

Report to: **Executive**  
Date: **27<sup>th</sup> January 2022**  
Title: **Enhancing Biodiversity on Council green spaces – Detailed proposals**  
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. Endorse the new specification for management of Council owned green spaces (as based on cutting schedule in Appendix 1 and the new proposed Grounds Maintenance layer).
2. Approve up to £36,000 from the earmarked Climate Change and Biodiversity reserve for equipment required to manage Council greenspaces in a more biodiverse manner.
3. Approve up to £10,000 from the earmarked Climate Change and Biodiversity reserve towards wildflower seed to create new wildflower areas.
4. Delegate authority to the Senior Specialist for Natural Resources and Green Infrastructure, in consultation with the Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager, to make minor revisions to the proposed Grounds Maintenance layer and cutting schedule in response to local demand, or if experience and learning dictate, that doing so would assist delivering improved biodiversity outcomes.

## **1. Executive summary**

- 1.1 Further to the Council's declared target of increasing the biodiversity value of its land by 10% by 2025 and reports to Executive in July and October 2021, through public consultation our residents have overwhelmingly demonstrated their support for the principle of increasing biodiversity and wildlife value at Council green spaces, by relaxing cutting regimes, leaving areas of long grass, and introducing new areas of wildflower and tree planting.
- 1.2 In response to this support, officers have proposed a new Grounds Maintenance layer reflecting how the aspirations could translate at Council green spaces on a site by site basis. This has been circulated to Members, Town and Parish Councils with an invitation for comment.
- 2.1 This report presents the detailed proposals, equipment specification, revenue and capital expenditure to deliver the increase in biodiversity value on Council green spaces. The proposed approach could deliver in excess of 36% Biodiversity Net Gain across Council green spaces by 2025 (delivering AM1.6 of the Better Lives for All Thematic Delivery Plan and Id.3.3 of the Climate Change and Biodiversity Action Plan).
- 1.3 The equipment required to deliver the proposed new management schedule is summarised in para 5.6, and would cost £36,000, which would be funded from the earmarked Climate Change and Biodiversity Reserve.
- 1.4 The proposed new management schedule is considered likely to be cost neutral in terms of staffing. It is proposed to trial the extension of seasonal summer posts into shoulder months whilst the new arrangement is rolled out, with the approach kept under review. There is an anticipated cost of £5,500 per year for disposal of grass cuttings, which can be met for the next three years from income secured through external grant funding, after which the cost will be absorbed into the service budget.
- 1.5 Responding to the requests of Members at previous meetings of the Executive, the report also provides an update on various current tree planting initiatives and the reduction of glyphosate use.

## **2. Proposed green space layer and cutting schedule**

- 2.2 The proposed green space layer is available at <https://maps.swdevon.gov.uk/wm/Map.aspx?MapName=SHWD> (by turning on the '*Proposed GM Updated*' map feature). The mapped proposed green space layer takes into account 'grass' areas. It is noted that within these grass areas are playing pitches and other sites at which there is no realistic scope of changing the management approach. Non-grass areas of Council owned green space including woodland, hedgerows and shrubs have been excluded from the layer and calculations. There are seven types of maintenance approaches proposed within the layer for 'grass' areas.

- 2.3 Generally the proposal has been well received in those Towns and Parishes in which the District Council own green space – these comments are summarised in Appendix 1. Where the Parish Council did not support proposals (and where the Ward Member agrees with the Parish Council’s view) changes have and will be made to the proposed layer. Comments are still awaited from a couple of Parish Councils in which the District Council own green space. The layer will continue to be kept under review, and fine-tuned as required, either introducing more green space into biodiverse management, or the contrary.
- 2.4 Of c.54ha of green space, the breakdown of the seven maintenance approaches is broadly as follows:

| <b>Type</b>                      | <b>Area</b> | <b>Approach</b>   |
|----------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Regular amenity cut              | 19ha        | Generally a fortnightly cut as per existing regime  |
| Edged long grass cut and collect | 10.5ha      | Annual/biannual cut and collection of cuttings, and a more regularly cut 1m edge/framing strip  |
| New Wildflower                   | 2.5ha       | Newly created wildflower area with appropriate cut and collect regime   |
| New Tree planting                | 2.2ha       | Cut and collect as far as is practicable  |
| Verge cut and collect            | 5ha         | Three/four cut per annum initially – with the expectation that this reduces fertility and vigour of grass growth and within a couple of years this can reduce to two cuts per annum |
| Verge cut and drop               | 6ha         | Continuation of an existing GM approach – typically four cuts per annum with drop (where impractical or of little benefit to collect)   |
| Informal                         | 7ha         | Typically areas of bramble that may require cutting every 2 <sup>nd</sup> or 3 <sup>rd</sup> year   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                     | <b>54ha</b> |   |

- 2.5 In addition to newly created wildflower areas, the ‘edged long grass cut and collect’ and the ‘verge cut and collect’ approaches will also provide favourable conditions for wildflower in some cases where there is an existing wildflower seedbank at a site.
- 2.6 Closed churchyards maintained by the District Council have been excluded from the mapped layer, given that a generalised approach is unlikely to either work or be well received. These sites will be reviewed in 2022 on a case by case basis with Ward Members, Parish and Church Councils to consider opportunities to adjust maintenance schedules both to standardise the approach more efficient whilst seeking opportunities to benefit biodiversity. It is noted that the Council is obliged to maintain closed churchyards upon request, but receives no funding for this additional service.
- 2.7 The associated cutting schedules for each maintenance approach are summarised in Appendix 2.
- 2.8 The proposed approach could deliver in excess of 36% Biodiversity Net Gain across Council owned ‘grass’ areas included within the mapped proposed green space layer by 2025. A summary of this calculation is given in Appendix 3.

### **3. Tree planting**

- 3.1 The tree planting shown on the proposals layer reflects that for which officers have currently secured funding.
- 3.2 A successful bid for £250,000 to the Forestry Commission's Urban Tree Challenge Fund will result in planting at over 30 urban parks, green spaces and verges (of which 25 are District Council owned). The funds contribute to planting of over 600 substantial standards (typically 2-4.5 metres in height when planted) during the 21/22 and 22/23 seasons, and includes revenue funding for 3 years to establish the trees, covering Grounds Maintenance staff costs to undertake regular watering and checks of each tree.
- 3.3 Through the Emergency Tree Fund (Woodland Trust funding, administered by Devon County Council) planting of 1,450 whips (40-60cm height trees) will be undertaken at five District Council owned sites, primarily at parks and countryside sites, and includes funding for 5 years to cover initial maintenance to establish the trees.
- 3.4 A modest amount of planting will also be undertaking at woodland edge sites in Woolwell this planting season under the auspices of the Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest.
- 3.5 Further opportunities for tree planting on Council green spaces will be sought in future years, including through the Emergency Tree Fund, Community Forest, and other grant schemes, with officers encouraging communities to identify further planting sites on Council green spaces.



#### **4. Chemical use**

- 4.1 When considering previous reports on enhancing biodiversity at Council green spaces, Executive Members have queried the use of Glyphosate, and asked for information about its use by the Council.
- 4.2 The Council has moved away from use of Glyphosate in recent years and currently does not use the chemical except for control of Japanese Knotweed. Recently this move has also extended to ceasing use of Glyphosate as part of any contracts with local Town or Parish Councils.
- 4.3 Whilst more labour intensive, where required the Council does undertake some physical removal of weeds (hoeing), and has trialled use of acetic acid on general weeds (to limited effect). However, no feasible alternative is considered available currently to enable the Council to cease use of Glyphosate on Japanese Knotweed. Alternatives typically being more costly, impractical, and of limited effectiveness – these including foamstream, acetic acid/vinegar, hot water, burning. Effectiveness is key, given the duty incumbent upon the Council (or any other landowner) to prevent spread of Japanese Knotweed from its land.
- 4.4 Officers will continue to monitor alternative options for treating Japanese Knotweed that may enable the Council to cease use of Glyphosate. Use of electric current has shown some early promise (albeit not as effective as Glyphosate), however it is currently prohibitively costly and has constraints on its practical use.

- 4.5 It is noted that the use of Glyphosate by the Council is by trained individuals, using the chemical in a targeted manner and in quantities far lower than might typically be used in an unregulated domestic situation with excessive and non-targeted application. The Council's use is typically around 1 litre per year (compared to 40-50 litres before moves were made to reduce use). It is hoped to further quantities of use, by introducing direct stem injection into Japanese Knotweed.

## 5. Equipment

- 5.1 To deliver the proposed Grounds Maintenance approach, new equipment will be required to prepare sites, collect and transport cuttings. To work, the approach needs to be mechanised as far as possible, reducing operative time (e.g. avoiding time intensive activities such as raking cuttings).
- 5.2 There are various pieces of equipment that can deliver the desired outcome, but they differ significantly in terms of cost, and have relative pros and cons.
- 5.3 To give further confidence in approach, officers have discussed the recommended equipment with other Local Authorities who have experience of a more biodiversity minded approach to verge and green space management (namely Dorset Council, South Somerset District and Plymouth City Councils) to seek second opinions, as well as consulting national practical guidance (namely Plantlife's 'Managing grassland road verges').
- 5.4 Notwithstanding that there is variance in approach by these Councils, they agree that the equipment proposed is suitable for intended purpose, and that the proposed approach to cut and collect with removal of arisings is broadly consistent with their own approaches.
- 5.5 A summary of equipment used by these other Local Authorities is available in Appendix 4 including their comments on pros and cons of their approach relative to our proposal. Officers have been mindful of alternative approaches in recommending equipment as expressed in Appendix 4.
- 5.6 The equipment proposed for purchase is summarised below:

| Equipment   | Cost    | Purpose  | Benefit   |
|---|---------|--|---|
| <b>Tractor mounted stone burier</b>   | £11,000 | Enables cultivation, stone burying, levelling, rolling and seeding in one pass       | Useful for burying nutrient rich topsoil/turf, preparing and seeding wildflower areas |
|  |         |  |   |

|   |                |  |   |
|---|----------------|--|---|
| <p><b>Cut and collect flail for compact tractor</b></p>                             | <p>£10,000</p> | <p>Cuts long grass cleanly, collecting material on the same pass. Has a hydraulic high-tip arm to empty into a trailer. Can also scarify</p> | <p>Can cut and collect long grass, is considered suitable for use in wet conditions without blocking, and is a comparatively cheap option</p> |
|    |                |    |   |
| <p><b>Tipping dump trailer</b></p>  | <p>£15,000</p> | <p>To receive collected cuttings to be transported to the green waste composting site</p>  | <p>For towing with the standard tractor. Can hold a large amount of material reducing frequency of trips to composting site</p>               |
|  |                |    |   |

5.7 It is also noted that as existing Grounds Maintenance equipment reaches the end of its usable life, each piece will be reviewed to consider whether there is a suitable replacement which might also be as effective at cutting and collecting long grass as it is cutting and collecting short amenity grass (noting some of the other pieces of equipment referenced in Appendix 4).

## 6. Staffing and revenue

- 6.1 The Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager considers that the proposals can be achieved within the existing Grounds Maintenance staff numbers. This is on the basis that there will be less visits to some sites with a reduced cutting frequency but this will be offset by these visits taking longer due to collection of cuttings.
- 6.2 There will be an annual review of staffing levels and the most appropriate way of matching staffing to the Grounds Maintenance schedule and seasonal pressures as the new schedule is rolled out. It is anticipated that a sensible approach

may be to extend the season for seasonal posts into the shoulder months, or to reduce the number of seasonal posts instead turning them into year-round staff to reflect the reduced cutting in the summer months, but additional work in the shoulder months.

- 6.3 The incorporation of a cut and collect approach will generate significant amounts of cuttings which need to be removed to a green waste disposal site at an estimated £5,500 per year cost. In the first 3 years, this cost will be met from secured external income to the service. After this 3 year period, and based on the experience of other Local Authorities, it is anticipated that the amount of green waste cuttings will reduce as the fertility (and vigour) of grass is reduced, and the cost will be subsequently be absorbed by the service to remain revenue neutral.

## **7. External Grounds Maintenance contracts and other operational considerations**

- 7.1 Officers have sought feedback from Town and Parish Councils with respect to their appetite for buying into a more biodiversity focussed District Council Grounds Maintenance service for management of their own land (i.e. cut, collect and disposal of arisings). The response has been mixed. Some do not currently anticipate changing their approach to cutting specification in future contract retendering. Others are looking to change their specification to be more biodiversity focussed and include cut and collect. Others own limited land, and are already undertaking biodiversity focused management, including using local volunteer resource.
- 7.2 A summary of Town and Parish Council responses is included in Appendix 5.
- 7.3 A number of recommendations from the 2020 South Somerset review of the Grounds Maintenance service have been undertaken and completed. Others are in progress, with some recommendations not being taken forward, or remaining aspirations. It is noted that the redirection of the Operations Team Leader to cover pressures in the Waste service has had some temporary impact on progress of the recommendations. The Grounds Maintenance service has struggled with staffing levels through the 2020 summer season due to Covid 19, and the 2021 summer seasons with operatives diverted to waste, and long term sickness within the team. Nonetheless income secured from external contracts in 2020/21 totalled £43,000.
- 7.4 Currently, a new Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager and Chargehand are being recruited, and one Chargehand is expected to return to work after long term sickness. Accordingly, in the context of adjusting to the roll out and delivery of the schedule, it is unlikely that there will be capacity to secure any additional external work in 2022.

## **8. Communications**

- 8.1 As noted in the July Executive report, the importance of sustained positive and informative communications via social

media, press releases, and on-site signage continues to be recognised.

- 8.2 Alongside effective implementation (including for example, regular framing cuts of long grass), effective communication and signage will convey the Council's intended management to residents as well as managing their expectations. It remains inevitable that the approach will not be supported by all, however has in part been mitigated by consulting Town and Parish Councils, and removing proposals where the local Parish Council are not supportive.

## 9. 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           |  | <p>£36,000 is required for proposed equipment from the earmarked Climate Change and Biodiversity reserve</p> <p>For the next 3 years, the green waste arising costs will be met through income from external funding. Subsequently costs will be absorbed by the service.</p>  |      |            |  |  |   |  |
| 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>Risks to delivery of proposals and mitigation include:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="724 1688 1493 2033"> <thead> <tr> <th data-bbox="724 1688 1038 1720">Risk</th> <th data-bbox="1038 1688 1493 1720">Mitigation</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="724 1720 1038 1865">A new GM Operations Manager and Chargehand are currently being recruited</td> <td data-bbox="1038 1720 1493 1865">Close liaison between Assets Specialist, the new GM Operations Manager and the Operations Team Leader will be needed to establish a strong working relationship.</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="724 1865 1038 2033">Capacity – planting in 2021/22 season for Urban Tree Challenge Fund</td> <td data-bbox="1038 1865 1493 2033">With new staff joining, and the need to plant UTCF trees, it is accepted that no new wildlife areas would be prepared in spring 2022, the first of these would be deferred to autumn 2022. It is</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> | Risk | Mitigation | A new GM Operations Manager and Chargehand are currently being recruited | Close liaison between Assets Specialist, the new GM Operations Manager and the Operations Team Leader will be needed to establish a strong working relationship. | Capacity – planting in 2021/22 season for Urban Tree Challenge Fund | With new staff joining, and the need to plant UTCF trees, it is accepted that no new wildlife areas would be prepared in spring 2022, the first of these would be deferred to autumn 2022. It is |
| Risk   | Mitigation   |  |      |            |  |  |   |  |
| A new GM Operations Manager and Chargehand are currently being recruited | Close liaison between Assets Specialist, the new GM Operations Manager and the Operations Team Leader will be needed to establish a strong working relationship.                                 |  |      |            |  |  |   |  |
| Capacity – planting in 2021/22 season for Urban Tree Challenge Fund      | With new staff joining, and the need to plant UTCF trees, it is accepted that no new wildlife areas would be prepared in spring 2022, the first of these would be deferred to autumn 2022. It is |  |      |            |  |  |   |  |



|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
|   |  |  | also noted that the UTCF revenue funds will cover a new member of staff to undertake maintenance of trees.   |
|   |  | A period of adjustment whilst operatives and managers become accustomed with delivering the new site maintenance and habitat creation schedule.  | GM operatives will be introduced to the new schedule, empowered to deliver it, and a close dialogue will be maintained between operatives and managers. It is accepted that all will learn through the experience. |
|   |  | Ensuring the GM team operates at full capacity will be important to the successful delivery of the schedule  | Any vacant posts will be filled immediately, and dialogue will be maintained to seek opportunities to flex where necessary on cutting timings if capacity is temporarily reduced.                                  |
|   |  | Managing public expectations   | See section 8 – namely via communications and signage. Also, keeping the public onsite with framing cuts and paths as appropriate to avoid perceived neglect.  |
|   |  | New wildflower areas not performing  | Notwithstanding the lead-in on flowering of perennial wildflowers, the success or otherwise of such sites will be kept under review, and the approach will be changed if or as required.                           |
| Supporting Corporate Strategy                 |  | Climate Change and Biodiversity – delivering AM1.6 (A 10% increase in biodiversity on Council land)  |  |
| Climate Change - Carbon / Biodiversity Impact |  | The proposed approach could deliver in excess of 36% Biodiversity Net Gain across Council green spaces by 2025 (and ultimately 45% when taking into account tree planting). A summary of this calculation is given in Appendix 3. This delivering AM1.6 (A 10% increase in biodiversity on Council land) of the Better Lives for All Thematic Delivery Plan. |  |
| 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:**

- 1 – Summary of Town and Parish Council comments on proposed layer**
- 2 – Summary of cutting schedule for each maintenance approach**
- 3 – Summary of Biodiversity Net Gain from proposals**
- 4 – Equipment used by other LPAs**
- 5 – Potential for 'biodiverse approach' and equipment to be of use in tendering for future Town and Parish Council contracts**

**Background Papers:**

None