



## **CABINET – 8<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2021**

**SUBJECT: GRASS CUTTING REGIMES**

**REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT**

### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To seek the views of Cabinet in relation to grass cutting regimes across the county borough and proposals to enhance and promote biodiversity following consultation with local members. A report was presented to the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee on the 26<sup>th</sup> October to seek their views prior to this report being present at Cabinet.

### **2. SUMMARY**

- 2.1 Members will recall that a national lockdown was imposed in March 2020, this required the council to reshape and transform, almost overnight to respond to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Consequently, many services across the council were paused, one of these services was grass cutting.
- 2.2 The national and local lockdowns forced residents to interact with their surroundings in a new way. Whilst people worked from home where they could, the local environment became a source of appreciation and as lockdown rules heightened, appreciation for our local county and urban parks along with other open green space heightened, which benefitted residents with both their physical and mental wellbeing.
- 2.3 Through the summer of 2021, a consultation exercise was undertaken with local members to identify suitable areas within their respective wards which could be allowed to flourish during the summer period. These spaces would be marked with a wooden plaque thanking residents for allowing the dedicated areas to grow into eco-friendly spaces and allowed to produce abundant flowers, pollen seed and habitat for local wildlife

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 The approach adopted during the 2021 cutting season be adopted as the standard going forward in relation to our highway verges and by-pass routes where mowing is kept to a minimum.

- 3.2 That urban areas, such as housing estates, older person accommodation, cemeteries etc. are maintained at the current cutting frequencies.
- 3.3 That Cabinet endorse the list of areas nominated by both officers and local members within their respective wards, which could be allowed to flourish during the summer period. Officers will continually work with local members to identify areas as the programme is expanded.

#### **4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.1 To fulfil our statutory bio-diversity duty and to assist in our response to the Climate Emergency, which this council declared in 2019.

#### **5. THE REPORT**

- 5.1 Grass cutting frequencies currently range through the growing season across Parks, housing estates and other public open space. Cemeteries and older person sheltered accommodation are cut on a weekly frequency, albeit these were reduced in the summer of 2020 due to the pandemic.
- 5.2 As members will be aware, in 2020 the UK was placed into a national lockdown and consequently, many of our non-essential services were paused. In response to the global pandemic, many staff were redeployed to allow our efforts to focus on maintaining essential front-line services and delivering the new services created to support our communities at the height of the pandemic.
- 5.3 At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, one of the many services paused was grass cutting and this had an unexpected and welcome impact on our environment as we had inadvertently created many wildlife habitats and havens for pollinators. Some of our community spaces became a sea of wildflowers, enjoyed by many and the council was commended by the Welsh naturalist and TV personality, Iolo Williams.
- 5.4 Like many services across the authority, we are continually striving to ensure that we are transforming and evolving to ensure we are meeting the ever-changing needs of our communities and that we are doing all that we can to respond to the Climate Emergency, which the authority declared in 2019. The management of green and blue spaces should be directed by the Green Infrastructure Strategy, which was formally adopted in November 2020 and such changes will enable multiple benefits such as improving mental and physical health and increasing biodiversity, which will lead to more resilient communities, more resilient habitats and ecosystems and a more resilient local economy.
- 5.5 Throughout May 2021, cutting along our highway verges and roundabouts were kept to a minimum in support of the 'No Mow May' campaign. The campaign encouraged local individuals, councils, and stakeholders to help bees, butterflies, and other wildlife by letting wildflowers grow on lawns and green spaces throughout May instead of mowing them. Grass cutting across the county borough still took place in order to:
- Maintain visibility for road users;
  - Keep traffic signage and sight lines clear;

- Maintain margins and access on footways and cycle routes;
- Maintain parks, sports grounds, cemeteries, housing estates, play and recreational green open spaces.

Set out at appendix one, Members will see photographs taken along both the Risca and Newbridge by-pass routes in June 2021, which illustrate the success of the approach.

- 5.6 In regularly mown areas, grass cuttings are left on the ground, which unfortunately does not promote a good growing environment for wild flora and fauna. Wildflowers and grasses thrive in nutrient poor soil, leaving grass cuttings uncollected allows nutrients from the grass to go back into the soil, which is not good for the wild flowers we would like to encourage. Areas that are left to grow need to be cut and collected at the end of the summer, removing the arisings deprives the soil of nutrients and thus creates the perfect environment for more species of flora and fauna to flourish.
- 5.7 Through the summer of 2021, a consultation exercise was undertaken with local members to identify suitable areas within their respective wards which could be allowed to flourish during the summer period. In total three responses were received from the 73 Councillors. These spaces would be marked with a wooden plaque thanking residents for allowing the dedicated areas to grow into eco-friendly spaces and allowed to produce abundant flowers, pollen seed and habitat for local wildlife.
- 5.8 Areas nominated by local members and relevant officers are: -
- Snowdon Close, Risca;
  - Junction of Heol Adam and B4254, Gelligaer (near the Cross Inn);
  - Areas within the Grove Estate, Trethomas;
  - Areas around the Community Centre, Llanbradach.

Arial photographs of these areas are set out in appendix 2.

- 5.9 During 2021, an assessment was undertaken along strategic roadside verges. The main objective being to gather data on habitats within the verges and to identify opportunities for management that would be beneficial for biodiversity.
- 5.10 The study was undertaken in May and June 2021 and identified a wide range and variation of verge habitats. The best example of diverse grassland habitats tended to be on the most recently constructed roads and where the soils have a relatively low nutrient status. One notable finding was a population of the nationally rare plant, Deptford Pink at Aberbargoed. In some cases, the flora diversity of newer roads has benefited from wildflower seeding. Longer established verges tended to be less diverse and dominated by coarse grasses and scrub, although there are exceptions where species rich vegetation has remained in areas of low fertility soil or which have been maintained by more frequent cutting in previous years.
- 5.11 Site specific recommendations to enhance biodiversity have been made for each of the sections of roadside verge and a series of more general measures have been produced that can be applied at verges across the county borough. The most important of these are to leave verges uncut through the spring and early summer to allow plants to flower and set seeds and to remove grass cuttings to reduce the dominance of coarse grasses.

## 5.12 Conclusion

To allow specific areas across the county borough and our roadside verges to flourish will not only enhance the local environment but will assist in fulfilling our statutory bio-diversity duty and assist in our response to the Climate Emergency, which this council declared in 2019.

## 6. ASSUMPTIONS

6.1 No assumptions have been made within this report.

## 7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.1 The Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) has identified a number of both positive and negative impacts; however, the recommendation is to proceed with the proposal. The proposal would have a positive impact in that it would enhance our local environment and create habitat for wildlife and areas where wildflowers could flourish. It will also assist with residents' physical and mental well-being regardless of protected characteristics and support the council's Biodiversity Duty and Decarbonisation Strategy but also assist with the Climate Emergency which the Council declared in 2019.

7.2 However, areas left to flourish may give an untidy and unmanaged appearance, which could result in complaints from residents. This potential negative reaction will be mitigated by the installation of a sign where areas are being managed in an alternative manner to advise residents and to highlight the benefits.

[Link to full Integrated Impact Assessment](#)

## 8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no significant financial implications associated with this report, any costs will be funded from existing revenue budgets.

## 9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no personnel implications associated with this report.

## 10. CONSULTATIONS

10.1 A report was presented to the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> October to seek their views prior to a report being presented to Cabinet. During the debate, one Member praised the commitment to allow the growth of wildflowers but raised the issue of road safety if visibility was reduced as a consequence of the policy at highway locations such as roundabouts. The Green Spaces and Transport Services Manager provided assurances that the policy would not impede traffic safety. It was outlined how verges along principal roads such as bypass routes were cut twice a year to ensure that sight lines were maintained. One Member asked

about contact details for Park Officers, the Green Spaces and Transport Services Manager provided details to the Member.

Members of the committee discussed and debated the proposals and unanimously supported the recommendations. It was noted that there were 12 votes for, 0 votes against and no abstentions. The Green Spaces and Transport Services Manager advised that relevant officers would continue to work with local members to identify suitable areas within their respective wards, which could be allowed to flourish during the summer period as the programme is expanded.

10.2 The views of the listed consultees have been reflected within this report.

## 11. STATUTORY POWER

11.1 Environment (Wales) Act 2016  
Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981  
Highways Act 1980

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Background Papers:

[Link to Green Infrastructure Strategy](#)

Appendices:

Appendix 1 Photographs of Risca and Newbridge by-pass in June 2021

Appendix 2 Aerial photographs