

Report to: **Executive**

Date: **14th October 2021**

Title: **Enhancing Biodiversity on Council green spaces – Consultation feedback**

Portfolio Area: **Climate Change and Biodiversity
Cllr Holway**

Wards Affected: **All**

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: **After call in period for Executive**

Author: **Chris Brook** Role: **Director – Place and Enterprise**

Contact: **Chris.Brook@swdevon.gov.uk**

Recommendations:

That the Executive:

- 1. Notes the support shown through the public consultation for the principle of increasing the biodiversity value of Council owned land by the proposed approach to site management.**
- 2. Notes that in response to this support, officers are drawing up a site by site Grounds Maintenance schedule which will be circulated to Members and Town and Parish Councils for comment.**
- 3. Request a report be put on the forward plan for January 2022 to consider the detailed proposals, equipment specification, revenue and capital expenditure to deliver the biodiversity gain.**

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Further to the Council's declared target of increasing the biodiversity value of its land by 10% by 2025, the Council undertook a public consultation in summer 2021 on the principle

of managing Council owned land to increase biodiversity and wildlife value, and inviting further comments and ideas.

- 1.2 The public engaged positively with the consultation resulting in over 1,000 responses, with over 700 respondents adding further comments or ideas. The responses to the questions posed were overwhelmingly supportive, with:
 - i. Over 97% in favour of general principle of improving biodiversity and wildlife value
 - ii. Over 90% in favour of:
 - relaxation of cutting regimes
 - leaving areas of long grass on verges and peripheries of parks
 - new areas of wildflower planting.
- 1.3 Less than 5% of the written comments presented a negative comment to the principles of relaxing cutting regimes and long grass.
- 1.4 In response to this, officers are reviewing existing Council owned green spaces (namely 'grass' sites) District-wide to compile a proposed Grounds Maintenance map layer reflecting how the aspirations could translate on a site by site basis.
- 1.5 This will be circulated first to Members, then shortly afterwards to Town and Parish Councils, inviting their comments and discussion on appropriate approach as required, for inclusion in a future report to the Executive.

2. Public Consultation results

- 2.1 Further to the recommendations of the July Executive, a public consultation, underpinned by a Consultation Plan and promoted via local press and social media, was undertaken on the principles of making changes to the approach to Grounds Maintenance on Council owned green spaces.
- 2.2 The consultation has drawn the highest level of engagement yet to a Council consultation by a considerable margin. It might be reasonable to consider that this high level of response is reflective of a cross-section of South Hams residents - i.e. that given the emotive nature of both climate change/biodiversity on the one hand, and the aesthetics of green spaces on the other, that the consultation would naturally attract responses from those strongly supportive as well as those strongly opposed to the principles of relaxing grass cutting and letting grass grow long.
- 2.3 Accordingly, consultation has shown, that at least in principle, the majority of South Hams residents support moves to increase biodiversity and wildlife value of Council owned green spaces, by

relaxing the frequency of grass cutting where appropriate, and by introducing a more biodiversity focussed regime.

- 2.4 The full consultation report can be reviewed at Appendix 1, this includes 40 pages of written comments to the question '*Do you have any further comments or ideas about the Council proposals.*'
- 2.5 Notwithstanding that there are many excellent, and varied comments for the Council to seek to act upon and incorporate into proposals as they evolve, the most commonly occurring comments can be grouped into the following broad points:
- a. 10% Biodiversity Net Gain is not enough, it should be much higher and the Council should just get on with it. Managing for nature should be the default approach.
 - b. There is a need to ensure proposals do not compromise highways and junction visibility, and that pavements remain safe to use.
 - c. Glyphosate use should cease.
 - d. Trees (including fruit trees) should be planted wherever possible.
 - e. Communication is important – onsite signage, communicating positive outcomes, linking with existing initiatives and seeking to educate widely.
- 2.6 Alongside the public consultation a more targeted consultation was undertaken with Town and Parish Councils including questions related to their own site management and appetite for engaging with a more biodiversity focussed Grounds Maintenance service, if the District Council offer this option commercially. Early feedback has been received with more to follow after officer meetings with Town and Parish Councils. This will be included in the January 2022 report to Executive.

3. Proposed Way Forward

- 3.1 To assist Members and the Town and Parish Councils, officers are compiling a proposed biodiversity focussed Grounds Maintenance layer on the Council's Interactive Map. The link to the layer will be circulated first to Members, before being circulated shortly afterwards to Town and Parish Councils for review, with an invitation to comment on and discuss proposals. In this way Members and Town and Parish Councils can see what the well supported principle means to each community and its green spaces and this will influence the approach the Council ultimately adopts.
- 3.2 The January 2022 report will also include information with respect to:
- Glyphosate use
 - Tree planting on Council owned green spaces

- Consideration of commercial aspects of Grounds Maintenance including the 2020 South Somerset review of the service
- Equipment required to deliver the proposed biodiversity site management
- Revenue implications including staffing and disposal of green waste arisings.

3.3 It is envisaged that, subject to the Executive supporting the detailed proposals in December, positive action towards meeting the 2025 10% Biodiversity Net Gain target can commence in 2022.

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance		<p>The Council has a general power under the Local Government Act 1972 to maintain land that it owns either for the purpose of its functions or the benefit, improvement or development of the Council's area.</p> <p>The Council also has a duty to have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of its policy and decision making under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.</p>
Financial implications to include reference to value for money		Detailed proposals will be set out in the report to December Executive.
Risk		<p>A politically binding target of 10% net increase in biodiversity has been adopted by the Council. Inaction to meet the Council's biodiversity target will undermine the Council's credibility to deliver on this and other commitments.</p> <p>Detailed proposals will be set out in the report to December Executive.</p>
Supporting Corporate Strategy		Climate Change and Biodiversity
Climate Change - Carbon / Biodiversity Impact		Measure to be detailed in a proposed new Grounds Maintenance layer would achieve the target set of 10% increase in Biodiversity from our own land.
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity		No implications

Safeguarding		No implications
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder		No implications
Health, Safety and Wellbeing		No implications
Other implications		None at this stage

Supporting Information

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – South Hams Biodiversity Survey results

Background Papers:

None