

CABINET - THURSDAY, 4 APRIL 2024

Report of the Head of Contracts: Leisure, Waste and Environment Lead Member: Executive Member for Waste, Open Spaces and Leisure facilities

Part A

BIODIVERSITY IMPROVEMENTS – CHANGES TO MOWING ARRANGEMENTS

Purpose of Report

To consider introducing a three-year pilot scheme of mowing changes at sixteen locations for the purpose of improving biodiversity. The pilot scheme will reduce the mowing frequency from ten cuts per annum to two cuts per annum at sixteen locations to improve biodiversity.

Recommendations

1. That changes to the mowing arrangements at the sixteen locations highlighted in this report are implemented on a pilot basis for three years.
2. That an interim review of the pilot is carried out after two years to consider the initial findings.

Reasons

1. To improve the biodiversity value of council managed open spaces.
2. To consider the success of the pilot scheme and assess the potential for embedding the changes on a permanent basis, and to consider whether the new arrangements can be introduced in more locations.

Policy Justification and Previous Decisions

Public authorities who operate in England must consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity. This means that, as a public authority, the Council must consider what it can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

The Council's Corporate Strategy 2024- 2028 states that it will preserve open spaces for future enjoyment.

The Corporate Delivery Plan for 24/25 states that the Council will implement mowing trials in suitable locations throughout the borough as identified in the Nature Positive report.

The Council's Open Spaces Strategy 2018-2036 states that biodiversity is fundamental to the sustainability of our ecosystem. With the ever-increasing pressures on agricultural practice and loss of habitat-rich gardens, public open space has increased its strategic importance. The benefits to biodiversity can be in habitat management, nature conservation, maintaining green corridors and targeting work towards protected species.

Implementation Timetable including Future Decisions

If approved, the pilot mowing scheme will commence from the 1st May 2024 and run until the end of the mowing season (usually October) in 2026.

Report Implications

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising from the report. Whilst the selected areas will be mown less frequently by the contractor, there will not be a financial saving to be made from the pilot. The reasons for this are as follows.

- The contractor will need to purchase additional equipment to accommodate the changes.
- The arisings from the mowing will need to be collected and disposed of, whereas currently they are left in situ.
- Each mowing operation will take longer due to the length of the grass.

If the pilot scheme is adopted on a permanent basis a small saving may be possible. This will increase if the new arrangements are adopted on a greater number of sites.

Risk Management

The risks associated with the decision Cabinet is asked to make and proposed actions to mitigate those risks are set out in the table below.

Risk Identified	Likelihood	Impact	Overall Risk	Risk Management Actions Planned
An increased number of complaints due to the grass being left longer.	3	1	Low	That a Communications Plan is used to inform residents of the reasons for the changes. This will include on-site notices.
A higher risk from grass fires due to the increased length of the grass.	2	2	Low	The perimeter of each site will be mown at the current frequency (10 times per annum) to minimise the risk to neighbouring properties.

Equality and Diversity

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and can be seen at Appendix A.

Climate Change and Carbon Impact

The proposed changes should be capable of providing a minimum 10% increase in the total biodiversity value of Amenity Open Space in the Borough.

Crime and Disorder

None

Wards Affected

Please see Part B, Table 1 for a list of locations impacted by the changes.

Publicity Arrangements

A communications plan will be delivered should the recommendations be approved.

Consultations

None

Links to the Corporate Strategy

Caring for the Environment	Yes
Healthy Communities	Yes
A Thriving Economy	No
Your Council	No

Key Decision: Y

If yes

Date included on Forward Plan 18/03/2024 (General Exception Notice)

Background Papers: None

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Part B

Project Background

1. Open Space management is undertaken on behalf of CBC by an external contractor, idverde, over a total area of around 375 Ha. This represents around 1.3% of the total Borough area (27,907.95Ha) and includes a range of land use types including residential housing, formal amenity space, Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), Local Nature Reserves (LNR) and the Outwoods; part of the Beacon Hill Hangingstone and Outwoods SSSI. In 2021, the Council successfully applied for funding from Natural England to undertake a study to assess the potential for biodiversity net gain in Charnwood's Open Space. The study recommended the introduction of a pilot project to reduce mowing frequency on selected CBC sites. Review the success of the project and if appropriate identify additional sites.
2. The Open Spaces Assessment Study (2017) assesses the provision of eight established typologies of Open Space, as follows: -
 - Parks & Garden
 - Amenity Green Space
 - Natural & Semi-natural Green Space
 - Children & Young People's Facilities
 - Allotments & Community Gardens
 - Green Corridors
 - Civic Spaces
 - Cemeteries, closed churchyards and other burial sites.
3. The sites selected for the study were taken from the those categorised as Amenity Open Space. This is the second largest designation by area behind Natural and Semi-Natural Open Space. As Natural and Semi-Natural Open Space is already under conservation and biodiversity focussed management the study did not focus on sites within this designation.
4. Amenity Open Space sites are mown up to 10 occasions per annum, depending on the weather. The study identified 16 locations where reducing the mount of grass cutting to twice per annum would have significant biodiversity benefits. Some of the locations were recommended to have a mixed approach where sections of the site would be mown frequently, and other sections be cut less frequently. The sites are shown in Table 1 below. Maps of the areas are available at Appendix B.

Table 1: Pilot Study Areas

Site ID number	Location	Total area/Ha	Area enhanced / Ha	Biodiversity Net Gain /HU	% Biodiversity Net gain
AGS345, AGS346	Bramcote Road, Loughborough	4.44	1.13	2.06	21.35

AGS408	Allendale Road, Loughborough	2.15	0.84	1.53	35.58
AGS127	Garland, Rothley	1.03	0.54	0.98	47.57
AGS163	Land north of Maxwell Drive, Loughborough	3.63	1.91	3.47	46.02
AGS337	Land on forest road pedestrian pathway, Loughborough	1.45	0.88	1.6	55.17
AGS341	Triangle of land on Holt Drive, Loughborough	0.05	0.03	0.05	50.00
AGS339, AGS340	Land adjacent to Woodbrook Way, Loughborough	0.25	0.18	0.33	66.00
AGS105	Land off Wolsey Way, Syston	0.62	0.47	0.85	68.55
AGS347	Epinal Way, Loughborough	0.63	0.63	1.15	91.27
AGS030	Collingwood Drive, Sileby	0.53	0.44	0.80	75.47
AGS465	Greedon Rise, Sileby	0.14	0.094	0.15	51.72
AGS123	Holbourne Cl, Barrow upon Soar	0.72	0.58	1.05	72.92
AGS300	Branston Avenue, Barrow on Soar	0.40	0.37	0.67	92.75
AGS414	Fishpool Way, Barrow on Soar	0.22	0.09	0.16	40.72
AGS092	The Sandhills Quorn	0.36	0.33	0.60	91.67
AGS074	Rothley sports and social centre	0.21	0.20	0.36	95.24

6. The change in management is expected to lead to the establishment of a taller grass sward with greater botanic diversity and structural complexity, having the potential to benefit a range of fauna. For the purposes of the study this habitat type was characterised as semi-improved grassland in poor ecological condition. Although this type of intervention is not, in most cases, sufficient to produce species rich meadows or colourful floral displays in the summer the improvements for wildlife are nevertheless significant. Table 1 compares short mown grassland with the type of grassland habitat expected to result from a reduction to one or two annual cuts.

Table 2: Expected habitat changes resulting from reduction of amenity grassland to two annual cuts

Management approach	<i>Short Mown Amenity Grassland</i>	<i>Reduced mowing regime</i>
Description	Short, open sward, typical of lawns, gardens, sports pitches, golf courses etc.	Tall sward with greater structural variety including some open areas, tussocks, a thatch layer that retains moisture during dry spells.
Botanic diversity	Amenity grasslands can be species rich but overwhelmingly botanic diversity is suppressed by regular cutting. Sward is dominated by a small number of species and flowering is reduced by cutting.	Diversity is contingent on species already present and the potential for new species to colonise. In very dense and tall swards the colonisation rate by new species is likely to be reduced. However, species intolerant of regular mowing are likely to be present and the total herb species richness and abundance likely to be higher.
Invertebrate diversity	Limited species richness and abundance across a range of taxa and functional groups (EG pollinators, detritivores, carnivores, etc)	Much greater richness and abundance across a range of taxa and functional groups

7. Although there appears to be public support for measures to improve biodiversity in the Borough there are also high expectations of open space management standards. It is likely that a wholesale and sudden change in open space management practice would be met with resistance. For this reason, a pilot study is proposed that should be capable of providing a minimum 10% increase in the total biodiversity value of Amenity Open Space in the Borough.

Appendices

Appendix A – Equality Impact Assessment

Appendix B – Maps of revised Mowing Areas