

AGM – Talk on Biodiversity

By Steve Whitbread, Biodiversity Officer, Harrow Council

Julian Maw welcomed Steve Whitbread to the 95th AGM. Steve informed the meeting that he had been in the biodiversity post for seven years and that his talk would be on preparing for nature recovery in Harrow. He began by giving an overview of the state of nature in the UK: 16% of species are threatened with extinction and 151 of the 10,008 species assessed have already become extinct. We have seen big changes where wildlife is found: the distribution of half of flowering plant species have decreased across the UK (54%); the distributions of invertebrates have on average decreased across the UK (13%); pest control insect groups have declined by 34% and pollination groups by 18%. The UK is one of the most depleted countries on Earth – the drivers of this over the past 50 years have been agriculture management, unsustainable fishing, marine development, housing, and climate change. However, the UK has ambitious targets to address nature loss:

- Improve species status
- Increase nature-friendly farming, fisheries and forestry
- Expand and manage protected areas
- Increase ecosystem restoration
- Co-ordinate our response to the nature and climate crises

Steve explained that when conservation action takes places it can deliver results such as in the Lyme Bay Marine Protected Area where the number of species has increased since trawling was banned in 2008 or in the Cairngorms in Scotland where a large-scale restoration project is benefitting many woodland-dependent species. Bringing things back to a local level we saw a slide that depicted the green spaces in the Borough of Harrow. The borough is 5,046 hectares of which 1,025 hectares are publicly-accessible parks. Harrow is ranked as the 10th greenest out of the 33 London boroughs in terms of proportion of area under publicly-accessible greenspace. Harrow's is made up of Metropolitan Green Belt, Metropolitan Open Land and Public Open Space. There are also Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) which account for about 16% of the borough's area. Despite being a green borough, a significant part is deficient in access to nature and this is also where most people with least access to garden areas live.

The conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in England needs to be cyclical and proactive:

- **Consideration** of what action the authority can properly take
- Adoption of **policies** and specific **objectives**
- **Planning** and implementation of **actions**
- **Reporting** of actions and outcomes and plans with data

The Environment Improvement Plan 2023 has various targets for the UK. All local authorities will have to cooperate.

Long term:

- by end 2030, halt the decline in species abundance
- by end 2042, increase species abundance so it is greater than in 2022 and at least 10% greater than in 2030
- by end 2042, restore or create in excess of 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites, compared with 2022 levels
- by end of 2042, improve the GB Red List Index for species extinction compared with 2022 levels.

Interim:

- to restore or create 140,000ha of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites by 31 January 2028, compared with 2022 levels
- all SSSIs will have an up-to-date condition assessment by 31 January 2028
- 50% of SSSIs to have actions on track to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028.

The Council's land management involves:

- Nature reserves
- Park and other open spaces
- Drainage and flood risk
- Trees and woodlands
- Allotments
- Housing estates
- Small bits of green land (verges, roundabouts)
- Other borough lands

When it comes to planning and development, the handling of applications involves:

- Mitigation hierarchy
- Species/site/habitat protection
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

What is BNG? Net gain is an approach to development that seeks to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was before. But why do we need BNG? Because over the past 70 years, efforts in the UK have primarily focused on nature conservation by protection of species and pockets of nature. However, this approach has not halted the decline in wildlife nor the environment more widely. Over the past century, the state of nature has seen a significant and alarming decline due to increased pressures, including population increase, agricultural intensification, pollution, climate change and development, resulting in degraded and fragmented habitats and species loss. The UK is the worst G7 nation for biodiversity loss and has experienced a 19% decrease in wildlife abundance on average since the 1970s with one in six species at risk of extinction. So, there is a definite need for a better approach. A minimum BNG of 10% will be required, delivered on-site (via habitat creation or enhancement; landscaping or green infrastructure) or off-site (new habitat creation or enhancement on land holdings or via habitat banks) through a new statutory biodiversity credits scheme. There will be a national register for net gain delivery sites.

How does this affect Harrow? The minimum 10% is mandatory and doesn't need to be repeated in local policy, but there are good reasons to include BNG policies in Local Plans to support implementation since going above 10% involves backing this with appropriate evidence, including that the approach taken will be viable. And BNG delivery and monitoring will need to integrate with other local priorities such as water quality, important habitat restoration, health, flood risk, recreation, and tourism. The Council can only do so much to raise awareness and engage residents, but it is ideally placed to influence others to take, get involved with or lead on positive actions, for example, via the Harrow Parks Forum, Harrow Nature Conservation Forum, local community or interest groups, faith groups and schools and youth groups.

There are various projects: Harrow Nature Recovery, Stanmore Common, Yeading Brook, Bentley Priory, tree and woodland strategy and invasive species

strategy. Luke Farnsworth is the Nature Recovery Ranger, involved in these projects including the Riverside Park in Hatch End. Thanks to £350,000 in external funding, the Council will be undertaking a range of works to enhance the section of the Yeading Brook at Headstone Manor Park, Yeading Walk, Streamside Open Space and Roxbourne Park, as well as a number of smaller sites. While contractors will be undertaking the major works, park user groups and local residents will be instrumental to the preparatory and follow-up works, including control of the invasive non-native Himalayan balsam and new plantings in and alongside the stream. Invasive species are often free from pest and disease problems so can cause significant problems to native wildlife. The Council will be seeking to identify an effective programme of control, particularly for Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed along streams and cherry, laurel and rhododendron within significant heath and woodland sites. The Council has an existing tree strategy and the intention is not only to update this but to ensure that it also provides a guide for the management and creation of new woodland – following the right tree, right place (and right climate) principles.

Steve then asked if there were any questions.

Q What is the Council doing about the fact that so many front gardens have been paved over?

A We can't change what has already be done in the past.

Q Instead of moving the verges in Harrow, could we not sow wildflower seed and let the verges grow?

A We are doing a trial of this in parts of the borough.

JR and wildflower meadows