

**Manchester City Council
Report for Information**

Report to: Environment, Climate Change and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee – 20 July 2023

Subject: Update on the Manchester Biodiversity Strategy and the Open Space Study

Report of: Director of Planning, Licensing and Building Control

Summary

This report provides an update on delivery of the Biodiversity Strategy that was endorsed by Executive in October 2022. The report also includes information on the findings of the open space audit that will inform the development of the emerging Local Plan.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to consider and comment on the information in the report.

Wards Affected: All

Environmental Impact Assessment - the impact of the issues addressed in this report on achieving the zero-carbon target for the city

Ecosystems, such as Manchester's woodlands, helps to capture and store carbon, as do effectively managed meadows, while rivers and canals provide a cooling effect during times of heat stress. Access to nature encourages walking and cycling and improves health and wellbeing, reducing reliance on cars with a consequent reduction in carbon emissions.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - the impact of the issues addressed in this report in meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty and broader equality commitments

Actions set out in the Manchester Biodiversity Strategy 2022-30 relate to the need for addressing environmental inequalities across Manchester. This includes areas such as increased community engagement with diverse audiences, improving local biodiversity and improved access to nature which are referenced in the Action Plan

Manchester Strategy outcomes	Summary of how this report aligns to the OMS/Contribution to the Strategy
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	Thriving biodiversity and good quality open spaces increase the attractiveness of Manchester as a place in which to work and invest. Jobs are created in the environmental sector through the need to plant and manage the local green and blue infrastructure resource. Specialist jobs are also created such as Forest Schools leaders, ecologists and wildlife related engagement officer roles. Biodiversity-related land management projects build capacity and provide work, skills and training and volunteering opportunities for individuals and groups.
A highly skilled city: world class and home grown talent sustaining the city's economic success	Manchester competes on a world stage to attract skilled people. A high quality, attractive natural environment and good quality open spaces make an important contribution to this.
A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	A more biodiverse environment should be accessible to all communities within Manchester, offering the potential to gain health benefits through improved access to nature for relaxation and exercise and learning new skills through volunteering opportunities.
A liveable and low carbon city: a destination of choice to live, visit, work	The city's open spaces and natural environment, its woodlands, rivers and meadows play a valuable role in storing carbon and creating a liveable city
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	Improved connectivity between wildlife friendly sites increases and improves species abundance and movement, while at the same time improving local public access to nature and open spaces, reducing the need to travel.

Full details are in the body of the report, along with any implications for:

- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Risk Management
- Legal Considerations

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Background documents (available for public inspection):

The following documents disclose important facts on which the report is based and have been relied upon in preparing the report. Copies of the background documents are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy please contact one of the contact officers above.

Manchester Biodiversity Strategy – 2022-2030

Report on Manchester Green and Blue Strategy and Implementation Plan, including annual update and a report on the Tree Action Plan to Environment and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee (9th March 2023)

Report of Draft Manchester Biodiversity Strategy to Environment and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee (13th October 2022) and Executive (19th October 2022)

Manchester City Council Assessment of Open Space Report Dec 2022,

Manchester City Council Assessment of Open Space Report Exec Summary March 2023

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Manchester Biodiversity Strategy was approved at the Council's Executive on 19th October 2022. It is the third Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan to be developed in the city over the past 18 years. The Strategy focuses on the need to conserve, protect and enhance biodiversity in the city for current and future generations. This is set within the strategic context of delivering economic growth, new jobs and new homes that are essential to a prosperous, modern city. This report provides an update on the delivery of the Strategy based on an analysis of the three main objectives set out in the document.
- 1.2 Work on an updated Open Space audit was undertaken throughout 2022. The completed study will form an important component of the evidence base to inform the emerging local plan. Presentations to members were previously held in December 2022 and this report provides a quick overview of the information presented at that point plus an update on a key aspect of making the audit available via online mapping tools.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The development of the latest Biodiversity Strategy involved a range of partner organisations including Natural England, The Environment Agency, The Wildlife Trust for Greater Manchester, Greater Manchester Ecology Unit, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, City of Trees, Canal and River Trust, The Conservation Volunteers, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester Museum and the University of Manchester.
- 2.2 The Strategy consists of three objectives with several priority actions that flow from each objective.
 - Objective 1 - Managing and understanding biodiversity
 - Greater Manchester Nature Recovery Network Strategy, contextualised for the urban character of Manchester, guides the focus of habitat management work.
 - All priority wildlife sites to be in active management by 2030.
 - Key species action plans will be developed which will guide management work across the recovery network as well as indicator species recording to measure change.
 - Objective 2 - Involving people
 - Creatively involving more people in the city to encourage action to help the nature recovery network in Manchester.
 - Manchester Biodiversity Action Group (MBAG) acting and supporting communities (includes the Council, MMU and UofM universities, Natural England, RSPB, GMEU, Groundwork, Environment Agency, City of Trees, The Conservation Volunteers and Friends of the Earth).

- Increase knowledge and skills amongst land managers and practitioners in the city to protect, enhance and restore biodiversity.
 - Objective 3 – Planning, policy and partnerships
 - Biodiversity embedded and mainstreamed into refreshed City Council policies to help protect and enhance nature.
 - Cross thematic links established with partners delivering against challenges including climate change, health and wellbeing and air quality to ensure new effective collaboration in the City.
 - Realise funding opportunities for recovery of nature, particularly through the planning and development process.
- 2.3 Section 3 of this report provides an update across key actions under each of the three objectives that have taken place since the adoption of the Strategy in October 2022.
- 2.4 The commissioning of a new Open Space audit (referred to in 1.2) provided an opportunity to update the last major study conducted in 2009/10. The City's increasing population places many demands on land, such as meeting housing, employment, and social needs, including the requirement for recreational open space. Manchester already has more than 150 parks and significant areas of semi natural and amenity open space. Some new areas of open space are being created, for example at Mayfield and along City River Park at Victoria North. Although the new Local Plan will not be identifying large areas of new open space, it is important to ensure that all communities within Manchester have good access to high quality open space and that we understand where opportunities arise to improve this.

3.0 Main issues

Biodiversity Strategy

- 3.1 The recognition of biodiversity in all work undertaken by the Council is a key component of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. Section 40 of the NERC Act places a duty to conserve biodiversity on public authorities in England. It requires Local Authorities to have regard to the purposes of conserving biodiversity in a manner that is consistent with the exercise of their normal functions such as policy and decision-making. 'Conserving biodiversity' may include enhancing, restoring or protecting a population or a habitat. Having a plan or strategy for Biodiversity contributes to realising NERC act objectives.
- 3.2 The activities set out below demonstrate the breadth of work that is taking place across the city involving the Council and the various partners noted above (paragraph 2.0).

3.3 Objective 1 - Managing and understanding biodiversity

a) Local Nature Reserves

- Two additional Local Nature Reserves recommended for designation by the Council. The two new LNRs cover an area of 50 hectares equating to about the size of 125 football pitches:
 - Kenworthy Woods in Northenden (36 hectares) Approved at Executive 19th December 2022
 - Broadhurst Clough in Moston (14 hectares) Approved at Executive - March 15th 2023.
- This takes the number of LNRs in Manchester up to 10, covering 441 hectares of land in total.
- Working with our colleagues in other land managing departments, we are looking to establish a pipeline of other sites as candidate LNRs.

b) Sites of Biological Importance (SBIs)

- Manchester has 37 Sites of Biological Importance. In 2008 we had 35, with 40% deemed to be in active conservation management. There are now 37, with around 65% in active conservation management. The park teams in the council have commissioned park specific biodiversity management plans for SBIs within their control.

c) Species Action Plans

- The Manchester Biodiversity Action Group has collaboratively progressed with the identification of 39 key indicator species for Manchester's Local Nature Recovery Network and 22 additional focus species to encourage wider public engagement. Working with the Universities, Draft Species Action Plans are now being developed.

d) City Wide – Trees Capacity Work

- The ward-based tree capacity assessment is now available online through the Council's website. It is the most comprehensive treescape assessment ever undertaken in the City and will enable neighbourhoods to prioritise tree planting in their wards.

e) Pollinator Parks and the Northern Flowerhouse

- Working with the Eden Project, the National Wildflower Centre and Groundwork Trust, the Council's Parks team are developing a pilot project to establish large scale harvestable wildflower crops in the city. Dependent on the outcome of the project, this has the opportunity to be rolled out to other spaces across Manchester.

f) Manchester Meadows

- The City Council Grounds Maintenance Team are looking to sow approximately 14,000 square metres of wildflower areas along verges and in greenspaces across the City.

g) Resilient River Valleys

- This project to engage local communities in a developing work and skills opportunities across the Mersey, Irk and Medlock River Valleys, has concluded. A summary video has been produced –see link here: [Our impact | Resilient River Valleys - YouTube](#)

h) City Centre

- Through the Council's Neighbourhood Initiatives Fund, resources have been committed to improve habitats in Bridgewater Basin and other areas of Deansgate Ward. The project will also undertake nestbox monitoring and surveying.

3.4 Objective 2 - Involving people

a) Manchester Museum

- The Museum reopened in February 2023 after extensive refurbishment to excellent reviews and customer feedback. Over 11,500 people visited the museum in its first week after opening. A new Exhibition called Wild! is in development for 2024.

b) City Nature Challenge

- In April 2023, Manchester was one of over 400 cities to have taken part in this year's global City Nature Challenge, which encourages people to record their local wildlife sightings via an easy-to-use app, capturing data for useful monitoring purposes.

c) Manchester Festival of Nature

- This year's festival was held at Heaton Park in June and was organised by the Manchester Nature Consortium (a partnership made up of key environmental organisations and the City Council). The day delivered an exciting range of nature-based events and activities.

3.5 Objective 3 – Planning, Policy and Partnerships

a) Biodiversity Net Gain – Focused Study

- The Council has commissioned a new study to undertake detailed analysis around the need for BNG, looking at the potential level of biodiversity units required on a range of future development sites and considering options for "supply sites" which may be needed for possible off site mitigation. The study will provide further detail to work already undertaken by the Greater Manchester Ecology Unit that provided information across Greater Manchester about the potential for BNG. The work will feed into the evidence base for the emerging Local Plan and provide additional information for preparations for when the national requirements for BNG commence in November 2023.

Open Space Study

- 3.6 The Open Space Study was commissioned as part of the necessary evidence to underpin the new Local Plan. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires policies on open space to be based on up-to-date information

and an understanding of where there may be a surplus or a deficit in different types of open space. The last comprehensive study was undertaken in 2009/10. In undertaking the work, it is also important to reflect on the findings of the Marmott review into equality and impacts on health.

3.7 The consultants looked at the following types of open space across Manchester:

- Parks - City, Neighbourhood, Local
- Local Green space/Amenity green space
- Natural and semi natural greenspace
- Children's play space and youth space
- Allotments
- Cemeteries
- Civic spaces
- Green corridors - e.g., Canal towpath

3.8 The focus of the study was on sites with public access that were larger than 0.2 hectares. Site visits were undertaken to many of the sites identified. Consultation was also undertaken via online survey; and specific conversations with "friends of" groups and other relevant stakeholders.

3.9 The final draft study was presented in December 2022 at two member briefings to enable further feedback and clarifications to be taken on board. Five key recommendations emerge from the report and are set out below.

Recommendation 1

Quantity standards should be used to help determine priorities for open space provision.
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Quantity levels should be utilised to indicate if there is a potential lack of provision in any given area may have. This should be done in conjunction with accessibility.

The quantity standards would help to determine if there are open space requirements as part of new housing developments. In the first instance, all types of provision should look to be provided as part of new housing developments. Where this isn't viable, improving quality and accessibility should be the key priorities.

Recommendation 2

Sites helping or with the potential to help serve areas identified as having gaps in catchment mapping should be recognised through opportunities for enhancement.
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The approach to these sites should be to enhance their quality and/or value to the applied standards (i.e., high quality and/or value).

The key focus should be to work to improving existing open space for more multi-purpose outcomes. Across the City, there are 75 sites highlighted as helping to serve gaps in accessibility catchment mapping.

Recommendation 3

Ensure lower quality sites helping to serve potential gaps in accessibility catchments are prioritised for enhancement

There are 344 sites that rate as below quality and/or value thresholds. Of these 344 sites, 26 are identified as helping to potentially serve catchment gaps in other types of open space. This also includes any site which has not been assessed as a result of not meeting the various criteria used to determine whether a site was included (further details available in the methodology section of the Open Space Study).

These sites should first look to be enhanced in terms of quality. Consideration should be given to changing the primary typology (see Recommendation 4) or strengthening the secondary function of these sites, to one which they currently help to serve a gap in provision, even if their quality cannot currently be enhanced. For some sites, such as natural and semi-natural greenspace, the ability to adapt or strengthen secondary roles may be limited due to the features and characteristics of the site.

Recommendation 4

Recognise low quality and value sites and how they may be able to meet other needs

This study identifies 22 sites currently rated as low quality and low value. Where sites of low quality and value appear to fall within an area of sufficiency, a change of primary typology should be considered. If no shortfall of other open space type is noted or the practicality of enhancing the site is not cost effective, then the site may be redundant in its current form.

Further exploration into these sites should be undertaken to establish whether they could be better at serving the city as a different open space type. For example, allotment demand is identified as being high. Consequently, some sites could look to be repurposed on this basis.

Recommendation 5

Keeping data, report and supporting evidence base up to date to reflect changes over time

The Assessment of Open Space provides a snapshot in time. Whilst significant changes are not as common for open space provision, inevitably over time changes occur through creation of new provision, loss of existing provision and/or alterations to site boundaries and management. Population change and housing growth are also another consideration to review when undertaking any form of update as this may impact on quantity provision levels and standards. It is therefore important, particularly given the growing

recognition of open space provision because of Covid-19, for the Council to undertake regular reviews of the data and/or actions informed by it.

- 3.10 A web browser is currently being created to allow easy access to the information that underpins the different open space typologies in the Open Space Audit. This will allow different teams across the council to understand where there are gaps in types of open space and how their area of work, whether planning, parks, regeneration or neighbourhoods, can help to mitigate this by repurposing land, improving access and quality, as set out in the recommendations above.

4.0 Recommendations

- 4.1 The Environment, Climate Change and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee is recommended to consider and comment on the information in the report.