

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC REGENERATION AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	10 MARCH 2022	AGENDA ITEM:	
TITLE:	REWILDING AND THE WILDFLOWER PLAN. INCREASING BIODIVERSITY ON HIGHWAY VERGES AND OTHER PUBLIC LAND		
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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 previously mown grassland. This project is aimed at dealing with two different aspects of the climate emergency: carbon sequestration and increasing biodiversity.
- 1.2 As part of the Council's response to the climate change emergency declared in February 2018, an experimental rewilding project commenced in spring 2020 on a number of larger highway verges, which were left un-cut during the growing season, allowing wildflower species to grow and seed. Site conditions were assessed in the autumn, together with an analysis of feedback from residents, and the Wildflower Plan was prepared.
- 1.3 During its first year, the initiative did not apply to parks, although historically at least 40 hectares of parkland has been managed as conservation grassland. The Wildflower Plan proposed the inclusion of additional areas of parks in the rewilding project.

- 1.4 The rewilding project has now been underway for two seasons. This report gives further details of the operational changes involved in the project, updates members on the results of extending the experiment and on the recommended next steps contained in the draft updated Wildflower Plan.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That Members note the report and the progress of the Re-wilding experimental project in 2021.
- 2.2 That the committee endorse the recommendations of the Wildflower Plan appended to this report.

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 early 2020 the Reading Climate Change Partnership consulted on the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy (RCES). 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 project.
- 3.3 At the same time, the Council was consulting on the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which 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 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 and along parks boundaries:
- The creation of new wildlife rich habitats
 - Reversal of the decline in Reading’s biodiversity
 - Greater value placed on Reading’s biodiversity by its residents

4. THE PROPOSAL

The background: Year 1

- 4.1 The experimental rewilding project began in March 2020 and the following was monitored over the course of the first year:

- 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.

4.2 The review, presented to HNL in autumn 2020, found the programme to be largely successful:

- 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 only a limited number of sites, and this was removed prior to cutting.
- Residents' responses were overwhelmingly positive. Around 150 responses were received, mainly through the dedicated inbox, of which over 80% were enthusiastically supportive.
- Of the nearly 20% of more critical comments, almost all were in favour of close-mown grass. Many of these applied to mowing grass on large banks. As a result, banks were returned to regular mowing in 2021.

The current situation: Year 2

4.4 Following recommendations in the Wildflower Plan, the following changes were made in 2021

- Some sites were sown with locally sourced wildflowers and cut only at the end of the season to allow establishment.
- Additional marginal rewilding (changing the mowing regime around parks boundaries and margins) was trialled at twelve locations in parks, adding around 2ha (5%) to the current area, 41 hectares, of conservation grassland already managed by the Council.
- The Council agreed to work 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 town'.

4.5 An assessment of the Year 2 programme is included in the revised Wildflower Plan attached in the Appendix. However, monitoring carried out over the course of the year indicates that:

- There was public support for marginal rewilding in parks.
- There was no noticeable improvement in species diversity from sowing wildflower seed on poorer sites.

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of the BID-funded 'enhanced' schemes in Reading, because the flower-rich turf was laid only in the autumn. This will be assessed over the extended flowering season from spring to autumn 2022.

- 4.6 The planned change from an annual cut-and-collect to a three-times-a-season cut-and-collect on those sites with less diversity of flora did not take place because of difficulty in securing the right machinery. A bid has been made to purchase small cut-and-collect mowing equipment to enable this to start in 2022.
- 4.7 One result of the rewilding project has been the spontaneous involvement of residents in the creation of local wild areas. Feedback from residents was a key aim of the 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. However, local involvement has extended beyond this to volunteers arranging their own neighbourhood rewilding.
- A group of volunteers have started the Newtown Community Garden on open land owned by Housing between Cumberland and Amity Roads. The purpose is to create and maintain a sustainable re-wilding area for locals to get involved in and enjoy. The group canvassed local residents and received overwhelming support for their plans, which include planting bulbs, wildflowers and fruiting shrubs; rainwater harvesting; keeping the area free of litter; installing and maintaining seating and a noticeboard; and regular low-key events related to art and gardening. A key focus is to invite people living alone to participate or simply to sit on the bench with a cup of tea.
 - The Friends of Waterloo Meadows have been interested for a long time in improving the biodiversity of the riverside site, and encouraging wildflowers predates the rewilding project. In 2021, the Friends of Waterloo Meadows and CROW (Conserve Reading on Wednesdays) worked together to extend the wildflower scrapes. Using funding donated by SUSTRANS for seed, volunteers have created several large areas of wildflowers, most near to the main path, going through the Meadows. The results in the middle of summer were spectacular.



- Enquiries about starting other local rewilding have been received from residents on Woodcote Way and Chiltern Road.

Next steps

- 4.5 The appended Wildflower Plan recommends the continuation of the current programme on highways verges and in parks. It also recommends looking at the margins of allotments sites for future rewilding. Not only do allotments sites offer so far untapped potential for biodiversity enhancement, but there are unambiguous synergies between habitat for pollinators and the presence of pollinators for growing fruit and vegetables.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 Improving the quality and diversity of wilder places in Reading supports a number of Corporate Plan aims including:

- Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe
- Promoting great education, leisure and cultural opportunities for people in 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. Response was actively encouraged, and hundreds of emails were received into a dedicated Rewilding inbox.

6.2 The response of residents was overwhelmingly positive. Around 150 responses have been received over the first two years of the project, mainly through the dedicated inbox, of which about 20% are critical and the remainder enthusiastically supportive. Examples of these are below. There have also been hundreds of 'likes' on the Twitter feed. It is impossible not to conclude that residents are receptive of the project and wish to see it continued.

Hi there. I just wanted to say I support this scheme 100%. It's a win win, from my point of view, more attractive because for me even longer grass that doesn't go brown so readily in the hot part of the year looks better, but also saves money. A total no brainer. Wildflowers do still take a bit of maintenance but nowhere near as much as continuous aggressive mowing that destroys everything, even the grass really if too short. I do not want to live in such a barren landscape and hate the waste. To be this is an all round intelligent solution. Thanks very much. Ian.

You asked us to let you know what we think of the rewilding scheme in Reading. I love it! I live on Rotherfield Way and walk past the rewilding area here every day. I think it looks great, as well as having a positive effect on the environment. I am always happy to see it as I pass by. I wholly support the scheme and would love to see it extended to wider areas. It makes me proud of Reading! Kate

I would like to thank you for what is being done on the 'rewilding' project. Since lockdown my husband and I have taken daily walks around Prospect Park and Southcote and have been delighted by the beautiful wild flowers and grasses that now grow in the verges and meadow areas. It is a joy to watch the different varieties of plants growing through the weeks and seeing all the insects, bees and birds that they attract. Please keep it going! Hilary and Mike

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 for £76,000 to fund the additional cut and collect machinery required for the project, as this will be more cost-effective over time than repeatedly hiring in machinery. This proposal has scheme but not yet spend approval.

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 contribute to climate change targets by dealing with two different aspects of the climate emergency: carbon sequestration and enhancing biodiversity.

10.2 Rewilding responds to the Climate Crisis declared by the Council in February 2019 and to help achieve our target of a carbon neutral Reading by 2030.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 None for this report. The Wildflower Plan is appended.