

Use of council-owned land for environmental mitigation Briefing Note No. 23-01

Service : *Estates & Development*
Further Enquiries to: Mike Dawson, Head of Estates & Development / Lynn Trigwell, Head of Natural & Historic Environment
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Direct Line: (01225) 713250 / (01225) 718479

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The council, in its capacity as landowner, is considering the best way to make use of its land to assist with environmental mitigation, help deliver the goals of the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy and support the objectives of the Climate Strategy and two initiatives have been drawn up:

1. **Environmental Mitigation Land Review** – A review of green spaces and rural estate to determine opportunities to make improvements, including pilot schemes
2. **Town and Parish Improvements on Wiltshire Council Land** – A process to enable town and parish councils to plant trees on Wiltshire Council land

This Briefing Note sets out some basic details of each proposal and actions being taken by officers to progress them.

There are a range of projects already in progress elsewhere in the council that Members are likely to be aware of. These include the:

- Zero Emission Council House Build Programme
- Housing Energy Efficiency Programme
- Carbon reduction programme
- Trowbridge Bat Mitigation project – To mitigate recreational pressures from new developments around Trowbridge through the creation of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) and the loss of bat habitat through woodland and hedgerow planting funded by developer contributions.
- Maintenance of amenity space reviews

The briefing note introduces further measures to assist with environmental improvements through the use of land owned by the council.

Firstly, the council is undertaking a council-wide review of land to consider alternate uses with a supporting Asset Management Framework. Secondly, it will look to enable town and parishes to plant trees on Wiltshire Council land, where appropriate along with any necessary conditions.

1. Environmental Mitigation Land Review

The council has a large land holding: rural estate land of circa 1900 hectares and public open space and amenity land of circa 400 hectares. This could provide significant opportunities to undertake environmental improvements enhancements that attract new funding that could in turn reduce maintenance and management costs. Existing amenity uses and other future opportunities need to be considered at the same time to ensure the maximum benefits are secured from these natural capital assets.

With the council having to meet best consideration / value legislation, as a landowner it must factor in a financial return from any initiatives to cover costs of implementation and management. The aim of the review is to create a place in the wider market to sell credits or generate income that covers the costs of implementation / management into the long term. The review will identify self-financing opportunities and avoid projects that could become a revenue burden for the council.

The possible opportunities include:

- Nitrogen and Phosphorus mitigation to offset new developments in protected areas.
- Biodiversity net gain for:
 - Woodland
 - Wetland
 - Grassland
 - Hedgerows
 - Rivers
- Nature-based solutions for:
 - Carbon offsetting / carbon capture / carbon sequestration
 - Water management – drought and flood improvements
- Green energy production
 - Solar energy generation
 - Bio-mass fuel growth
 - Wind energy generation
 - Battery storage, independent of other energy generation
- Nature Based Air Quality Improvement and Climate mitigation
 - Tree planting to improve air quality, provide shade and reduce urban heating during summer months.

Not all opportunities will be self-financing, and the staged approach, which will consider resource requirements and priority, are likely to reduce the number of feasible opportunities significantly.

For each of these initiatives the council has established the technical implementation requirements, as follows:

- Description of Environmental Initiative – A brief scoping description
- Qualifying Features – Relevant issues with minimum or essential requirements
- Ideal Land Allocation – Details of the size or features of land that would be needed.
- Funding – Outline funding opportunities – income generation, invest to save or grant funding options.
- Alignment to council objectives – non-monetised benefits e.g., improved mental and physical health.
- Community engagement – summary of the role the community may play in delivering and managing any schemes, including funding

In addition to looking at initiatives in isolation, the opportunity to have multiple benefits (stacking) will be explored. An example may be undertaking a bio-diversity net gain scheme but also being able to benefit from the carbon capture and conservation grazing.

Implementation initiatives on council land will follow these stages:

- **Stage 1** – Develop a set of mitigation initiatives, including drafting an Asset Management Framework
Progress – Ethos Environmental Planning have been engaged with establishing the initiatives. The Framework was presented to and approved by Cabinet on 13 December 2022. This included the definitions necessary to allow for stage 2 to start.
- **Stage 2** – Determine which mitigation initiatives may be possible on council land, with a corresponding long list of sites.
Progress – Ethos Environmental Planning have been engaged to carry out a map-based review and have provided this long-list.
- **Stage 3** – Develop a shortlist of sites, through internal review, for inclusion in the mitigation framework, including alignment to council objectives (non-monetised benefits). This will factor in any existing use, availability of land, alternate opportunities, and financial impacts. It is anticipated this will be concluded by the end of 2022/23.
- **Stage 4** – Develop business cases for selected sites. This will include stakeholder engagement and consultation.
- **Stage 5** – Deliver mitigation initiatives

Pilot Schemes

The council will be exploring a number of pilot schemes to help inform Stages 4 and 5 of implementation. These will test a number of the initiatives proposed in order to improve understanding of the role of stakeholders (including community groups) in the development and management of the initiatives and determine the process to sell any credits generated.

The pilots will have stakeholder engagement throughout their development, including local elected members, town or parish councils and local community groups. The council will be assisted by external support from a technical perspective.

The aim is to establish proposals by the end of April 2023, with implementation to follow.

Engagement

The development of this review includes a number of internal departments, including climate, grounds maintenance, estates, FM and natural environment and will take a collaborative approach to implementation and management.

There will be external engagement at various stages as it is recognised that community and town/parish involvement is key to making schemes a success.

2. Town and Parish improvements on Wiltshire Council land

There is a growing desire for town and parish councils, and community groups, to be involved in environmental enhancements that support biodiversity, and the council will be exploring opportunities for their participation through a range of initiatives and strategies. This ranges from tree planting through community gardens to wildflower planting.

In many cases their ability to do so is limited by the land they either own or are in control of. With the extent of Wiltshire Council's land, there is a role for it as landowner to enable third parties to carry out improvements that help deliver a range of wider national and local objectives.

To ensure there is longevity to proposals, the relevant town or parish council will be involved in the discussions. Any applications for use of Wiltshire Council land will only be accepted from town or parish councils, ensuring any community group would have their respective council's support and buy-in.

The council will create an application process for town and parish councils to apply to use Wiltshire Council land, followed by an internal review. Approvals will be documented either through transfer of land to parish councils, where appropriate, or the grant of licences for future maintenance.

Those agreements will include terms for the town or parish maintenance and factor in an ability for Wiltshire Council to make use of carbon capture, on a proportional basis, through enabling its land to be used.

Engagement with town and parish clerks will be undertaken before formal implementation of the proposal.