

**LEISURE, ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITY COMMITTEE
24 NOVEMBER 2021**

BRIEFING PAPER

1 Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this briefing paper is to provide Members with information to aid debate on the Motion put forward by Councillor Michaels.

Grassland is one of the most unique habitats for wildlife and pollinators in the UK. 97% of species rich grassland in Hertfordshire has been lost since the 1930's and 48% of species associated with it have noticeably declined since 1970

(1) Hertfordshire has predominately chalk bedrock

(2) which often leads to conditions which support chalk meadows which have been called 'the UK's equivalent of rainforest'

(3). Of the total publicly owned land in the District TRDC owns circa 30%. TRDC resolves to look for opportunities to cease mowing up to 50% of the grassland it owns and manages and replace this with hay meadow management (cutting and clearing twice a year). This will exclude unsuitable areas such as football pitches, areas used for playgrounds (etc.) and include verges, areas in parks and all other areas which are mown and do not need to be mown for a specific recreational reason (e.g. football pitch, playground). This motion will aim to decrease grass cutting by up to 50% of TRDC owned land and achieve concurrent gains in biodiversity. Costs for the cut and lift will likely fall into two areas. Firstly new equipment which may be paid for by cost savings, reduced mowing where possible, existing budgets or a request to P&R. Secondly disposal costs which should be mitigated by creating sacrifice areas wherever possible, or by sale to a biodigester (e.g. the plant at Royston). TRDC will aim to have a plan presented to LEC prior to April 2022, which will take into consideration biodiversity data gathered in the 2021 audit. TRDC will review relevant officers job descriptions within the Leisure department and ensure sustainability is incorporated to re-enforce this shifting outlook.

2 Alternative Grassland Management Update

- 2.1 At the Leisure, Environment and Community Committee in March 2021 alternative grassland management was discussed and five pilot sites put forward by officers (Minute : LEC 53/20). At the meeting it was agreed that officers would look at adding further sites in conjunction with Lead Members and that any further sites should include the Aquadrome, Leavesden Country Park and Rickmansworth Park. The alternative grassland management pilot was added into the Environmental Protection Service Plan which Annual Council approved on 25 May 2021.
- 2.2 Post meeting, officers agreed a number of other sites with Lead Members, including areas in the open spaces mentioned above, as well as at The Swillett in Chorleywood. The pilot site maps can be found in Appendix A.

- 2.3 The pilot sites detailed within Appendix A are in addition to sites which are already left for a once or twice a year cut: Chorleywood House Grounds, Hornhill Playing Fields, The Bury (part of), The Green, Croxley Green and Stones Orchard (part of) (which is done on behalf of Croxley Green Parish Council), Woodcock Hill Woodland section, Batchworth Heath (cut twice a year), top end of South Oxhey playing fields, The Horses' Field, some areas of Leavesden Country Park, Warrings Field, the Withey Beds, Chenies open space, areas around the River Chess, Riverside Drive (part of), Coombe Hill open space (part of), Pheasants Wood, Bishops Wood, Hornhill recreational ground, Prestwick Road Meadows, Croxley Common Moor, the old tip sites at Toms Lane and Furtherfield and behind Eastbury tennis courts.
- 2.4 Alongside the pilot areas, a number of signs were installed to inform the local community on why the grass was being left uncut. In addition to this, there were a number of posts across social media and information on the Council's website.
- 2.5 Appendix A provides an update on the pilot project and was presented at the Abbots Langley Local Area Forum on 8 July and was included in the July Members' Information Bulletin. Within the presentation there are all the relevant links to the press release that was issued, the web page that has been created and a short video update that has been created and used on the Council's social media channels. However, it should be noted that the pilot project is not yet complete and the final evaluation of the project will not be reached until the early autumn.
- 2.6 There have been some positives from the pilot sites, the highlight was at Leavesden Country Park with both Bee Orchid and Pyramidal Orchid found in areas left uncut. Mead Place and Carpenders Park sites in particular had a good diversity of grasses and plants, including Crested Dogs tail, Meadow Buttercup, Common Cat's Ear and Self-heal. There have also been a number of positive comments on social media, including comments around the beautiful meadow effect, enjoying the wildflowers and bees and saying it's good to see the Council taking this approach.
- 2.7 There were also some negative responses. Officers received a number of complaints regarding urban areas looking unkempt, concerns over pet wellbeing and comments relating to it being a cost-saving exercise, rather than for the benefit of biodiversity.
- 2.8 To counter any negative reaction to changes in mowing regimes, officers would advise carrying out a period of public consultation prior to making any major changes to management of open spaces. This would provide an opportunity to engage with local communities; make modifications to plans; and build support amongst residents for changes identified in the Biodiversity Opportunities Audit.
- 2.9 In addition to the above comments, Hertfordshire County Council cut one of the pilot areas at Hayling Road, as part of the verge (roadside) is theirs, but the non-roadside verge is TRDC's. This has been rectified for future cutting, however highlights the complexities of grass cutting regimes, especially in urban areas. Hertfordshire County Council is looking at re-wilding/reduced mowing and their update, as well as information from across Hertfordshire can be found in Appendix B, for information.
- 2.10 With the current sites, outlined in paragraph 2.3 the areas cut once or twice per year total 54% of land maintained by Three Rivers. The remaining 46% is made up of football pitches, play areas and bowling greens as well as approximately 39% of 'other' land – which is neither used for football, play areas or bowling. It should however be noted that this other land includes areas around football pitches, land that may be used for general recreation such as dog walking, picnics and informal

sport, as well as verges in urban areas. These 'other' areas are cut up to 12 times per year, depending on the weather.

- 2.11 With the sites listed in paragraph 2.3 and the new pilot sites the percentage of areas cut once or twice per year totals 55%.
- 2.12 It should be noted that areas managed by the Parish Councils are not included in this calculation. Notable areas include Chorleywood Common, Manor House Grounds and the Green Sarratt.

Biodiversity Audits

Biodiversity Opportunities Audit - (Being undertaken by Countryside Management Service – CMS)

- 2.13 The aim of this audit is to focus on our minor open spaces, which historically have not had management plans, but may have the potential for significant biodiversity improvements and new tree planting, as many are predominantly areas of amenity grass. CMS will be visiting these spaces over the coming months and will be preparing a report with identified improvements, during the autumn and winter.
- 2.14 Draft plans are due from CMS by 30 November 2021. These will cover 59 sites that don't have a management plan. A moderation process of the plans, to be undertaken by officers from Leisure and Landscapes, Grounds Maintenance, Environmental Protection, Sustainability and CMS officers will be completed by 15 January 2022, with the final report received by 15 February 2022. The final report will then go through an internal sign off process and be taken to Policy & Resources Committee on 14 March and the Leisure, Environment and Community Committee on 16 March.

Biodiversity Baseline Report - (Also being commissioned by CMS)

- 2.15 A countywide stock take to establish a baseline for biodiversity at County, District and Ward level. Desk top study using aerial photography to support an evidence-based approach to strategic planning for biodiversity investment and support the delivery of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS); another policy expected from the Environment Bill, to be delivered locally through a partnership approach.

A Biodiversity Baseline will:

- Support the Local Plan process by allowing an initial biodiversity valuation of different land parcels under consideration for development potential.
- Help strategically identify candidate sites for biodiversity off-setting (i.e. investment to improve biodiversity when developers cannot meet their 10% BNG target on-site).
- Help support delivery towards national goals and targets expected to be outlined in the Environment Bill.
- Would allow authorities to measure the effectiveness of efforts to support and enhance biodiversity, both at a site-scale and across administrative areas. These calculations may in turn support funding applications for habitat establishment and restoration projects.
- Working collaboratively to procure this baseline will allow all authorities within Hertfordshire to maximise cost advantage for such an exercise through economies of scale.

Other Factors

- 2.16 The Council's Climate Change and Sustainability Strategy highlights a number of aims and objectives in relation to biodiversity. The Council will also have a new Tree Strategy by early 2022, detailing how the Council will manage its tree stock in the future. This will include actions on increasing things such as tree planting across the District.
- 2.17 These strategies, alongside the results of the audits, will be used to develop action plans, including any resource implications and will be included in any further Committee reports.
- 2.18 Each site will be considered on its own merits dependent on the habitat and location, and will require a lot of work and cross-department coordination to ensure it is done correctly and is sustainable over time. The need to purchase any new mowing equipment will only be fully known once all the sites have been identified and assessed. The pilot areas can be cut (not lifted) with current equipment, namely a rotary ride-on mower although the general standard of the cut is unlikely to be of the standard if more suitable equipment is used. Also the long grass could burn out the belt driven motors on this equipment. To carry out a proper cut (not lift) on the pilot sites and for use on any further sites the Council as a minimum will need to purchase a tractor mounted flail and a small flail for a ride-on, costing around £12,500.
- 2.19 With respect to cut and lift of grass, a cut and lift machine would be required at a cost of circa £11,300. For Woodhall Lane (and any further similar areas) a small ride-on with collection box at a cost of £17,000 would also be needed.
- 2.20 Any grass (and other 'green' waste) arisings would need to be disposed of at a composting facility. Officers believe the biodigester referred to in the motion is in fact an anaerobic digestion plant, which processes food waste to produce electricity and a bio-product of fertilizer.
- 2.21 It is not the case that the Council can sell the garden waste to a composting facility. Disposal of grass would cost the Council approximately £25 per tonne. Tonnage can fluctuate substantially due to several factors, including weather conditions; with high rainfall resulting in more substantial growth than dryer conditions; and timing and number of cuts per year.
- 2.22 It is estimated the pilot sites would generate between 30 to 80 tonnes, not including transport costs of a dustcart to run to South Mimms (the composting facility location). In addition there will be manpower costs for travelling to and from the disposal site.
- 2.23 It also has to be considered that if all sites need cutting and lifting in a narrow window in late summer, then extra equipment and staffing may be required to achieve this, not only to carry out the cuts but also to ensure litter picking is undertaken first and ensure a good finish around street furniture (benches, bins, signs, etc.) is achieved.
- 2.24 Obstacles to mowing, such as trees and street furniture frequently found in smaller residential sites will also increase mowing costs, as smaller less efficient machinery will need to be used.
- 2.25 The pilot sites also highlighted the importance of accurate mapping of management regimes on open spaces. Improvements to the Council's GIS system would enable

areas to be mapped more accurately, greatly assisting the communication of different mowing regimes to the Council's Grounds Maintenance teams.

- 2.26 Grounds Maintenance is a small team of 14, plus a supervisor, who carry out many and varied duties across the District including; litter picking, emptying dog and litter bins in parks and open spaces, inspections of the 31 play areas, five adult gyms and four skate parks, grave digging, maintenance of the three cemeteries, three bowling greens and Rose Garden at Three Rivers House, shrubbery and tree works, installing signage, as well as marking out of football pitches and grass cutting. In addition they provide a reactive maintenance response where possible, to deal with incidences of damage and vandalism, cutting back over hanging vegetation and clearing smaller fallen trees and assisting with flooding incidents and snow clearance when necessary.
- 2.27 Three Rivers currently has four Green Flag accreditations; Rickmansworth Aquadrome, Leavesden Country Park, Chorleywood House Estate and South Oxhey Playing Fields. Leavesden Country Park also has Green Heritage Site Accreditation.
- 2.28 There are also four environmental maintenance staff that cover verge cutting across the district, as well as the following tasks; clearance of fly tips, leaf clearance, mud/accident clean ups, shrub bed maintenance and hedge cutting, dead animal removal, emptying of dog bins (not including parks), drainage ditch maintenance at a number of sites, clearing up after any traveller incursions, graffiti removal and garage site maintenance.
- 2.29 The Tree Strategy is also currently in production, which includes a draft action to increase grounds maintenance staffing to water and care for newly planted standard trees. As a result there is growing pressure on the Grounds Maintenance team to carry out additional tasks and ad hoc work, and with increased use and misuse of the parks during the pandemic the work of this team is only increasing in nature.
- 2.30 Cutting of the pilot sites took considerably longer than it would have, had the grass not been left to grow. The quality of the cut would also have been better, had the appropriate equipment, (as outlined in paragraphs 2.18 and 2.19) been available. The staff that were not used to cut the pilot sites throughout the season continued with other tasks as laid out in paragraphs 2.26 to 2.29.
- 2.31 Additional works that would need carrying out throughout the growing season also need to be considered as short grass strip needs to be maintained alongside footpaths edges, which may require a different grass cutting crew to attend. This is also the case where the sites have street furniture to cut around.
- 2.32 It should be noted that leaving grassland areas can encourage ragwort and other weeds, which would need treating before disposal, or pulling and disposed of via other routes to normal composting, which would be at a further cost. There is Government guidance around the disposal of ragwort and the Weeds Act 1959 applies to owners of land covering in addition to Ragwort the presence of Spear Thistle, Creeping or Field Thistle, Curled Dock and Broad Leaved Dock. Enforcement is by issue of a notice and the County Council has authority to do this.
- 2.33 This paper highlights locations where an annual cut and lift regime is currently in place. However, there are other forms of grassland management which also benefit biodiversity, such as annual flail cutting, higher sward heights, and tri-annual cutting. The Biodiversity Opportunities Audit will assist officers in determining what alternative

grassing cutting regimes might be appropriate in which locations, on a site by site basis.

- 2.34 There are a number of officers that have sustainability within their remit, including; the Climate Change, Sustainability and Recycling Officer, the Climate Change and Sustainability Strategy Officer, the Green Homes Grant Project Officer (fixed term) and the Community Biodiversity Officer (which is presently out to advert).

3 Options

- 3.1 Members can debate and consider two options; either rejecting or accepting the motion.
- 3.2 The Motion is rejected until such a time that the pilot project is complete and the Biodiversity Opportunities Audit has been completed and evaluated. The results can then be fed into an action plan with associated costs. This would help ensure that resources can be allocated to best effect and achieve the greatest biodiversity outcome, within the resources available.
- 3.3 The Motion is accepted. The costs at this time are unknown and unquantified, and the project, in officers' view, could not be achievable within present Council budgets. A budget bid would therefore need to be submitted for the project to the Policy and Resources Committee for approval to be ratified by Council as part of the budget setting process.

4 Policy/Budget Reference and Implications

- 4.1 If the Motion is rejected this is within Council's agreed policy and budgets, as we will continue to manage the parks and open spaces as agreed at this time.
- 4.2 If the motion was to be recommended by the Committee at this time it would be outside policy and budget and would require expenditure by the Council in excess of £10k.

5 Financial

- 5.1 Whilst indications have been given above, officers need to carry out further assessment of the pilot scheme and the implications of the Biodiversity Opportunities audit, to be able to assess how much of this work can be delivered through existing budgets and staff resources.
- 5.2 Once this assessment has been carried out, it will be possible to identify more accurately what additional financial and staff resources will be required, and the likely ongoing costs for alternative management regimes.
- 5.3 If the Motion is accepted Members need to be aware that full costings are not known at this stage.

6 Legal

- 6.1 The motion has, as required under Rule 11(6) (set out below), been referred to the Committee for discussion and debate as the motion, on present information, would be contrary to the Council's Budget and Policy framework. The motion details were included on the Council agenda for the meeting on 13 July 2021

“If a motion includes a proposal for the Council to take any significant policy decision which is contrary to the Budget and Policy Framework or incur any expenditure in excess of £10k it shall only be considered in principle to the extent that the matter is noted by Council and is referred to the relevant Committee for consideration. The motion shall not be moved or debated. The minutes of the meeting will record the motion being received. Any decision on the motion shall be made at a future meeting of the Council which shall not consider the matter without a full report on the policy, budget and financial implications together with any recommendations from the Committee to which the matter was referred.”

- 6.2 The Committee should be aware that if there is no Member to move the motion, it could not proceed under Rule 16 (1) and would have to be deferred until the Member was ready to move it as required under the Rules.
- 6.3 The Council has a duty to have regard to conserving and enhancing biodiversity under S40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. This does not mean that the duty must be given greater weight than other matters and the audits presently being carried out should satisfy the duty, which is for the Council to ‘have regard’ when it exercises its functions. As a landowner, the Council would also be subject to the regime under the Weeds Act 1959, (as amended by the Ragwort Act 2003), this being referred to above.
- 6.4 This briefing paper does not have the status of a formal report. However, subject to what the Committee may resolve after hearing the motion, it is anticipated a formal report in substantially these terms would be provided to Policy and Resources Committee, with reference on to Council in the normal way.

7 Recommendation

- 7.1 No formal recommendation is made by this briefing paper because Members are debating a motion. Once the Committee has debated the Motion and decided how they wish to proceed, details will need to be provided for either Policy and Resources Committee (if the motion is accepted) or directly to Council (if the motion is rejected).

Briefing paper prepared by:

Jennie Probert, Environmental Strategy Manager

Charlotte Gomes, Landscapes and Leisure Development Manager

Alex Laurie, Principal Tree and Landscape Officer

Ray Figg, Head of Community Services

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Presentation on pilot update

Appendix B – Hertfordshire update