

Summary Sheet

Council Report

Report to Cabinet, 11th April 2016
Cabinet Member: Councillor Yasseen
Decision to be taken by Commissioner Kenny

Title

Petition regarding the future of Rotherham Biological Records Centre.

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Caroline Bruce, Interim Strategic Director, Environment & Development Services

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

All

Summary

To report a petition containing 102 signatories expressing opposition to a proposal to cease hosting the Rotherham Biological Records Centre from April 2017.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Commissioner Kenny notes receipt of the petition and refers to officers for consideration as part of the proposals developed for 2017/18 and beyond

List of Appendices Included

Appendix A - Petition (excluding names)

Background Papers

None

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Title : Petition regarding the future of Rotherham Biological Records Centre.

1. Recommendations

It is recommended that Commissioner Kenny notes receipt of the petition and refers to officers for consideration as part of the proposals developed for 2017/18 and beyond

2. Background

- 2.1 The Rotherham Biological Records Centre holds data about where animals and plants have been identified in different parts of the borough. The Council does not have a statutory duty to provide this service, although it does need to access information kept by the Centre, for example to inform the development of planning policy and assessment of planning applications. The data is also useful to support funding applications, inform site management plans, and for a number of other purposes.
- 2.2 The Centre has been hosted by the Council since the 1980's. However, a plan to cease this arrangement from April 2017 is amongst budget savings proposals currently under consideration.
- 2.3 A petition organised by the Yorkshire Naturalists Union and signed by 102 people opposed to the proposal was received by the Council on 10th February 2016.
- 2.4 The petition urges the Council to continue to support the Biological Records Centre, based on arguments that can be summarised as follows:-
 - The Centre is something that Rotherham should be proud of, being regarded as a model of good practice nationally.
 - The data within the centre is needed for the Council to fulfil its statutory planning function, and for a number of other purposes, and this will be put at risk if the Council no longer operated the Centre.
 - The Council has invested in building up the Centre over 40 years, so loss of such a facility would not be fiscally responsible.
 - The Centre operates very economically and efficiently thanks to the large volunteer input, and is an outstanding example of local community engagement.

3. Key Issues

- 3.1 The Council recognises the importance of the Centre and would prefer not to see it close. The proposal is for the Centre to continue to be funded throughout 2016-17, prior to the implementation of the saving in 2017-18, to allow sufficient time for proper investigation of options for future delivery of the service.

- 3.2 Options that deliver savings whilst minimising disruption to service users, volunteers, partner organisations and other stakeholders need to be given full consideration.

4. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 4.1 Options for the future delivery of the Biological Records Centre are yet to be fully explored, but are likely to include the following:
- Continued operation of the Centre by the Council, but with reduced net costs through increased income from commercial enquiries, and taking into account the value of enquiries from internal clients.
 - Transfer of the operation to a suitable external organisation.
- 4.2 A recommendation will be made after the available options have been investigated further and will be reported through the Council's budget setting process for 2017/18 and beyond.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 The petition arose during a month-long public consultation on the Council's savings proposals, ending on 12 February 2016.
- 5.2 Further consultation with relevant internal services, volunteers and other stakeholders will be undertaken as necessary during 2016 in order to inform the evaluation of options.

6. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 6.1 The department responsible for this service shall commence further investigation of options with immediate effect.
- 6.2 It is proposed that a preferred option will be identified by December 2016, to allow this to be implemented from April 2017 as part of the Council's budget setting.

7. Financial and Procurement Implications

- 7.1 The gross cost of running the Centre in 2015-16 is £19,357. Income from charges for commercial data requests in the same period is expected to be around £2,500.
- 7.2 Assessment of options for future delivery of the service will need to take into account the likely scale of any charges that would be payable by the Council to access information in future.

8. Legal Implications

- 8.1 The Council needs to access biological records data to comply with the National Planning Policy Framework 2015, Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, in matters concerning Local Plan-making, planning decisions, management of protected species, and consideration of major developments that fall

within Environmental Impact Assessment regulations. If it does not give such evidence due consideration, then there is an increased risk of challenge through judicial review and appeals.

9. Human Resources Implications

9.1 The Biological Records Centre is currently staffed by a part-time officer (0.6 FTE), whose job would be at risk if the Council ceased delivering the service.

10. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

10.1 This report has no implications for children or vulnerable adults.

11 Equalities and Human Rights Implications

11.1 This report has no equalities or human rights implications other than any relating to human resource issues.

12. Implications for Partners and Other Directorates

12.1 The Biological Records Centre provides essential information for the Planning Service, and is also used by other departments including Asset Management.

12.2 The Centre supplies information to the National Biodiversity Network who would therefore be affected by any reduction in service.

12.3 Rotherham and District Ornithological Society has entrusted all its records to the Biological Records Centre, and is therefore dependent on the future of the service for access to its data.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 If it is not possible to identify a viable option for the long-term operation of the Biological Records Centre, then the network of volunteers and other partners upon which the Centre has been built may disperse, and will be difficult to reassemble.

14. Accountable Officer(s)

14.1 Philip Gill, Leisure and Green Spaces Manager

14.2 Approvals Obtained from:-

Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services:- Jon Baggaley

Director of Legal Services:- Dermot Pearson

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