



CABINET – 17TH JANUARY 2024

SUBJECT: GRASS CUTTING REGIMES

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek Cabinet approval to amend grass cutting regimes across the county borough to enhance and promote biodiversity.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Council has a legal duty to maintain and enhance biodiversity and in so doing, promote the resilience of ecosystems under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. The Council is also responding to the challenges of climate change and declared a Climate Emergency in 2019. Welsh Government declared a 'Nature Emergency' in Wales on the 30th of June 2021.
- 2.2 The Council has a schedule of grass cutting frequencies through the growing season across the county borough. Grass cutting was one of a range of services that was paused in the national lockdown in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic and the Council has been developing its approach to grass cutting since.
- 2.3 On 22nd March 2023 Cabinet agreed further revisions to the Council's grass cutting regime in 2023. This included an additional list of areas which were also allowed to flourish during the summer period. An all-Members Seminar was held on 14th November 2023 where feedback on the 2023 grass cutting season and an update on the proposed approach for 2024 were provided.
- 2.4 It is proposed that the grass cutting regime in 2024 moves away from the 'No Mow May' campaign previously adopted, and continues with the current adopted approach in maintaining our highway verges and by-pass routes. This demonstrates our continued commitment to the 'Nature isn't Neat' campaign as adopted by partners of the Gwent Green Grid (as set out in recommendations 3.1.ii below). The list of selected areas which will be allowed to flourish during the 2024 growing season has been reviewed and revised following feedback during 2023 and these are detailed in Appendix 1. An example of the revised approach includes more grass cutting on housing estates as this was a particular issue raised in the feedback on the 2023 cutting season.

- 2.5 Following consideration of the report at a meeting of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee on 12th December 2023 the recommendations were endorsed.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 That Cabinet consider the contents of this report and note the comments of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee detailed at 10.2.
- 3.2 That Cabinet approve:
- i. The approach adopted since the 2021/22 cutting season continue to be the adopted grass cutting standard 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 continues its commitment to the Nature isn't Neat project, which is part of the Gwent Green Grid Partnership, establishing joined-up green space management to create wildflower-rich pollinator habitats across the Gwent local authority areas, which includes Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport, and Torfaen.
 - iii. 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, will be maintained at the current cutting frequencies.
 - iv. That Cabinet endorse the list of areas as set out in Appendix 1, which are to be allowed to flourish during the summer period.
 - v. That the Authority continues to develop and enhance areas using bought in wildflower seed 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.
- 4.3 To assist with the Wales 'Nature Emergency' declared by Welsh Government on the 30th of June 2021.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 The Council has a schedule of grass cutting frequencies through the growing season across Parks, housing estates, other public open space, cemeteries, and older person sheltered accommodation. When the UK was placed into a national lockdown in 2020 in response to the global pandemic many of our services were paused and staff redeployed to focus on maintaining essential front-line services and delivering the new services created to support our communities at the height of the pandemic. 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.

- 5.2 The Council has a legal duty to maintain and enhance biodiversity and in so doing, promote the resilience of ecosystems under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. The Council is also responding to the challenges of climate change and declared a Climate Emergency in 2019. Welsh Government declared a 'Nature Emergency' in Wales on the 30th of June 2021. 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.
- 5.3 The Council has been developing its approach to grass cutting over the last few grass growing seasons whereby cutting along our highway verges and roundabouts was kept to a minimum. Following an all-Member Seminar in October 2022 additional areas were identified to be allowed to flourish during the summer of 2023. With the endorsement of Sustainability and Environment Scrutiny Committee Cabinet agreed to continue the Council's commitment to the UK wide 'No Mow May' campaign and biodiversity with further revisions to the Council's grass cutting regime in 2023.
- 5.4 In 2023 formal grass cutting did not commence until June with the exception of designated areas including: 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 were maintained at regular cutting frequencies. 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.

An additional list of areas nominated by both relevant officers and local members within their respective wards were also allowed to flourish during the summer period.

- 5.5 A lot of feedback was received regarding grass cutting across the year, both positive and negative, and lessons have been learned from the new approach. Unfortunately the service was unable to complete the first cut of all areas as a result of staffing issues associated with some key staff leaving the organisation combined with sickness absence causing operational difficulties. However, this must be balanced against the compliments also received from residents. Our approach to grass cutting has been reviewed taking into account the range of feedback received and the need to be mindful of our statutory biodiversity duty and the need to significantly reduce our carbon footprint.
- 5.6 A number of measures are in place to improve performance in the 2024 cutting season. Upgraded cutting equipment (flails) has been purchased for use during the cutting season and all additional flails will be in place ahead of the 2024 season. Key experienced staff left the organisation ahead of the 2023 season and these posts are now filled. It is also proposed to begin cutting cycles at the beginning of March 2024 (weather permitting) to enable the service to manage demand and potential changes to our climate / growing conditions.

- 5.7 It is proposed that the grass cutting regime in 2024 moves away from the 'No Mow May' campaign previously adopted, and continues with the current adopted approach in maintaining our highway verges and by-pass routes. This demonstrates our continued commitment to the 'Nature isn't Neat' campaign as adopted by partners of the Gwent Green Grid. The list of selected areas which will be allowed to flourish during the 2024 growing season has been reviewed and revised following feedback during 2023 and these are detailed in Appendix 1. The edges of these areas will continue to be maintained to prevent any overgrowth affecting pedestrians. Where appropriate, walking routes will also be cut.
- 5.8 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 wildflowers 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. The list of selected areas has been refined to indicate those areas where biodiversity will be further enhanced with the removal of grass arisings following cutting, these are set out in Appendix 1.
- 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.
- 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. To manage the correct locations and successful integration of wildflower swathes within areas identified in Appendix 1, Members and Community Groups are invited to liaise with respective Area Parks Officer before the Spring to plan additional wildflower planting. Parks Operations have invested in equipment to create wildflower swathes to further enhance these identified areas of green space.
- 5.12 Members will be aware of the Council's commitment to be a net zero carbon local authority by 2030. The revised approach to grass cutting regimes contributes to this and is one of the measures set out within the Council's Decarbonisation Action Plan. Any reduction in grass cutting, either the frequency of mowing or the reduction in the sizes of the areas that are mown, reduces the use of diesel or petrol and the carbon emissions associated with them. As well as reducing emissions from mowing there are also significant emission reductions in travelling to and from individual sites. As an example an assessment of carbon reduction has been undertaken at seven of the 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.

It is estimated that reducing the frequency of grass cutting at these sites from 6 times per year to once has achieved an annual saving of 7,740kgCO₂e. 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).

CONCLUSION

- 5.13 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 biodiversity duty and assist in our response to Climate change and the Climate Emergency, which this council declared in 2019.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 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.

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

Link to IIA

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 A saving of £59,000 was identified as a result of implementing the amended grass cutting regime in 2023 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.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 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.

10. CONSULTATIONS

- 10.1 The views of the listed consultees have been reflected within this report.
- 10.2 A report on the amended grass cutting regime proposals was considered at a meeting of Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee on 12th December 2023. The Committee highlighted that Scandinavian Design is no longer at Aberbargoed and Britannia as mentioned in the report at Appendix 1, the new name is Wild Water. Officers noted the change.

Members stated their support for the proposals, a Member asked that consideration is given to wildflower areas on council owned housing estates and suggested better signage to explain why grassed areas are not mown. The scrutiny committee members were advised that there is an open invitation to propose areas in their wards where wild areas can be developed. Lessons have been learned from the previous year and appendix one has a shorter list to ensure there are sufficient resources to clear the areas at the end of the year.

Members asked how successful the wildflower seeding is and suggested plant plugs might be a better option. The committee was advised that it is important to remove arisings to enable natural flowers to spread and flourish. Officers would like to work with Members and community groups to boost species numbers.

In terms of signage, members were informed that there are plans to put up signs or use message stencils to mark pathways and inform the public.

The scrutiny committee asked if there are plans to start collecting grass cuttings going forward, the committee was advised that to collect cuttings additional resources and additional new equipment would be required. The Authority has invested in some new machines that can collect in smaller areas however there is still an aspiration to do this in remaining areas and the intention is to remove grass arisings after cutting at all of the locations listed in Appendix 1.

Members asked what the plans are for spraying of weedkiller on roads and pathways. The committee were informed that the council currently engages an external contractor who carries out 2 sprays per annum, they use a glyphosate-based product which is considered the most effective method. The next planned sprays are due in February/March 2024.

A scrutiny committee Member highlighted the lack of grass cutting collection in cemeteries which can result in complaints from the public. The committee were advised that officers will look at this and will liaise with the Member concerned.

Members expressed concerns regarding the impact of the loss of senior staff, the committee were assured that whilst it is acknowledged there has been an impact with the loss of their skills and knowledge, that new staff have been recruited and have been developing their experience well.

The scrutiny committee asked if the messaging from 'No Mow May' has changed and it was confirmed that we are now prioritising nature.

A member highlighted the number of leaves left on pathways and roads and asked what the planned use of road sweepers is to remove them. The committee were reminded that it is impossible to collect all leaf fall across the County Borough and the priority is to keep "at risk" gullies clear of leaves where possible.

The Corporate Director also advised that many of the items that had been requested at the meeting (e.g.: collection of cut grass, collection of leaves, etc.) represented additional revenue costs against the backdrop of a parks and grounds service that has already given up circa £1m in savings over the last 8-10 years and more importantly the requirement corporately to save a further £50m+ over the next few years which represents significant financial challenges ahead for all service areas.

Following consideration of the report it was moved and seconded that the recommendations be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms this was agreed by the majority present.

11. STATUTORY POWER

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

Author: Robert Hartshorn, Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services
Hartsr@caerphilly.gov.uk

Consultees:

Councillor Chris Morgan, Cabinet Member for Waste, Leisure and Green Spaces
Morgac15@caerphilly.gov.uk
Councillor Andrew Whitcombe, Chair Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee
whitca@caerphilly.gov.uk
Councillor Shane Williams, Vice Chair Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee
willis42@caerphilly.gov.uk
Dave Street, Deputy Chief Executive
Streed@caerphilly.gov.uk
Mark S Williams, Corporate Director for Economy and Environment
willims@caerphilly.gov.uk
Michael Headington, Green Spaces and Transport Services Manager
Headim@caerphilly.gov.uk
Robert Tranter, Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer Trantrj@caerphilly.gov.uk
Lynne Donovan, Head of People Services Donovl@caerphilly.gov.uk
David Roberts, Interim Finance Manager Roberda@caerphilly.gov.uk
Kevin Eadon-Davies, Acting Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager
eadonk@caerphilly.gov.uk
Jonathan Davies, Parks and Countryside Operations Manager Daviej27@caerphilly.gov.uk
Stephen Harris, Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer
harrisr@caerphilly.gov.uk
Paul Cooke, Transformation Manager - Decarbonisation Cookepa@caerphilly.gov.uk
Maggie Iles, Ecologist ilesm@caerphilly.gov.uk

Background Papers:

Cabinet Report 24th November 2021: 'Grass Cutting Regimes'

Cabinet Report 22nd March 2023: 'Grass Cutting Regimes'

Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee Report 12th December 2023: 'Grass Cutting Regimes'

Appendices:

Appendix 1 List of areas identified to flourish during the 2024 growing season.

Appendix 1

List of areas identified to flourish during the 2024 growing season.

Within the selected areas listed, we aim to mow a swathe along footpaths and roadsides maintaining safety for pedestrians and clear site lines. Additionally, in larger areas we aim to mow swathes throughout the areas creating desire lines/paths and where the site allows maintain areas for recreational use.

Rhymney

- Rhymney Bypass/Rhymney roundabout to Butetown /Butetown to Heads of the Valley roundabouts.
- Verge in front of Travellers site, Rhymney
- Maerdy Park, Rhymney
- Areas in Rhymney War Memorial Park

New Tredegar / Phillipstown

- New Tredegar Bypass
- White Rose Way Business Units
- 'Daisy Field' and area to entrance of Phillipstown

Aberbargoed / Britannia

- Area front of Wild Water Group Ltd. Pengam Road, Aberbargoed

Fleur de lys / Pengam

- Banking and surrounds at Trelyn Park, Fleur de lys
- Area below St Davids Football field, Pengam
- Area between High St, Pengam and St David Ind. Est

Trinant

- Banking on entrance to Trinant via Kendon Hill

Blackwood / Cefn Fforest

- Bedwellty Rd/Heol Y Cefn, Cefn Fforest
- Highfields Way banking
- Blackwood Showfield (specific areas)
- Cwmgelli verges

Pontllanfraith

- Lower Islwyn Park banking
- Blackwood Road (From Traffic lights opp. Police Station to former Tredegar Junction PH)

Penllwyn / The Bryn

- Bryn Playing Fields (specific areas)

Oakdale

- Waterloo
- Oakdale Bypass verges

Nelson

- Nelson Wern Park
- Large Grass area Ynys Las Nelson

Bargoed / Gilfach

- Triangle in front of Ty Bargoed Offices
- Angel Way (Bargoed Bypass)
- Large area between William Street/St Marys Street, Gilfach
- Large grass area The Avenue, Gilfach
- Large grass area Fairways

Hengoed / Cefn Hengoed

- Bank area to the of Raglan Road to Main Road Hengoed
- New Road RBT to Viaduct

Llanbradach

- Llanbradach Park
- Banks in Llanbradach Park and flat area behind Library
- Llanbradach Bypass and layby

Maesycymmer

- Maesycymmer verges Main Road/The Boot
- Areas at Maesycymmer Playing Fields

Gelligaer

- Areas at junction by The Cross Inn on Gelligaer Road

Penpedairheol / Cascade

- Large area with pylon rear of Burnet Drive, Penpedairheol
- Area from Clos Mynach to Bryn Awelon/Bryn Siriol

Abercarn / Cwmcarn

- Banks at Abercarn Welfare
- Persondy Bankings
- High Meadow Old Swimming baths plot

Hafodyrynys / Crumlin

- Hafodyrynys wide verges
- Herbert Avenue Banks

Treowen

- Rear of Ael Y Bryn

Newbridge

- Newbridge RBT (McDonalds)
- Torlais Street
- Verges at former Aiwa Site, Newbridge

Wattsville / Cwmfelinfach / Ynysddu

- Surrounds of Wattsville Lower Football pitch
- Rear of Alexander Road, Ynysddu

Risca / Pontymister

- Snowdon Close
- Large open areas around Ty Sign Open Space and skate park
- Large area outside Ty Isaf Football Pitch

Caerphilly

- Verges from Trecenydd to Penrhos
- Penrhos RBT
- Watford Road turning circle
- Caerphilly Mountain Verges
- Verges from Cedar Tree RBT to Bedwas RBT
- Crescent Road Floral Area
- Morgan Jones Park - Tump & woodland

Aber Valley

- Senghenydd Recreational Ground

Penyrheol

- Hendredenny - large field by Angel PH.

Castle View Estate

- Roundabout by Cwrt Rawlin PH.

Bedwas & Trethomas

- Upper Glyn Gwyn – Large area Upper Glyn Gwyn Street (leave kickabout area)

Rudry / Machen / Draethen

- Top Orchard above Mountain View, Machen