

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC REGENERATION AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	15th DECEMBER 2020	AGENDA ITEM:	
TITLE:	REWILDING AND THE WILDFLOWER PLAN. INCREASING BIODIVERSITY ON HIGHWAY VERGES		
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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Rewilding means restoring, reclaiming and protecting natural habitats and native species and involves the encouragement of wildflowers to grow on areas of mown grassland. This project is aimed at dealing with two different aspects of the climate emergency: carbon sequestration and biodiversity.
- 1.2 As part of the Council's response to the climate change emergency declared in February 2018 an experimental project to rewild some larger highways verges was being planned at the time when the first Covid related lockdown happened in March. The pandemic resulted in temporary staff absence of up to 20% and the subsequent re-deployment of the highways grass cutting teams to the main parks.
- 1.3 This gave an opportunity to bring forward the rewilding experiment and the grass on a number of larger highways verges was left un-cut during the summer, allowing wild flower species to grow and seed. Site condition of each location was then assessed and the Wildflower Plan prepared. The experimental change in grass mowing regime was not extended to parks, however the Wildflower Plan suggests that a similar experiment is conducted

in 2021 to assess whether the 40 hectares of grass in parks which is currently managed for wildflowers can be expanded by up to 5%.

- 1.4 This report gives further details of the operational changes involved in the rewilding project, updates members on the results of the experiment and the recommended next steps contained in the draft Wildflower Plan.

Appendix 1 shows the on - site rewilding information signs used during the experiment.

The Wildflower Plan is also appended to the report.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Committee note the report and the progress of the Rewilding experimental project in 2020.
- 2.2 That the committee endorse the recommendations of the Wildflower Plan as shown in section 4.2.4 of this report.
- 2.3 That the Wildflower Plan is subject to public consultation and its adoption is then sought at a subsequent Committee.
- 2.3 That an annual rewilding progress report is brought to HNL Committee at its Autumn meeting.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 In February 2018 the Council declared a climate emergency, and, together with partners from all sectors (public, business, voluntary, education), has been working on a range of initiatives and policies to attempt to address this.
- 3.2. In November 2020 the Reading Climate Change Partnerships' Reading Climate Emergency Strategy (RCES) was adopted by the Council. Within the 'Nature' theme of the strategy is a wide-ranging requirement to improve the urban environment for flora and fauna an initiative directly supported by the rewilding experiment.
- 3.3 Earlier in the year, the Council consulted on the Biodiversity Action Plan. The plan is focused on promoting natural solutions to climate challenges, such as improving habitats to help wildlife and people adapt to the impacts of climate change. It sets out priority objectives and actions for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity within Reading.
- 3.4 The rewilding project sits within the framework of the Council's new Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which is focused on promoting natural solutions to climate challenges, such as improving habitats to help wildlife and people adapt to the impacts of climate change. Rewilding directly

addresses the following themes of the BAP by reviewing and changing the mowing regime of some highways verges to allow, where appropriate, more species-rich long grass in corridors along the highway:

- New wildlife rich habitats are created
- Reading's biodiversity is valued by its residents
- The decline in Readings' biodiversity is reversed.

4. THE PROPOSAL

4.1 The experimental rewilding project began in March 2020 and in order to test the following:

- what different verges in different parts of Reading look like over the course of the flowering and seed-setting seasons;
- how residents respond to changes in the mowing regime;
- how to carry out practical maintenance issues like cutting and collecting, margin mowing, etc.
- whether there are ecological improvements coincident with changes to mowing patterns.

It was comprised of the following elements:

4.2. Change in mowing regime.

The sites included in Phase 1 are shown in Table 1 of the Wildflower Plan and include the larger areas of highways grass and banks and bunds. The normal grass cutting 'let-fly' regime was suspended and the areas cut once in September/ October with the arisings being removed or composted in piles on site. However in order to preserve a 'cared for' look close mown margins were maintained next to roads and footpaths, to create fire breaks in larger areas and to maintain sight lines. The areas rewilded this summer account for less than 5% of the area of highways grass in the Borough which are currently cut up to 8 times per year. Currently 40 hectares (10%) of parks grass is managed in this way and the target is to re-wild up to 20% of the highways and parks grass areas within 5 years.

4.3 Promotion and feedback.

Feedback from residents was a key aim of the rewilding experiment as one of the main themes of the BAP is to encourage the appreciation of a biodiverse environment by residents. Feedback was pro-actively sought and was substantially positive throughout the trial.

The project was supported by attractive promotional signs on verges (as shown in Appendix 2, a dedicated e mail inbox, social media posts, a press release and details on the RBC website.

4.4 Assessment of the trial

The results of the site by site assessment of Phase 1 are set out in detail in the Wildflower Plan and they are summarised below:

- From a maintenance point of view it was a success. Cut and collect mowing was effective and left a neat finish. Litter build up was a problem on a limited number of sites but it was removed prior to cutting.
- All steep banks will be returned to the routine 8 cut per annum regime as cut and collect mowing was found to be impractical.
- The response of residents was overwhelmingly positive. Around 115 responses were received, mainly through the dedicated inbox, of which about 20% were critical and the remainder enthusiastically supportive. Details are shown in the Wildflower Plan.

4.5 Conclusion and next steps: The Wildflower Plan.

The end of season review concluded that the experiment had worked in most areas from the point of view of both maintenance and appearance and was overwhelmingly positive.

The review has led to the Wildflower Plan, which is appended to this report. It captures the results of the rewilding experiment and makes the following recommendations for achieving the expansion and improvement of the rewilded areas in the Borough, as summarised below:

It is recommended that:

1. Rewilding of larger verges continues.
2. The maintenance regime be changed from an annual cut-and-collect on some rewilded sites to a three-times-a-season cut-and-collect in order to assess the effect on biodiversity and the vigour of both flowers and grass. Vigorous grass competes out other species. The most effective way to encourage wildflowers to flourish in grass is to reduce soil fertility. This is done by repeatedly cutting grass and removing the cuttings. The grass draws nutrients out of the soil, so, if it is cut and removed, nutrients are taken away and not returned to the soil.

Over successive seasons, the result is shorter grass and greater species diversity. Over time, it should be possible to reduce the cutting regime from 10 cuts annually to 2 or 3 cut-and-collect mowings each season, and the grass remains relatively short, because growth is suppressed. There are also more wildflowers, which are, in fact, an incidental by-product of the process. This regime was recommended by the ecologist Dr Philip Sterling, who has pioneered the ecological approach to amenity grass management its use on highways verges in Dorset and Devon.

3. Some sites be sown with locally sourced wildflowers and cut only at the end of the season to allow establishment.

4. Marginal rewilding (changing the mowing regime around parks boundaries and margins) be trialled at twelve locations in parks, adding around 2ha (5%) to the current area of conservation grassland. These will be assessed on the basis of biological performance, appearance and difficulty of management at the end of the season.

5. The Council continue the public information and consultation started in 2020.

6. The Council works with business partners to create enhanced-flowering, wild-looking commercial centre schemes that will raise the profile of the rewilding initiatives and contribute to refocusing perceptions of Reading as a 'green/wild city'.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 The proposals contained in this report are in line with the following Corporate Plan priorities:

- Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe
- Promoting health, education, wellbeing and culture
- Ensuring the Council is fit for the future

5.2 In addition, the Council has adopted a Strategic Framework (March 2020) which sets out the Council's key priorities including:

- To keep social care services running for the children and adults who need them;
- To support vulnerable and isolated people during the crisis;
- To support business and the economy, which will secure the long-term recovery of Reading.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

6.1 The rewilding project was widely promoted via the Council website, social media, on-site signs and a press release.

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, the Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

- 7.2 The Council has reviewed the scope of the project as outlined within this report and considers that the proposals have no direct impact on any groups with protected characteristics.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Under Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980 the Council as Highways Authority has a duty to maintain the highway maintainable at public expense.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 A bid has been submitted to the Capital programme to fund the additional cut and collect machinery required and for additional wild-flower seed for sowing over the next 4 years. The capital programme will be considered in February 2021.
- 9.2 The rewilding project will result in a net reduction in the parks revenue budget of £30k per annum by financial year 2023/24 (£15k in 21/22 and £15k in 23/23).

10. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The rewilding project will benefit the climate by contributing to two different aspects of the climate emergency: carbon sequestration and biodiversity.
- 10.2 Rewilding responds to the Climate Crisis declared by the Council in February 2019 and will contribute to achieving our target of a carbon neutral Reading by 2030 in accordance with the Climate Change Strategy.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 Appendix 1 - Rewilding information signs
11.2 Wildflower Plan - October 2020