

Details of Stafford Borough Council's Biodiversity Programme

Introduction

Over the past decades much of Stafford Borough's wildlife has been in decline - and some of our favourite species have all but disappeared. This is mirrored across the UK to the extent that recent years have seen a groundswell of effort to restore lost species and habitats – both for their own sake – and for the quality of our own lives.

In Stafford Borough, our response to biodiversity losses was allied to the recognition of the need for sustainable development and therefore grew out of the **Council's Local Agenda 21 programme**.

In 1998 the **Stafford Borough Biodiversity Strategy Steering Group** was formed. Members on the Group included Stafford Borough Council (with representation from Local Agenda 21, Forward Planning and Grounds Maintenance), Staffordshire County Council's Ecologist, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, English Nature, the Environment Agency, British Trust for Nature Conservation and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG).

This Group together researched and produced the first **Stafford Borough Biodiversity Strategy**¹ in 2000 – one of the first of its kind in the country. Its production led to the LA 21 Co-ordinator being invited to speak at a West Midlands Biodiversity Training Seminar during 2001. The Strategy provided a practical link between the County's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) and nature conservation work at a community level in the Borough. It was also the starting point for proposals to restore and enhance the Borough's biodiversity asset.

In 2001 the LA 21 team, guided by the Steering Group, organised a **seminar** entitled **Biodiversity and Planning**, recognising the huge relevance of biodiversity within the planning system. There was significant interest in this event, which was attended by Planners and Councillors as well as those with a specialist wildlife and ecology interest. A Conference Report was produced subsequently.

In 2001 progress was being made on the ground too, with a successful application to Defra to put two Council owned fields into the **Countryside Stewardship Scheme** and thus restore them to species rich meadows.

By 2002, the biodiversity workload was building up and the Steering Group supported the submission of an application for funding to the **'Wildspace! Grant** scheme – lottery funding administered by English Nature – by the

¹ The Biodiversity Strategy was revised and updated in 2005. The original and the updated versions are also available on www.staffordbc.gov.uk/la21

Councils' Local Agenda 21 Co-ordinator. This bid was successful, enabling the appointment for three years of a **Community Biodiversity Officer**, to take forward the mushrooming biodiversity programme. The appointment started in January 2003.

Since then, a considerable amount of progress has taken place.

Key achievements include:

1. The declaration of five new Local Nature Reserves in Stafford Borough as follows:

- Kingsmead Marsh Local Nature Reserve (SJ925234). Declared December 2003. Approx 6 hectares.
- Astonfields Balancing Lakes Local Nature Reserve, Stafford (SJ926248). Declared October 2004. Approx. 4.2 hectares. Main habitats: Open water, Phragmites reedbed and saltmarsh.
- Stone Meadows (SJ909326 and SJ895340). Declared December 2004. Approx. 13.9 hectares. Main habitats: Lowland wet grassland, diverse hedgerows and wet woodland.
- Kingston Pool Covert (South), Stafford (SJ943235). Declared September 2005. Approx. 4.5 hectares. Main habitat: Wet woodland.
- Crown Meadow, Stone (SJ 901335). Declared October 2005. Approx. 3 hectares. Main habitat: Lowland wet grassland.

And the management of the existing LNR, Barlaston and Rough Close Common Local Nature Reserve (SJ923396 and SJ926399). Declared December 2000. Approx. 21 hectares. Main habitats: Lowland heathland and lowland acidic grassland.

2. Production of appropriate Management Plans for each new site.

3. Growing awareness and understanding of LNR's and their value for wildlife and people (as a result of regular coverage in the local press, leaflet drops and new signage an increasing number of people are becoming aware of their local LNRs. Access improvement works that have been carried out since January 2003 and organised events, including 'Health Walks', are also encouraging more people to visit the sites and to appreciate them).

4. Community Participation has grown significantly. The Community Biodiversity Officer helped to set up a number of 'Friends of' groups, including the Friends of Stone Meadows (approximately 64 members) and the Friends of Astonfields Balancing Lakes (approximately 30 members), members of which act as Volunteer Wardens for their sites. Some volunteers carry out 'patrols' and report any damage/works that need to be undertaken, whilst

others give their time to undertake small scale site management work, such as litter-picking. There is also the nucleus of a "Friends of" group for Kingston Pool Covert (South) LNR.

5. Development of strong links with schools. Several schools are located very close to LNRs and potential LNRs and have become involved with environmental education activities, competitions or practical conservation work. Furthermore, advice and help has been given in relation to conservation in school grounds, especially working through the Stafford Borough Eco-schools Network which has 35 members (around half of all schools in the Borough are members).

6. A particular effort has been made to conserve Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan target species and habitats, including:

- Lowland heathland
- Lowland wet grassland
- Inland saltmarsh
- Ancient/Diverse hedgerows
- Native black poplar

7. Growing integration of biodiversity into Council activities eg grounds maintenance (mowing regimes now designed to enhance biodiversity) eg planting of 'Wildflower Roundabouts'.

8. Increasing awareness of biodiversity in Planning eg biodiversity will be incorporated into the new Local Development Framework and biodiversity impacts of new development are now more acutely recognised and mitigation works required. Biodiversity will also feature in the new pre-application 'Validation Process'.

The increasing obligations that local authorities have with regard to planning, have also been flagged up. The implications of Planning Policy Statement 9 (PPS9) on Biodiversity and Geological Conservation are significant. Funding has thus been secured to appoint a permanent Biodiversity Officer post – combining practical conservation, management of LNR's, community based work and Planning.

9. Groundwork has also been taking place to prepare or investigate the following:

- a) Biodiversity projects and targets within the new Sustainable Community Plan for Stafford Borough
- b) Biodiversity targets within the County's Local Area Agreements (LAA)
- c) Biodiversity Targets for SBC in the draft Sustainable Development Action Plan.
- d) Research regarding good practice in the production of a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for Biodiversity
- e) Research regarding developer contributions for biodiversity as part of Section 106 agreements

- f) Declaration of further LNRs in Stafford Borough, including: Ferndown Drive South, Swynnerton Parish (SJ852422), which contains an area of grade 2 SBI grassland and a network of mature hedgerows; Site at Tittensor, a grade 1 SBI on the edge of the village of Tittensor (SJ873380). Both are owned and managed by Stafford Borough Council.

10. Continued alertness to national policy development and input to consultations.