PR/JH/PW
Water courses and adjacent areas	Protect blue-green corridors in planning application assessments Promote actions to improve water quality Continue development of the Eco area for increased wildlife in the water and across the whole area	Protection of areas adjacent to water courses where wildlife can thrive and biodiversity promoted. Enable greater movement of wildlife Substantial improvement in the quality of water in streams and river flowing through the parish More waterlife and birdlife	• Monitoring of water quality in Littlestock Brook • Extensive pressure on Thames Water to stop sewage discharge to water courses • Support the development & planting of ponds in the eco area to help remove excess nutrients from farmland run off. Monitoring of birdlife planned by a volunteer.	• Continuing • Continuing • Continuing	• JP/GA • JP • PW & volunteer
Common / other open spaces (need to define	Adopt a management plan?	Ensure manageable and rational actions to promote biodiversity Reduction in dog excrement in public areas	TBC	TBC	???

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such spaces eg MARC space and potentially privately owned public open space such as Calais Field	Encourage residents to remove litter and pick up after their dogs. Liaise with OCC on verge management, favouring biodiversity but noting which areas may need cutting for highway safety Encourage residents to adopt areas to look after, making it clear what is expected e.g. peat free compost and no chemicals. Work with private landowners where possible	Sustain and enhance natural habitats Protecting habitats Protecting/enhancing habitats diversified and used by wildlife	Ongoing including application for new hedging in Calais Field and on four farms this year	Autumn, 2024	PW
The built landscape	Ensure that planning consultations are considered against the requirements of the Neighbourhood Plan, especially the blue-green corridors and protection of local green spaces	Protecting/enhancing habitats	• Planning sub-committee recommendations to the Parish Council on each planning application where biodiversity could be affected	• Continuing	• PW/PR

Site or objective	Action	Outcome sought	Activities under way or planned	Timescale	Responsibility
	Encourage hedgehog/small animal highways with permeable boundaries	Extending habitats eg more sightings of hedgehogs and others	• Liaison with hedgehog highways project in Charlbury	• summer 2024	• PW/EB
Increase community awareness of biodiversity	Ask residents for their views on what they would like to be done to conserve biodiversity within the parish	Engagement/ownership of biodiversity	• Update pages on the parish council website with photographs, information and links	• Continuing	• GS/EB/CT
	Raise awareness of the importance of gardens as habitats for wildlife, with possible actions highlighted in the Wychwood magazine and in the BMAG Newsletter	Promote biodiversity.	• Use Annual Parish Meeting to promote the importance of gardens	• 12 June	• GS/EB
	Engage with local farmers to see how best the parish can work with them to promote biodiversity	Promote biodiversity.	• Continue discussions with North Cotswolds Farmers group, Bruern Farms and others	• Continuing	• EB/PW
	Discourage floodlighting and other bright lighting which could confuse nocturnal animals.	Protect nocturnal animals.			
	Use the BMAG Newsletter as widely as possible to raise awareness and community action	Greater number of responses to the BMAG newsletter and the annual Springwatch	• regular newsletters from BMAG	• Quarterly	• EB/PW and volunteers
	PC /BMAG activities about biodiversity at the Village Fete and at the Great Big Green Week event in June 2024	Good attendance at these events and increased involvement in BMAG activities	• planning in progress	• summer 2024	PW/EB and volunteers

Site or objective	Action	Outcome sought	Activities under way or planned	Timescale	Responsibility
Support Community Projects and build links with other organisations	Support hedge/tree planting in any appropriate areas	Extending habitats	• Involvement in Hedgerow Heroes activity		• PW/EB
	Work in partnership with the school to develop young people's awareness of the environment around them.	Promote biodiversity. Encouraging children's involvement	• Four areas of hedgerows identified for enhancement in 2024 if application for funding approved.		• PW
	Involve young people in organisations such as scouts and guides in activities such as tree planting	Promote biodiversity. Greater involvement of such groups including the Milton Volunteers	• Liaison with the primary school via Sustainable Wychwoods Action Group (SWAG)		• EB/PW/CT/ GS
	Consider events and offer volunteering opportunities to support biodiversity, working with local organisations.	Increased number of volunteers	• Liaison with FarmED and other farms		