

## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT**

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|----------------|--------------------------------|
| Date Written   | 11 <sup>th</sup> February 2021 |
| Report Author  | Matt Davies                    |
| Service Area   | Planning and Countryside       |
| Committee Date | 01 <sup>st</sup> March 2021    |

To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

# **Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Action Plan, First Annual Review 2020/21**

## **1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Action Plan (MTNRAP) 2019-2024 was formally adopted by Council on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2020.
- 1.2 The MTNRAP includes measures undertaken by MTCBC to comply with the Section 6 duty in accordance with the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.
- 1.3 The MTNRAP requires an annual review of the actions taken by MTCBC. The results / outcomes of this and subsequent annual reviews will be incorporated both within:
  - The next Section 6 duty plan [Welsh Government (WG) requires this to be published by the end of 2022]; and
  - The next incarnation of the MTNRAP (2024-2029)
- 1.4 A document has been produced setting out the actions that have been undertaken within 2020/21 by MTCBC and its partners – *Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Action Plan, First Annual Review 2020/21* (document provided as an Appendix of this report)

## **2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 2.1 That the Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of this document.

### 3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Environment (Wales) Act (EWA) came into force in 2016. Public authorities are required by WG to prepare and publish a plan showing how the Section 6 (S6) duty would be fulfilled (the S6 plan). The Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Action Plan (MTNRAP) 2019-2024 document had a dual purpose. Not only did it replace the previous Merthyr Tydfil Biodiversity Action Plan (MTBAP) 2014-2019 document, but also represented the S6 plan, in accordance with Welsh Government Guidance: *Environment (Wales) Act 2016 Part 1: Guidance for Section 6 – The Biodiversity and Resilience of Ecosystems Duty*.
- 3.2 The MTNRAP was formally adopted by Council on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2020.
- 3.3 The MTNRAP included a review undertaken annually following its adoption. The results outcomes of these annual reviews will be incorporated within
- the next published S6 plan required (by WG) to be published by the end of 2022; and
  - the next incarnation of the MTNRAP (2024-2029).
- 3.4 A document representing the first annual review (*Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Action Plan, First Annual Review 2020/21*) setting out the actions undertaken within 2020 by MTCBC and its partners has been produced (NB the document is provided as an Appendix of this report).
- 3.5 The Scrutiny Committee received a report regarding the Council's Nature Recovery Action Plan on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2020. The Scrutiny Members have requested a report that provides a current position statement on the actions within the plan along with any details of issues/barriers experienced and how these have been overcome. In addition to this, the committee have requested specific information on the grass cutting priority plans. The report is also to consider key areas for development and improvement for 2020/21.

### 4.0 WHERE WE WERE

- 4.1 The EWA 2016 replaced and strengthened the previous biodiversity duty under Section 40 of the NERC Act 2006. Whereas previously, MTCB was required to 'have regard to the purposes of conserving biodiversity', it now is required to 'seek to **maintain and enhance biodiversity** wherever possible within the proper exercise of their functions'. In doing so, public authorities must also 'seek to promote the resilience of ecosystems'.
- 4.2 On the 29<sup>th</sup> January 2020, the MTNRAP 2019-2024 was formally adopted by Council and replaced the MTBAP 2014-2019.
- 4.3 Grass Cutting - all grass throughout the County Borough was at one time cut to a good amenity standard with no areas left to grow for the benefit of wildflowers and pollinators. However, due to available resources and with new obligations to maintain and enhance biodiversity, the way we managed our grass areas had to change. Instead of cutting whole areas, one metre wide swathes were cut around the perimeters and along path edges. This was done to keep the edges looking neat whilst allowing the bulk of the area to grow wild. This change in grassland management needs to be sustained over more than one season for the true results to begin to be seen and must be coupled with information disseminated to residents regarding the benefits. In the meantime, areas can

be perceived as being uncared for or untidy and for these reasons some residents were unhappy with the new approach. At the end of 2020 it was proposed to prioritise six priority areas throughout the County Borough and concentrate on these for wildflower and biodiversity enhancement as a way of demonstrating what could be achieved, before rolling out the approach to other suitable areas.

## **5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW**

- 5.1 A year on from formal adoption of the MTNRAP, the first annual review of the MTNRAP / S6 plan has been undertaken.
- 5.2 A proportion of the actions as set out within the MTNRAP / S6 plan have been undertaken, however, the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic has been a significant barrier to progress and many actions have been prevented. These unfulfilled actions will now therefore be the focus of 2021.
- 5.3 Grass cutting – the six areas chosen as priority biodiversity sites were as follows:
  - Haydn Terrace, half of disused football pitch;
  - Parc Taff Bargoed, small field within park;
  - Prince Charles Hospital Field, disused football pitch (NB - a funding bid to enhance the wetland properties of this site is in the process of being made – therefore this site may need to be replaced in the list with another);
  - ‘The Inky’ Twynyrodyn, lower half only;
  - Teddington’s field, disused playing field;
  - Gellifaelog Terrace, top half around tree bays.

The sites were chosen for their existing biodiversity interest and for their suitability and access for a new tractor-mounted cut-and-collect machine. These six sites will be cut once or twice throughout the year with the grass clippings collected. Ecological surveys will be undertaken over the coming years to show the improvements taking place and to evaluate the benefits of the new management regime.

Councillors were invited to a series of meetings with the Parks Department to share their views on the current system of grass cutting and to highlight particular priorities within their own Wards. Information gathered at these meetings will be shown on the ward plans as further priority areas for the new grass cutting regime.

## **6.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE**

- 6.1 By undertaking the actions as set out in the MTNRAP / S6 plan, MTCBC will have contributed to maintaining and enhancing biodiversity with the County Borough and in doing so promoted the resilience of ecosystems.
- 6.2 The document should not be definitive in the sense that we should be attempting, not only to undertake those actions documented, but also to go above and beyond them wherever possible.

## 7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT

- 7.1 Many of the actions as set out in the MTNRAP are repeat actions that must continue to be undertaken regularly.
- 7.2 Those actions that have so far been prevented due to Covid 19 restrictions will be pushed forward into 2021.
- 7.3 Any assistance required to fulfil these actions will be offered and provided by the Countryside Team within both the Planning Department and the Parks Department.

## 8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

- 8.1 Please see the table below, which sets out the Wellbeing Objectives to which the contents of the report relate. The table explains how the issues in the report relate to the Wellbeing Objectives.

| Wellbeing Objectives  | Does your proposal have a positive or negative impact on the Council's Well-being Objectives? Please place an X in the relevant box |          |     | Why have you come to this decision? Please provide an explanation  | What actions have been/will be taken to better contribute to positive impacts and/or mitigate any negative impacts?  |
|---|---|----------|-----|--|--|
|   | Positive  | Negative | N/A |  |  |
| <b>Best Start to Life</b><br>Children and young people get the best start to life and are equipped with the skills they need to be successful learners and confident individuals. | <b>X</b>  |          |     | <p>The trend for children spending less time in natural surroundings, threatens the development of environmentally aware attitudes and behaviour and can have negative effects on health. Many of the actions within the MTNRAP, include outdoor events that involve children (e.g., nature/biodiversity events, tree planting etc.). Positive outcomes from these types of actions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of education and the gaining of knowledge about the natural world</li> <li>• Health benefits from being outdoors. Accessing natural spaces provides direct health benefits, opportunities for physical activity, reduction of developmental disorders and improved mental health.</li> </ul> | The actions detailed within the MTNRAP and the first annual review document include those already undertaken and those still to be carried out moving forward. |

| Wellbeing Objectives  | Does your proposal have a positive or negative impact on the Council's Well-being Objectives? Please place an X in the relevant box |          |     | Why have you come to this decision? Please provide an explanation   | What actions have been/will be taken to better contribute to positive impacts and/or mitigate any negative impacts? |
|---|---|----------|-----|---|---|
|   | Positive  | Negative | N/A |   |   |
| <b>Working Life</b><br>People feel supported to develop the skills required to meet the needs of businesses with a developing, safe infrastructure making Merthyr Tydfil an attractive destination. | X   |          |     | An overall improvement and increase in the attractiveness/aesthetics of habitat and environment within the County Borough is likely to increase inward investment and draw people into Merthyr to both live and work. Events that promote biodiversity have the potential to attract both residents and visitors from outside the area and offer skills development opportunities.  | See above   |
| <b>Environmental Well-being</b><br>Communities protect, enhance and promote our environment and countryside.  | X   |          |     | <p>There is a wealth of research that demonstrates that a healthy natural environment can provide many benefits (for people and wildlife). Biodiversity and resilient ecosystems across the County Borough (including areas in and around towns and urban spaces) provide ecosystem benefits and services that support the health of residents, including reducing the risk of flooding, filtering polluted air, and providing a reliable supply of clean drinking water.</p> <p>Examples of these benefits and services include helping to reduce the prevalence of infectious diseases and respiratory disorders, and assisting with adaptation to climate change. Accessible natural spaces also provide other, more direct health benefits, for example, opportunities for physical activity, reduction of developmental disorders and improved mental health. In theory, nature provides cost savings for health services by improving the health of the population.</p> | See above   |

|  |   |  |  |   |           |
|--|---|--|--|---|-----------|
|  |   |  |  | The Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Action Plan (MTNRAP) describes the special habitats and species (both the natural environment and urban environment) found within the County Borough and then details actions designed to protect / recover them. The Section 6 Plan sets out actions that will be taken to maintain and enhance biodiversity and create resilient ecosystems. Not only do the actions attempt to protect the natural assets of Merthyr Tydfil, they try to involve residents and communities of Merthyr to achieve these aims through direct action, which will potentially provide new skills and offer educational opportunities. |           |
| <b>Living Well</b><br>People are empowered to live independently within their communities, where they feel safe and enjoy good physical and mental health.   | X |  |  | See previous section (Environmental Well-being), which demonstrates how the MTNRAP will promote healthy behaviour and potentially increase levels of physical activity and promote good emotional well-being and improvements to mental health.   | See above |
| <b>Sources of evidence to support the above:</b>   |   |  |  |   |           |
| <a href="http://www.primarycareservices.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/1150/CMO%20Report%202014-15.Eng.pdf">http://www.primarycareservices.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/1150/CMO%20Report%202014-15.Eng.pdf</a><br><a href="https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4808994/">https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4808994/</a><br><a href="https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969718349751">https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969718349751</a><br><a href="https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1618866717307628">https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1618866717307628</a> |   |  |  |   |           |

**JUDITH JONES**  
**CHIEF OFFICER – NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES, COUNTRYSIDE AND PLANNING**

**COUNCILLOR DAVID HUGHES**  
**CABINET MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES, PLANNING AND COUNTRYSIDE**

| <b>BACKGROUND PAPERS</b>   |                         |  |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Title of Document(s)</b>  | <b>Document(s) Date</b> | <b>Document Location</b>                   |
| Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Action Plan, First Annual Review 2020/21              | [February 2021]         | Supplied with Scrutiny Report (Appendix 1) |
| <b>Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?</b> |                         | <b>No</b>                                  |