

## **ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE**

**14 JUNE 2021**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	Progress Update on Biodiversity Actions
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	Director of Neighbourhood Services

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

Committee approved the Council's Environment & Climate Emergency Policy at its previous meeting in March and since then officers have been putting arrangements in place and taking action, to progress the Policy's objectives and commitments. This report provides Committee with an update on progress being made with the biodiversity aspect of the Council's Environment & Climate Emergency Policy.

The report focuses on 2 of the Council's biodiversity commitments within the policy, the 'Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy,' which was launched in July 2020 and 'Transforming our Open Spaces and Enhancing Biodiversity,' including the current position with the development of the Council's pollinator plan for roadside verges and parks green spaces and the new approach to grounds maintenance with a blend of reduced grass cutting and cessation of maintenance regimes being implemented during 2021-2022.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee is recommended to: -

1. note and comment on the contents of the report on the progress being made against the Council's biodiversity commitments.
2. note the development of the Council's Pollinator Plan which will be presented to Committee for approval at its September meeting.

This report provides Committee with an update and is not a key decision.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATION**

- 1.1 The Council recognises importance of the natural environment and the role that it can play in tackling climate change. This Committee participated in the development of the Environment & Climate Emergency Policy and set the commitments the Council should make in response to the Council's 2019 declaration of an environment and climate emergency. When approving the Environment and Climate Emergency Policy, Committee confirmed that they regard protecting the environment and promoting biodiversity are key aspects of the new policy.
- 1.2 The Council launched Wirral's Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy in July 2020, with the headline of doubling Wirral's tree canopy cover, at optimum growth, by planting and nurturing over 200,000 trees by 2030. The partnership board established to oversee the Strategy, which is made up of local, regional and national stakeholders, as well as various Council functions, has delivered on many of the strategy's early actions in its first year. This includes planting over 23,000 trees despite the lockdown restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 1.3 Insect pollinator species have experienced national declines, in part due to the loss and fragmentation of habitat space. The Council is developing a Pollinator Plan to increase the wildlife value of roadside verges, parks and open spaces, to provide food, shelter and nesting sites for pollinator species in addition to supporting a wider range of wildlife including plants, mammals and birds. The Council has now identified and established over 50 pollinator sites, which are now subject to reduced or grass cutting.

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 The report provides Committee with an update on biodiversity aspect of the recently approved Environment & Climate Emergency Policy. However, the Council has declared an environment and climate emergency, recognising the urgent need for action to address and plan for the changes to the environment and climate. Therefore, the alternative of not making the necessary environment and biodiversity interventions would not address the Council's declared emergency.

### **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

#### **TRANSFORMING OUR OPEN SPACES AND ENHANCING BIODIVERSITY**

The Council and its partners have a range of opportunities and alignments this year and beyond, to make significant progress with transforming open spaces and enhancing biodiversity. The challenge to all those involved is to ensure such opportunities are identified and harnessed to maximise the benefit. Committee has recognised previously that the post Covid-19 pandemic recovery phase, now being

entered, is a major 'green reset' opportunity and a chance to do things differently and set new priorities going forward. The Climate Emergency Team will focus on bringing colleagues, partners and stakeholders together to ensure joined up thinking and alignment of strategies, including those for Growth and Regeneration, the Local Plan and Pandemic Recovery, to progress action against the Council's biodiversity commitment.

### **Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy**

An example of the new approach and collaboration is the joint work between Planning and Climate Emergency officers, on the consideration of a joint environmental action plan as part of the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy. Such an action plan will be used to coordinate the implementation and delivery of a range of environmental improvement projects arising from the new Local Plan, Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy, Pollinator Plan and others, including:

- The identification of project areas for offsite biodiversity net gain contributions from new development;
- The identification of project areas for coastal recreational visitor management;
- The identification of potential improvements to existing open spaces; and
- Resource and management implications

Committee will be updated on the development of this crucial piece of work, which will be designed to ensure full alignment of planning and development objectives with the Council's Environment and Climate Emergency Policy.

### **Pollinator Plan**

- 3.1 The Council has been developing a Pollinator Plan for some time with Parks & Countryside Services implementing an initial action plan in 2018, to review established mowing regimes and consider adopting the practices of 'Plantlife's Road Verge and Wildlife Management Guidelines.'
- 3.2 In 2019, Council resolved to develop the Pollinators Plan through a series of pilot sites across the borough. The 2 initial pilot sites identified were grass verges at the corner of Plymyard Avenue and Eastham Rake. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in these pilots being postponed until 2021 and are still planned for this year.
- 3.4 In Spring 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic and full lockdown resulted in a delay in starting the grass cutting season of approximately 8 weeks. This meant that the grass across the borough had been allowed to grow much longer than in previous years, which in turn enabled certain native wildflowers to grow and prosper in the unmaintained verges. This unexpected outcome of the lockdown generated a lot of positive public feedback, people wanted to see an expansion of rewilded areas to enhance wildlife and supported a reduction in grass cutting. As a result, people were encouraged to send in requests for locations to be considered for inclusion in an expanded number of sitters for reduced maintenance.
- 3.6 Officers have collated this feedback and working alongside partners (including Wirral Wildlife Trust) a list of 59 pollinator friendly verges has been identified for establishing this year. The grass verges that are left to grow (re-wild) have had signs

installed to inform residents of their purpose and have had an edge border of 1.5m cut and/or pathways to maintain access and sightlines. Initial observations of the pollinator sites suggest that they have become established and have proven popular with the public. However ongoing work is needed to promote the purpose of the pollinator sites and further public awareness campaigns are planned.

- 3.7 In addition there has been positive developments for wildflowers and pollinators along the Rock Ferry bypass section of the A41. In April 850 plug plants were planted with another 3000 plug plants and approximately 4000m<sup>2</sup> of seeding to be sown in May.
- 3.8 Parks and Countryside Services are continuing to identify and promote suitable pollinator sites in parks and open spaces across Wirral with Officers exploring how they can further work with residents, councillors, and partners such as Friends of Parks Groups and Wirral Wildlife Trust. Officers will now continue to develop the Council's Pollinator Plan ensuring it sits under and is fully aligned with the Environment and Climate Emergency Policy and present it for approval to a future Committee meeting.

### **Reduced Grass Cutting Regime**

- 3.9 Sustainable grounds maintenance operations are key to driving the biodiversity objectives by encouraging pollinators, sustainable re-wilding, and reduced levels of carbon emitting grounds maintenance. Aligning with the Pollinators Plan and commitment to promote biodiversity, the development of the reduced grass cutting and cessation of maintenance regimes are being implemented across Wirral for the 2021/2022 season. This new maintenance programme means that some green spaces will have reduced maintenance or may no longer be maintained these new regimes align with the objectives of the Pollinators Plan. This includes the frequency of grass mowing being reduced from 13 cuts per year to 10 cuts per year for all general grass areas in parks and public open spaces and the cessation of maintenance at 42 Amenity Greenspaces and 85 Grass Verge sites.
- 3.10 For locations where longer grass growth would be inappropriate, previous maintenance frequencies remain in place. This includes provision for sports pitches, bowling greens, play areas and ornamental gardens. For roadside verges, which if left to grow would cause roads safety concerns, sightlines have been created by cutting a corridor edge along the verge. Such sites will be subject to regular inspection to ensure they remain safe and comply with statutory duties. The unmaintained grass areas are providing opportunities for pollinator sites and locations for tree planting.

### **'No Mow May'**

- 3.11 In addition to the reduced grass cutting regime, the Council is participating in 'Plantlife's' national 'No Mow May' campaign. This involves the cessation of grass mowing in general areas of parks for over a month, to encourage bees, butterflies, and wildlife to thrive in parks. The cessation of grass mowing will run until the mid-June; however, pathways have been cut where required and these will be maintained to provide walking routes. Signage has been erected at each site to provide details of the No Mow May campaign, including the benefits of leaving grass

areas to grow during this period. Sport pitches, bowling greens, churchyards, cemeteries, play areas, outdoor gyms, and formal areas (i.e., Hamilton Square) are not part of the No Mow May campaign and being maintained as normal.

## **WIRRAL'S TREE, WOODLAND AND HEDGEROW STRATEGY**

- 3.12 Wirral's Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy was approved and launched by the Council in July 2020, following collaborative work with local stakeholders WiT (Wirral Initiative for Trees), and regional and national stakeholders such as Mersey Forest and the Tree Council. At the time of launch the strategy received acknowledgement for providing best practice in demonstrating clear linkage to climate emergency and the function trees perform in response and also for the collaborative and joint work undertaken by stakeholders to produce the strategy.
- 3.13 The organisations and stakeholders who worked together to produce the strategy have since formed an partnership board to establish the strategy and drive action. Since September last year the advisory board has been meeting regularly to oversee a work programme of early action.
- 3.14 One of the headlines in the Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy is to plant 210,000 trees across Wirral in the 10 years to 2030 and in doing so eventually doubling Wirral's tree canopy cover. Since the Covid-19 pandemic began a total of 20,432 trees have been planted, with a further 3,600 to be planted over the coming weeks. This includes over 1700 trees planted through the Urban tree Challenge Fund and over 10,000 trees planted by schools through the Eco Schools programme. Therefore, the total number of trees planted in Year 1 of the strategy will be 24,032; which exceeds our annual goal. Preparations are now underway to develop the programme for the next planting season which commences in November.
- 3.15 The Council has recently recruited a Tree Landscape Manager whose role will be to plan for and coordinate future tree planting programmes, including land identification, tree sourcing and provision of equipment. However, an early priority for the Tree Landscape Manager will be to establish a community planting and engagement policy and to work with local stakeholders to get local people involved in tree planting. The first tree planting season was successful in terms of numbers of trees planted, however, it highlighted that work is needed to improve resident consultation and involvement which are both vital to the Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy's overall success.
- 3.16 Moving forward into this year, work will be undertaken to progress other aspects of the strategy including raising awareness of the ash dieback disease, promoting the protection and reinstalment of hedgerows, recruiting tree wardens and support for other voluntary roles, the development of tree awareness training for officers and members and the protection of trees and hedgerows from wilful damage.

## **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 There are some financial implications of the development of the Pollinators Plan. There may be a need to purchase additional machinery that can cope with longer grass and removes arisings off site. Grass arising removal is important as it prevents

nutrients from being added back into the soil, which over time is detrimental to native wildflowers.

- 4.2 The Council will still have to maintain the pollinator grass verges (e.g. cutting edge borders and removal of the grass cuttings at least once a year) to ensure wildflowers are not out competed, a saving may be achieved by the modified 'pollinator friendly' mowing of the sites proposed. However, the cost of removing and appropriate disposal of the grass cuttings will take up a proportion of this saving but it is difficult to predict what the cost of the disposal will be at this stage.

## **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The Council has a statutory duty to keep roadside verges cut to a reasonable height to maintain sightlines for road users.

## **6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

- 6.1 The Council's biodiversity commitments do have resource implications and will require changing work practices, new skills and competencies for the workforce and investment in new machinery to address these. It is also essential that the Council delivers an effective public awareness campaign to ensure that residents understand the changes that are occurring to their local environment and how they can contribute and get involved. Community participation in the initiatives and campaigns that will drive biodiversity is essential. All of the actions involved in promoting biodiversity require public involvement and ownership to succeed.

## **7.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

- 7.1 There is a risk that too long grass will hinder sightlines for vehicles along the road network. This risk is mitigated against by careful site selection and by cutting edge borders surrounding long grass.
- 7.2 Trial areas may be unsuccessful in establishing, due to poor weather and other ground factors. The success of the trial sites will be monitored and reviewed throughout.

## **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

- 8.1 Public engagement is welcomed and encouraged throughout, with an on-line form on Wirral Council's website enabling residents to request areas to be assessed for their viability of becoming a pollinator site. The on-line form can be accessed here: <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/environmental-problems/street-care-and-cleaning/pollinators-and-wildflower-sites>
- 8.2 Officers have benefitted from expert advice (for instance Wirral Wildlife Trust and Plantlife) to inform decision making.

## **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 The report provides Committee with an update on progress with biodiversity actions and therefore an equality impact assessment has not been undertaken. However, the Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy was subject to an equality impact assessment prior to launch and the Pollinators Plan will be assessed in preparation for approval.

## **10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The Council's commitment to promoting biodiversity will have a positive impact on the environment, there are tangible carbon offset and sequestration benefits from the delivery of strategies such as the Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy and pollinators plan.
- 10.2 Since the 1930's the UK has lost 97% of its ancient wildflower meadows. Roadside verges in the UK support around 700 species of wildflowers. Wildflowers provide a vital habitat for many bees, butterflies, birds, bats and bugs. Not only do flowering plants provide nectar and pollen for declining pollinators species (especially bees), wildflowers provide an important food source and refuge for many insects. For instance, Dandelions are in the top five of road verge wildflower species that support the highest number of invertebrates, supporting 107 species.
- 10.4 By promoting wildflowers on Wirral's roadside verges and green spaces the Council can provide a valuable habitat for these plant species, which in turn helps all wildlife from the bottom to the top of food chain.

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## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Plantlife “The good verge guide: a different approach to managing our waysides and verges” (2016)

Buglife “Road Verges and their potential for pollinators: A review of costs, benefits and management options” (2019)

Wirral Council's Environment and Climate Emergency Policy (2021)

Wirral's Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Policy (2020)

## SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Environment, Climate Emergency &amp; Transport Committee</b> Environment & Climate Emergency Policy	<b>16<sup>th</sup> March 2021</b>
<b>Environment Overview &amp; Scrutiny Committee</b> Update of Pollinators Action Plan	<b>28<sup>th</sup> November 2019</b>
<b>Full Council</b> Notice of Motion on Pollinators	<b>15<sup>th</sup> July 2019</b>