

Developing Capacity in Open Space Development (Community Services, Chris Swatridge)

Synopsis of report:

This report outlines proposed changes to the structure of the Open Spaces and Community Development teams. Following a recent resignation and an existing vacancy within the Community Development team, consideration of the future requirements has been given. This results in a proposal to utilise both positions to create two distinct roles, which add capacity and expertise.

This report sets out the proposed roles and associated financial implications that Members are asked to consider.

Recommendation that:

- i) This Committee recommends for approval by Corporate Management Committee, that the authority's establishment list is amended as set out in the report with the following roles created:
 - a) an Open Spaces Development Biodiversity Officer (permanent, 37-hour contract on grade 10); and**
 - b) a Community Development Projects Officer (permanent, 30-hour contract on grade 8).****
- ii) This Committee recommends for approval by Corporate Management Committee, a supplementary revenue estimate of £4,886, required from 2025/2026 onwards**

1. Context of report

- 1.1 With the recent departure of the Open Spaces Project Manager, a vacancy within the small Open Space Development team in Community Services, exists.
- 1.2 This role, has been responsible for a broad area of activity including projects relating to Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs), and projects relating to recreational facilities and enhancements (e.g. playgrounds, skate parks etc.).
- 1.3 Officers feel that such breadth is challenging, given the priorities across both areas including:
 - key biodiversity objectives
 - delivering Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space management plans
 - advising on the development of the Council's Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy

- Work relating to the provision of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG).
- The development of a play area replacement programme
- Other projects relating to the enhancement of recreational facilities
- Development of site-specific development plans for parks and open spaces

- 1.4 Therefore, it is felt that now there is an opportunity to consider the roles required by the Council to facilitate the above priorities and others. In doing so, a review of a vacant post within the Community Development team has also been considered, given the overlap in activity (i.e. recreational enhancements form part of on the ground community development discussion/work with communities). Therefore, it is important to note that Community Services is intending to utilise its resources to meet the corporate priorities through a flexible, cross team approach.
- 1.5 In addition, through the strong working relationship established with Planning colleagues since the appointment of the Open Space and Community Development Manager, the opportunity to utilise grant funding received by Planning to assist with the proposed changes has also been able to be incorporated. This evidences the successful cross business unit relationship that has been formed and the keenness on both sides to realise the opportunity proposed in this report.
- 1.6 This report sets out the options considered in advance of recruitment and a proposed way forward, for consideration.

2. **Report and, where applicable, options considered**

- 2.1 The resignation of the Open Space Project Manager, together with an existing vacant post in the Community Development team (Community Services Business Unit), has provided an opportunity to review the required roles/skills ahead of recruitment to two posts.
- 2.2 The initial business case presented to the Corporate Leadership Team, is attached at Appendix 'A' for information. Within this business case, three possible options were proposed as to how we could proceed with recruitment. These are summarised below:
- 2.1.1 **Option 1 (preferred option):** For approval to be given to use the BNG grant and funding for current position to create a new position of Biodiversity Officer. Currently, there is no biodiversity specialist employed by the Council and any advice is outsourced using consultants. This post would be recruited alongside an Open Spaces Project Officer and the two would work in tandem across specialisms. By having two Officers we will be able to deliver more specific work rather than rely on one person to deliver different skill sets. Given the workload concerning biodiversity advice is currently increasing, there is a need for a provision to be provided in-house. Now that the Open Space Project Manager role is vacant, there is an opportunity to slightly modify the structure to employ an Officer to contribute towards important strategic functions to be delivered by the Council. Furthermore, with the availability of funding from within the Planning department, there now exists an opportunity to employ two new members of staff as an invest to save option.

2.1.2 **Option 2 (Temporary Contracts):** To utilise the recruitment opportunities mentioned in Option 1 but to do so with temporary contracts. Either post could be offered as a temporary post but the risk for this option would be a lack of qualified candidates who need the security of permanent contracts. Given the strategic need of qualified Officers in posts relating to biodiversity and recreation, the long-term nature of the requirements in the Environment Act 2021, and the importance that both form part of the wider strategies of the Council, it is felt that recruiting to permanent posts is more appropriate for such a role.

2.1.3 **Option 3 (Do Nothing):** The 'do nothing' approach would be two Officers, as per the existing staff structure.

2.3 Supported by the Corporate Leadership Team, Officers are proposing through this report that option one is approved by Corporate Management Committee, subject to this being agreed as the recommendation from Community Services Committee.

2.4 Approval would mean that the following positions would be recruited to on a permanent basis, employed within the Community Services Business Unit.

- 1 x Biodiversity Officer (grade 10, 37 hours, permanent)
- 1 x Community Development Officer (grade 8, 30 hours, permanent)

2.5 The above will result in the deletion of the Open Space Project Manager position currently within the Council's establishment list.

2.6 A cross business unit approach with Planning colleagues, on a range of matters that have either previously been under-developed, or which are new requirements in relation to the climate change and biodiversity agenda, is intended to be supported by both posts, including Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy and associated projects, planning for Biodiversity Net Gain projects and developing a response to the proposed River Thames Scheme.

2.7 This joint approach is recognised as carrying strategic importance. Therefore, it is considered appropriate to utilise grant funding which the Council has already received from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) for this proposal. In particular, given the impending requirement for new developments to require 10% Biodiversity Net Gain, there is a need for further ecological planning advice for the Council.

2.8 In addition, the roles will be able to spread the functions identified within 1.4 of this report, working separately and jointly where required, together with the Open Space Development Manager.

3. **Financial Implications**

3.1 Table 1. Shows the revenue savings and expenditure over a six year period.

REVENUE COSTS						
Revenue Expenditure (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Biodiversity Officer 37 hours at top of grade 10 including 28.5% on costs	49,185	49,185	49,185	49,185	49,185	49,185
Open Spaces Project Officer 30 hours at top of grade 8 including 28.5% on costs	32,366	32,366	32,366	32,366	32,366	32,366
IT costs relating to equipment (to be sourced from current budgets)	1,000	-	-	-	-	-
Less: Savings to existing budget						
Community Development Officer 30 hours at top of grade 8 including 28.5% on costs	- 32,366	- 32,366	- 32,366	- 32,366	- 32,366	- 32,366
Open Spaces Officer 37 hours at top of grade 9 including 28.5% on costs	- 44,299	- 44,299	- 44,299	- 44,299	- 44,299	- 44,299
Total Revenue Expenditure	5,886	4,886	4,886	4,886	4,886	4,886
Revenue Income (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Grant Income	9,000	9,000	-	-	-	-
No Grant Income	-	-				
Potential to sell services to other authorities (unknown)						
Total Revenue Income	9,000	9,000	-	-	-	-
Net change to revenue budgets	-3,114	-4,114	4,886	4,886	4,886	4,886

- 3.2 Initially, the post can be delivered through a combination of the existing budget, together with funding agreed to be passed from Planning to Community Services to support the proposed direction. The sum available via Planning is circa £13,000 and has to be spent over this and the following financial year. The funding available to planning is only available for two years.
- 3.3 As a result, an annual supplementary budget estimate of £4,886 is required to cover the full cost of both posts, on a permanent basis when the grant funding ceases (financial year 2025/2026).
- 3.4 The table below, shows the finances related to the proposed establishment changes, as detailed in the business case:
- 3.5 Whilst growth is required, it is also felt that in part as a result of the introduction of a Biodiversity Officer, opportunities to make financial efficiencies or to generate additional income to the Council may be possible, to support the financing of the role. These include:

- Potential income to be gained through Biodiversity Net Gain (through selling biodiversity units from our own sites to developers to help them meet their BNG requirements)
- Potential for the Biodiversity Officer post to become a shared post with a neighbouring Authority (subject to work priorities, volume and requirements of the role at RBC)
- In future years, it may be possible for the Biodiversity Officer to provide advice relating to planning applications, which currently is undertaken at a cost of 12k per annum, by Surrey Wildlife Trust (subject to work priorities, capacity and other requirements of the role)

3.6 There are possible opportunities for the future. However, these are not yet in a position to be realised and are also subject to a number of unknown factors. Therefore, revenue growth is requested. It is however, recognised that a supplementary estimate, given the current financial position of the Council, is a challenging request, at this time.

4. Policy framework implications

4.1 By having a dedicated ecologist, the Borough will have more conservation input to strategies and plans that can realise biodiversity potential. This would also be a demonstrable commitment to the conservation of biodiversity by the Council, and the delivery of the Council's wider Climate Change Strategy which seeks 'to drive biodiversity net gain and protect our natural assets' as part of its mission.

4.2 An in-house resource would mean that policies relating to Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces and Biodiversity Net Gain could be produced more efficiently without having to rely on Surrey County Council (SCC) or consultants to provide advice, surveys or coordination of resources.

4.3 A dedicated ecologist would be available to the local communities within Runnymede to advise on ecological or conservation matters. This would raise awareness of biodiversity issues within communities while also conserving nature in local areas. Furthermore, it could create more of a sense of ownership of green spaces and land within communities where projects around biodiversity are supported. This would also support the Council's Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

4.4 The Environment Act 2021 will place significant new requirements on the Council as a local authority from winter 2023. The proposed roles will support the Council (working with Planning) in meeting these requirements.

4.5 The Council's Health and Wellbeing strategy includes the theme of "healthy communities". An important part of this is use of our parks and open spaces, and the provision of play and recreational facilities. The Community Services area plan includes strands of work that support this. By splitting responsibilities and areas of focus additional capacity to focus on this will be achieved.

5. Legal implications

5.1 There are no specific legal implications in relation to this report. However, it is possible there will be legal implications for specific objectives mentioned above and where these exist consideration will be given, working with colleagues in Law & Governance.

6. **Equality implications**

6.1 There are no equality implications in relation to this report.

7. **Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications**

7.1 There are several implications linked to the environment and biodiversity. These are intrinsically linked to the writing of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces management plans and strategies for Green and Blue Infrastructure and Biodiversity Net Gain. The formulation of these strategies will increase the amount of focus on the environment and biodiversity through identified objectives linked to development within the Borough.

7.2 The principal intention for the Biodiversity Net Gain strategy will be to keep funds and resources within the Borough through the identification and surveys of current sites suitable for Biodiversity Net Gain projects. Without this focus, funds will have to be diverted to a nationally centred fund where they could be distributed anywhere in the Country.

7.3 The longer-term priority of developing site-specific development and management plans will incorporate environmental and biodiversity considerations, as well as leisure, recreation and play opportunities, as a standard area of consideration.

8. **Conclusions**

8.1 The changes to the Council's staffing establishment as proposed in this report and attached business case, provides the Council with an opportunity to push forward with a number of work strands, that support the Climate Change and Health and Wellbeing strategies.

(To Resolve)

Background Papers

None stated.