REPORT TO:	**ENVIROMENT AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**	**AGENDA ITEM: 8**
DATE OF MEETING:	**18 APRIL 2024**	**CATEGORY: RECOMMENDED**
REPORT FROM:	**STRATEGIC DIRECTOR (SERVICE DELIVERY)**	**OPEN**
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	**SEAN MCBURNEY HEAD OF CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICES** Sean.mcburney@southderbyshire.gov.uk	**DOC:**
SUBJECT:	**GRASS VERGE CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT**	
WARD (S) AFFECTED:	**ALL WARDS**	**TERMS OF REFERENCE: EDS**

1.0 Recommendations

1.1 That the Committee acknowledges the scope of this project and supports the Councils involvement in this scheme/project.

1.2 That the Committee approves the proposed project plan and the areas of road verge to be included in this scheme.

2.0 Purpose of the Report

2.1 To give background and details on this project.

2.2 To present the proposed project plan for approval. Table 1 & 2 – Year 1(2024), Table 3 – Year 2/3(2025 & 2026).

3.0 Executive Summary

3.1 The no mow may campaign which has become well established and has run as a success for many years, SDDC propose to expand the campaign with conservation grazing management on verges across the District. The project will encompass how both South Derbyshire District Council commissions road verge maintenance work so that we can have healthier and more biodiverse grassland verges throughout the District and as part of the County under the Nature Recovery Network (NRN).

3.2 Road verge maintenance is mainly undertaken by District and Borough Councils on behalf of the County Council under the specifications set out in Agency Agreements. It is important every opportunity is taken to make sure maintenance work is done in the

right way, at the right time, for the right money and fulfils the Council's legal duties, including the duty to biodiversity.

3.3 The Environment Act 2021 has extended existing 'biodiversity duties' which apply to local planning authorities. All public authorities must review how their activities can affect or improve biodiversity, and to plan for how they can conserve and enhance biodiversity as they carry out their work.

3.4 The Nature Recovery Network is a major commitment in the government's 25 Year Environment Plan. The NRN will help deal with 3 big challenges: biodiversity loss, climate change and wellbeing.

3.5 We have support for the project from Derbyshire County Council who are looking to test how changing specifications of road verge management impacts on work programmes, efficiencies, and cost.

3.6 Also grass cut later in the growing season, less frequently and removing the cuttings creates greater diversity of species, better structure and provides resources to pollinating insects.

3.7 The list of areas to be advanced in Year 2/3 of the project have been initially identified from the previous scoping works carried out by DCC and SDDC Officers. A consultation period is proposed to receive input from councillors and parish councils to determine the suitability of the verge for conservation management, alongside a prior physical check of the verge before proceeding with any site. We welcome any feedback from appropriate representatives and the list is open to amendment. The focus of conservation management is to create diverse grasslands within shin height grassland as opposed to knee length longer grass.

4 Detail

4.1 The no mow may campaign which has become well established and has run as a success for many years has encouraged SDDC to propose to expand the campaign with conservation management on verges across the District.

4.2 Conservation grassland management plans to expand the concept of no mow may but with a particular focus on developing the diversity of grasslands to becoming more diverse and much more able to cope with climate change. A focus of conservation management is to increase flowering plant diversity in shorter grass to avoid a longer sward becoming dominated by common and course grasses such as False oat-grass *(Arrhenatherum elatius*), cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*) and Yorkshire-fog *(Holcus lanatus*) and overdominance by forbs particularly cow parsley (*Anthricus sylvestris*), hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*), creeping thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), broad-leaved dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*) and common nettle (*Urtica dioica*).

4.3 South Derbyshire verges will be managed on an adjustable approach to avoid cutting of plants in flower, comprise fewer cuts per year and at a greater height to allow grasses and forbs to become stronger and more resilient. With a strong focus on monitoring and adaptability to prevailing weather conditions. Part of the focus of the plan is to steer away from the public perception of unsightly and unmanaged long grass dominated a by a few competitive grasses and forbs. The plan aims to create manged grasslands that are rich in diversity and function for wildlife but are also accommodating as green spaces and occupy a pleasant aesthetic.

4.4 A ‘managed’ look will be maintained for pathways and desire lines by mowing a 1-2 metre strip of short grass between any paths and longer grass. ‘South Der-bee-shire’ bee signs provide information to the public about the benefits of biodiversity rich grasslands.

4.5 To keep flowering plants in short grass, cutting up to 8cm can take place up into April, then avoid cutting until after flowering and seeds have set, then cut to 8-10cm. Mowing will take place at a maximum of once every four weeks to allow plants to continue growing in short grass and to flower between cuts. The time of cutting will be decided by the Green Space Biodiversity Officer and Street Scene Supervisor to avoid unnecessary and potentially damaging cutting.

4.6 Verges may only be cut once between mid-July and end of September or have main cut between mid-July and end of September with possible cut(s) later in the year.

4.7 Any cut that produces substantial mowings should have them removed. This will reduce the build-up of organic material, keep nutrient levels low, and provide space for plants to regenerate from seed. It may be necessary to reduce soil fertility by cutting a few times, removing mown grass each time.

4.8 The project in Year 2/3 requires SDDC to put 100km of grass verges (50km of road is verges on both sides) into conservation management in those summers. These are verges SDDC manage on behalf of DCC in the District but would ideally include a range of conditions, for example ‘rural’, suburban, urban, high visibility, low visibility.

4.9 These areas have been identified and have been selected by the Ground Maintenance Supervisor and team with consultation from our outgoing Biodiversity Officer. These areas are ones that have been assessed from and Health & Safety point of view and from an ecological aspect. Where we can create wildlife corridors to link some of these verges with areas that will be involved in No Mow May or wildflower meadows.

4.10 There is a lead project officer from DCC who will be liaising with us throughout the project. They will lead on Public and stakeholder reaction. We will be channelling comments, and correspondence to them so they can respond and collate.

4.11 Communication plans to notify residents within proximity to the selected verges has been implemented under No Mow May, as well new signage will be placed on selected verges to explain the advancement of the project.

4.12 The initial first cut of the season will be planned as normal as an opportunity to litter pick and clear the verges prior to the start of conservation management.

4.13 The list of no mow May sites to be managed under Conservation Management in year 1 (2024).

Table 1

Village/Parish	Verge Number	Street Name
ASTON ON TRENT	1	MAPLE DRIVE,
	2	WILLOW PARK WAY,
CHURCH GRESLEY	3	LAND NORTH OF YORK RD/WEST OF WILMOT RD,
	4	THORPE DOWNS WAY,
	5	GLAMORGAN WAY,
	6	HANDSACRES CLOSE,
	7	BRUNEL WAY, CASTLETON PARK CASTLE ROAD,
	8	SOLENT ROAD, CASTLETON PARK,
ETWALL	9	EGGINGTON ROAD,
HILTON	11	MONTGOMERY CLOSE,
MIDWAY	12	EDGECOTE DRIVE, EDGECOTE ESTATE,
	13	LAND OFF ASTON DRIVE, EDGECOTE ESTATE,
	14	LAND NORTH OF LAWNS DRIVE, EDGECOTE ESTATE,
	15	TENNYSON AVENUE, OPP SANDHOLES,
NEWHALL AND STANTON WARD	16	BRETBY HOLLOW,
	17	NEWHALL PARK,
SEALES WARD	18	ACRESFORD ROAD, OVERSEAL,
	19	BURTON ROAD, OVERSEAL,
	20	FOREST VIEW, OVERSEAL,
	21	HALLCROFT AVENUE, OVERSEAL,
	22	CLOVER COURT,
SHARDLOW	23	BURWICK ROAD,
STENSON	24	HEARTHCOTE ROAD,
SWADLINCOTE	25	HANDSACRE CLOSE,
	26	LAND ADJACENT TO CADLEY HILL ISLAND,
WOODVILLE	27	DOVE CLOSE (FALCON WAY),
	28	FINCH CLOSE (FALCON WAY) WOODVILLE ROAD,

4.1 Below listed in table 2 are verges in current management as rural verges or as gateway sites and those verges that underwent a wildflower seeding programme under Pictorial Meadows, a not-for-profit Green Estate Community Interest Company. These sites are to be managed under Conservation Management in year 1 (2024).

Table 2

Village/Parish	Verge Number	Type of Verge
A514 TICKNALL TO STANTON	1	RURAL VERGE
A50 SHARDLOW TO ELVASTON	2	RURAL VERGE
WALTON ROAD, DRAKELOW	3	RURAL VERGE
CATTON ROAD, WALTON ON TRENT	4	RURAL VERGE
B5008 TOWARDS WILLINGTON	5	GATEWAY SITES
A516 ETWALL TO MICKLEOVER	6	GATEWAY SITES
WILLIAM NADINE WAY, SWADLINCOTE	7	PICTORAL TRIAL
THE MEASE, HILTON	8	PICTORAL TRIAL
TICKNALL ROAD, TICKNALL	9	PICTORAL TRIAL
HARTSHORNE ROAD, HILTON/REPTON	10	PICTORAL TRIAL

4.2 The list of areas to be advanced in Year 2/3 (2025 & 2026) of the project is as follows; These have been preliminary identified with DCC and SDDC officers, a consultation period will be held to receive input from councillors and parish councils to determine the suitability of the verge for conservation management, alongside a prior physical check of the verge before proceeding with any site. We welcome any feedback from appropriate representatives and the list is open to amendment. The focus of conservation management is to create diverse grasslands within shin height grassland as opposed to knee length longer grass.

Table 3

Village/Parish	Verge Number	Street Name
ASTON ON TRENT	1	SHARDLOW ROAD
BARROW ON TRENT	2	CHURCH LANE,
	3	SWARKESTONE ROAD,
	4	TWYFORD ROAD,
CALDWELL	5	MAIN STREET,
	6	SANDY LANE,
CASTLE GRESLEY	7	BURTON ROAD,
	8	CASTLE ROAD,

	9	MOUNT PLEASANT ROAD,
	10	SWADLINCOTE LANE,
CHURCH GRESLEY	11	BRUNEL WAY,
	12	CASTLE ROAD,
	13	GRESLEY WOOD ROAD,
	14	OLD HALL GARDENS,
	15	SWADLINCOTE LANE,
ETWALL	16	ASHVIEW CLOSE,
	17	BELFIELD ROAD,
	18	CHESTNUT GROVE,
	19	CHURCH HILL,
	20	EGGINTON ROAD,
	21	GERARD GROVE,
	21	HILTON ROAD,
	23	LAWN AVENUE,
	24	MAIN STREET,
	25	SANDYPITS LANE,
	26	SPRINGFIELD ROAD,
	27	SUTTON LANE,
	28	THE BANCROFT,
	29	WILLINGTON ROAD,
	30	WINDMILL ROAD,
FINDERN	31	DOLES LANE,
	32	HEATH LANE,
	33	WILLINGTON ROAD,
HARTSHORNE	34	WOODVILLE ROAD,
HATTON	35	DERBY ROAD,
	36	FIELD AVENUE,
HILTON	37	BACK LANE,
	38	DERBY ROAD,
	38	EGGINTON ROAD,
	39	MAIN STREET,
	40	PEACROFT LANE, HILTON
	41	THE MEASE, HILTON
LINTON	42	CALDWELL ROAD,
	43	CEDAR GROVE,
	44	COTON PARK,
	45	HIGH STREET,
	46	PRINCESS AVENUE,
	47	SEAL VIEW,
	48	THE CLOSE,
	49	THE CREST,
	50	WARREN DRIVE,

	51	WINCHESTER DRIVE,
	52	WINDSOR ROAD,
MIDWAY	53	BURTON ROAD,
	54	DUNSMORE WAY,
MILTON	55	MAIN STREET,

5.0 Fire Hazard Control

5.1 This advice seeks to find an evidence-based resolution and retrieve standing evidence for the Fire & Emergency Services to take forward conservation management of verges and identify the risk of ignition and wildfire spread on those verges. It is recognised that the risk of wildfire is greater now because of climate change and that this risk needs to be factored into grounds management procedures.

5.2 When considering wildfire risk, the combustibility of the type of vegetation cover should be considered compared to the alternatives that might already be present. If possible, 'fire resistant' vegetation types should be chosen in place of any that are known to be particularly flammable. Useful information on the relative combustibility of different forms of vegetation comes from a recent study on wildfire occurrence on the borders of Hampshire, Surrey, and Berkshire. Here nearly 1000 actual wildfire records collected over a four-year period by the Fire & Rescue Service were classified according to land-use (Table 1). Table 1 shows the 'Risk of Ignition' according to a five-category system, from Very Low (score 1) to Very High (score 5).

5.3 It shows that based on real data, some forms of vegetation such as heather grassland are comparatively flammable, whilst others such as grass and 'other vegetation' carry a very low risk. Taken as a whole, the Table suggests that wildflower meadow creation using both widely accepted creation methods ((a) let existing grass grow long (don't mow until July or August) and wait for wildflower seed to arrive by natural colonisation, and then germinate and establish. Alternatively, (b) it is possible to remove the grass turf by digging it up and then seed the site with appropriate meadow species) is comparatively safe. However, it might be advisable to make a summer cut in newly establishing meadow areas, with the arisings being carried away from the site. The accepted practice of "cut & collect" in the management of such areas reduces the potential of dry arisings to become fuel for wildfires.

Comparison of relative Risk of Ignition scores for land cover types using method based on Fire and Rescue Service data for all vegetation fires for financial years 2009/10 to 2012/13. Score 1 = Very Low, Score 5 = Very High

Land cover type	Risk of Ignition score
1. Broadleaved	3
2. Coniferous	3
3. Felled	2
4. Ground prepared for new planting	5
5. Mixed – predominantly Broadleaved	5
6. Mixed – predominantly Conifer	4
7. Young trees	4
8. Low density	1
9. Assumed woodland	1
10. Shrub land	1
11. Grass	2
12. Agricultural land	3
13. Other vegetation	1
14. Bare ground/rock	2
15. Urban/building	3
16. Quarry	5
17. Powerline	1
18. Forest road or track	1
19. Heather	2
20. Heather grassland	4

(from McMorrow et al., 2021)

5.4 Using advice from American experience, who have well established practices for dealing with wildfires giving increased and proven risk on 'fire resistant landscaping' is to purposely establish areas of wildflower meadows in areas of housing but leaving a meadow-free zone of five feet (1.5 metres) around properties. Other authoritative American advice for semi-arid areas in Utah states: "Furthermore, wildflower meadows could serve as an important buffer against wildfires at the urban-wildland interface". This implies that the authorities there don't regard wildflower meadow as a risk, but instead see it to prevent wildfire spread.

5.5 American research and experience in managing wildflower meadows in regions prone to wildfire suggest that this can be done without undue risk if wildflower areas are managed regarding fire hazard, i.e. **arisings are removed from site**.

5.6 Following these principles, establishment of wildflower meadow is seen as providing a low risk of ignition and this is borne out by British data from the Home Counties. Indeed, Surrey Heath Borough Council, with considerable heathland vegetation cover close to the study area referred to above, makes it clear to residents that it doesn't regard areas of wildflowers and long grasses as creating a fire hazard, if proper guidance is followed.

5.7 Standing advice from Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Service in 2022 is;

Is long, dry grass a fire risk?

5.8 Any length of grass needs an ignition source to catch fire. It cannot spontaneously combust. However, grass fires can start and spread quickly, travelling considerable distances at speed. Because of how fine grass is, it burns very fast. The taller and drier

the grass, the more intensely it will burn. Shorter grass will have a lower flame height and the fire will be easier to control. Grass under 10cm is a lower risk.

5.9 It is important to remember that a fire must start with ignition, so we can all take responsibility for reducing the risk of grass or wildfires:

- Put out and discard cigarettes carefully.
- Don't drop litter.
- Avoid campfires and BBQs.

If Residents have concerns about overgrown grass near property

5.10 If you are particularly concerned about overgrown grass near your home, consider:

- Having a hosepipe or water easily available
- Trimming back your own hedges, plants, and grass to create more space between your home and the problem area

Reporting overgrown grass or vegetation

5.11 If Residents are concerned about an area of land and you don't know who owns it, you could ask your neighbours, or contact your local council. Remember that many councils will be deliberately leaving grass longer as part of their rewilding programme.

5.12 Standing advice from Warwickshire Fire Service/Warwickshire County Council and South Devonshire Fire Service will be used with particular focus on removing arisings off verges. Further confirmation will be obtained from Derbyshire Fire & Rescue Service to confirm national advice/best practice.

6.0 Financial Implications

6.1 There are no direct financial implications assessed yet. However, data will be collated and monitored to identify any savings directly arising from advancing Verge Conservation management. It would also be valuable to incorporate cost analysis within the project. To help generate a per km cost for those larger verges to be incorporated in Year 2/3 (2025/26) to amenity cut a grass verge (current situation) and to conservation cut. Also to help determine the costs (reasonable estimate) of running a dual system where some verges need to remain in amenity cut management and others as conservation managed. Also determining If there are savings to be made through conservation cutting, how could they be reinvested, for example into the rural network or for the purchase of machinery etc.

7.0 Corporate Implications

Employment Implications

7.1 There are no employment implications arising from this report.

Legal Implications

7.2 This project and the Action Plan for Nature (APN) Work Programme provides a measurable opportunity to adhere to its legal ‘Biodiversity Duty’ under the Environment Act 2021 to ‘conserve’ and ‘enhance’ biodiversity.

Corporate Plan Implications

7.3 The project contributes to the Corporate Plan Priorities and Key Aims including:

Our Environment

a. Improve the environment of the district
    i. Enhance biodiversity across the district
b. Tackle Climate Change
    i. Strive to make South Derbyshire District Council carbon neutral by 2030
c. Enhance the attractiveness of South Derbyshire
    i. Improve public spaces to create an environment for people to enjoy.

6.4 The advancement of this programme contributes to the Ecological Emergency Declaration made by South Derbyshire District Councillors in 2023.

7.0 Risk Impact

7.1 The Action Plan for Nature and this project provides a measurable and accountable strategy of The Council's legal 'Biodiversity Duty' under the Environment Act 2021 and therefore reduces the risk of not complying with this legislation.

8.0 Community Impact

8.1 An output of this project will be encouraging local communities to connect with nature through environmental projects and education to appreciate biodiversity.

9.0 Equality and Diversity Impact

9.1 None known.

10.0 Social Value Impact

10.1 The APN and this project promote 'investment in nature' which can create opportunities for nature-based solutions such as climate adaptation and resilience, flood alleviation, the improvement and expansion of green spaces, and connection to nature. Nature-based solutions therefore have the potential for significant positive impacts to society.

11.0 Environmental Sustainability

11.1 This project and Work Programme promotes Environmental Sustainability at its core. Investing in nature is critical to sustaining a healthy environment for generations to come.

Description of Documentation	Document Reference
The compatibility of wildflower meadow areas and wildfire risk in Petersfield parish Andy J Moffat and Melanie Oxley June 2023	https://petersfieldsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Wildflower-meadows-and-wildfires-June-2023.pdf
South Derbyshire Common Ragwort Policy & Advice Note	Attached Separately

Appendix 1 – Ground Maintenance Training
Appendix 2 – Ragwort Policy & Advice
Appendix 3 – DEFRA Ragwort Ragwort code of practice