



## **RBWM 2021-22 Budget Consultation**

### **RBWM Wilds submission**

#### **1. Summary**

The seven RBWM 'Wild' groups (listed at the end of this document) have reviewed the proposed budget cuts in order to assess any likely impact on environmental actions in the Borough. We consider that some of the cuts will have little impact in our areas of interest and may indeed be beneficial. We are, however, concerned at the proposed cuts in the Trees programme and suggest that there could be alternative approaches to this. The proposed cuts in Training and Planning may also have a detrimental impact, especially when combined with the Trees function cuts.

We also link the cuts to the, as yet, unfunded Environment and Climate Strategy. This is a very real concern, and we note the commitments on the Strategy made by several Councillors and we urge them to have these in mind when debating where cuts should be made.

#### **2. Introduction**

Coming to definitive judgments on these matters, where so many variables are involved, is not easy and we have sympathy with the Council in the dilemma it now faces. We offer the comments below in a spirit of support but with the aim of ensuring that the Council does not, in taking short-term decisions to address immediate and real difficulties, give itself – and the local community – bigger problems later on. We are especially concerned that investments related to the Environment and Climate Strategy will be downgraded or insufficient funds made available to meet the clear commitments offered unanimously by the Council.

Commenting on these specific issues is made more difficult due to the lack of any confirmed budget allocation for the Environment and Climate Strategy – and therefore this area of activity is not included in the cuts. We are worried that there may well be a commensurate reduction in the budget called for by the Emergency. This is something the Council must guard against.

### 3. Specific budget headings

We consider that some proposed cuts may help in addressing waste and even reduce pollution and other damage. These include:

- a. Ref 022 (Reduction in budget for Member mileage claims). Lower expenses, as well as more virtual meetings, should certainly reduce the number of journeys.
- b. Ref 029 (Removal of all vending machines in council offices). This facility is clearly an important service for Council staff but it may well reduce waste.
- c. Ref 032 (Additional income from green waste subscriptions). It appears reasonable to ask people using this service to pay the full cost of it though we counsel caution and wonder whether, after taking into account possible additional local tipping of such waste, and the environmental impact of additional visits to the local recycling centre, there will be a significant overall financial/environmental saving.
- d. Ref 035 (Introduce fortnightly residual waste collections whilst retaining weekly food waste and recycling collections). This cut, if implemented in the right way, should lead to increased recycling. However, effective communication of the cut is important and we urge the Council to allow budget for this. Fortnightly collection will work for almost all residents, but there may be some cases, such as multiple occupancy residences with limited bin storage that need additional collection.
- e. Ref 038 (Reduce the council's pool car fleet). This makes sense but we suggest the Council considers more imaginative options such as removing pool cars altogether and, for example, joining an electric car club as other councils have done.
- f. Ref 043 (Deliver the waste incentivisation scheme through the Climate Change Strategy). This makes sense as long as it actually happens this way! We would urge the Council to ensure that, at the time that this item is removed from the current draft budget, other steps are taken to encourage recycling: it is not a good message to suggest that this incentivisation scheme is being dropped.
- g. Ref 061 (Remove funding from Borough in Bloom and community participation project). The flowers currently used for this scheme are not typically pollinators so we expect limited biodiversity impact from this cut; also there is an environmental cost in the watering and vehicle movement associated with it. However, the Council should link this to the commitment (and budget) for nearby roadside wildflower seeding/planting).

There are three issues where we have concerns:

- h. Ref 019 (Removal of Member training budget). Training is identified as a critical and urgent need within the Environment and Climate Strategy. We are particularly concerned that the cuts identified in the current budget will have a knock-on effect on the commitment to provide biodiversity and other

relevant training for Members and Officers. Local wildlife groups have offered to help with this training, if appropriate.

- i. Ref 055 (Reshape Planning Support Team). The proposed cuts here are relatively minor. Our concern is that Ref 064 (Reshape the Trees function), which we address below, assumes that the Trees role is taken on by the Planning function: how effective will this be if the latter's budgets are also cut – coupled possibly with a lack of training budget to bring the planners up to speed?
- j. Ref 064 (Reshape the trees function). This is our most significant concern and is addressed below.

#### **4. Proposed cuts to the Trees function**

The RBWM Trees and Woodland Strategy (2010-2020), still assumed to be the relevant guiding policy for the Borough, sets out the key issues for the Strategy with funding stated to be 'relevant' for Open Space trees and of 'high relevance' for Woodlands and Street Trees.

This Strategy, with many specific programmes, reflects a genuine wish on the part of the Council to protect and enhance its exceptional trees resource. The Environment and Climate Strategy, unanimously adopted in 2020, reiterates the commitment to our trees, underscoring their role in carbon management, biodiversity, air and water quality, soil stability, flood control and human well-being. With so many other competing demands on the Council's attention it is already difficult for these voiceless inhabitants to gain the priority they deserve and, though the intention may be that they will still get this from the Planning function, we believe that it is inevitable that they will suffer if specialist numbers are reduced. The fact that the clear intention is to achieve a reduction in the number of posts gives real concern: can the claimed hope for improvement in communication compensate for the likely reduction in expertise?

A search of the Planning website shows that, in 2020, there were 201 applications across the Borough relating specifically to tree removal or other action, with 120 in the second half of the year. This almost certainly ignores the many other planning applications which result in the 'accidental' removal of trees of which no notice has been given.

It would be perhaps instructive to find out how long, on average, each such application takes. Certainly, where a Tree Protection Order (TPO) is to be granted, there has to be a visit first.

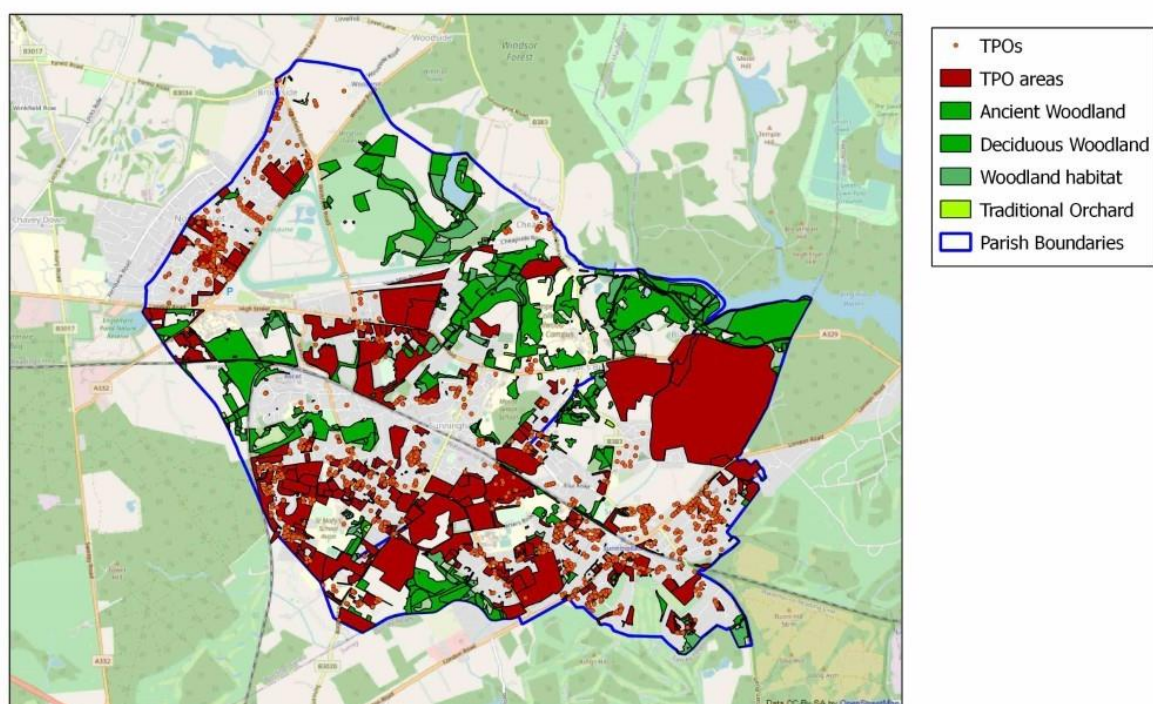
The Borough has a rich and varied tree population with some areas especially well endowed and, given its important historic forests, almost certainly richer in trees and woodland areas than many other local authority areas. The map below shows the Ascot area, indicating individual TPOs, TPO areas and other areas of priority woodland habitat as per the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. These are an incredibly important part of the Borough's natural assets: lack of focus on them is likely to result in their neglect and ultimate harm. Trees play a fundamental role in several Priority Habitats in the Borough including Woodpasture and

parkland, Deciduous Woodland and Traditional Orchards and understanding these ecological distinctions is important for biodiversity.

In addition, there are 27 Conservation Areas in the Borough: all trees above a certain size in these areas have protection. In theory this can be handled by the Planning function: this should not be assumed.

We are also concerned, supported by the experience of members of our groups, that, by moving the function to Planning, this will not be the primary interest of those involved. Where there is no planning development issue there will be limited interest.

**Map showing extent of woodland and TPOs in Sunninghill, Ascot and Sunningdale Parishes RBWM**



The Environment and Climate Strategy trees programme. The lack of budget and specific plans makes it difficult to challenge the wisdom of moving the Trees function. The Strategy does have a specific commitment to plant 15,000 trees by 2025. Responsibility may fall elsewhere but is this confirmed? And where will the expertise behind the plan lie?

For these reasons we urge the Council to think beyond this being an administrative change and to look at the actual impact it is likely to have on an important element of the Borough's assets.

Protect or plant? We also suggest that, if budgets are an issue, it makes more sense to protect the trees we have rather than give them less protection and spend money on planting new ones. Established trees (unless towards the end of their lives) will make a considerably greater contribution to carbon capture (and other beneficial outcomes) than new plants.

## **5. Beyond the current budgets**

The RBWM Budget Consultation relates specifically to those budgets which already exist. Beyond these we are concerned that no budget has yet been set for the implementation of the unanimously adopted Environment and Climate Strategy which will need significant input from RBWM ecologists and tree specialists. We appreciate that the exceptional nature of the Environment and Climate Emergency places enormous pressures on Council budgets. We are, however, concerned that the Council's intention appears to be to cover the Strategy implementation costs within existing service income and capital budgets and from Government grants. This does not instil confidence and the reliance on inevitably uncertain CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy)-type funding further undermines this.

#### Natural Environment Strategy commitments

For some activities laid out in the Strategy, the investment will principally be management time; for some there will be a clear need for financial investment. We have listed below the Council commitments in relation to the Natural Environment, showing in **blue** those that are most likely to call for staff involvement, with attendant salary costs, and in **red** those where we see a requirement for financial support beyond Council salary requirements (which themselves may be considerable if the Strategy is given the priority it clearly needs). It is clear that most activities will require additional funding and the funding for much of this is needed urgently if the Emergency targets are to be achieved.

[There are substantial requirements for funding for the activities under the other three main headings in the Strategy and these are not covered here.]

1. *Creating a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (Any plan will require significant funding for transitioning and management of selected areas)*
2. *Create a new biodiversity baseline and metrics and action plan across the borough (The creation of the baseline should mainly involve time but implantation of the resulting plan will almost certainly require additional funding)*
3. **Integrate biodiversity improvement metrics into the borough BAP**
4. *Tree planting programme with other actions, such as soil preservation, to bring about carbon sequestration. Plant at least 15,000 trees by 2025 on council owned land*
5. **Provide biodiversity training to our own staff by 2021**
6. *Our in-house experts will take biodiversity awareness out to the community and offer training to local schools, businesses and residents (Publicity, facilities hire will be needed on top of staff time)*
7. *Engage with 10 largest landowners in the borough and seek involvement in our natural capital programme (Difficult to see how this will not involve financial outlay)*
8. We also note that, across the whole strategy, there is a commitment to "Increased communications with residents and businesses to achieve strategic objectives including promotional actions listed". This will certainly apply to the Natural Environment element of the Strategy and will call on budgets to cover this activity.

#### **5. Council commitments to the Environment and Climate Emergency**

We also urge individual councillors to remember the commitments they have made to implement the Environment and Climate Strategy agreed unanimously last year. We understand that budgets to implement the strategy are currently being discussed but each councillor carries a responsibility to ensure that any cuts, or reallocation of budgets, cannot be allowed to undermine the need to meet the climate challenge.

As an aide memoire, we note some of the commitments by our Councillors. Each of these commitments carry cost implications if they are to be delivered. We do this not to place doubt on these commitments, nor to point the finger at particular Councillors, but to remind us all that there are over-arching priorities relating to the long-term future of our community that must not be side-lined.

#### Councillor Rayner

As part of this commitment we will be running biodiversity training for planning officers and an awareness and volunteering programme for council employees and partners.

#### Councillor Carroll

Encouraging active forms of travel and improving our green spaces will have wider benefits to our communities and I will work with the rest of my cabinet colleagues to ensure these benefits to both physical and mental health are delivered.

#### Councillor Coppinger

We will set a new biodiversity net gain requirement in new development, which will support our ambition for biodiversity.

#### Councillor Hilton

I will oversee individual service revenue budgets, our capital programme and anticipate that where appropriate the impact on climate change will be noted so it may be challenged.

#### Councillor McWilliams

We can only deliver net zero as a borough by working in partnership with others. Communicating with and engaging with our residents, businesses and partners will be critical to our success. We will be developing and delivering a communication and engagement plan to support delivery of our strategy and a number of the actions set out for the next five years.

Incentive developers to bring forward schemes that support our climate change obligations to achieve net zero by 2050, and consider zero carbon technologies on our existing properties and new homes.

#### Councillor Stimson

One of my most pressing tasks as portfolio holder for parks and countryside will be launching our natural capital programme, including the creation of a baseline for biodiversity, based on the excellent work already undertaken by our community organisations.

I will also focus on our ambitions to significantly increase renewable energy generation capacity in the Borough. Currently the Royal Borough produces 13,142 MWh renewable energy per year, and we aim to increase renewable capacity 10 fold by 2025 to bring us in line with other local authorities performing well in this area.

Source: RBWM document submitted to local 'Wild' groups, 23 June 2020

#### RBWM Wilds members

Wildlife in Ascot

WildCookham

Wild About Datchet

Wild Eton and Eton Wick

Wild Maidenhead

WildSL6

Wild Windsor

28<sup>th</sup> January 2020