



ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 7TH FEBRUARY 2023

SUBJECT: GRASS CUTTING REGIMES

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

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek the views of the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee prior to a further report being presented to Cabinet in relation to grass cutting regimes across the county borough and proposals to enhance and promote biodiversity.

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 Both 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 country and urban parks along with other public open space heightened, which benefitted residents with both their physical and mental wellbeing.
- 2.3 Throughout 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 of 2022. These spaces were marked with either a wooden plaque or a stencil on the ground 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. The outcome of the consultation exercise along with a list of areas was reported to this committee on 26th October 2021 and subsequently Cabinet.

- 2.4 On 24th October 2022, an all Member Seminar was held during which members received three detailed presentations, one in relation the council's Biodiversity Duty, the second related to the Gwent wide '*Nature isn't Neat*' project, which is part of the Gwent Green Grid partnership and a third which provided an update on progress made during the 2022 growing season as referred to in paragraph 2.3 above.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider and comment upon the following recommendations prior to their presentation to Cabinet for approval:
- i. The approach adopted during the 2021/22 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, in accordance with Traffic Wales guidance.
 - ii. The Council shows a commitment to the UK wide '*No Mow May*' campaign and formal grass cutting does not commence until June with the exception of designated areas to include: visibility splays and sight lines on highways; margins and access on footways/cycle routes; sports grounds; urban areas such as housing estates, municipal parks, older person accommodation, cemeteries; play/recreational public open spaces, which are maintained at the current cutting frequencies.
 - iii. That Cabinet endorse the initial list of areas nominated by both relevant officers and local members within their respective wards as set out in Appendix 1, which could be allowed to flourish during the summer period.
 - iv. That the Authority continues to provide wild flower seed packs to community groups on request as set out in Paragraph 5.11 below.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To fulfil our statutory bio-diversity duty and to assist in our response to Climate change and the Climate Emergency, which this Council declared in 2019.
- 4.2 To reduce carbon emissions and to contribute to the targets within the Council's Decarbonisation Strategy.

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 Council, 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 challenges of Climate change and Climate Emergency, which the Council 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 During the 2021 and 2022 grass cutting seasons, cutting along our highway verges and roundabouts was kept to a minimum in support of the 'No Mow May' campaign. The campaign encouraged members of the public, local authorities and key 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 public open spaces.
- 5.6 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, but capacity

issues both in terms of staff and machinery available to undertake this task dictates the number of areas where this is achievable. As we make changes to our grass cutting regimes, we are also developing our approach to the removal of grass cuttings in order to promote a good growing environment for wild flora and fauna.

- 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 of 2022 and a number of locations were identified.
- 5.8 The additional areas identified to be allowed to flourish during the summer of 2023 are set out at appendix one. Following the all Member Seminar held on 24th October 2022 representations were received from a number of Members regarding grass cutting at locations in their wards and these have been incorporated. Members should note that the edges of these areas will continue to be maintained to prevent any overgrowth affecting pedestrians. If appropriate, walking routes will also be cut.
- 5.9 These proposals have been developed in conjunction with our participation in the Gwent Green Grid Partnership which includes the 5 Gwent local authorities, Natural Resources Wales, Forest Research, and Severn Wye Energy Agency. Officers will continue to work and engage with local members, and other stakeholders and environmental groups to develop the list of areas in Appendix 1 as the programme is progressed and expanded.
- 5.10 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 is 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.
- 5.11 Training and awareness raising sessions with frontline staff have taken place via the Nature isn't Neat campaign, this will continue via tool box talks and appropriate publications. In previous years, wildflower seeds have been made available free of charge for our communities and this will continue through this coming season.
- 5.12 Members will be aware of the Council's commitment to be a net zero carbon local authority by 2030. This proposed approach to grass cutting regimes will contribute to this and is one of the measures set out within the Decarbonisation Action Plan. Any reduction in grass cutting regimes, either the frequency of mowing or the reduction in the sizes of the areas that are mown, will reduce the use of diesel or petrol and the carbon emissions associated with them. As well as reducing emissions from mowing there will also be potentially significant emission reductions in travelling to and from individual sites. An assessment of potential carbon reduction has been undertaken at eight of the suggested sites at: -

- Snowdon Close, Ty Sign.
- Highfields Way / Montclair Avenue, Blackwood.
- Blackwood Road, Pontllanfraith to Plaza.
- Ael-y-Bryn, Rhymney.
- Pengam Road, Aberbargoed.
- Addison Way, Trethomas.
- Frontages of Lansbury Park and Porset Park, Caerphilly.
- Cwm Farm Balancing Lakes, Castle View, Caerphilly).

Should grass cutting at these sites be reduced from 6 times per year to once, it is estimated that an annual saving of 8,616kgCO₂e would be achieved. The promotion of grasses and wildflowers in this way also offers the potential for additional carbon sequestration (the storage of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere in vegetation).

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 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 Climate change and the Climate Emergency, which this council declared in 2019.

7. ASSUMPTIONS

- 7.1 No assumptions have been made within this report. The CO₂ savings figures have been calculated using emissions factors from the Welsh Government Net Carbon Zero Reporting Tool, and estimated fuel savings based on the size and location of the sites.

8. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 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.
- 8.2 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 or stencil on the ground where areas are being managed in an alternative manner to advise residents and to highlight the benefits.

[Link to integrated impact assessment](#)

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 A saving of £59,000 has been identified as a result of implementing the proposals contained within this report and this sum featured as a permanent saving in the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) budget savings report for 2023/24, which was presented to Cabinet on 18th January 2023.

10. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no personnel implications associated with this report. Staff are already engaged in the revised approach to grass-cutting and this will develop further as it is progressed in additional areas.

11. CONSULTATIONS

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

12. STATUTORY POWER

- 12.1 Environment (Wales) Act 2016,
The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
The Highways Act 1980

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Appendix 1 – List of areas identified to flourish during the 2023 growing season.