

Rural Conservation Business Unit Annual Report 2015 to the Environmental & Public Protection Scrutiny Committee

1. Introduction

Carmarthenshire's landscapes and its habitats and species are some of the county's most important natural resources. They make up the green infrastructure which provides a framework for our social, economic and environmental health. The Rural Conservation Business Unit promotes the understanding, conservation, enhancement, and responsible management of these resources, consistent with Carmarthenshire's Integrated Community Strategy and CCC's core values. The Unit directly contributes to the delivery of Outcomes F1, F3 and F4 within the Council's Improvement Plan 2014/15 (for further details see table at the end of this report).

The Unit provides advice to development management, other CCC departments and the general public on landscape, trees, woodlands, hedgerows, biodiversity, common land and on development within the Caeau Mynydd Mawr SPG area. It is also instrumental in ensuring that approved developments and other projects comply with relevant legislation and meet the various policies that relate to the natural environment in the Local Development Plan.

The Rural Conservation Business Unit carries out the following statutory functions:

- Tree Preservation Orders - Town and Country Planning (Trees) Regulations 1999
- Hedgerow Regulations 1997
- Commons Registration Act 1965

It also works to ensure that the Council's operations are compliant under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.

2. Coed Cymru

Coed Cymru is a partnership of organisations (including local authorities, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales) dedicated to bringing Welsh native woodlands into sustainable management and creating new native woodlands in appropriate locations. Carmarthenshire County Council employs two Coed Cymru officers, one full-time and one part-time, totalling 1.6 posts currently 60% funded by Natural Resources Wales and Welsh Government. Coed Cymru officers advise on the whole spectrum of issues from the planting of new trees through to the management of existing woodland for biodiversity, amenity and the production of high quality Welsh timber products. Officers also provide advice and support in the management of woodland on the Council estate and assist the Arboricultural Officer in ensuring that the Council meets its statutory obligations for responsible tree management.

In 2014/15 in addition to the above activities Coed Cymru officers delivered the Welsh Government Nature Fund *Soil, Water and Conservation* project in Carmarthenshire. This involved the preparation of 5-year farm plans for participating land owners and the administration of payments for activities including: creating shelterbelts, restoring

hedgerows, fencing riparian zones and improving farm buildings and yards to prevent dirty water polluting watercourses.

In 2014/15 Carmarthenshire Coed Cymru Officers realised the following outputs:

- 179 woodland advisory visits made;
- 8 Glastir Woodland Management plans and 30 Nature Fund project plans approved; 21 other management plans prepared (including Glastir Woodland Management and Creation schemes in preparation)
- 66 woodland management and tree planting schemes managed with a total of 77 ha (192 acres) of woodland brought into management;
- Over £80,000 in NRW grant payments claimed by local farmers and land owners, resulting in 409 contractor days being worked;
- 14 promotion shows and events attended;
- 9 tree safety surveys completed on Council properties.
- Preparation of felling licence application for woodland management at Pembrey Country Park and provision of advice for Llyn Llech Owain Country Park woodland management and habitat restoration projects.

In 2014/15, in addition to a continuation of the work above, Coed Cymru officers are advising on habitat restoration projects at Pembrey Country Park and Llyn Llech Owain Country Park and are assisting the rangers there in planning woodland operations and preparing felling licence applications and environmental impacts assessments.

3. Common Land

Carmarthenshire has the third largest area of Common Land in Wales, some 15,000ha (37,000 acres) covering 6.35% of the County. The county has 120 commons and village greens, and there 49 ownerless commons in Carmarthenshire which the local authority has the power to protect.

The Authority has a statutory duty to keep and maintain a register of common land under the Commons Registration Act 1965 and the Commons Act 2006. Part 1 of the Commons Act 2006 requires commons registration authorities to update the common land registers by recording past changes which may not have been recorded under the Commons Registration Act 1965. Commons registration authorities will have significant new powers to correct the many mistakes which exist in the current registers. It is anticipated that the Welsh Government will implement Part 1 of the Act in 2016.

This year we have carried out 39 apportionments and 637 common land searches, and the Common Land officer has had 15 meetings with members of the public who wish to inspect the register.

Carmarthenshire's Common Land officer is the only Welsh director of ACRA (Association for Commons Registration Authorities) which provides advice and guidance to our members with regard to all matters relating to the registration and management of common land and village greens. He is also a member of the Commons Act 2006 Advisory

Group which provides advice and guidance to the Welsh Government with regard to the implementation of the Commons Act in Wales.

Over the last 12 months the Common Land officer has also been closely involved in the Resilient Ecosystem funded Carmarthenshire Bogs Project that attracted £20,000 of grant aid from the Welsh Government. All six sites covered by this project are areas of common land with no known owners; as such the County Council is expected to protect these sites from illegal activities. The officer has provided the project and local communities with advice on the legal aspects of common land and has been able to advise on approaches to management. Following on from the Bryn Llewellyn public inquiry the officer is similarly involved in trying to improve the management of one (small) part of Llanllwni Mountain, where CCC acts in the interests of the landowner. Common Land is important natural resource within Carmarthenshire that supports a range of wildlife habitats as well as agricultural activities and is one to which the public have open access under the CROW Act 2000.

4. Trees

The Council's arboricultural officer is primarily concerned with managing Carmarthenshire's 215 Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs), processing application for works to existing TPOs and placing new orders when appropriate, supervising contractors and taking enforcement action when trees have been removed without permission. He manages applications for works to trees in the conservation areas within Carmarthenshire, as well as dealing with queries from other departments, elected members and the general public. He comments on planning applications where trees are affected by proposals. The officer is also currently involved with two long running enforcement cases.

The tree officer produces surveys and assists the head of planning with High Hedge cases that are covered by the anti social behaviour law. He assists the highway officers under the 154 Highways Act advising on health and safety issues, and advises on planning applications that have impacts on trees.

The Tree Safety Strategy is progressing and Education is contacting all head teachers asking them to inform the section of schools where there are trees on site that should be surveyed. Surveys of the country parks have also taken place this year and the Arboricultural Officer has completed further training in tree safety inspections.

5. Hedgerows

The Unit is responsible for implementing the Hedgerow Regulations 1997. It advises the public on applications to remove hedgerows, and carries out the hedgerow surveys required. It investigates instances of unauthorised removal, and carries out enforcement action where hedgerows have been removed without consent, and covers the appeals procedure. The Unit advises other CCC departments on projects where hedgerows may be affected, and provides advice to development managers regarding planning applications and hedgerows. Over the last 14 years the Unit has developed considerable expertise in translocating hedgerows, and where appropriate will encourage the retention of a hedge in

a new position, rather than its removal. In 2015 we have received 2 requests to remove hedgerows and have dealt with 8 enforcement cases, one of which involved the removal of over 1300m of hedgerow.

6. Landscape

Carmarthenshire's landscapes, its uplands, river valleys and coasts, are justly recognised as being of high quality and the protection and enhancement of these landscapes are objectives of the LDP, the landscape officer's role is to help to deliver these objectives.

The landscape officer acts as an internal and external consultee and adviser on the landscape and visual aspects of development within the county. This role includes providing advice to development managers, planning applicants and agents on the following: -

- the impact of proposed developments upon landscape character and visual amenity
- the acceptability of proposed development against landscape related planning policy
- the requirements of appropriate landscape measures to mitigate for impacts of development
- the requirements of landscape design schemes to deliver successful and attractive development

The landscape officer also provides internal advice to other CCC departments, particularly in terms of potential development on council land. The officer is involved in the formulation of landscape policies and supplementary planning guidance within CCC's Forward Planning Unit. In addition, as part of the Rural Conservation Business Unit, the landscape officer fulfils the role of providing direct advice to members of the public on rural and landscape issues.

Renewable energy schemes – wind turbines and solar farms – have remained a major part of his work load over the last 12 months, in addition to a large number of large scale residential, commercial and infrastructure projects, including addressing planning applications, and ongoing compliance monitoring for Cross Hands East and West, and Carmarthen West development areas.

Previous collaborative work with the landscape officers from the other South Wales Local Authorities has led to the development of a number of guidance documents:

- Planning Guidance for Wind Turbine Development Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Requirements
- Wind Turbine Development Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study – Methodology
- Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire: Cumulative Impact of Wind Turbines on Landscape and Visual Amenity Guidance.

In addition to these documents, within the last 12 months, the landscape officer has been involved in preparing the brief, commissioning and ongoing management of an additional study which will provide a landscape capacity and sensitivity assessment for wind turbine

and field scale solar photovoltaic development for the county. The study is due for completion in early 2016.

All of the recent guidance documents will underpin the forthcoming SPG for renewable energy; the landscape officer will play an important role in providing an input upon landscape and visual considerations within this SPG. Development of the SPG will follow completion of the landscape capacity and sensitivity study.

The landscape officer has established and maintains the CCC database and GIS mapping layer for all operational and approved wind turbine development within the county. This data forms the basis for assessment of ongoing sensitivity to cumulative development.

The landscape officer is developing a series of Landscape Advice Notes which provide guidance on the landscape requirements for planning applications, and Landscape Design Guidance Notes which provide guidance on the content of the constituent elements of an approvable landscape design scheme for new development. These guidance documents are increasingly useful as part of the input required from the landscape officer within the pre-application consultation system currently encouraged by the Development Management Section

The landscape officer is also on the steering group of a Seascape Character Assessment Study, covering the coastline between Pendine and Porthcawl Point.

The landscape officer works closely with the Planning Ecologist to ensure that the interrelated issues of landscape and ecology are addressed consistently in consultation responses to planning applications.

7. Caeau Mynydd Mawr SAC project

This ground-breaking project has been developed to offset the impacts of development in the Cross Hands area on the European protected marsh fritillary butterfly. It has been put in place to demonstrate that the Council's Local Development Plan is compliant with EU Habitat Regulations. It is funded by contributions from developments within the project area and will secure sufficient habitat to support the butterfly in this area through management agreements and land purchase.

The marsh fritillary butterfly was once fairly widespread in the UK, but the number of places in which they are found has dropped by 60%. Areas of south and west Wales such as Cross Hands now hold the bulk of the UK's population. It has been suggested by Natural Resources Wales that in 50 years time this area may support the only remaining population of this butterfly in Wales.

The butterfly requires a network of marshy grassland to thrive, and the habitat which supports it supports a range of other scarce and protected species of birds, insects, reptiles and mammals, as such the project is of wide ranging benefit to biodiversity in the local area. The project involves the local community through work with local contractors and volunteers, and it provides opportunities to raise awareness of conservation in the area with local residents.

In the last 12 months the project has continued to increase the area of habitat it manages through new agreements and habitat management operations. Key achievements include:-

- Continued management of 10 sites, with 4 additional management agreements. One 7ha site has been purchased by the project
- Mowing to reduce the density of vegetation on neglected sites in preparation for grazing at 8 sites
- Clearance of scrub encroaching on the grassland at 2 sites
- Fencing installation and repair at 5 sites to facilitate grazing
- Hedge laying at 1 site to facilitate grazing where fence installation was impractical
- Drainage work at 3 sites to ensure they are safe for grazing stock, whilst remaining damp enough to support the marshy grassland habitat
- Installation of track, access point or stock handling infrastructure was carried out at 5 sites, assisting grazing management and ongoing habitat management
- Provision of water for stock at 3 sites
- 4 managed sites were grazed for the first time in a number of years and the results have been very promising
- Working with volunteers from different organisations, Devil's bit scabious seedlings grown by Aberystwyth University students have been planted out on 2 sites. This will increase the larval food resource at the sites and therefore increase the area of breeding habitat for the butterfly
- The project is currently negotiating the purchase of 2 sites which will safeguard the habitat for the future.

2015 was not a particularly good year for Marsh fritillary numbers due to unsettled weather, but despite this there were encouraging signs of habitat recovery on the site managed by the project. A survey showed that the butterfly is now breeding on one site where no evidence of this had been found in recent years, and a previously neglected site also revealed evidence of the butterfly's presence.

The project is monitored by the Council's PIMS system and is on target to meet the March 2016 milestone of managing 75ha of habitat that is suitable for the butterfly, some of which is on designated sites (SACs and SSSIs). At present there are 70.96ha of habitat in suitable condition for the butterfly.

8. Biodiversity

Biodiversity is a core component of sustainable development, underpinning economic development and prosperity, and has an important role to play in developing locally distinctive and sustainable communities consistent with the Integrated Community Strategy, and K10P 5. The conservation and enhancement of biodiversity is vital in our response to climate change and in the delivery of key ecosystem services such as food, flood management, pollination and provision of clean air and water. The Council's biodiversity work is also vital for the delivery of the Well-being and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 in Carmarthenshire, as it provides a mechanism for ensuring that the Council delivers the WG goal of delivering resilient ecosystems.

Contributing to the Integrated Community Strategy

The Biodiversity provision within the Rural Conservation Unit contributes towards the following themes in the Integrated Community Strategy:

- 4.3 Supporting opportunities for the building of economically viable and sustainable communities;
...by working with and providing advice to local schools and communities to ensure that projects have realised their potential to integrate and enhance biodiversity as well as avoid adverse impacts on protected species and habitats (e.g. community at Pentregwenlais regarding management of the George V playing field and Tycroes school regarding management of their grassland for conservation and education potential).
...by contributing to the development and implementation of a Green Infrastructure project that will help ensure that people are able to live, work in and visit a good quality environment and provide and enable opportunities for people to learn in, about and enjoy the environment.
- 4.5 Protect, enhance and conserve our natural and built environment and champion biodiversity in the County;
...by facilitating the production and implementation of the County's Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP), which seeks to take positive action for a series of priority habitats and species in the county, raise awareness of the benefits of our natural environment and how people can get involved. It provides a secretariat for the Carmarthenshire LBAP Partnership and is instrumental in drawing down funding for projects that will conserve and enhance Carmarthenshire's species and habitats, - £6000 in 2013–14 and £5400 in 2014–15.
...by organising public events, walks and talks throughout the year, including during Wales Biodiversity Week in June and producing a biodiversity newsletter and maintaining the biodiversity pages on the CCC website.
...by facilitating the NRW grant for LBAP projects - £6000 in 2013–14 and £5,400 in 2014–15.
- Developing resilient and sustainable communities;
...through our work with other departments we ensure that CCC is compliant with the NERC Act 2006 and takes account of biodiversity in the carrying out of all its functions. This contributes to the development of truly sustainable projects where social, economic and environmental factors are considered together. The pollinator project in Llanelli demonstrates the biodiversity officer's work with Housing...and together with Economic Development and Natural Resources Wales we have safeguarded and enhanced the water vole habitat in Berwick, Llanelli.

Biodiversity Highlights 2015

- *NRW Joint Working Partnership Fund*

Approx £20,000 to support outputs from the Biodiversity Officer and to support internal and partner biodiversity projects. Projects included:

- Habitat management at CCC site at Morfa Berwig, Bynea. Management is underway on this wildlife-rich council-owned site on to improve some of the brownfield habitats for invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians, manage ditches for water voles and scrub management and fencing to maintain open grassland. This land has been moved from Corporate Property to the Leisure portfolio, and we hope to make this site a Local Nature Reserve and increase community use of this site.

- Dafen pond nature trail: A small nature trail will be installed with QR codes linked to more information on the CCC website that looks at less obvious features – bark, lichen, fungi, mosses, soil, etc. This is tied into a wider community project looking at the development of local natural resource management plans.

- The Council, working with local ecologists, has run or contributed to a series of training sessions on protected species. Officers and contractors had a session on the value of roadside verges habitats. Officers working on housing projects learnt about bats and bridge engineers learnt about otters and bats in sessions that discussed developing new protocols for working. In 2016 the council and NRW will arrange a session on water voles for council officers.

- *Heritage Lottery Funding*

A partnership led by Carmarthenshire County Council has been successful in receiving a grant of £43,000 HLF for an exciting project – Carmarthenshire Bogs – exploring their past, celebrating the present and conserving their future. The project continues work on five commons near Brechfa and Llanfynydd and is also supported with funding from Natural Resources Wales and the Council. It will seek to explore the botanical history of the peat bogs, raise awareness of the important bog habitats and species, and take action to conserve these important habitats for the future. Partners in the project are NBGW, Swansea University and Dyfed Archaeological Trust.

Other

The biodiversity officer facilitated the formation of the Carmarthenshire Meadows Group in 2015. Its aim is to inspire the establishment of a county-wide community that supports each other to conserve and enhance our wildlife-rich meadows, large or small, across Carmarthenshire. Walks, talks, site visits and a group [website](#) were established this year.

9. Project support

The Business Unit is supported by a project support officer who oversees the financial arrangements for the various grants and income the Unit receives, and the expenditure that the various projects incur (e.g. LBAP projects, Carmarthenshire Bogs HLF project and Caeau Mynydd Mawr SAC project). She is also able to provide financial support to other units within planning services.

10. Rural Conservation Business Unit and CCC policies and core values

The work of the Unit is consistent with Carmarthenshire's Integrated Community Strategy as it delivers one of its five key outcomes. Its work also reflects one of CCC's core values

(see table on page 9 onwards) and directly contributes to the delivery of Outcomes F1, F3 and F4 within the Council's Improvement Plan 2014/15. The Unit is also instrumental in ensuring that approved development meets the various policies that relate to the natural environment, through the provision of advice to development management, other CCC departments and the general public on landscape, trees, woodlands, hedgerows, biodiversity, Common Land and on development within the Caeau Mynydd Mawr SPG area.

The CCC policies that the work of the Unit supports are listed below:

Relevant policy or strategy	Content	Delivered through
CCC's Core values	<p>Treating people and the environment with respect. We aim to be a leader in the field of sustainability - improving the quality of life for local people while conserving the earth's resources and protecting the environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coed Cymru project bringing woodlands into management • Tree Preservation Orders conserving trees, and advising on tree management • Ensuring Common Land is safeguarded • Conserving and enhancing the habitat required by the Marsh Fritillary butterfly • Carmarthenshire Local Biodiversity Action Plan partnership and running grant aided biodiversity projects • Commenting on planning applications with respect to landscape, common land and trees • Implementation of the Hedgerow regulations 1997
Carmarthenshire's Integrated Community Strategy	Carmarthenshire's communities and environment are sustainable	See below F1, F3 and F4
CCC's Improvement Plan 2014/15	<p>KIOP5 – Protect and enhance the environment and make a major contribution to sustainable energy and climate change policies</p> <p>Outcome F: Carmarthenshire's communities and environment are sustainable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • F1: Living within our environmental limits using only our fair-share of earth's resources and minimising our carbon emissions • F2: Reducing waste and moving towards becoming a zero-waste county • F3: Supporting opportunities for the building of economically viable and sustainable 	<p>The focus of the Unit is on the conservation and enhancement of Carmarthenshire's natural environment – common land, trees, woodlands, hedgerows, landscapes, biodiversity and EU protected Species (Caeau Mynydd Mawr SAC project). Protection of peat based habitats.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • F1: Carmarthenshire Bogs Project - conserving peat habitats that act as carbon stores • F3: Commenting on planning applications with respect to landscape, common land and trees • Implementing the Hedgerow Regulations 1997 • F4: Coed Cymru project bringing woodlands into management. • Tree Preservation Orders conserving trees, and advising on tree management.

Relevant policy or strategy	Content	Delivered through
	<p>communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • F4: Protect, enhance and conserve our natural and built environment and champion biodiversity in the County • F5: Developing resilient and sustainable communities • F6: Developing sustainable transport options • F7: Ensuring the promotion of the Welsh language and Welsh culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring Common Land is safeguarded. • Conserving and enhancing the habitat required by the marsh fritillary butterfly through S106 agreements. • Carmarthenshire Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) partnership and running grant aided biodiversity projects.
<p>Planning Division Business Plan 2014/15 Rural Conservation Business Unit</p>	<p>The Rural Conservation Business Unit actively works in partnership with local and national organisations, as well as the community, to assist in safeguarding a high-quality environment which retains its biodiversity, landscapes and historical and cultural heritage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carmarthenshire Bogs project funded by HLF working in partnership with others • Caeau Mynydd Mawr SAC project steering group includes NRW, Butterfly Conservation Menter Cwm Gwendraeth, Wildlife Trust and RSPB • Carmarthenshire LBAP partnership includes 13 partner organisations and individuals • Commenting on planning applications with respect to landscape, common land and trees • Implementing the Hedgerow Regulations 1997
<p>Local Development Plan (LDP) Strategic Objective 4</p>	<p>To ensure that the natural, built and historic environment is safeguarded and enhanced and that habitats and species are protected.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coed Cymru project bringing woodlands into management • Tree Preservation Orders conserving trees, and advising on tree management • Ensuring Common Land is safeguarded • Conserving and enhancing the habitat required by the marsh fritillary butterfly • Carmarthenshire Local Biodiversity Action Plan partnership administers grant aided biodiversity projects • Commenting on planning

Relevant policy or strategy	Content	Delivered through
		<p>applications with respect to landscape, common land and trees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the Hedgerow Regulations 1997
LDP Strategy and Strategic objectives	5.6.2 – The Plan seeks to protect and enhance the nature conservation and biodiversity value of Carmarthenshire, including its rich tapestry of habitats and species.	As above
LDP Strategic Policy 1 Sustainable places and spaces:	<p>Proposals for development will be supported where they reflect sustainable development and design principles by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect and enhance the area’s biodiversity value and where appropriate, seek to integrate nature conservation into new development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commenting on planning applications with respect to landscape, common land and trees. Ensuring mitigation and/or compensation is provided as appropriate by means of habitat management and landscape design (Ecology matters are covered by the Planning Ecologist) • Providing pre application advice to other departments and the general public • Implementation of the Hedgerow Regulations 1997
LDP Strategic Policy 14 Protection and Enhancement of the Natural Environment	Development should reflect the need to protect, and wherever possible enhance the County’s natural environment. All development proposals should be considered in accordance with national guidance/legislation and the policies and proposals of this Plan, with due consideration given to areas of nature conservation value, the countryside, landscapes and coastal areas, including those outlined below.	As above
LDP also contains the following Environmental Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EQ3 – Regional and Local Designations • EQ4 – Biodiversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EQ3 – Provide advice on planning matters re designated sites, inc commenting on planning

Relevant policy or strategy	Content	Delivered through
that reflect the work of the Conservation Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EQ5 – Corridors, Networks and features of distinctiveness (including trees, woodlands and hedgerows) • EQ6 – Special Landscape Areas • EQ7 – Development within the Caeau Mynydd Mawr SPG area 	<p>applications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EQ4 – Delivery of Carmarthenshire LBAP and ensuring biodiversity advice is available pre application, and ensuring biodiversity is taken into account when determining planning application • EQ5 – Commenting on planning applications with regard to hedgerows, trees, woodlands and other landscape features • EQ6 – Review of SLAs and revision of these designated areas for the LDP. Ensuring that development does not adversely affect SLAs • EQ7 – Managing and delivering the Caeau Mynydd Mawr SAC project in the SPG area

Glossary of Terms

ACRA	Association for Commons Registration Authorities
CCC	Carmarthenshire County Council
CROW	The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000
EU	European Union
HLF	Heritage Lottery Fund
KIOP	Key Improvement Objective Priority
LBAP	Local Biodiversity Action Plan
LDP	Local Development Plan
NBGW	National Botanic Garden of Wales
NERC	Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act
NRW	Natural Resources Wales
PIMS	Carmarthenshire County Council's Performance Information Management System
QR Codes	A Quick Response Code is a two-dimensional barcode that can be read using a smart-phone or another QR reading device
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
S106	Section 106 of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990
SLA	Service Level Agreement
SPG	Supplementary Planning Guidance
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Importance
TPO	Tree Preservation Order
UK	United Kingdom
WG	Welsh Government