

CLIMATE, BIODIVERSITY & PLANNING COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday, 15 February 2022

Title: Lake & Country Park – Rewilding

Contact Officer: Maintenance & Environmental Services Officer - Angus Whitburn

Background

The lake and country park is made up of the main lake, two meadows and several smaller parcels of land. The two meadows and the small parcels of land which make up the east side are completely unmanaged by Witney Town Council staff, contractors or volunteer groups.

PO4 of the adopted Open Spaces Strategy Action Plan is to identify areas for rewilding and to implement them by April 2022. Several areas have been identified which are hard to maintain due to access restrictions but also the value doesn't outweigh the costs to do so.

A group, Wild Witney has approached the Council for an area of land they can rewild and manage. The Maintenance & Environment Officer has held a meeting with the group and walked several areas with them that may be of interest.

Current Situation

The group's process is to follow the 12 steps of rewilding outlined by rewilding Britain. The area of land that has been discussed has been completely unmanaged since 2015 when grazing ended. This would help the group as they could skip step one of that process and move on to gathering information on the land, seeking advice and devising a plan.

The section of land that's been identified is an area south of where the old train line used to run. It's about 2.14 acres and is surrounded by trees and borders the River Windrush on the west side. This parcel of land is hard to access with vehicles and equipment making it hard to maintain by staff and contractors.

To give Wild Witney some autonomy over the land a user agreement could be created between Witney Town Council and the community group. This would enable Wild Witney to progress with the rewilding process without having to consult with the council at each stage but also keep certain aspects of the land under control such as the footpaths.

To publicise the project it would also be beneficial to install notice boards on both sides of this patch of land. The first stages of rewilding are fairly unnoticeable but this could spark interest in the project and help increase its support.

To reduce the potential risk's highlighted below its been discussed with Wild Witney to adopt a smaller section of land. This will help them to learn the process of rewilding become established and in future, this could be extended out beyond those boundaries. This has the added benefit that if the council decide to rewild the whole area the council could work with Wild Witney to achieve this.

Environmental impact

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 – with this in mind Councillors should have due regard to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates.

As well as reversing biodiversity loss 'Rewilding Britain' has also highlighted the added benefits rewilding has to remove carbon from the atmosphere,

'We calculate that restoring and protecting native woodland, peatbogs, heaths and species-rich grasslands over a total of six million hectares could sequester 47 million tonnes of CO2 per year'

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

Trusting a community group with a section of town council owned land could set a precedent. Also if Wild Witney was to collapse their projects could be left unmanaged and displeasing to visitors of the country park.

Historically the land has been used for farming and in rewilding the Council would be moving the land away from that use in the future. However, it is worth noting that the land would require substantial works to reintroduce grazing, such as repairing fences, hedge lines and harvesting the land while removing unwanted plant species.

Financial implications

Described here or as stated in the report above.

➤ Wild Witney haven't asked for any grant money to cover this project.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. Agree upon the area to rewild or reject the proposal.

2. Delegate to officers to draft a user agreement between Witney Town Council & Wild Witney.
3. Discuss any points that are to be detailed in that user agreement (maintaining footpaths, planting of tree species, further consultation with the council on introducing habitats and new species).
4. Discuss the idea of installing notice boards informing users of the county park about the plan for the area.