



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

**Monday, 15 November 2021**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>OPERATION EVALUATION – POLLINATOR PILOT</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES</b>

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

Committee approved the Council's Environment & Climate Emergency Policy in March 2021 since then officers have been putting arrangements in place and taking action, to progress the Policy's objectives and commitments.

The report focuses on providing an operational evaluation of the Pollinator Plan, which supports the Council's biodiversity commitment within the policy, '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, a blend of reduced grass cutting and cessation of maintenance regimes which has been implemented during 2021-2022.

The report seeks to highlight some of the lessons learnt from this year's implementation, which may be used to further develop the Council's Pollinator Plan.

### **RECOMMENDATION/S**

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

1. note and comment on the contents of the report which will be used to develop the Council's Pollinator Plan to be presented to Committee for approval at a future meeting.
2. agree to a workshop for Members, as a part of the development of the Council's Pollinator Plan, to agree future pollinator and cessation sites.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1.1 The Council recognises the 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 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.
- 1.3 Wirral Council has had success in promoting pollinators being recognised last year for its work in this area with a Bees' Needs Champions Awards for the Meadow Restoration Project at Wirral Country Park. Bees play a part in every aspect of the ecosystem, they support the growth of trees, flowers, and other plants, which serve as food and shelters for creatures large and small, Bees contribute to complex, interconnected ecosystems that allow a diverse number of different species to co-exist.
- 1.4 A number of initiatives were implemented for 2021 including: -
- Rewilding (cessation of maintenance) on several amenity greenspaces and highway grass verges.
  - A reduction in the frequency of grass maintenance on all general grass areas in parks and public open spaces, including 'No Mow May'.
  - The designation of some highway verges as Pollinator sites, with a management plan to promote wildflower growth.
- These initiatives are intended to reduce the amount of disturbance to habitats which promote pollinators, provide opportunities for amenity greenspaces to be used in different ways to support re-wilding and reduce the cost of maintaining these areas.
- 1.5 The report seeks to highlight some of the lessons learnt from this year's implementation, which may be used to further develop the Council's Pollinator Plan.

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 This report provides Committee with an operational evaluation of the Pollinator Plan, a part of the response to increasing biodiversity in the recently approved Environment & Climate Emergency Policy. 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**

- 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.
- 3.3 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 sites for reduced maintenance.

#### **Pollinator Sites**

- 3.4 Officers have collated feedback from residents and working alongside partners (including Wirral Wildlife Trust) a list of 59 potential pollinator friendly verges were identified for establishing this year, a list of these is provided in Appendix C. The grass verges that have been designated at Pollinator sites are left to grow and had signs installed to inform residents of their purpose. These areas receive a mown 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. Of the 59 pollinator areas proposed 18 were removed from the scheme as follows: -
  - 11 areas were removed as the verge was too narrow and was therefore not suitable for re-wilding.
  - 4 areas were removed because they were not owned by the Council
  - 1 was removed as unsuitable being the central reservation in a busy carriageway
  - 1 was removed as it was reported as causing a dangerous sight line issue on several occasions.
  - 1 was removed as there were no grass vergesFull details of areas removed from the scheme are included in Appendix C.
- 3.5 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. Since launching the Pollinator Scheme a further 15 areas have been submitted as pollinator sites, these are listed in the table below.

**Table 1: New Submissions for inclusion in the Pollinator Scheme**

Road name	Area
Selkirk Avenue	Eastham
Union Street-Darlington Street	Egremont
Liscard Crescent/Monk Road	Liscard
Liscard Crescent/Mill Road	Liscard
Marlowe Road/Torrington Road	Liscard
Highcroft Avenue	Bebington
Mount Wood Road	Prenton
Price Street	Birkenhead
Upton Bypass	Upton
Latham Way	Spital
Hoole Road	Woodchurch
Stanton Road	Bebington
Dock Road, East Float Quay	Seacombe
Woodside Road	Irby
Oakland Vale (Seacombe Promenade)	New Brighton

- 3.6 5 areas have also been identified through the verge's rewilding scheme, detailed in the table below.

**Table 2: Pollinator Sites from other schemes**

Name	Previous scheme
Frankby Road	Rewilding verges replacement for Bromsgrove Road
Willow Park	Rewilding verges
Greasby Road/Frankby Road	Rewilding verges replacement for Hambledon Drive
Kingfisher Estate	Rewilding verges
Birkenhead Road (Goose Green)	Rewilding verges

- 3.7 Continued engagement with Friends Groups, residents and elected members will form a part of the development of the plan. The Pollinator Plan will be reviewed through its five-year lifespan.
- 3.8 The need to be able to quantify the increase in pollinators over the course of the plan is recognised. A baseline and method of evaluation is required. Voluntary Groups could assist the Council in establishing and monitoring progress in this area.

### **Reduced maintenance and 'No Mow May'**

- 3.9 From April 2021 proposals to reduce the frequency of grass maintenance from 13 cuts per year to 10 cuts per year on all general grass areas in parks and public open spaces were accepted by Council. Key areas where growth would be inappropriate continued to be maintained as normal. This included, sports pitches, bowling greens, play areas and ornamental grass.

- 3.10 As a part of this reduced maintenance throughout the month of May, the council took part in 'No Mow May', a national campaign led by Plantlife. This involved stopping mowing in general grass areas in parks to help our bees, butterflies, and wildlife from the end of April 2021. In Wirral pathways were cut through larger grass areas to provide walking routes, and borders were cut surrounding existing pathways. Signs were erected at each site to inform Wirral residents and users of parks of the benefits of leaving areas to grow during this period. Sport pitches, bowling greens, churchyards, cemeteries, play areas, outdoor gyms, and formal areas (for example, Hamilton Square) were not affected and were maintained as normal.
- 3.11 The responses received from residents, regarding the 'No Mow May' initiative has been largely positive. However, learning points from this pilot would be that signage for 'No Mow May' could be improved with taller, more robust signs being used. Also, to note is that this year grass cutting ceased from the start of May and did not recommence until mid-June, which did create several enquiries. It is therefore proposed to cease cutting from later April to recommence cutting at the start of June.

### **Rewilding (Cessation of maintenance):**

- 3.12 The proposals for the Rewilding (cessation of maintenance) of amenity greenspaces and highway verges recognised that this was a significant change for residents. The Council put forward a list of amenity greenspaces and highway verges for rewilding. Residents and ward members that wanted maintenance to continue were invited to suggest alternative areas, of similar size and within the same ward, that could be swapped for those identified to allow for maintenance to continue. Rewilding areas could also be identified as potential land for tree planting schemes, allotments plots, pollinator site or could be maintained by community groups or residents for the local community to enjoy. The approach and costs of wild flower planting to support converting areas to pollinator sites are currently being investigated.

### **Amenity greenspace rewilding**

- 3.13 A total of 41 amenity greenspaces were listed as rewilding sites, a list of which is provided in Appendix A. Of the 41 amenity greenspaces listed 7 were removed from the scheme as follows: -
- 5 amenity greenspaces were replaced by alternative areas, of similar size and in the same Ward as follows: -
    - Greasby Road amenity greenspace – replaced by a large roadside verge on Arrowebrook Road
    - Hanover Close amenity greenspace – replaced by space in Bidston Court and Tollemache Rec
    - Shorefields Field – replaced by space at Green Lane Field
    - The Grange – replaced by space at Cross Lane Playing Field
    - Flynn's Piece – replaced by space at Cross Lane Playing Field
  - 1 amenity greenspace, Captain's Pit, has been adopted by residents who have come forward to carry out maintenance.
  - 1 amenity greenspace, Martin Close greenspace, was identified as not being in Council ownership and was therefore removed from this scheme.
- Of the remaining amenity greenspaces listed 10 greenspaces required amendments to be made to the initial proposal, these amendments are detailed in Appendix A but

may be summarised as mowing the edges 3 amenity greenspaces, edge mowing and cutting pathways in a further 2 amenity greenspaces and reducing maintenance in 5 areas with other substitute locations being identified.

3.14 Through this exercise several areas of amenity greenspace have been identified for potential inclusion in the Tree Planting scheme. These include: -

- Broadway greenspace
- Ballantyne Drive greenspace
- Bentham Close greenspace
- Boundary Road greenspace
- Hargrave Avenue greenspace
- Lennox Lane greenspace
- Limekiln Lane greenspace
- Shorefields Field

### **Highway verge rewilding**

3.15 A further 85 grass verges were also identified, a list of which is provided in Appendix B, for rewilding. Of the 85 grass verges listed 14 were removed from the scheme as follows: -

- 6 grass verges were replaced by alternative areas, of similar size and in the same Ward as follows: -
  - Mereheath – replaced by an area on Moreton Common
  - Kings Parade Estate – replaced by an area on A554 (Bayswater Road through to B&Q Roundabout
  - Harrow Close – replaced by Bayswater Drive
  - Salacre Crescent – replaced by an area on Upton Bypass
  - Davenham Avenue – replaced by an area on Junction 3
  - Shavington Avenue – replaced by an area on Junction 3
- 5 grass verges were designated as pollinator sites, as follows: -
  - Bromsgrove Road – replaced by Frankby Road as a pollinator site
  - Hambledon Drive – replaced by Greasby Road / Frankby Road as a pollinator site
  - Willow Park – now designated as a pollinator site
  - Kingfisher Estate – now designated as a pollinator site
  - Birkenhead Road (Goose Green) – now designated as a pollinator site
- The grass verge area on Stevenson Drive has been adopted by residents, with perimeter maintenance being undertaken by the Council.
- Thorns Drive Roundabouts were removed from this scheme as roundabouts should not be included in this scheme.
- Fairview Road verges were identified through the scheme as being owned by Magenta and were therefore removed from the scheme.

3.16 Overall, the amount of amenity greenspace and highway verges where rewilding was proposed has been achieved, working closely with residents and elected members to modify, and put forward alternatives as appropriate. It should be noted that the Parks and Countryside service are still receiving enquiries regarding rewilding site and are working with elected members and residents' groups to resolve these. Therefore, the sites outlined above may be subject to further amendment.

- 3.17 Learning points from re-wilding of amenity greenspace and grass verges would include better and earlier communication with elected members and residents regarding the sites proposed in order that alternative options could be considered earlier. Equally better communication of rewilding sites may reduce the number of enquiries received, with some residents being unaware that a specific site had been included and causing some confusion especially with regards to the 'No Mow May' national initiative. A further learning point would be that the selection of sites requires more rigour with some sites being put forward that were not appropriate or owned by the Council.
- 3.18 The rewilding initiative has been a significant change both for residents and for staff. Staff have previously been judged on the neatness of amenity greenspace and grass verges and in line with these expectations have had a rigorous routine for grass cutting. In rewilding these areas concerns have been raised by experienced staff around the council's ability to 'get onto' these spaces in future, to use these spaces for such things as pollinator sites or for tree planting. Therefore, amenity greenspaces and highway verges that have been selected as rewilding sites will receive one cut in the autumn to control growth. Cutting once in autumn would have less impact on the insects and wildlife the Council is seeking to encourage than at other times and allow for any future alternative uses for the space to be implemented more easily.
- 3.19 Most negative enquiries have been received from residents where the grass verge immediately outside residents' houses have been selected for rewilding. Going forward the recommendation would be to avoid selecting sites immediately outside residents' houses.

### **Lessons Learnt**

- 3.20 Several important lessons have been learnt from this year's initiatives which will be incorporated into the future delivery of the Pollinator Plan. These are outlined below:-

#### **Site Selection**

- Earlier communication with elected members and residents regarding the sites proposed in order that alternative options could be considered prior to implementation.
- The selection of sites requires more rigour to ensure that the sites put forward are appropriate and owned by the Council.
- It is recommended that the selection of grass verge sites for rewilding avoid selecting sites immediately outside residents' houses.

#### **Communication**

- Clearer communication of rewilding sites may reduce the number of enquiries received. Some residents were unaware that a specific site had been included, with some confusing rewilding with the 'No Mow May' national initiative.
- Develop an approach for the community to be consulted and engaged in process of selecting sites for a particular scheme, which builds upon the active involvement from elected members.
- Signage was introduced into areas to raise awareness of 'No Mow May' and 'Rewilding' areas. In some areas signage was removed and in others

it has become obscured. A learning point would be that signage made from robust, recycled material and fixed to taller stakes.

#### **Maintenance**

- In relation to 'No Mow May', grass cutting should cease in mid to late April and recommence from the 1<sup>st</sup> of June.

#### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

- The need to be able to quantify the increase in pollinators over the course of the plan is recognised. A baseline and method of evaluation is required. Voluntary Groups could assist the Council in establishing and monitoring progress in this area.

### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 Two budget proposals were linked to these activities for 2021/22, these were: -
- NEI1 - Reduction in grass cutting and maintenance of roadside verges and all Parks and Open Spaces
  - NEI8 - Amenity space and grass verge maintenance cessation (rewilding)
- 4.2 The total savings to be achieved was stated as £350,000 for 2021/22. This was to be achieved through the deletion of several posts (both permanent and seasonal) from grass cutting operations and was in addition to savings to be realised through the recent Parks & Countryside Restructure. To date £326,175 has been achieved against the target of £350,000.
- 4.3 To implement this budget option, an initial capital investment of £100k was agreed to upgrade the machinery to handle longer grass, which would be in line with business-as-usual asset replacement expenditure, every 10 years. Parks Managers are currently identifying the machinery to be purchased including flail mowers rather than cylinder mowers.

### **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 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.

## **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

- 8.1 The reduction in grass cutting and rewilding of specific amenity greenspaces and highway verges was included in the budget consultation for the 2021/22 budget, undertaken between November 2020 and January 2021. There was support for these options from residents when balanced against other reductions in services.
- 8.2 The Council website detailed the reduced maintenance, including 'No Mow May' scheme and rewilding in order to inform residents of these initiatives, a link to which is provided below: -  
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/environmental-problems/street-care-and-cleaning/grass-cutting-and-ground-maintenance#rewilding%20areas%20and%20roads%20list>  
Through this web page residents were able to raise issues with the sites selected. In addition, elected members have been very active in putting forward alternative areas for consideration.
- 8.3 The Pollinator Scheme was also published on the Council's webpages: -  
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/environmental-problems/street-care-and-cleaning/pollinators-and-wildflower-sites>  
Through this webpage residents were invited to put forward additional areas as pollinator sites.
- 8.4 All the schemes were featured in Wirral View to raise awareness amongst residents. While the Council encourages residents to use its CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system to log enquiries and elected members are asked to use the Members Portal, often enquiries are received via e-mail. While the service will continue to encourage residents and elected members to use these systems it is difficult to provide a definitive number for the enquiries received for these schemes and sites. However, those rewilding areas that received the most significant number of enquiries have been identified. This information has been included within the lists provided in Appendix A and B for the rewilding sites.

## **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 The report provides the Committee with an operational evaluation of the Pollinator Plan and on progress with biodiversity actions. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken, as a part of the budget options for 2021/22, and details the potential positive and negative impacts arising. Through working closely with residents and elected members Wirral Council has been able to mitigate many of the negative impacts. This has been achieved by swapping rewilding areas, for a similar size area of land within the same Ward or developing mown walkways and edge mowing as required. Wirral Council has also worked with residents who wish to maintain amenity greenspace themselves.
- 9.2 The Equality Impact Assessment is available via this link:  
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>

## **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 Pollinator 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), but wildflowers also 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.
- 10.3 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.

## **11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 Wirral is facing stark economic, social and health inequalities. The Wirral Plan is committed to addressing this. With Community Wealth Building at its heart, the Wirral Plan sets out how to tackle this and makes a major contribution to improving the economic, social and health outcomes of the borough.
- 11.2 Objective 2 of the Community Wealth Building Strategy 2020-2025 is to Create a Generative Economy. Which is '*An economy with a built-in tendency to be to be socially fair and ecologically stable.*' The Pollinator Plan will 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 increase in biodiversity will contribute to the ecological stability and the social and environmental wellbeing of Wirral.

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## **APPENDICES**

- Appendix A – Amenity Greenspace Rewilding Sites
- Appendix B – Highway Verge Rewilding Sites
- Appendix C – Pollinator Sites

## 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)

## SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Environment, Climate Emergency &amp; Transport Committee</b> Progress update on Biodiversity actions	<b>14<sup>th</sup> June 2021</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>