

**EXETER CITY COUNCIL**

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ECONOMY**

**1 MARCH 2007**

**EXECUTIVE**

**13 MARCH 2007**

**WILD CITY PROPOSAL**

**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 This report proposes the development of a long term framework for managing Exeter's natural assets for promoting biodiversity and for enhancing, in the broadest sense, public access.

**2. INFORMATION**

- 2.1 In comparison with most British cities Exeter is unusual in terms of its structure which makes the natural environment particularly accessible to very many citizens. The River Exe and a range of tributaries combine to give it a unique character; when added to the adjacent countryside and to other open space within the City, nearly half of Exeter is a major biodiversity resource. The linkages, from the Valley Parks to the surrounding countryside and the estuary, mean that there is already a considerable level of biodiversity across the City. The City's population therefore has access to a range of varied habitats ranging from those of local significance to those of national and international standing.
- 2.2 There are inevitably threats to the nature and the extent of the City's biodiversity. The day to day interest of a substantial part of the population in recreational activities that put pressure on these habitats needs to be carefully managed so that people can enjoy all but the most sensitive of these habitats without undermining the quality and long term prospects for their survival. Longer term pressures on open space could also substantially undermine biodiversity if new development is not directed to those sites of limited value, (or where pressures can be carefully managed) and if sporadic development results in corridors being severed.
- 2.3 Looking beyond these comparatively short term issues, there is the likely impact of climate change which threatens imminent damage to a range of diverse habitats unless a comprehensive and innovative response is adopted to manage this impact during the coming decade. The current review of the City's Community Strategy has recognised that, to date, the emphasis on sustainability has been comparatively weak, but that it should be amongst several priorities for a revised Sustainable Community Strategy. Sustainability should be a core focus of the strategy, which needs to be supported by a comprehensive and cross cutting programme of actions, to

ensure that the biodiversity we currently enjoy is at least maintained, and if possible, appropriately enhanced. Indeed, we have a duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 to promote biodiversity.

- 2.4 The City Council has already done a considerable amount to manage Exeter's biodiversity effectively. The City Council commissioned a major biodiversity survey of Exeter several years ago and adopted a biodiversity strategy. A number of action plans have been implemented and others are still to be prepared. Work on interpretation and education has had some input to date but this will expand significantly with a new team member in Leisure and Museums on a two year contract, whose principal focus this will be.
- 2.5 One of our key partners is the Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) and their Chief Executive sits on the Vision Partnership. He has proposed taking this a significant step further. The core of the proposal is to highlight the City's inherent attractions by designating Exeter as a "Wild City", and to put together a policy and programme that can deliver on our emerging Vision commitments. The two core elements of this work are an over-arching strategy and a set of actions that will deliver more enhancements, building on those initiatives that have already been successful. Some elements of that strategy are already being put in place through the review of the Community Strategy and by dovetailing this with work currently being undertaken by the City Council and East Devon District Council.
- 2.6 Previous survey work has already substantially identified the nature and the extent of the City's biodiversity and a joint piece of work is about to be undertaken on a Green Infrastructure Study that will look at how, as part of a sustainable development strategy for the East of Exeter development, green infrastructure could be established at the heart of that spatial strategy and delivered over the next 20 years. The strategy also needs to model the potential impacts of climate change on particular habitats and to consider whether these habitats can be maintained in the face of significant change and, if so, what actions are necessary. Beneath this strategy, there are a number of initiatives that need to be developed or expanded, ranging from policies to be applied in local planning documents and in relation to specific applications, through to actions for managing the Valley Parks and other sensitive habitats to ensure their survival.
- 2.7 A further significant challenge is making these issues accessible to a much greater proportion of the population. The jargon involved is off-putting to most people, but the sheer enjoyment of particular environments or wildlife, whether they be woodlands, wild flower meadows or rare birds, mean that much of the population could be excited and motivated by a set of practical projects. It will also contribute to a strong theme on which to base visitor promotion activities which is of particular interest to organisations such as the RSPB. There is a wide range of possible initiatives, including:
- creating new wildlife corridors through the City
  - introducing Green Coat Guides – along the same lines as Red Coat Guides

- combining the Health Agenda and the Green Agenda to encourage greater access to our Valley Parks (and other parks, gardens and allotments) by a wider group of the population
- creating green gyms
- promoting locally sourced food, ensuring reduced air miles and lower energy intensity production
- setting up wildlife listening posts
- setting up screens in key City Centre locations linked to webcams in key green spaces – similar to the kestrelcam
- introducing a wildlife festival
- linking up with ‘green’ access strategies such as the Green Circle and Cycle Network
- and so on!

2.8 There are many potential partners in this work, ranging from the Environment Agency through to the RSPB. The RSPB has also developed a “City to the Sea” proposal, embracing integrated recreational and biodiversity provision between the City, the estuary and the coast and has discussed initial ideas with funding bodies. There is considerable potential to integrate these two projects. To take this work forward Members will be aware that within the 2007/08 budget there is provision for grant aid to the Devon Wildlife Trust for the appointment of a Project Officer for a two year period. The intention would be a collaborative effort between DWT, the City Council and other key partners (including the RSPB) to develop a strategy, identify a set of key actions and submit a range of Lottery bids for funding for innovative proposals to help deliver this.

### **3. CONCLUSION AND FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

3.1 This is potentially a very exciting project that could link a series of themes together under the sustainability banner, by combining planning, biodiversity, leisure and health as part of the “Wild City” initiative. The longer term financial implications cannot yet be quantified and will depend on the work of the Project Officer over the next two years, for which £30,000 per annum has been budgeted in 2007/08 and 2008/09. The benefits of this work will be considerable, protecting the biodiversity we currently enjoy and delivering selective enhancements around the City. It is potentially of benefit to very large numbers of residents and, given the spread of the Valley Parks and other open spaces, provides good access to a number of defined Wards within the Valley Park catchments. The “Wild City” tag has associated linkage with the wildlife attractions of the adjacent countryside and estuary areas, and will help to promote eco-tourism to our unusually biodiverse City.

### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.1 It is recommended that Members
- (i) support the development of a Wild City Strategy and Action Plan
  - (ii) request officers to set up a cross Directorate project team to work with

the Devon Wildlife Trust and other key partners to take this project forward, whilst incorporating elements of the concept in a revised Sustainable Community Strategy

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**Local Government (Access to information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

Background papers used in compiling this report:

*None*