

Environment Committee – 3 March 2015

Transcript of Item 5: The Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy Update

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): That brings us to the substantive item for this morning, which is the Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy update. We have four invited guests before us and one person I believe is running a bit late and will, hopefully, join us shortly. We have Peter Massini who is Principal Policy and Programme Officer at the Greater London Authority (GLA); Mathew Frith, who is Director of Policy and Planning at the London Wildlife Trust; Claire Wansbury, who is Associate Director of Ecology at Atkins. Finally, we have John Archer, Vice Chair of the London Boroughs Biodiversity Forum (LBBF). You are all very welcome. We hope to be joined shortly by Kathy Wormald, who is Chief Executive of Froglife.

We have a series of questions for our invited guests and I am going to start off with a general question and then some of my colleagues will come in. If I can start off principally to Peter to start with, can you outline briefly the content and objectives of the Strategy update?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The Biodiversity Strategy, as you know, was first written in 2002 and this Committee had a discussion about it about 18 months ago in terms of an update or a review. This Committee and stakeholders recognised that it did not need a wholesale review because its core content was still valid, but this document is an update. It is about setting the context of how things have changed in London over the last 10 or 15 years. It provides progress on the whole list of policies and proposals in the existing Strategy. It lists all the proposals in the original part of the Biodiversity Strategy and gives an update on progress on those proposals and where we need to go in the future. It sets out some context about some changes that have happened at a national level and how those are reflected in the Biodiversity Strategy and the London Plan. It also sets some objectives for future work and where we need to prioritise in the future. Essentially, that is the core content of the document.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Is it normal for a Strategy of this type to go 13 years between updates? It seems like this update has been a long time coming, does it not?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): My understanding is that there is no formal process for a review or an update. They are updated or reviewed as and when necessary. There is detail in the GLA Act [1999]. The last Committee meeting recognised - and most of our stakeholders recognise - that the actual core content of the Strategy is fit for purpose and so the issue is that you do not need to update it if the core content is fit for purpose. Clearly, there are differences in terms of some of the terminology and some of the organisations: it refers to English Nature, which does not exist anymore, it is now Natural England. However, the core policy framework is still fit for purpose and still applies.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): I wonder if you can explain the changes in the update that have, if you like, reflected changes in legislation since the original 2002 policy was adopted.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There are no significant changes because the changes at national level were almost pre-empted by the Biodiversity Strategy. The Government produced a Natural Environment White Paper about two years ago, which set out a framework for nature conservation and green infrastructure across the UK. Most of that was pre-empted by the Biodiversity Strategy because it was very much about how you integrate biodiversity conservation with economic growth, how you integrate biodiversity conservation with issues around health and wellbeing and how you start looking at things at a landscape scale. The Biodiversity Strategy was actually ahead of the curve in many of those respects. By doing an analysis of the Biodiversity Strategy and those changes in Government policy, there is not a big

mismatch between the existing Biodiversity Strategy and those changes in Government policy. This draft document identifies the changes that have been mooted by the national Government and identifies how the current Biodiversity Strategy already addresses a lot of those issues.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Welcome to Kathy Wormald who has now joined us.

Before I bring in anyone else, a final question from me: what is the GLA's position on the whole issue of biodiversity offsetting?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): That is a debate that is being had nationally. My colleagues in the London Wildlife Trust have been doing a piece of work on biodiversity offsetting and so we are quite keen to see the work they have done and to see how that might apply in London. There is an ongoing conversation nationally and at regional level about how biodiversity offsetting might work because the Government has not given any prescriptions about how you do biodiversity offsetting. It has identified it as a potential mechanism and perhaps the Trust can give us an update on where they --

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Indeed. I was going to bring in some of our other guests at this point to comment on this issue of biodiversity offsetting. Claire, perhaps this is something that you have done some work on or have some understanding of or have a position on?

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): I can provide some direct experience of applying it. Perhaps it might be good to hear from Mathew first about the work they have done specifically on London.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): To pick up on what Peter [Massini] was saying: yes, there has been a lengthy national debate and it is fair to say that there are very strong differences of opinion as to the merits and the benefits or the disbenefits of offsetting.

Nevertheless, the trajectory of the Government's work up until certainly autumn last year was that offsetting was going to be introduced in some way. Whilst that may have been kicked into the long grass for the moment, there is a trajectory that suggests that local authorities in certain parts of the country are beginning to take this seriously. Ribble Valley Borough Council now has a policy in its Local Plan committing itself to ensuring that offsetting is introduced as a very last resort after all the other elements of the mitigation hierarchy have been addressed; likewise, Uttlesford's draft Local Plan in Essex.

From our perspective, we have been talking to various partners to explore how biodiversity offsetting could be delivered in London given the significant constraints that we have in the city. One of those is the huge development pressure. We know that at the moment, in terms of mitigation, let alone compensation for the impacts on biodiversity, [those interventions] are not really working. We have a number of section 106 agreements but a relatively small number of those are actually applied to the protection, enhancement and conservation of wildlife habitats. Therefore, it is looking to see how offsetting would work.

We have trialled a project with Thameslink on some impacts that it had caused onsite that it was not able to mitigate elsewhere on its Bedford-to-Brighton route in Selhurst. We have been working with Thameslink and other local stakeholders particularly Lambeth Council, the Friends of Streatham Common, the Friends of Brockwell Park and the Friends of Ruskin Park about how some of that could be compensated.

We have yet to finally finish that and report back on it because there are still many lessons to be learned. One is that there is not often the space to do the stuff for the impacts that may occur. Also, trying to adhere to the issue of making sure that compensation is at the very end of the hierarchy so that no other impacts can be dealt with onsite, it has to be local to the site and often the very nature of London makes that very difficult to

achieve. Yes, we are producing that piece of work. It has still some way to go. We are looking to publish something later this year.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): That was very helpful. Does anyone else have a particularly strong view on offsetting?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): I have to say that I do not think there is really a consensus amongst the boroughs' biodiversity officers. Probably 'varying degrees of scepticism' is the best way to describe it.

We all have concerns that a badly designed and implemented offsetting scheme could be a developer's licence to trash important sites. At least some of us - me included - believe that a good scheme could well be a useful tool particularly to pick up small losses of habitat, often perhaps not even particularly high quality habitat, which currently go completely unmitigated. We all agree that it is sensible to have a strategy on how we would try to make this work in London ready if at some stage in the future it does get imposed on us by the Government.

We are very interested in the outcome of the work that the London Wildlife Trust is doing. We are also aware that the Association of Local Environmental Records Centres is working on something as well with Greenspace Information for Greater London (GiGL), the London records centre, involved in that. We certainly hope that the two studies will talk to one another.

One thing that really is not clear to me is, without some sort of compulsory scheme from the Government and a new mechanism, quite how it works under the planning system. It cannot work with the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) because that is a blanket thing for all developments and is not about losses. Since CIL came in, section 106 does not allow you to pool more than three different developments' losses into one and so it certainly would not work for lots and lots of little ones to get anything meaningful. Something that we definitely need some answers on is how it will work under the planning system if it does not come in as a new mechanism in itself.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Peter, can I come back to you? You rightly told us that the Biodiversity Strategy needs updating in terms of the national legislation. I am just interested to know whether the updates that you are talking about will be in line with the requirements of the Localism Act [2011] as well, because that is another requirement the Mayor has. Was that foremost in your mind when you suggested it?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Actually, a lot of the work that is now happening in London is a consequence of the Localism Act and a lot of the responsibility has now been devolved to the boroughs. That is where there has been a bit of a mismatch between the original Biodiversity Strategy and how we approach things now. The Localism Act actually devolves some of those responsibilities to boroughs. Things like the rolling habitat survey, which was --

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Yes, you had to reflect the devolvement of power under localism to the local authorities.

I was interested in another particular responsibility the Mayor has, which is to bring all the environmental strategies together - as you know, there are more than half a dozen - into one document. That has not yet happened. Was that in any way stopping this update happening? Was that whole exercise getting in the way? Was that something you had to be conscious of when you were doing this update in response to our request last year?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Not really because we are doing an update, not a review. That is one of the issues. If you review the Strategy, it then potentially triggers a review

of all the strategies. Because this is an update, it does not trigger that review. There are some niceties around the --

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): OK, the semantics: what is the difference between an update and a review, then? Just tell me.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The Committee meeting recognised and the stakeholders recognised that the core Biodiversity Strategy, its policy and its framework were fit for purpose. However, clearly, there were some things - in terms of terminology and in terms of things that have changed over the last few years - that we needed to update: update on progress and update where we need to prioritise. A review would be a fundamental review of all of the biodiversity policy strategies. It was agreed at a previous Committee meeting --

Kit Malthouse AM: A review may result in an update or is a review needed to update it?

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): I did not want to go into those semantics. Again, coming back to what you said earlier, Peter, as the Chair indicated, it has been 13 years since it was first put in place by the previous Mayor. Whilst you may not be required to update it, review it or completely put it together by a set time, clearly, things have changed out there in the flora and fauna of London. Should that not be the thing that triggers the review and the update?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): That is why we are updating it. The original question from the Committee was whether it should be reviewed. The Committee agreed with the Mayor and our stakeholders that it did not need a review and we agreed to do an update.

Jenny Jones AM: In your draft update of proposal 12, which I thought was a pretty good one:

“The Mayor will press the Government to bring Sites of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation into the criteria for mayoral planning referrals.”

What you have said in the update is, “Proposal no longer relevant”. Can you explain that? I do not understand. What has happened?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): That question was asked of the Government a number of times in the past and the Government does not acknowledge that that needs to be part of the Mayor’s planning referrals. Partly because of things like the Localism Act, those kinds of issues now devolve down to boroughs. It does not trigger a mayoral referral.

Jenny Jones AM: You have just decided there is no point in carrying on because the Government has ignored --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Sorry, I have not decided that. It is not something that been identified as a key issue that we need to address.

Jenny Jones AM: All right. Mathew, do you have a view on that?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): Yes, we do. We are a member of the London Wildlife Sites Board, which is chaired by Peter [Massini] of the GLA. There is guidance on the identification and ratification of wildlife sites, Sites of Borough Importance and Sites of Metropolitan Importance (SMI).

One of the things that we have identified as an issue is that there does not seem to be any formal mechanism for reviewing and ratifying new sites or changes to SMIs. These are regionally important sites. They are something that the boroughs will influence but are something that a slightly higher level - which we would argue is the mayoral level - has a role in identifying and ratifying. Also, because they are regionally important sites, for anything that is likely to impact on them through development, for example, we believe that they should be part of the criteria for planning referrals.

Jenny Jones AM: Are you arguing that proposal 12 should go back in or have you another suggestion to improve the document?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): I know that we concur with the LBBF on this and John [Archer] may add to this. We believe that there should be a rolling programme of monitoring the quality of the SMIs. At the moment, that is not going on. It is only where those boroughs have the resources to undertake reviews and updates of the wildlife sites in their boroughs. For example, we have undertaken work on behalf of Camden and on behalf of Bexley. Whilst that will address the SMIs in those boroughs, and then goes to those boroughs for adoption, there is a question about how the SMIs are ratified at a regional level, particularly when some of them will be cross-boundary.

Jenny Jones AM: You are arguing that this role should be undertaken by the Mayor's Office here and by the Mayor's people here?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): Yes.

Jenny Jones AM: It is not being done at the moment?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): No.

Jenny Jones AM: This would be a mechanism for making it happen here, but there could be other mechanisms?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): There are other mechanisms, yes. I do not have the immediate answer to that at the moment, but it is an issue that we are concerned about in the Trust. The whole SMI issue is something that needs clarification on who is responsible for ratifying them. We believe that impacts on them should be a trigger for referral to the Mayor for comment.

Jenny Jones AM: John, you obviously put this in as something that had to be done.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Yes. I perhaps should point out here that in another life some years ago I was one of the main authors of the Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy. I worked here for the first nine years of the GLA in the biodiversity team.

Yes, speaking now from a borough point of view, SMIs are by definition of more than just important across boroughs: they are of importance across the whole of London. I do not think that the localism agenda really makes a significant difference. I accept that, yes, the Mayor has tried on at least two occasions in the past to get the criteria for referrals changed to include these and has failed. Peter [Massini] might very well be right that, in the light of the localism agenda, the chances of succeeding are perhaps less than they were. However, I do not think that is a reason for abandoning it. It is still worth trying at any stage when the criteria for mayoral referrals are changed.

In terms of some of the things that Mathew [Frith] said, one of the proposals in the original Strategy - which appears now to have been devolved to the boroughs - did say that the Mayor will identify Sites of

Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation (SMINC). In the review document, it says that this is now down to the boroughs. Most borough biodiversity officers do not have the London-wide knowledge and the strategic view that enables them to identify whether a site is of metropolitan importance or not. They should know whether it is one of the best sites in their borough, but there is no reason why they are likely to know beyond that. Therefore, there is definitely still a role for the Mayor there.

Jenny Jones AM: Is this something you can pick up, Peter?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is, but there is a mechanism. The London Plan talks about how the Mayor and the boroughs will identify SMIs. We established the London Wildlife Sites Board, which is a mechanism by which the boroughs come to the GLA - chaired by me - to identify whether sites meet the criteria, whether boroughs are applying the criteria properly and whether sites should be changed from borough sites to metropolitan sites. Therefore, there is a mechanism. It might be not such a clear-cut mechanism as was originally intended in the Biodiversity Strategy, but there is a mechanism there.

Actually, that probably fits quite well with the localism agenda. There is a way in which you can refer some of those sites to a board, which we chair and that Mathew [Frith] and John [Archer] sit on, which gives an opportunity for that board to view the recommendations from borough partnerships about whether sites should be borough sites or metropolitan sites. There is a mechanism there. As I say, it might not be as clear-cut as the original intention in the original Biodiversity Strategy, but it has not been completely abandoned.

Jenny Jones AM: Something we have found on this London Assembly is that those people who are elected to a constituency obviously take their constituency and borough concerns more seriously than they do perhaps Londonwide issues. Therefore, I would urge you to think about this because those of us who are elected Londonwide obviously have a more strategic approach to London.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): That is why we established the --

Jenny Jones AM: Yes, I understand that, but what you are dealing with is borough people who cannot have the same Londonwide view as the Mayor.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I personally do not have a Londonwide view. I cannot know what is coming from London. We established the London Wildlife Sites Board, which includes the GLA, the LBBF, GiGL and the London Wildlife Trust, all of whom have a view about things happening in London, to use that body as a way to determine whether boroughs were applying the protocols to identify those sites. There is a mechanism there.

Jenny Jones AM: Yes, but it is difficult for boroughs - and I have to repeat this - to have a Londonwide view. Would you pick this up? That is the issue that I am trying to get to. Actually, somebody ought to be thinking Londonwide when monitoring these sites and thinking about ratifying them or whatever it takes.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Sure, but the people who will be in that group to make those decisions will be the same people who are currently in --

Jenny Jones AM: Then perhaps it is not the right group. That is what I am saying. You have to find, perhaps, another mechanism or make it work.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Could I just ask how many of these SMIs there are?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Between 90 and 100.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): I just wanted to pick up on Peter's [Massini] issue. Yes, there is the London Wildlife Sites Board and I agree with, potentially, the view of Jenny and maybe we need to review the membership of that, but there is a strategic experience there. The issue we have identified is that if a borough comes up with a proposal for a SMI, it is only the borough at the moment that can endorse that in its Local Plan. There is no mechanism identified for regional ratification. Where does it go to in the GLA?

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Peter, do you want to answer that point?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The London Plan can no longer have maps showing SMIs. That was a consequence of the Localism Act. If you look at the London Plan now, it does not have site-specific maps. It is not allowed to. There is no mechanism to publish maps in the London Plan of those specific sites.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): There is no legal mechanism to do this. That is what you are saying? OK.

Jenny Jones AM: The Mayor does lots of things that are not entirely defined in law.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): One could argue that, certainly. Nicky, you wanted to come in?

Nicky Gavron AM: Just for me, are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) different from the --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): They are different because they are designated under national legislation and so they have a statutory --

Nicky Gavron AM: Is there not some overlap between them?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is some overlap, certainly, yes.

Nicky Gavron AM: There is an overlap?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Not a complete overlap, but some SSSIs are also SMIs. Actually, all SSSIs are SMIs.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Presumably, there are many fewer SSSIs than there are of these metropolitan --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There are fewer SSSIs than SMIs, yes.

Kit Malthouse AM: A SSSI would be a product of a particular species that you would find there - so if you have something with a newt in it - but you could have one of these SMIs that does not have anything that is protected in terms of species but is still of interest because it is very diverse or is a little green oasis that produces lots of run-of-the-mill species?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The fundamental difference is that SSSIs have a statutory protection and so anything that affects those sites has to go through a statutory process. SMIs are protected through the planning system and it is a planning issue.

Nicky Gavron AM: Could I just ask? Is there a map of these sites in the update? It may not be in the London Plan, but is it in your update?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Yes.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): A point of clarity about SSSIs: they can be designated for species and they are actually often designated for habitats. It is looking at sites that are of national importance because of the species or habitat. Not every site with a newt on it is automatically an SSSI, but I believe all of the SSSIs in London are also SMIs, recognising that they have that national importance and they are also vital for London as well.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): We will move on to London's wildlife sites and populations. Kit, you are going to lead off on the next area of questions.

Kit Malthouse AM: I just want to ask some questions about the full range of species. Obviously, the update seems to be largely focused around birds and that is fine, but I just wanted to ask about some others as well.

Before we do that, I just wanted to ask a bit of an existential question. Do we want to protect all species in London? Is there a role for management of particular species? You will have seen in the news recently they have eradicated the grey squirrel from Anglesey. Would it be appropriate for part of the Strategy to see some control of the grey squirrel population in London?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I am not sure about grey squirrels because it is probably physically impossible to actually control grey squirrels in London but --

Kit Malthouse AM: This was the theory, but they are doing it in Anglesey and they are doing it in Northumberland now. We could have a trapping programme.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Yes, but there are a number of species that are controlled in London for nature conservation reasons; mink, for example. London has a nationally very important population of water voles and mink are controlled in London. Some invasive species of plant - things like floating pennywort, which has a devastating effect on waterways - are controlled.

Kit Malthouse AM: As part of the review, did you consider any other species? For instance, from my own experience, last year we were getting woodpeckers to our table. We have now had eight ring-necked parakeets move in and we have not seen a woodpecker since. We are seeing an explosion in population there.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is an initiative called the London Invasive Species Initiative that is co-ordinated by the Environment Agency, GiGL, the London Wildlife Trust and others and which has identified the species of most concern. Mathew [Frith] probably has a view on ring-necked parakeets. Everyone has a different view on ring-necked parakeets. However, there are some key species like floating pennywort, mink and Himalayan balsam that are significant and have quite a serious adverse impact on existing habitats. For things like ring-necked parakeets, the jury is out on the actual impact they have. They might irritate people but their nature conservation impact is --

Kit Malthouse AM: I think they are lovely but they seem to --

Tony Arbour AM: They are very noisy.

Kit Malthouse AM: -- have ushered out our woodpeckers. You have reviewed and decided that no other species need to be looked at?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The London Invasive Species Initiative is the body that had that discussion and identified those species that are of most concern and where there needed to be action taken to prevent their spread.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Just briefly while on the London Invasive Species Initiative since it is an opportunity to say something, the boroughs have found the London Invasive Species Initiative extremely helpful. It had three years' funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), which is due to run out at the end of this month. It is looking for alternatives. That might be something strategic that the Mayor might consider at least in the short term while there is a gap because it would be a great shame if that initiative should disappear in the same way that the London Biodiversity Partnership did when its co-ordinator vanished.

Just briefly on the species that might be controlled, public opinion is something that would prevent most boroughs wanting to control anything that is remotely cute or fluffy because there would be an outcry. Grey squirrels do a lot of damage but an awful lot of people like feeding them. With the grey squirrel, it would not be feasible to do anything anyway.

Kit Malthouse AM: Why not if they have done it in Anglesey and elsewhere?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Anglesey is an island.

Kit Malthouse AM: You could suppress the population, though?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): You could suppress the population. You could reduce the population. But you would have to continue trapping and killing them indefinitely.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): They are very smart animals, are they not?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Yes.

Jenny Jones AM: There is more food for those left and so the population zooms again.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Yes. You would have to continually control grey squirrels to have any impact on the population because there are just far too many of them to be able to eradicate them nationwide without spending absolutely millions and millions.

Kit Malthouse AM: We do continually control, presumably, the rodent population. Householders, individuals, organisations and local authorities spend quite a lot of money and effort controlling the rat and mouse populations and suppressing those populations on a continuous basis. Should something as invasive and damaging join them?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): You are the politician. I will let you --

Kit Malthouse AM: No, I am asking. I guess the question I am asking is whether the Strategy is basically kind of Darwinian, "OK, we will just provide the habitat and let the animals fight it out and see who wins", or is it more managed than that? Therefore, I guess I am asking whether there is a league table where particular species move up and down and, once they get into a certain zone like rats, mice and the species you have mentioned, we will start to have a go at them.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Yes, there is that.

Kit Malthouse AM: I guess the question I would ask is that a lot of the update is around birds and birdlife and I happen to be a particular enthusiast for birds: would a big part of a bigger diverse bird population be the suppression of the grey squirrel population?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): It would have some impact. However, when you are looking at whether to control an invasive species, you have to look at the amount of damage they do and how feasible and, in this day and age, how costly control would be. Because rats and mice are a major public health hazard, obviously, a lot of money is spent on them.

From an ecological point of view, if you could eradicate the grey squirrel from London or from the country as a whole, it would be desirable. However, with the huge amount of money that would have to be spent doing it and with the public outcry from people who like feeding the fluffy grey squirrels in their local park, all of these decisions have to be political decisions made with scientific advice. I do not think many politicians would push a scheme that would spend millions of pounds indefinitely to keep under control an animal that the majority of people --

Kit Malthouse AM: I guess the wider question is what the Strategy and the update have done to protect the wider range of species, amphibians, other types of mammal --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Just very quickly, the Biodiversity Strategy's core strategic objective is to protect that network of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs), which are quite extensive in London. That is the most important and significant thing to do and that protects the bulk of London's key habitats and species.

The reason why birds figure in this document, just providing the context, is that it is only birds and a couple of other key taxa where there is detailed information about changes over the last 10 or 15 years. There is some very good recording of birds and some very good national schemes for recording birds and some reasonably good recording schemes on certain habitats. Those things figure in the context-setting for the Biodiversity Strategy because we have evidence about the changes that have occurred over the last 15 years.

Kit Malthouse AM: For instance, on amphibians, Kathy, we do not have much evidence to say whether it is up or down?

Kathy Wormald (Chief Executive Officer, Froglife): We know that it is declining but we do not have sufficient species data in the way that we have bird data. Species data is lacking across the country for amphibians and reptiles.

Kit Malthouse AM: From an amphibian and reptile point of view, as I was telling these guys, we found a lizard in our house last summer.

Tony Arbour AM: In the house?

Kit Malthouse AM: Yes, a little brown lizard. I have never seen one in London before. I guess the approach has to be 'if we build it, they will come' and let us protect the ponds and trust that the amphibians will inhabit it, even though we do not know whether they will or not.

Kathy Wormald (Chief Executive Officer, Froglife): It is more complex than that. Yes, of course we have to provide habitats for amphibians and reptiles, but another thing that impacts on them enormously is development and translocations. Certainly our data and our research is definitely showing that a translocated population of amphibians or reptiles will decline over a period of time because they simply do not breed on new sites in the same way as they would breed on the site they have been moved from. Development is having

a very big impact on them. You can mitigate for that, but we believe that the mitigation processes are not working effectively particularly for amphibians and reptiles but we also know of some other species as well that suffer once they have been translocated. There is a massive impact.

We also know that toad populations are definitely declining as a result of mortalities on roads. There are toad populations that have gone extinct and we know this because we do have 25 to 30 years of data in toad populations through the Toads on Roads project. It is a much bigger subject matter than just purely providing them with habitats. It is how you treat the species in the whole policy process.

We also know that a lot of mitigation processes such as wildlife tunnels are installed, but once the five-year monitoring - that is the requirement within the planning condition - has been fulfilled, the tunnels are neglected. We are finding we are doing a lot of camera research in tunnels across the country and we are finding a lot of these wildlife tunnels have become blocked so that the species cannot use them anymore. These are tunnels for much wider wildlife than amphibians and reptiles.

Kit Malthouse AM: Do you mean tunnels under roads and things like that?

Kathy Wormald (Chief Executive Officer, Froglife): Tunnels under roads. There are other mitigation practices such as putting exclusion fencing up and then it just becomes overgrown with vegetation so that the animals can simply climb over it and go across the road that way. There is no long-term planning when the planning condition is put in. It lasts for about five years and, post that, everybody forgets about it. It is not strategic and long-term and this is having an impact on a lot of wildlife.

Kit Malthouse AM: It is interesting that there are these gaps in data. Birds are pretty well covered. I do my Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) annual weekend when I sit for an hour and tick boxes and all that kind of stuff. For amphibians and reptiles, you are saying, there is no data other than for toads but that is purely because we find them squashed on the roads and can tell which is which.

What about ground-dwelling mammals like rabbits and hedgehogs, the desirable ones? Obviously, there are rodents and we have a --

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): It is something that we are looking into - and I have not even told some of my colleagues around the table here - to develop a project on the small mammals of London. Anecdotally, we know that data is virtually absent. When I am talking small mammals, I am talking about things like wood mouse, yellow-necked mouse, bank vole and also the predators, weasel and stoat.

Kit Malthouse AM: Hedgehogs?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): Hedgehogs as well. We know hedgehog numbers are collapsing and that is mainly due to changes in garden design. I know that is in a question in itself. The fact is that gardens are losing their vegetation and also we have been pretty good at putting very effective fences around them.

Kit Malthouse AM: Yes, fences and walls are a big problem.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): There is the increase in night-time traffic, which obviously has the same impact on amphibians as well. The actual data on small mammals in London is virtually non-existent, apart from certain species. There have been public surveys on hedgehogs and so we have a bit of data on that, but there is not for some of the other smaller stuff.

There is an issue. So what? What do small mammals mean? For me, they are principal links in the food chain. If they are present, then things upwards in the food chain such as weasels and stoats and also predatory birds, for example - and kestrel, we know, have declined significantly since the 1980s - will be there. It is getting an idea of what the position of small mammals in London is and that is something we are looking to pursue as a particular project to add to the data.

I also wanted to come to this whole issue of SINC's and Peter is right that the Strategy does focus on them, but they are the foundations. The toads and the amphibians predominately are found outside the SINC system. The SINC system in London is only 19% of London's coverage. You have species like bats, which are going to be found in buildings and trees outside the SINC network. So, whilst the SINC network and the wildlife site system needs to be protected and better managed, it is also - and we would want the Strategy to do some of that work in partnership with a whole range of other organisations - recognising the other impacts of London's economic growth on the broader threat to species, not only the ones that cause some of us a few problems but the ones that we want to retain into the future.

Kit Malthouse AM: Yes, I am with you there.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): Could I take a Darwinian jump back to the grey squirrels? Just a comment. What is going on in Anglesey is looking at the harm the grey squirrels are doing, but it is also one of the areas where you have a rare opportunity because you still have a remnant population of red squirrels. Therefore, it is not just about what you are getting rid of. It is about what else you will protect by doing so. This is where all of the things about the 'invasive species' are tied in with the monitoring of what we as people think of as the 'good species', the ones we want more of.

The Strategy is going to be very important, but I do not think it can go into too much detail. Birds as an indicator: great. They can be monitored. We know that. However, if you focus too much on the detail, the Strategy will become out of date too quickly. It is like with invasive species at the moment people saying the jury is out on ring-necked parakeets. If you rely on the Strategy and you come back in 13 years' time, this could be a very embarrassed group of people saying, "I cannot believe we did not see this coming". Having the background and the monitoring outside the Strategy itself will allow the approach to shift with time as we suddenly spot that there is a problem or as we think there is a problem coming.

Kit Malthouse AM: Just a couple of specifics from me, just on particular species. In the species of birds that you said have risen, you referred to peregrine falcons, which I had not seen and that is fine. However, my perception is that other raptors have increased in population. Is that not the case? I have seen buzzards --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Certainly things like buzzards and red kites and --

Kit Malthouse AM: Owls?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I am not sure owls have increased in numbers. They have always been here. They are probably more obvious now.

Kit Malthouse AM: Peregrine falcons are not because they prey on other birds, but is it right that raptors that rely on carrion are increasing and the ones that rely on live small rodents and others are not?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is probably an element of that. The increase in things like buzzards, red kites and peregrines in London is just a reflection of a national changing population. There has been a big increase in the national populations and the birds have moved back into areas from which they previously were lost, largely by extermination and by persecution.

Kit Malthouse AM: They are largely carrion feeders, are they not, the ones that are expanding?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Buzzards and kites are, yes.

Kit Malthouse AM: The other question I just had is whether we have overdone it on bees. Claire, you will know the standard developer's response to the biodiversity thing is, "We will stick a couple of hives on the roof and have a sedum flat roof and that will do us". However, somebody told me that we are overdoing it on bees and that they are all starving to death because there is not enough food for them.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): It is important to keep a balance, but having flagship species that capture the public imagination is really important. If you have a site where you have no wildlife constraints and the developer says, "Bees? Let us chuck a bit of wildflower seed mix in", when they would have done nothing, then that is good. Flagships are good.

Kit Malthouse AM: No, the habitat side is fine, but the introduction of yet more hives is the issue. If you go to the City of London now, you will find a hive on pretty much every roof and it has become the in thing to do, but there is very little flora for them and they have to fly miles to get there. Half the hives do not succeed. They are starving them and they have to feed them on sugar solution and all the rest of it. What is the next thing we could make cool? Bat boxes or something?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There are things like bat boxes and swift boxes. Swifts are an issue that everyone is addressing now. Again, there are fairly straightforward ways you can incorporate swift boxes into buildings. The Sustainable Design and Construction Supplementary Planning Guidance talks about the need to do those kinds of things. Again, it is part of that London Plan policy.

Just going back to bees, there are a lot of beehives now in the City of London and around here. That has also triggered a lot of thinking about how to increase the number of green roofs. There is now the equivalent of 26 football pitches worth of green roofs in the Central Activities Zone. It is a significant amount of green space. Some of that is quite ornamental, but a lot of it is very good biodiverse habitat for not just bees but other pollinators. The green roof on PwC next door is a fantastic area of wildflower-rich habitat that supports a range of pollinating species and birds like black redstarts.

Kit Malthouse AM: We have not overdone it on bees. Is that what you are saying?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): No, I do not think we have overdone it. The focus on bees has encouraged people to think about, "We have beehives. Let us make sure we actually create a habitat that allows bees to forage".

Kit Malthouse AM: Feed the bees.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): We have a couple of specific supplementaries in this area, which perhaps we could pick up. In particular, we were going to ask Mathew about the Acts for Nature campaign and whether there would be a benefit in a mayoral endorsement?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): Just for clarity for Members, the Nature and Wellbeing Act is something that is being proposed by the Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB. I will leave this [leaflet] with you¹, which gives you a background to what we are collectively proposing, which is basically recognising that there is a raft of existing legislation nationally to protect and to try to conserve

¹ www.rspb.org.uk/Images/natureandwellbeing-short_tcm9-384573.pdf

nature - and one could argue some of that is being implemented well and some of it is not being implemented so well - but that there is no legal commitment to restore nature. It is very reactive. It is looking backwards. It is trying to limit damage rather than to say that we should be looking to restore ecological networks across the country.

The proposal is to have specific targets for nature's recovery that are embedded in legislation, to have a duty for local authorities to develop local ecological networks - and one could argue that London is somewhat ahead of the curve there in terms of the All London Green Grid - and to have a reporting requirement to Parliament and the establishment of an Office for Environmental Responsibility. There are a number of things that we are looking to do. One of the things that we would like is to see political support for this given the coming election.

I also just wanted to recognise and to acknowledge that what we have been doing collectively in London over the last 30 years has in many ways been ahead of the curve. It is about recognising the relationship between the quality of the natural environment and people's wellbeing. A healthy ecology in the city should mean a healthy place for people to live in the city.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Yes. Just before that, whilst we have discussed the habitats on land and in the air, we have not touched on the habitats along the waterfronts, whether they be canals or rivers. I just want to ask Peter whether he consulted the Canal & River Trust and also the Port of London Authority on what may be or should be done in our water habitats.

Kit Malthouse AM: We could talk about fish, actually. You are right; we have not talked about fish.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Exactly. We have a lot of people who fish in London and it is almost our first sport, actually, as far as I can see. And seals.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The first thing to say is that the improvement in the ecological condition of London's waterways has been one of the biggest success stories over the last 10 or 20 years.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): That is precisely why I am surprised it was not --

Kit Malthouse AM: Then the decline of the heron, you said.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I do not think the heron has declined in London.

Kit Malthouse AM: It says in your report that the grey heron has declined in London. I was surprised about that. They seem to be everywhere.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The population fluctuates. I do not think there has been a massive decline. It fluctuates over the year.

Kit Malthouse AM: Five species: blackbird, grey heron, house sparrow -- sorry.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Murad is asking at the moment.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): You are saying it is an area that has improved, yet there are not any updates. Are we missing something here?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is mentioned in the update. We mention the kilometres of river corridor that have been improved over the last 15 years. It is mentioned in the update.

Kit Malthouse AM: The update does not need any more doing because it has been a rip-roaring success, basically?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We can certainly emphasise how successful it has been in the update. I have no problem with that.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Let me go into another area. Some of us last week went to a conference and I think you were there, Peter, as well. What are your thoughts about the proposal for a Greater London National Park?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The Greater London National Park is a campaign by a guy called Daniel Raven-Ellison who has been promoting this notion about applying the principles of national parks to London. Those principles are around conserving our natural heritage and engaging people. Our view is that those principles are already embedded in the Biodiversity Strategy, the All London Green Grid and the London Plan. On the specific issue about declaring London a national park, it could not be declared a national park because the current legislation does not allow that. Daniel's view now is that we create something called a 'national park city', which is as yet undefined. Therefore, the principles are fine but the actual mechanism, because it is undefined, we have to remain slightly agnostic on.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Just to clarify, the Mayor is keen on the principle but is unsure about how it would be implemented?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is no mechanism.

Kit Malthouse AM: It is planning. A national park is about planning.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is no mechanism to create a 'national park city'.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Just for the record, the Mayor told Daniel [Raven-Ellison] that "the idea of a national park is an engaging way of sparking debate" but that "he does not have powers to 'create' a new class of urban national park". Daniel disagrees and I just thought, in light of the interest of Assembly Members last week, it is worth mentioning it.

Jenny Jones AM: This is on Murad's point and also going back to the Nature and Wellbeing Act. Peter, you might not know but the Assembly did pass a motion unanimously in support of that. I proposed it and Murad seconded it. It was a fit for us all. In fact, the Mayor can put legislation to Parliament. This is something that the Mayor could think about - both of these issues - if he is serious about biodiversity and about preserving green space. He could in fact put a Bill to Parliament on this.

Kit Malthouse AM: It would be good as a consolidation exercise just to round up all the various bits and pieces to get it all into one place. I just had one last question quickly on this. On the Strategy generally, you will have to forgive me for not having been through all of it, but my perception is that small thoughtful action by individual Londoners would have a much bigger impact on biodiversity than anything the Mayor or local authorities can do. If Londoners put up bird boxes, garden ponds, bat boxes, bird tables and all that kind of thing and if we could get a mass movement on that, it would have a much bigger impact than all this planning and protection stuff.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I am not sure it would have a much bigger impact. It is an important thing to do. The core planning framework is absolutely essential because that has actually protected the vast majority of London's important metropolitan sites for the last 20 or 30 years. London is quite an exemplar city in that respect in terms of the ability to protect those significant sites. Despite an increasing population and despite the pressures of development, it has been quite remarkable how the planning system has protected sites in London.

However, clearly, in terms of the common wildlife species that Mathew [Frith] has referred to, Londoners taking action themselves is critical because it is about species in gardens. It is about how you manage your garden, whether you feed birds and whether you provide holes in your fences to allow hedgehogs through. They are things outwith the power of the Mayor. The Mayor cannot impose those things, but certainly there is a need to engage the public more on those issues, no doubt.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Just before we move on to the next area, I wonder if any other guests have any comments on the proposal for a Greater London national park city and whether there are any particular comments or views on that.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): We met with Daniel [Raven-Ellison] about a year ago and I, too, spoke at last week's event. For us, it is a very good provocation. It is about challenging the view of London and what it should look and feel like for the 21st century.

From our perspective at the Trust in terms of trying to conserve and promote the natural heritage of the city, we are seeing London go through a phenomenal change. When we started, London was in economic decline and people were leaving the city. That has completely changed and there are significant pressures.

If we can start getting behind an idea that London can be greener and softer as well as provide that wellbeing for people, which also brings about the birds, the bees and the greenery, then that is great. Daniel's way of doing that with the tools at his disposal is beginning to throw a stone into the pond. What he has set out to do actually chimes very much with what we set out to do in 1981. If you look at our Primrose Hill declaration, it is all about clean air, clean water and children have access to the natural environment. It is another repeated call for a different view of the city and we are behind that at the moment. The issue for now is that in the next three months we will have greater clarity about the next stage of this proposal.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It is certainly a call to arms for all of us.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We are working with Daniel and we are open to his ideas. We are actually in contact with him to see if that is something we can take on board. At the moment, because it is undefined, we cannot really give it much thought.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): It is very interesting. From what I have read about it, it started almost as a thought experiment to say, "Where would this take you as an idea"? It has reached a point now where the idea of saying, "Let us try to get London designated as a national park", would be a distraction from the very important issues that it is raising about access, wellbeing and people's relationships with nature.

If it were possible to make London a national park under the existing system, you would want so many changes to how planning is dealt with in national parks just for London and I would actually see --

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): I do not think there is any suggestion that a national park city for London would incorporate planning powers. Certainly Daniel is not suggesting that, I believe.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): In that case, it is fundamentally different from what you might call the 'real' national parks.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It is a fundamental difference, indeed.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): There might be a danger that if there is not a bit more clarity about that, you could start to have people undermining the existing separate national parks system if they say, "For goodness sake. If London can be one, then why can we not just make the Lake District look like London?"

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): So you would be concerned about the knock-on effect on the other national parks if we take it to an extreme. Certainly a number of us spoke at the launch event at the Southbank last week. One of the points I made of course is that London is very much a growing population city in the next few decades and --

Kit Malthouse AM: What was this event?

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It was the launch event for the proposal called 'Reimagining London'.

Kit Malthouse AM: I was not invited.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): We currently have something like approximately one tree for every person in London. The challenge as London's population grows over the coming decades is whether we will manage to maintain that ratio or whether we will see the natural environment suffer as a result of population gain. Anyway, we have covered this area very well. Let us move on to the next area, which is about progress on implementing the 72 proposals in the action plan.

Nicky Gavron AM: This question is - to quote Kit [Malthouse AM] - about 'planning and protection and all that stuff' or begins that or opens it up. How can losses of biodiversity be averted or avoided or mitigated through planning? I am talking really about on development sites.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): In terms of development, the fundamental thing that is needed is the political will. Picture a development site. The developers will have their own objectives. The planning authority that is deciding on that site will have a series of pressures on it around what is expected to be delivered like, obviously, housing density. Biodiversity becomes something that is just a nice-to-have. If you are not actually damaging a designated site and then fit it in where you can, it will be reflected in the planning decisions.

Also, I know I find on sites that when you start talking about biodiversity or having any ecological discussion, it almost always starts by talking about constraints and damage. Even in this question, it is all about preventing loss. That is important, but the concept that a developer could do genuine enhancement and create something that is better than what was there before is definitely a nice-to-have. Realistically, there will be losses in some areas. It is to promote the gains and to say to developers, "We will reward you. We like sites with exciting biodiversity enhancements. You will find it easier to get your permission". Obviously, it would not be, "That is fine. You do not need to worry about any of the other issues", but saying, "This will do you good".

There are a lot of things where the knowledge is improving at the moment. There are discussions around ecosystem services and the benefits that nature gives to people. Developers can see where having public open space will make the houses more valuable. That is a direct benefit to them. However, if they also have those

pressures saying, “We want this housing density”, there is a very, very long list of things to put on that shopping list. If the political will is not there to say that biodiversity needs to be high up the list, then the developers and the planning authorities will just look at the top of the list and maybe, if you are lucky, you will come down to wildlife somewhere at the bottom.

Nicky Gavron AM: That is very interesting because often it is framed in terms of harming as opposed to benefiting the environment. Can you give me an example of where that has worked, apart from the [Queen Elizabeth] Olympic Park? Maybe that is debatable, too.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): The Olympic Park is an interesting example to use because, yes, there has been wonderful habitat creation but part of that was recognising that there were losses. It was not all buildings before the Olympic Park was there.

One of the sites that I am personally very interested in at the moment is the Camley Street Natural Park, which the Wildlife Trust manages, in Camden. It is right next to the King’s Cross development area.

Kit Malthouse AM: Camley Street Natural Park runs up the side and around the back of the [Francis] Crick [Institute].

Jenny Jones AM: It is tiny.

Nicky Gavron AM: It is tiny and wild.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): Yes. Interestingly, if you look at the development that is going on there, some of those developments have habitat creation within them but somehow the links were not made to say, “Camley Street is right next door. Can we look outside our site and do some good there?”

In Atkins we are doing a mini-project as essentially a volunteering exercise to look specifically at Camley Street and to ask what benefits it is providing so that if in future a developer were to say, “I want to invest”, something like a wildlife trust could say, “Here is your investment portfolio. Here is what you are promoting by stepping outside your own site and doing some good offsite”.

Nicky Gavron AM: Good. Do you have a view on this, Mathew?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): It is a great idea what Atkins is doing for us! I also have to say that we have also tried to influence the developments at King’s Cross so that they do not damage the ecology fragility of Camley Street and also bring about nature in the area.

Claire [Wansbury] is absolutely right that the focus on damage and harm has often focused people’s attention. We have seen a shift in proposals that take account of biodiversity. However, there are still some weaknesses.

The larger developments, which are so visible that someone is bound to see them and comment on them, are generally much better at bringing biodiversity into the frame. What are more worrying is the much smaller developments. In the planning application form it asks, “Does this site have an impact on biodiversity?” You can put a cross saying, “No”, and who within the Local Planning authority is going to check up on that? Expertise in ecology and planning, as the Association of Local Government Ecologists’ report published in 2013 suggested, is not only poor but is going down.² Who is there within the Local Planning authority to assess the impact of a development and then influence the decisions that are made?

² www.cieem.net/data/files/Resource_Library/News/ALGE_Report_on_Ecological_Compentence_and_Capacity.pdf

Nicky Gavron AM: Mathew, can I just ask you? How many ecology officers are there in London?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): John will be able to answer that one.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): I think at the moment somewhere between half and two-thirds of the boroughs do have an ecologist.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): Then the question is how many are having a link into the planning system.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Yes. One or two of those are parks-based and do very little in terms of planning. Most do some. It is about evenly split as to whether they are based in some sort of strategic planning part of the council or in parks.

Nicky Gavron AM: We have strayed into another question and I will come back to planning, but they are linked. Is quite a big jump between a half and two thirds, actually, and so we do not know? Nobody knows? Does Peter know?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The issue is that you have ecologists who work in different parts of the local authority. Some boroughs have ecologists who work in the planning department. Some have ecologists based in parks departments who might give some advice to the planning department. Some might be countryside rangers who also have their expertise brought in. There is a variety of different mechanisms in local boroughs.

Nicky Gavron AM: Is that why we do not know exactly how many there are? We do?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We do not know exactly how many people there are in terms of people providing direct advice to planning authorities. The LBBF has a membership of --

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): The LBBF has a mailing list that has some contact in every borough, but in quite a lot of those boroughs it is certainly not an ecologist.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Some boroughs contract that service from a consultancy. There are other ways in which you can get that advice and support. It does not have to be in-house.

Nicky Gavron AM: Whatever the issue, what you are saying or what was being said is that there is not necessarily the right kind of link-up between the ecologists and the planning departments?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): A significant proportion - it is a minority but a substantial minority - of London boroughs have no regular in-house or any other ecological expertise contributing to how they deal with their planning applications.

Nicky Gavron AM: I read in our briefing that something like 0.75 - I cannot remember - or 600 out of 80,000 or something applications do not have any biodiversity mention or impact assessment. That is --

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It is the other way around. A tiny proportion does have some, rather than does not have.

Nicky Gavron AM: Sorry, 0.75 of them do have? Sorry.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It is only a tiny number that seem to have input from ecologists.

Nicky Gavron AM: Sorry, I had it the wrong way around, but what I am trying to say is that 600 out of 80,000 have some kind of assessment.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): That figure means that of the 80,000 planning applications that are submitted in London, many of which are for loft conversions or minor extensions, only 600 get their information from GiGL. That does not mean that only 600 get any ecological information. Companies like Atkins and many other consultancies provide information to both the applicants and the local authorities in terms of ecological advice. It is just that only 600 go to GiGL, which is a provider of information for that advice. That is where that figure has come from.

Nicky Gavron AM: It is better than in our briefing?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Yes, certainly.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): There is still a very large proportion of planning applications that have no consideration of biodiversity whatsoever.

Nicky Gavron AM: Go back just to the point. Do you want to come in on planning for development, not the planning process? We have heard a lot about how it can stimulate benefits and enhance the environment and biodiversity protection, but what can be done to stop damage?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): To start with, the policy framework to allow planning authorities in London to prevent damage to biodiversity through the development control process is there and is very good. It comes from the Biodiversity Strategy and the London Plan policies. We have an excellent policy framework.

It is whether there is the political will to implement it because there are so many competing pressures that all have to be balanced in the planning process. It is not just housing density; it is having a significant proportion of affordable housing that, again, is going to put more pressure on a developer. There needs to be the political will. Also, even where there is the political will, sometimes, as I say, there is no biodiversity expertise.

The framework is there. I do not think the implementation is that bad, but my direct experience is in Tower Hamlets: we are in the position in Tower Hamlets where the vast majority of planning applications that come in are on sites that are already completely built. Therefore, I can confidently say that most of the planning applications that I see and certainly the major developments that I have input into do result in a net gain in biodiversity, but that is because we are starting with a site that has nothing on it. It is easier to deliver a net gain in biodiversity when your sites are not of high value to start with.

Nicky Gavron AM: The Further Alterations to the London Plan have now just been approved and now there is no longer a requirement to meet deficiencies in open space. There is weaker wording. Do you think that is going to affect biodiversity protection?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The wording has not changed.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): The wording of the biodiversity policies has not changed.

Nicky Gavron AM: The wording of the open space policies has.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): The wording of the open space policies has. I doubt if that will have a significant impact on biodiversity, to be honest. It might do in a small proportion of cases, but I doubt it.

Nicky Gavron AM: Why do you doubt it?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Those criteria for open space would not necessarily lead to a biodiverse green space anyway.

Nicky Gavron AM: That leads me on to my next question, then, which I have in my briefing. How do you enhance the quality of existing open space? Here we are and we are going to have less of it, apparently. It depends how it is implemented. There is certainly the requirement to meet deficiencies, is there not? What are we going to do about what we have? How can we enhance it?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): What we have is a whole range of things from already-important habitats that may be declining through neglect through to new and existing small open spaces that are not currently important for biodiversity. There has been quite a strong trend in recent years in those parks towards what previously used to be described on the ecological survey form as 'green desert with lollipops'; in other words, very closely mown grass and a few tiny lollipop trees.

Kit Malthouse AM: In my impression, King's Cross - other than Camley Street - is becoming a very sterile environment, albeit there are lots of grass and bushes which will be closely clipped, and no biodiversity.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): I do not know the King's Cross development, I am afraid. There has been a lot of habitat creation and creation of wild flower meadows and small bits of woodland in parks in recent years. The quality of wildlife habitat in what were previously perhaps not very exciting formal parks has, on balance, increased quite considerably.

Nicky Gavron AM: That is one way. That is a good one.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): What really concerns me is what is happening to some of our sites that are already good and maybe even some of the ones that are already the best, the SMIs that we talked about earlier. Through lack of management and neglect, a lot of those are perhaps declining in value. We do not know in many cases because there has not been any regular monitoring. Anecdotal evidence suggests that certainly some of London's best grassland sites in places like Barnet and one or two sites in Greenwich have not had the management they need. If you do not manage grasslands they decline very quickly. It is how we make sure that what we have is better is a combination of creating habitats where there are not any, which should also make small urban parks more interesting and exciting for the people who use them, but we also really do need to look at our best sites and make sure those do not decline. That is what is currently slipping through.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): John is right. We have to recognise that 30 years ago the quality of many of our parks' biodiversity was very poor. We have been through significant improvements on that. I agree in terms of the issue of some of the wildlife sites. Particular habitats are under threat, grasslands from under management, for example.

We have also been through probably about 15 years of a quite significant amount of grant funding that has enabled organisations like ourselves and local authorities to draw down upon. There are environmental stewardship grants such as Higher Level Stewardship, which has now been renamed Countryside Stewardship again; lottery; landfill tax credits funding and other trust funds that have enabled quite a lot of work to go on in London over the last 15 years. That is still likely to continue but against competing interests for those funds, plus also growing austerity in terms of the resources available in local authorities.

We know that many local authorities now are looking to perhaps divest some of their responsibilities in terms of their land management. That may be a good thing, but where are the resources to continue that into the future? We know that there are some very well resourced and very committed 'friends of' groups that are willing to take up the challenge but on many sites there are not. We share the same concerns of the LBBF that the longer-term projections for the management of many of our sites are questionable. Where are those resources going to come from? There are only so many volunteers in London and volunteer time that we and others can marshal and there is a gap. That is the thing that concerns us.

Nicky Gavron AM: A gap in funding.

Kit Malthouse AM: Just back to the developmental plan, one of the issues I wanted to ask you about was I suppose slightly covered by Nicky. It was the lack of expertise amongst planning officers in particular about some of the small things that can be done to make buildings themselves more habitable; ledges, nooks, crannies, access and all that kind of stuff.

Do you think there is a role for more training amongst them? It is all very well having an ecology officer who is a specialist because that lets the planning officer off the hook, but for planning officers to weave into their knowledge base the notion that if you are building one of these monstrous towers you should put some ledges at the top where the peregrine falcon is likely to nest rather than a pigeon and that kind of thing?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Firstly, I have to say that in my experience as a biodiversity officer, if you offered that training for planners, the invite would end up on my desk.

Kit Malthouse AM: That is the point, is it not? It is not woven into the weft of the plan. It becomes a specialist: "Let us get the ecology officer and he or she will twiddle around with it and we will do two thirds of what they want and that is it", rather than at the very start the developer saying, "Could you just possibly do XYZ?"

The other thing I was just going to ask about as well was modern materials. If you look at King's Cross, which I do think is going to be quite a sterile environment, it is all glass and steel. There is nothing organic about it. A sheer face of glass is no good to anybody. It does not even grow lichens on it; you cannot get any of those growing on it. Nothing will grow. There will be no weathering of it. It will not allow for bats or insects to be harboured in the nooks and crannies like a Victorian or older building will. A lot of this comes back to planning. Do you think there could be better education of planning officers and that rather than the political world getting in at that stage would be the best thing?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is quite a range of guidance out there for planners and others. Regarding the example of modern buildings, obviously the policy around modern buildings is to seal them and make sure there are no draughts and that is why you get glass, steel and that kind of stuff. There is guidance out there about how you can incorporate things like nesting sites into those buildings.

Kit Malthouse AM: How are lacewings going to get into any of those buildings on King's Cross in winter? None.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The vast majority of buildings in London are not those buildings. It is a very small proportion.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): Guidance is great but planning officers have a very large pile of paperwork. It is the same as policy; biodiversity is just one other thing. They have to have guidance on flood alleviation, housing, health and things like this.

To challenge something John [Archer] said, I have done wildlife awareness talks for local authority planning departments. Also, I have done them for colleagues within Atkins, both in planning and in design. We do a lunchtime talk. They provide the lunch. We provide some pretty pictures and talk them through the absolute basics. It is the alarm bell things. Where might bats turn up in a building? Then it is going on to think a little bit about enhancement, just to give them a flavour.

Kit Malthouse AM: I agree with that. I guess you have to hammer it home. In a previous life Jenny [Jones AM] and I spent years on the Metropolitan Police Authority. One of the issues we had with the Metropolitan Police Service was about diversity in the human population, how you treat equality and all the rest of it in an organisation. There was a whole department, if you remember, Jenny, which was about diversity. All that did was allow the senior officers and others off the hook because they could just say, "We have a diversity department. That ticks the box. We will have a bit of training every now and again. They will talk to us about apples in barrels and all sorts of odd stuff, but we do not have to take responsibility for it ourselves".

You might get lucky and get a RSPB member who decides to become a planning officer and makes it his or her mission to improve the bird environment around buildings. It seems to be too random. I wonder whether we should do more.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): One thing to point out is that younger planning officers tend to have a more rounded view about some of these things. A classic example I always use in terms of how things have changed is the approach we used to take in terms of rivers in urban areas. We used to put them in concrete channels. The Environment Agency has changed policy and now most river engineers think completely differently. That change in mind-set is beginning to emerge in planning authorities. You have lots of younger planners who come with a different ethos to planning.

Kit Malthouse AM: It is changing all the time.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is a culture change over time.

Kit Malthouse AM: That is interesting. The final thing for me I just want to ask is about corridors. You look at a place like King's Cross. Increases in the corridor that the rail lines out of King's Cross and St Pancras form into the countryside are absolutely vital. What work is there in the update around protection? If you look like somewhere like Old Oak Common, where there is going to be this vast new development, there is a corridor straight out into Oxfordshire and the Home Counties. What work is there around protecting those corridors in particular?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The existing Biodiversity Strategy and the London Plan policies speak quite a lot about those issues. Old Oak Common is a classic example where in the emerging Opportunity Area Planning Framework and the Local Plan produced by the Mayoral Development Corporation (MDC), the planning permit has a lot of stuff there about not just protecting Wormwood Scrubs but how you actually maximise the opportunities of the canal corridor and other green corridors through that development.

Kit Malthouse AM: If you look at High Speed 2 (HS2), a lot of that is going to be 'tunnellised'. Will it take into account that there needs to be some preservation of the wildlife corridor even though it is in a tunnel?

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): Thinking specifically about the rail industry and stepping outside what the Assembly does itself, it is good to be aware that Network Rail among its sustainability commitments has a positive commitment to biodiversity and to provide benefit where they can. That is not just in a policy sitting in a document somewhere. They have actually written that into their supplier chain and the contracts with the people who are going to be doing the work. If there is work in one of those railway corridors, it should be written into the documents to say, "You have got to be thinking about this". Actually for the engineers that is a real step-change.

For things like HS2 I know there has been a lot of work on thinking about tunnels not just as where the train goes but as green bridges. There are examples where they are not simply digging through the ground but actually planning to cut down and create a concrete tube and then, when they fill up above that, to restore the ground level. They are looking at what they can do to preserve and enhance habitat connectivity. On that the answer is yes. Also, Network Rail is making commitments that should be starting to filter down into projects.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): That is very helpful. A huge proportion of London's green space is apparently trackside land on the Underground and Network Rail.

Kit Malthouse AM: It will be. Very often it is not managed that well.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It is not managed at all from anybody.

Kit Malthouse AM: That is not a bad a thing. Being a bit wild is actually quite a good thing. My problem is they manage it too much. Because they do not want leaves on the line, they go along and cut everything down instead of allowing it to grow.

Nicky Gavron AM: I just want to mention tree officers. In my experience of chairing Local Planning committees, I have seen what happens to a development if a tree officer is not called to a site: very often the trees go. The trees are such an important habitat of so many species. I just wondered quickly about the ecology link-up. I know we deal with trees in separate meetings of this Committee, but the link-up between tree officers and ecology officers and planners must be a very important one, surely?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): It certainly can be. I remember seeing a cartoon that showed various people's view of a tree. There was a developer's one and a tree officer's one. Ecologists and tree officers do not necessarily share the same views of what makes a tree 'good'. A tree officer does not like to see cavities, dead wood and things like that, whereas those are the bits of the tree that are probably the most important to wildlife. Yes, it is very important that in local authorities Tree officers and ecologists work closely together. Both need to work with the planners. Ecologists and tree officers do not always see eye-to-eye on what constitutes a really good tree.

Nicky Gavron AM: That is a very interesting answer. I will not develop it more.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): That has to change.

Nicky Gavron AM: I have obviously met good tree officers. Can I just talk for a minute about the Green Belt, which is a very hot topic? Peter, do you think looking at the Mayor's Infrastructure Plan that the Green Belt is going to be protected?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is largely down to politicians to make those decisions about whether to protect it. The current Infrastructure Plan and the current London Plan do not envisage huge developments in the Green Belt. The current policy framework and the Infrastructure Plan is --

Nicky Gavron AM: The current policy framework is to build within London not on open space and obviously look to the rest of the southeast for some of London's growth. Do you think then, wildlife experts and conservation ecologists, that we have the right protections for biodiversity with the Green Belt?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): In large part, yes, there is an issue that the Green Belt and why it was designated in the first place has not taken account of some of the knowledge we have accrued since the 1940s about the value of the Green Belt for providing that continuous habitat. Whilst there may be some sites within the Green Belt that are not particularly good for wildlife - for example, golf courses - there will be others that are brilliant. The very network of open green space is going to be very, very important.

One of the issues I was not able to come to today was providing a figure for how many of those wildlife sites in London - and also arguably wildlife sites outside London - fall within the Green Belt. We believe that a significant minority, if not a majority, of them are actually in the Green Belt or in the inner London Green Belt, the Metropolitan Open Land. Therefore, any incursions into the Green Belt are likely to have some quite significant impacts.

Our position, which we are currently looking into at the moment, on the Green Belt is to basically abide by the existing legislation and the policies. We know there are various organisations and individuals throwing in ideas that the Green Belt should be diluted or done away with in order to meet the growth in the southeast. One of the things we saw in a policy proposal that was put forward earlier this year was calling for the abolition of the Green Belt and was on this very notion that because city wildlife is thriving it is not an issue. That is not quite the case. There is a black-and-white approach that is being played out at the moment. The issue of the Green Belt is far more nuanced than many advocates for its protection or its abolition necessarily pick up on, from an ecological perspective.

Nicky Gavron AM: Are you making that case?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): I am meeting colleagues --

Nicky Gavron AM: I have to say I think you are quite muted at the moment.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): Yes, we are. I quite agree with you. We are far too muted. I have convened a meeting internally this afternoon to look at the Green Belt and to start proposing our campaign to start raising our profile on the wildlife benefits of the Green Belt and its protection.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Peter [Massini] touched upon Metropolitan Open Land being valuable. Yes, overall, we probably should protect the Green Belt. It would be good for biodiversity. We must not forget that Metropolitan Open Land is just as important.

The borough I work in, Tower Hamlets, is a long way from any Green Belt. The people of Tower Hamlets are not going to benefit on a daily basis from the wildlife in the Green Belt and so Metropolitan Open Land is also very valuable and should be seen as perhaps just as sacrosanct.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The London Plan policies have not changed. It has actually been very good at protecting the Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Land.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): The protection is very similar between those two categories, is it not?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Yes.

Jenny Jones AM: I wanted to ask some more questions about the fact that small and medium-sized planning developments possibly do not have proper biodiversity assessments. I wonder if that is something we could pick up at some point, even if it is only writing to the councils to ask them. We all know instances of habitat-type land that is being developed into concrete.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Clearly what has come out of it is that an awful lot of boroughs do not have the expertise in planning, particularly in terms of advice to planners or indeed training for planners or whatever it is in terms of the expertise available to the planning process on biodiversity. That is clearly something that has come out of this session. Perhaps as a Committee --

Kit Malthouse AM: The problem is that they are not able to assess the different values of things. For instance, they might say, "Do you know what? We need to put a green roof on it", when actually it might provide more biodiversity to plant 40 trees around the development. Nobody is training them to make those evaluations, which is why they are more often than not saying, "Stick a hive on the roof and that will be enough".

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): The point is that there needs to be some expertise from a professional who understands these issues somewhere in the process. There is obviously a lacking point there. Shall we pick that up as a Committee through either a recommendation or writing to boroughs?

Jenny Jones AM: Yes, we have cross-party support to pick it up.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Perhaps you can move us on, Jenny, to the next area?

Jenny Jones AM: Yes, I will. I was curious about this All London Green Grid implementation. Not all the All London but the East London Green Grid started, obviously, under the previous Mayor. I am curious about how much weight biodiversity concerns are given in that now.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The All London Green Grid is a framework for green infrastructure and the whole issue about how you actually make that network of spaces and parks and green spaces work for a variety of benefits. Biodiversity is central to that framework. There are eight different functions of green infrastructure, one of which is biodiversity and ecological resilience, in a sense the whole issue that John [Archer] talked about on improving parks. A lot of parks are improved primarily for people in terms of health and wellbeing. You can do that through biodiversity enhancements. There is no suggestion that the All London Green Grid and green infrastructure are diluting biodiversity. In a sense, it can enhance biodiversity by using different arguments for why that is being made, the classic example being restoring rivers and parks. It is being driven by a flood management priority, but you can do it in ways that enhance the ecology of the river.

Jenny Jones AM: I was trying to get at how much weight biodiversity is given against the social or physical issues like flood relief.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I am not quite sure what you mean by what weight it is given. The All London Green Grid framework says these are the functions that can be delivered through green infrastructure and through the way you improve and manage parks, one of which is biodiversity. On any individual site you have to weigh up those different benefits and different functions. There is not a hierarchy of different benefits. If you are looking at improving a park in terms of its functions, you might be looking at its benefit to health and wellbeing, its benefit to biodiversity and its benefits in terms of flood management, and you design a scheme that optimises those benefits. It is not a process of going

through and saying, “We need to put biodiversity first”. Clearly, on sites important to nature conservation, the biodiversity function is primary because that is why that site has been designated. In a typical park, you might have a whole variety of different things you could do with that park to improve its benefits to local people, one of which might be by biodiversity. More often than not, if you are improving that site for things like flood management or growing food, you increase the biodiversity value as well. That is the point John [Archer] made about how parks have changed quite significantly in recent years away from being those green deserts.

Jenny Jones AM: I am not going to carry on with this but, quite honestly, the biodiversity you get in a series of allotments is quite different from the biodiversity you get in a piece of wild ground.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Sure, yes.

Jenny Jones AM: Let me ask you about the Mayor’s Green Infrastructure Task Force. How was it selected?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I will just explain what the taskforce is. The taskforce came out of the London Infrastructure Plan. The London Infrastructure Plan recognises that as one of the key drivers for a sustainable city in the future we need to be clear about how we manage and improve green infrastructure and that network of spaces across London. The taskforce has been charged with thinking about the ways in which we can do that better, the new governance arrangements that might need to be put in place, the new financial arrangements, how you make the link between flood protection for Lewisham town centre by improving parks, how you make that financial link between the beneficiaries of that flood protection and how invest in improving parks. It is looking at those big picture issues around how you manage that network of spaces.

What we tried to do was make sure that the voices in that group reflected a broad range of different stakeholders and agendas. There are people from the health sector, people from the Environment Agency, representatives from the boroughs and representatives of London Councils; a wide range of different representatives across all those different issues. We deliberately tried to make sure it was not a narrowly focused taskforce. It has to have those different perspectives and different views to ensure we get buy-in into that concept of improving and investing in infrastructure.

Jenny Jones AM: Who puts in the biodiversity expertise?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The Environment Agency sits on that panel. The Environment Agency as part of the Defra family has agreed to speak on behalf of Natural England and the Forest Commission.

Jenny Jones AM: Can I ask, Mathew? Do you feel that biodiversity is adequately represented?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): No. There is fantastic expertise and experience on the Green Infrastructure Task Force. My experience of many of those individuals whom I know is that a lot of those experiences are in fact duplicated. There is no voice there that has experience of land management for biodiversity and planning protection for biodiversity, which are issues as part of the ongoing functions of the Green Infrastructure Task Force.

Jenny Jones AM: Were you consulted before this was set up?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): We were in terms of the general consultation for the Infrastructure Plan. We fed our comments in and we offered our expertise to the Mayor in that response. We did not get any response back from that but that is where we are at the moment.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There were about 150 organisations that offered their services.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): Absolutely. I understand that.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We cannot have a committee with 150 people.

Can I just pick up on the issue about land management? The Director of Open Spaces from the City of London sits on the Task Force. She manages a significant amount of London's green space including Epping Forest, the Chalk Grasslands in south London, Hampstead Heath and the Royal Parks and so there is land management expertise on that group. We are not dismissing people with expertise in land management. Sue [Ireland, Director of Open Spaces, City of London] is a very strong advocate of ecology and biodiversity. We are not missing that on the taskforce.

Jenny Jones AM: However, the London Wildlife Trust does not feel that biodiversity is represented.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): They are entitled to take that view.

Jenny Jones AM: I am assuming they would know. I am assuming they have the expertise to know. How do you make sure when the taskforce is doing its work that enhancement of London's wildlife biodiversity is embedded in the work? How do you make sure that is happening?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Just to go back, the taskforce is not discussing specific land management issues. It is discussing the governance and financial arrangements we need to put in place to ensure we actually have that long-term investment in green infrastructure. It is looking at those governance and financial arrangements. It is not talking about specific land management issues. It is taking a much bigger and broader view about how you ensure long-term management and long-term investment in that infrastructure.

Jenny Jones AM: Does anybody else have a comment on the work of the taskforce? It is relatively new, is it not? I do not have a date.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Yes. The first meeting was back in November and it needs to report by November this year.

Jenny Jones AM: Who is chairing it?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is chaired by Matthew Pencharz [Senior Advisor, Environment and Energy, GLA].

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Not so much to anybody on the taskforce, but borough biodiversity officers do share your concerns, Jenny, about the way that the All London Green Grid seems to be being pushed in this update as more or less the answer to everything and certainly the answer to what the Mayor is going to do. The All London Green Grid is potentially an extremely useful tool for biodiversity enhancement. It at least ought to be able to do the new habitats and increase connectivity of parts of what is needed very well. I am not sure that it really does the enhancing and continuing to manage properly our existing habitats all that well.

We would like to see some evidence that the All London Green Grid is delivering for biodiversity. It would be interesting to get maybe GiGL or someone like that to do an audit of the projects that have been done under

the auspices of the All London Green Grid to date or maybe even look at the ones that are in the list of priority projects just to see what they have delivered - or will deliver - in terms of habitats and spaces. I hope it will be a lot but --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I can list some examples, if you like.

Jenny Jones AM: Have you done such an audit, though, overall?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We have not done an audit, no.

Jenny Jones AM: It sounds like a good idea though, does it not, so that when you come to a body like this you have the good answers?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Sure. That does require time and resources to do it.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It sounds like you have written a recommendation for us.

Kit Malthouse AM: Rather than spend the money on some bat boxes.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Shall we move on to data and monitoring? Murad, you are going to lead off.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Can I start with John? How can the Strategy updates encourage a more strategic data collecting and monitoring system in light of comments made earlier?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Forgive me for stating the obvious, but that is exactly why we put the rolling programme of habitat surveys in the Biodiversity Strategy in the first place. There is only one organisation that can collect London-wide habitat data in a strategic and even way across London and that is the GLA. If it is left to the boroughs, there will be some that will do a survey every five years, some that will do a partial survey every three or four years, some that might do something every ten years and some that will do nothing at all. If we want even, strategic data from across London, the only organisation that is going to collect that is the Mayor's team. Whether it is realistic to expect a complete survey of all the open land in London on a regular basis I do not know. It was expensive. I used to run it and so I know it was expensive. At least for the most important habitats, really, the Mayor needs to do that.

There are a number of borough biodiversity officers, members of LBBF, who want me to come here and say that the rolling programme as it was should be reinstated. While we would all potentially welcome that, we see that it might not be feasible. As I started to allude to earlier on when talking about metropolitan sites, a rolling programme of not just habitat survey but survey and condition monitoring of London's most important sites, the SMIs. Natural England does this for SSSIs, the country's most important sites. For the Mayor to do that for London's most important sites, over how many years it would be done and whether it would vary - woodlands might not need monitoring as open habitats, which change more quickly - is a strategically important bit of data collection that needs to be done and no one else is going to do it. If it could be coupled with a funding strand, maybe within the All London Green Grid, specifically targeted at those metropolitan sites that are found to be not in good condition or even in recovering condition, to help pay for the management of those to get them into good and recovering condition, so much the better.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you, John, for that contribution. Can I just come to Claire? What are your views on this data collecting and monitoring given things clearly have changed since the original Biodiversity Strategy was put in place?

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): It was just a comment, thinking about the London-wide issue. Assuming for the moment that it is impossible to get the rolling programme so that all boroughs have their surveys updated, something that the Assembly might like to consider is what happened with SSSIs 20 years ago. The reason for condition monitoring for SSSIs came about because the National Audit Committee asked the question, "What is the condition of the SSSIs?" The answer was, "We can tell you what percentage have been physically damaged by development". They said, "We did not ask that. What is the condition of the SSSI series?" The answer was, "We do not know". National monitoring came into place. Before that took place, there was a sample survey done just to get a snapshot to say, "Let us take a random sample of all the woodland SSSIs across England and let us have a look at that". The grasslands were the first one that was done. The results were interesting because the local conservation officers within English Nature looked at the results and said, "That was bit of a waste of time. I could have told you that". The higher political response was, "Are you sure? Is it that bad?" There are mechanisms if you do not know. There are ways to do something to get a snapshot answer, just to give you a feel for what the problem is, if there is one.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you for that contribution, Claire. Mathew and Kathy [Wormald], are you of a similar view?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): Yes. I totally support what Claire [Wansbury] and John [Archer] have said. I hope this does not come across as a criticism to Peter [Massini], but I do not think there is a demonstrative interest from the Mayor in looking at the strategic sites and making sure that our SINC systems are up-to-date. Yes, there are some local authorities who are undertaking some of the reviews. We know that some local authorities have not reviewed their SINC systems for over 15 years.

There is also the issue that there is GiGL but not all London boroughs are partners of that. That is a way of accessing information. It is a way of storing information and being able to use information to analyse, whether in terms of planning decisions or on site management. One of the things we would love the Mayor to do is to urge local authorities to join or to become partners of GiGL.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We do, regularly.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Kathy, do you have any views on data collecting and monitoring?

Kathy Wormald (Chief Executive Officer, Froglife): They are similar to what has been said. The only thing I would say about adopting a SSSI condition monitoring approach is that in theory it works very well and your sites are analysed, but in practice when a site falls into unfavourable condition there seems to be very little action. Obviously we would all like to see more data and data collection and monitoring, but we need to take action on what that data and monitoring tells us about sites. Definitely, as you said, it helps inform where work needs to take place. Certainly for organisations like us we rely on that in order to carry out work.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Again, a clear response from the other members of the panel on something the Mayor needs to be doing.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The issue lies in who is responsible for doing that update and monitoring. The policy framework in place says you should be doing this. Boroughs when doing their Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) should be getting updates and assessment of the sites in their borough to inform their LDF process. That is the responsibility of the boroughs, not the responsibility of the Mayor, I would suggest. Many boroughs have contracted London Wildlife Trust and others to do those surveys because they recognise it as an important piece of information they need to ensure their LDFs are up-to-date and relevant. That is clearly, again, something that has come through the Localism Act. It is about identifying who is responsible for gathering the information to inform those decisions. Getting

up-to-date information on your SINC network is pretty much a borough responsibility, just as it is about getting information about traffic flows in the borough or anything else.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): I fully accept there are differences in boroughs. I am always struck by the difference between the City of Westminster - my home borough - and the London Borough of Bromley. They are at opposite ends. I always emphasise that to show the point that London is actually a region as much as a city. Nevertheless, we need a strategic perspective across the whole of greater London. Should that not really be coming from here?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is a strategic framework in place in terms of what you should do. In terms of collecting data, it is not true to say that only the GLA can collect that data because the protocols are in place about how to collect it. In the old rolling habitat survey, various people were contracted to gather that information. Originally it was a team of Greater London Council (GLC) ecologists. That work can be done by external contractors because the protocols and the way you collect information is set down in a very specific set of protocols and frameworks. It is not true to say that only the GLA can collect the data. It is true to say that the GLA needs to hold the reins in terms of making sure that it is done consistently and applied in a consistent way --

Nicky Gavron AM: Aggregated.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): -- which is why we set up the London Wildlife Sites Board to make sure that is actually applied.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): The point is, Peter, that even a layperson like me can see that the flora and fauna of London has changed over the last decade or so. I am not *au fait* with what has changed. Whilst I can go to my local borough and probably find a biodiversity officer who is informed, there is a much greater context that we need to cover right from covering the whole of greater London. Surely that needs to really come from here to take up the scope of the changes we are seeing occurring on a decade basis at least.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is why the GLA along with its partners established GiGL, where that repository of information is held. The issue then is about how much information is going into that repository. Some of the information comes from --

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): This is the point because clearly some boroughs are not doing it. Some boroughs do not have an ecology officer. Some boroughs, we are told in our brief, have not updated the condition on their SINCs for almost 20 years.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): They should do.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): The question is: if the GLA is not going to do it, what can the GLA do to get the boroughs to do it? That is another way of putting the question, is it not?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Again, the Biodiversity Strategy and London Plan policies say that the frameworks are in place and boroughs should be collecting that information to make informed decisions so that when it comes to planning decisions the borough needs to have the information to make informed decisions. That is the information it needs to gather. The GLC and the GLA in the days when the rolling survey was done completed a complete baseline of habitats across London. That work was done by the London Ecology Unit and finished by the GLA. That baseline was provided. The issue is about who needs to do updating of the information. Is it the GLA? Is it the boroughs? Most of the Government guidance says it is a borough responsibility, just as it is in other parts of the country where county

councils and district councils share that responsibility in terms of updating the information through Local Plans.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): There are a lot of things that are other people's responsibility. It is a question of how you make them do it.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): What I will do is just quote the original Biodiversity Strategy:

"The Mayor is committed, as an important part of this Strategy, to a rolling programme of re-survey to keep the information on London's habitats updated every ten years. This will allow the Mayor to monitor trends in the changes to our habitats."

Given you are just updating the Biodiversity Strategy, you have not fundamentally changed that commitment, have you? Otherwise you would have to redo the whole Biodiversity Strategy altogether.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is a reality in terms of the resource available to do that. As John [Archer] said, it was actually a very expensive operation.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Resources. I am glad that is where we have got to and that is what it was. There has always been an issue about resources, has there not, here?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is not entirely an issue of resources because, as John [Archer] was pointing out in terms of doing the habitat surveys in the rolling programme, it is a question of whether you survey every piece of green space in London every ten years. Woodlands, for example, do not change that rapidly. When boroughs are doing their own updated surveys, some do samples and so they pick the habitats that are most likely to change, things like grasslands. You do not need to do it every ten years. There are other ways you can collect the information you need to inform decisions.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): Other ways of doing it, John [Archer]; is that true?

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): John [Archer] said earlier if you did not reintroduce the full survey you should at least introduce a survey of the most important, the metropolitan sites, which we know are about 100. Is that something the Mayor could look to do? Presumably the resources to do that would be significantly less than the whole piece if it was just focusing on the 100 --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I cannot make that commitment right now but it is something we can take away.

Nicky Gavron AM: We have a State of the Environment report, which is, Peter, biannual or triannual?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is every two to three years.

Nicky Gavron AM: Two to three years. That is looking at how our actions and our political decisions are worsening or improving the environment. What questions are there in that about biodiversity? What trends do we monitor in the light of those questions?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The trends we monitor are bird trends. Again, that goes back to an issue about data. You have to have a reasonable amount of data. We monitor bird trends. We get information from the British Trust for Ornithology every three or four years about bird trends. That is largely because that is the only meaningful dataset we can collect a lot of information from. We use information from Natural England in terms of SSSI assessment.

The last State of the Environment report did an assessment based on management of SINC's. Actually, more SINC's were being managed in London than elsewhere in the country. That had been increased and that is boroughs' own reporting of management of sites. The last three State of the Environment reports have painted a reasonably positive picture in terms of the state of London's biodiversity and the state of London SINC's. That is based on the evidence you can gather. There has probably been a decline in reptiles but we do not have comparable data. Anecdotally there is no doubt there has been a decline in reptiles. Of those things that we can actually measure, the story in London is reasonably good compared to the rest of the country.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): John, do you want to come back on what Peter has just said?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): I wanted to make it clear that I was not suggesting that the GLA's own staff were going to go out and do it and nor was I suggesting that physically the GLA is the only organisation that is capable of commissioning a survey. It is just that if we want an even London-wide survey it has to be a London-wide body that does it unless you have some way of forcing boroughs that do not want to do it to do it, which you have not. Practically, the GLA is the only organisation that could do it.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): It is the only body that has the statutory responsibility as well, from my reading of the responsibilities in the original GLA Act.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): To underline the importance of collecting this sort of data, do any of the guests want to comment on why it is so important that we do get this kind of data on a regular basis? Kathy, I know the species that you are concerned with in particular we have very little data about.

Kathy Wormald (Chief Executive Officer, Froglife): We have very little data. Obviously the data is important so that we can see what the trend is and whether they are declining or doing well. The other thing that is really important for us with data like this is we do, like the Wildlife Trust and stuff, a lot of habitat work. It is important for us to know what species, where the species are and where the work should be targeted. Otherwise we are potentially - as I said, most of our money comes from donors - spending donors' money on areas that may not be as important for us to do work on as some other areas.

A few years back we ran a project that was called Great Crested Newts Revisited in London and we revisited sites that had been surveyed in the 1980s to establish the current status of the great crested newts. If my memory serves me, we visited 12 sites and we found that only two sites still had a population of great crested newt. It did enable us to go into the other sites and to do habitat work in the hope of encouraging the species to come back. That is why it is really important that we have data so that we know where to target or work basically and we also can follow the trends for the species.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Mathew, do you want to add --

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): I just wanted to add one very quick point. We have just carried out the re-surveys of two boroughs' SINC systems. The majority of each site that we surveyed had changed in a minor kind of way in terms of either improvement or a boundary change. In terms of LDF and Local Plan development, having a very clear understanding so that you can defend a site, perhaps at a public inquiry, is critically important. The issue is to not underestimate the work that is required. I fully agree with what both John [Archer] and Peter [Massini] are saying, but it is essential for Local Plans to make sure the wildlife site systems are up-to-date.

Kathy Wormald (Chief Executive Officer, Froglife): I will also just say that getting data is really important when development does go for planning. If we do not know what is on a site or if we do not know what the current status of a site is, if something that goes for planning on a site that is adjacent to a wildlife site and we

know what is there, then we can put forward a much strong argument about that planning and the mitigation or whatever they have to put in place. It is vital for informing planning decisions as well.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There is no dissent in terms that we need better data and better quality information. There is no dissent there. The issue is about who collects it and who actually has the resources to pay for it.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): One last point. Surely there are third parties that can play a part? I can think of two straight away: The Royal Parks with such a landholding and the City of London. Essentially though, it will still need the GLA to bring that all the bits together.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): They do. The Royal Parks and the City of London provide all their data to GiGL. They are actually quite well resourced in terms of updating their information. It is not a black-and-white picture that there is no data being collected. There is a lot of data being collected. The issue is that some boroughs collect very little and some boroughs collect quite a lot. There is an inconsistency there. Given that a lot of data is collected by consultants when they are putting in planning applications, there is also an issue about how much of that information gets deposited with an authority.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): The important thing really is that the politicians will come and go and the political colour of this place may change but we just need a record of what those changes are so that Londoners can say, "That is what London was like at the beginning of the century in 2010 and 2020". That is where the GLA's, as an institution, responsibility is.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We have fulfilled that responsibility in terms of establishing GiGL. GiGL did not exist ten years ago. It has now been established as that record centre, which is a lot of work not just for the GLA but for our partners. Having that repository is a big step forward. That came out of the Biodiversity Strategy. It is not as if we are doing nothing but there are a lot of gaps, clearly.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): It is just how you fill those gaps.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Finally, before we move off this subject, an awful lot of boroughs are coming together to share commissioning of services with their neighbours and other boroughs. There is almost a case here where we have gone from one organisation commissioning a survey across the whole of London to the expectation at least, whether it is happening or not, 33 organisations separately commissioning surveys across different bits of London. Is there not an argument that says in terms of economies of scale in getting the best price for getting this job done it is much more efficient either for the boroughs to come together and jointly do it or, indeed, for the GLA to either do it or facilitate that happening and make sure we get proper data collected universally across London?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): That is happening as boroughs more and more start looking at those shared services. Four boroughs in southwest London are coming together now in terms of their parks service, in terms of contracts, etc, as well. That mechanism does actually make it cheaper and more targeted in terms of the survey information you gather.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It has just struck me that at the moment we have the worst possible world. We have boroughs trying to do it individually, which is both expensive and patchy and they are not getting the right data.

Nicky Gavron AM: In the last administration, we launched – and it was incredibly popular – a Wild Web so that we could crowd source identification of wild sites. It had more hits than virtually anything else we had ever put out. I do not know why it was taken off. Peter, why was it taken off?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): My understanding is it was a separate microsite and there was a decision taken corporately there should not be separate microsites. All that information was provided to GiGL, which holds all that information. It has not disappeared; it is still held by GiGL. We have worked with GiGL in the last two years to turn that into a more publicly facing site and so there is now iGiGL.

Nicky Gavron AM: GiGL have this?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Yes. They have now produced things at iGiGL, which you can get information from.

Nicky Gavron AM: It is not in any way to say that what we have just been talking about is not very valid, but that is another way of getting extra information.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): We must move on now. The next area we are moving on to is gardens and private green space in particular. Tony Arbour is going to lead off on this area.

Tony Arbour AM: I have always taken the view that you are nearer to God in a garden than anywhere else on earth.

Murad Qureshi AM (Deputy Chair): A cricket pitch, I would say.

Tony Arbour AM: You are quite near to God in a garden. Anyway, I am interested in knowing what effective protection there can be that could be introduced by the Mayor either through the planning process or in some other way. I have looked through our reports and notes on the amount of green space that is lost. It does refer to the large amount of space that has been lost because of hard standings in front gardens and things like that. It might be, might it not, that one simple thing the planning authorities could do is to say that off-street car parking that is provided by the introduction of parking control zones must be permeable?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): That has changed. If you now want to park your car in your front garden, you have to provide a permeable surface.

Tony Arbour AM: Who has legislated for that?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is changing in national legislation but applied by boroughs. To enable you to park your car in your front garden, you need to apply for a drop kerb. When you apply for the drop kerb, the local authority can insist that your space is permeable.

Tony Arbour AM: Do you know I did not know that? Is that not an extraordinary thing? There you are: blissful ignorance.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): The unfortunate thing is that it is quite a recent change and actually most of it has already happened.

Tony Arbour AM: That would account for why I do not know about it. If that can be done, what other things could be done to protect private gardens?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): There was a change in the London Plan. We did a piece of work with the London Wildlife Trust and GiGL about five years ago looking at loss of garden space, which identified there was a significant of garden vegetation being lost. That report actually identified it was not the planning process which had primarily altered; it was just changes in the way people managed their gardens and individual homeowners deciding to change the way they manage their gardens. There was recognition that some of that was as a result of planning and consequently there was a change to London Plan policy that allows boroughs, where they can prove there has been a loss of garden space, to apply Local Plan policy to prevent the loss of garden space by development. That planning policy is available to the London boroughs as a consequence of London Plan policy changes.

The reality is that most of those changes in gardens are nothing to do with planning. It is to do with individual preference in terms of the way gardens are managed. That is something you cannot legislate for.

Tony Arbour AM: A bloke who has a bonfire - and I am a big fan of bonfires - is bad news. Is that right?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is not bonfires. It is about putting up bigger garden sheds. It is about putting down patios and that kind of stuff. None of those require planning permission. That is a choice you take as an individual homeowner whether you want concrete in your garden rather than trees and grass.

Tony Arbour AM: Is the recent amendment that had been made to the planning regulations, which have been extended only this week, about extensions and sheds and things like that going to create additional harm?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It could do but, again, you can use London Plan policy to restrict that development if you can prove there is a significant loss of garden space in a neighbourhood or a borough.

Tony Arbour AM: You have referred to boroughs implementing specific policies on back garden development and certainly a borough I am familiar with has done that. How do you know this? Are you monitoring this? Is the GLA monitoring this as a routine exercise?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We cannot monitor changes in individual back gardens over --

Tony Arbour AM: No, clearly, you cannot. I am talking about monitoring the boroughs that actually have policies that say that they wish to specifically protect --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): We monitor it in terms of when LDF documents come for the London Plan so that you can check those LDFs. Again, it is a power that boroughs can apply if they choose to. It is not something that is very specific in the London Plan. It is about local evidence. It is about demonstrating there is a local requirement to apply that policy.

The GLA monitors a number of different things as a result of London Plan policy through the London Development Database. We monitor loss of urban space. We do not currently monitor things like an increase in the number of green roofs or the amount of habitat created because the London Development Database requires a two-thirds vote from boroughs about additional monitoring requirements. When we have asked for things like green roofs to be monitored or habitat creation to be monitored, the boroughs have not voted in sufficient numbers to put that into the London Development Database and there is a cost issue for that programme.

Tony Arbour AM: Is there anything practical that could be done to protect London's gardens? I calculate that back gardens are 6% of the open space of London. Does that sound about right?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is a significant amount of land, yes. It is largely about encouraging awareness and encouraging people to manage the space that they own in the most sympathetic way. Many people choose to manage their gardens in a different way. We cannot start mandating the way people manage their gardens.

Tony Arbour AM: Does anyone else have a view on what the GLA could do?

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Other than plant --

Tony Arbour AM: Practically, indeed.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Practically, yes. An awful lot of gardeners watch these television makeover programmes with Alan Titchmarsh [gardener and television presenter]. They are always putting in decking, patios and things. It needs one of those that is wilding gardens rather than making them formal. Other than encouraging people, I do not think there is much the GLA can do on this one.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): There is an issue of leadership perhaps. We as London Wildlife Trust and many other non-governmental organisations have done a lot of work to try to promote sympathetic management of gardens but discussions with the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) suggest we are not a nation of gardeners. We have this myth that we are a nation of gardeners but the majority of people do not garden. Gardening requires confidence, time, skill, etc, and obviously often with the complications of land ownership and use that we have in London in terms of housing estates, multi-occupancy, blocks of flats, etc, there is an issue that people do not actually have legitimacy to influence the spaces in which they live.

We have tried many things and we are still going to try through our Garden a for Living London campaign, which is on our website providing simple things people can do, but ultimately it is about recognising what one's garden is within the context of London and therefore where it fits into the mosaic of open spaces: what I do in terms of taking the tree from my garden and what impact that has on perhaps the bird populations in that mosaic of gardens. One of the things we are exploring is looking at neighbourhood clusters to raise awareness and to undertake things on a street-by-street basis rather than a scattergun approach across the city as a whole.

We would like to revisit the dataset we looked at in 2008/09. There is obviously a resource implication there because whilst that looked at a very clear change in terms of where there is vegetation or no vegetation, what we were not able to really explore because of the time and details required was whether other criteria are at play here. Was there something related to tenure; was there something related to the age and structure of the gardens, whether larger gardens were more likely to remain large, smaller gardens more likely to be concreted over? It was all that kind of stuff. Also, now that it is now 2015, we have another eight years pretty much of data that we could look at in terms of the trend we are seeing. Are we bottoming out or is the trend continuing?

Tony Arbour AM: How extraordinary. I thought we had done lots of surveys. I thought the GLA had done surveys and certainly boroughs have done surveys - definitely housing developers do - of what people want. They want gardens, which appears to be entirely contrary to what you have been saying. You were talking about the myth.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): They want outdoor space.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): They want outdoor space but they do not necessarily want gardens which they are then responsible for managing. We have to recognise - and this is from the RHS - that we are living in a time-poor society. People do not have the time that perhaps their grandparents had to spend gardening. There is also the issue of the confidence and knowledge and expertise that is required.

We also know that from my previous experience working with a Housing Association that there was a design not to create new developments with gardens because there was the issue of responsibility of having to deal with the gardens that were not managed. There was a desire to actually create non-garden space.

Tony Arbour AM: Can I ask what evidence there is in terms of the trends in gardening? Is there evidence that the quality of garden space in terms of biodiversity is declining? Are there fewer ponds full of frogs and newts? Is the garden space lower quality now as a result of trends in gardening and the use it was ten years ago?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): I do not think we can draw too many conclusions at the moment. There is one BUGS [Biodiversity of Urban Garden Space] surveys in Sheffield that was followed up in the cities of Edinburgh and Bristol and Cardiff which looked at the landscape importance of gardens for biodiversity. One of the things that completely surprised the researchers there was that Sheffield had 10,000 garden ponds; it completely blew their minds in terms of there was a resource there that was clearly under the radar. They have not followed that survey up on whether the 10,000 gardens in Sheffield in 2000 are still there now. Likewise, what we looked at was a time span between 1998/99 and 2006/07 that showed that a million trees had gone and 3,000 hectares of vegetation. One could argue that you could make a deduction from that, but there is no clear evidence other than that quantity which in itself --

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): The last time we did surveys it was going in the wrong direction, but we have not done the surveys recently enough to know what the --

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): What we have not been able to do and it would probably be impossible to do in terms of looking at people's garden ponds. The survey that was done was the work that went into the London planning process with the London Wildlife Trust and was using aerial photographs to make an assessment of the loss of vegetation. The information that is in your report and in the Garden City report is basically saying there has been a loss of vegetation in gardens. Some people may have put in ponds and there may be some sort of enhancements there but broadly it is a lot of vegetation. That is the landscape scale effect of trees and shrubs; that has been in decline as a consequence of the way people manage their gardens.

It just struck me actually in terms of what Mathew [Frith] said of the review of the London Plan. That dataset and that review is probably something we potentially could do with in London to look at whether the trend is still continuing. Although, again, what you then do through the planning process is very limited.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Just finally before we move off this area of private space, the one planning power I suppose boroughs have that does cover private space of course is tree preservation orders (TPOs). That struck me. I do not know whether is any evidence to show that boroughs are doing fewer tree preservation orders than they used to or whether those powers are being used effectively by boroughs to protect tree numbers.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): I do not think so. The TPO legislation is still quite robust and still used quite robustly by local authorities. I have no evidence to suggest there has been a decline in the use of TPOs or that TPOs are being ignored any more than they used to be.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): We have not seen a net loss of TPOs in London?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Not that I am aware of.

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): There is a patchiness in the boroughs. Islington, for example, is very strong on getting TPOs placed on both its tree stock and private tree stock. Other London boroughs are perhaps not so prone to doing that.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): I know it is an area that my borough has been slightly lax on in recent years and it is just this year doing a survey, which is somewhat overdue, of our existing TPO trees and next year going along and doing another survey to look for trees that should be TPO'd. Otherwise, TPOs have been purely reactive.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): It is one area of planning where citizen power has actually been quite powerful.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It is not a power that is being used strategically to protect particular garden land where there are trees. It strikes me that, by proxy, by protecting the tree, you can protect the land around it.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Yes. You can use TPOs to protect a group of trees in a back garden but it is a bit more difficult to apply that because you have to demonstrate it meets the TPO requirements. You can use it. Clever TPO officers do use it occasionally.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): You have to be able to see them from the back garden. You have to be able to see them from the public realm.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Good, OK. I am going to move us on to the last area because we are running short of time, as ever. We have talked an awful lot about some of the challenges but a lot of this is suffering from the era of public spending cuts and austerity we have faced in recent years. How can a strategic biodiversity policy be properly implemented into a local area in particular in the face of all these public spending cuts? Perhaps, John, I do not know if you want to comment on this area first. It is a challenge, I imagine.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): It is indeed a challenge. It is something not only within the London Biodiversity Forum but the Association of Local Government Ecologists has been talking about this a lot. No one has come up with a definitive answer. There are various things that work well in some areas. In Dorset, where very few of the districts have ecologists, the county provides a service that is paid for not only to the boroughs but directly to developers to effectively sign off their biodiversity mitigation. I am not sure I would advocate that one and I do not particularly know how that might work in London.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): We used to have a London Ecology Unit.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): We did indeed, yes.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Probably lots of people on the panel were employed by it.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Three of us here used to work for it.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): It strikes me that either through boroughs sharing ecologists or through a London Ecology Unit that boroughs could buy into you could create the expertise at a lower cost than each borough having to employ their own ecologist, could you not?

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): This is part of the reason we established the Green Infrastructure Task Force to look at these issues. The London Green Grid looks at how you manage parks and green spaces, not necessarily on borough geographies but on more meaningful geographies within a catchment scale. It is about how you work through those different issues around governance and branch arrangements. The Wandle Valley Regional Park, for example, has been established by four boroughs in southwest London to look at how they manage that network in a more strategic way, in a more joined-up way and that is partly driven by shared services but also partly about how we actually maximise the opportunities of managing a suite of spaces in a more integrated way. It takes a bit of thinking through because you have to unpick some existing frameworks but that is the direction of travel and also identifying what other resources you can apply to deliver the outcome.

Despite the fact there is a smaller public sector budget, there is still a lot of money in health budgets that could be applied to improving green spaces. The other day the Green Infrastructure Task Force was talking to the Director of Public Health England about how public health budgets could be used to improve parks and green spaces because it is delivering health outcomes. It is about having those conversations in those relationships. You start cross-fertilising the different sectors.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Does anyone know if there are any boroughs in London that are sharing an ecologist? The tri-boroughs have one each, presumably, or share a team, presumably, in Kensington and Chelsea.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): Yes, Kensington and Chelsea's ecologist does a little bit in Hammersmith but not much. I think that is right. Hammersmith only has a very small amount of the ecologist's time.

Peter Massini (Principal Policy and Programme Officer, GLA): Certainly where planning services are being merged, if you have an ecologist currently working in one of those planning services, the chances are they are then probably servicing the crossroads.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): They will be supporting the planning process across. There are certainly mechanisms there that boroughs could look to.

Finally a question and I open this up to others as well. What would you like to see from the Mayor? It is a wider point to planning in terms of leadership and guidance to maximise biodiversity expertise in the capital. I start off with Mathew and then I will ask the rest of the panel to comment. This is the final point. What would you like the Mayor to do to maximise the leadership of biodiversity in London?

Mathew Frith (Director of Policy and Planning, London Wildlife Trust): I suppose one of the issues from the Trust's perspective - and I just want to pick up on what was just discussed - is that we are seeing a fragmentation in some ways of structures. Before, it was quite simple: the local authorities, the GLA and before that the GLC. We now have merging sub-regional partnerships and we have catchment improvement groups being developed for the various rivers and, from an NGO's perspective, it is really challenging in being able to influence and fit into all that. The NGO community is actually an area that I wanted to make sure that the Committee is aware of how much collectively we do in London to manage biodiversity and to help protect it. These changes in structures can be quite challenging for us to meet just on that basis.

In terms of leadership, it goes back in some ways to making sure that we do not lose sight of the fact that London, when it started doing this stuff about 30 years ago - with the GLC and the London Wildlife Trust and

others and then the London Ecology Unit and now the GLA and a much larger number of NGOs - was actually at the forefront of urban nature conservation. We set the pattern with the SINC system. The wildlife site system was the one that was then followed by other conurbations and other counties in the UK.

As Peter [Massini] has stated, whilst a lot of the work has been done and is in place, we would like to see a little bit more leadership in terms of championing what wildlife, what nature there is in London, how some of that is going to be under pressure and under threat and what their commitment is either through their direct responsibilities or by working with partners, whether they are local authorities or NGOs. Also the thing that was not in place 20 years ago is a much stronger, private sector in terms of the consultancies but also what some of the companies such as Thames Water and Network Rail are doing in terms of their responsibilities for wildlife and how they can have a role to play.

I would like to see the Mayor be more of a facilitator as much as anything in championing it. Bearing in mind we have seen two Mayors so far with very different ways of doing things and we will have a new Mayor in just over a year's time, we want to help set that process in terms of looking at what London will look like in 2020 as much for nature as it is for people.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): It is leadership, with so many different priorities on the agenda, to actually say nature is up there very high and that it is contributing to other things like health. In terms of specifics, it might be appropriate perhaps for the Mayor to consider some of the other leadership that has been going on around the country like the Construction Industry Research and Information Association (CIRIA). Last year it launched the Biodiversity Interest Group (BIG) Awards, which are about biodiversity improvement. It is about development projects where people just put in case studies to say, "We did what we needed and we did a bit extra", and there was a national award for the ones that they said among those case studies were the best. To actually have that at a London level.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): A celebration of the best would be obviously something very powerful.

Claire Wansbury (Associate Director of Ecology, Atkins): Yes.

Kathy Wormald (Chief Executive Officer, Froglife): Pretty much what has already been said: the Mayor can be an ambassador for nature. The NGOs do a lot of work in London for nature. As I said, it all comes to grant funding but nature or wildlife conservation is the lowest funded sector amongst all the sectors. There are a lot of very wealthy foundations based in London and the Mayor could do a lot more with them, encouraging them to fund wildlife conservation and also the companies. There is a lot of business in London and he could do something about generating some money for us as well.

John Archer (Vice Chair, LBBF): I would certainly agree with what has been said. There are quite a number of proposals in the Biodiversity Strategy where the Mayor said he would influence and encourage things which are totally outside the remit of his direct powers. The response in the update to all of this seems to be, "That is not our thing". Yes, the Mayor does need to go out and really push this because he has a lot more influence than he has direct power and he needs to use that for biodiversity, whether it is pushing the Government for better legislation and - although I should not say it with a borough hat on - pushing boroughs harder to make sure they all have ecological expertise to implement those policies. It is that sort of leadership the Mayor needs in addition to funding the metropolitan site work I talked about earlier.

Stephen Knight AM (Chair): Thank you very much. I cannot really put that question to you, Peter [Massini]! We are going to finish there. I want to thank our guests very much indeed for coming this morning and some of them have travelled some distance, I know. Thank you very much indeed for your contributions.

