

REPORT TO:	ENVIRONMENTAL AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES	AGENDA ITEM:6
DATE OF MEETING:	21st JANUARY 2021	CATEGORY: (See Notes) DELEGATED or RECOMMENDED
REPORT FROM:	ALLISON THOMAS, STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OPERATIONS	OPEN
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	ALLISON THOMAS, 5775 Allison.thomas@southderbyshire.gov.uk	DOC:
SUBJECT:	PICTORIAL WILDFLOWER PLANTING TRIAL-OUTCOMES AND NEXT STEPS	
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	TERMS OF REFERENCE: (See Notes)

1.0 Recommendations

- 1.1 That the Committee notes the outcome of the pictorial wildflower planting pilot scheme which was undertaken at four locations within the District during 2020.
- 1.2 That the Committee approves the continuation of wildflower planting in the four pilot areas in 2021, adapted to reflect the lessons learned in the initial scheme in 2020.
- 1.3 That the Committee welcomes Derbyshire County Council's agreement for the Council to trial a different mowing regime at four sites and at two "gateways" into the District to encourage indigenous/native wild flowers, under the terms of its Agency Agreement subject to the Committee's approval.
- 1.4 That the Committee endorses a communications campaign under the banner "First Impressions" for the work on the "gateway" sites into the District.
- 1.5 That the Committee notes that the above work will inform the potential development of a revised specification for its Agency Agreement with the County Council in the longer-term.
- 1.6 That the Committee notes that the continuation of the wildflower trial and amendments to highway verge management on the proposed trial and gateway sites can be accommodated within existing budgets. However, should the Committee wish to see a District-wide expansion of the proposed trials in the longer-term then the resource implications of so doing -wide would be the subject of a future report to this Committee and also referred to the Finance and Management Committee for approval.

2.0 Purpose of the Report

- 2.1 To seek approval to the continuation of the pictorial wildflower planting as a pilot scheme at four locations within the District, slightly amended to reflect lessons learned from the initial scheme.
- 2.2 To seek approval to trial a different highway verge mowing regime to encourage indigenous wild flowers at four sites and at and at two “gateways” into the District, as part of a “First Impressions” communications campaign with the endorsement of Derbyshire County Council under the terms of its Agency Agreement with the Council.
- 2.3 To explain the financial implications of the continuation of the wildflower trials, variation to the verge mowing regime and work to “gateways” into the District.

3.0 Executive Summary

- 3.1 Unlike the current grass cutting arrangements which the Council undertakes to agreed Service Standards and for highway verges in accordance with its Agency Agreement with Derbyshire County Council, pictorial wildflower planting and the encouragement of indigenous/native wild flowers requires a different management and mowing regime.
- 3.2 In August 2019, the Committee gave approval to the commencement of a pictorial wildflower planting pilot on four sites across the District. These were as follows:
 - Hartshorne Road, Repton – Right hand side of road heading towards Hartshorne just after the Knights Lane junction.
 - Ticknall Road, Ticknall – Left hand side of road heading into Ticknall
 - The Mease, Hilton - Derby Road end nearest to A50.
 - William Nadin Way, Swadlincote
- 3.3 The first three of the above sites were a success. The fourth pilot area at William Nadin Way failed.
- 3.4 A meeting has taken place with Derbyshire County Council’s Highway’s Network Manager to discuss the pilot, for which cultivation licences were given and to consider further opportunities for joint working. The County Council has indicated that whilst it would be willing for the Council to continue to plant the original pilot areas with wild flowers in 2021, longer-term it would be keen to explore how it might amend the specification of its Agency Agreements with all District and Borough Councils, where appropriate and subject to highway safety considerations, to introduce different verge mowing regimes that encourage indigenous wild flowers to grow.
- 3.5 The County Council is not in a position to amend its specification in the short-term but would be willing for South Derbyshire to “informally” pilot a different mowing regime in the District which would inform its work in this area.
- 3.6 As a consequence of the above, four sites have been selected with the County Council’s endorsement, to trial a different verge maintenance regime for 2021. In addition, a further two “gateway” sites into the District are also proposed for inclusion in the trial.
- 3.7 The County Council has indicated that irrespective of any pilot, the District Council will still be required to maintain a one metre swathe cut to rural roadside verges, a full cut four times per year to visibility splays and a minimum five cuts per year to urban roadside verges in order to maintain highway safety.

4.0 Detail

- 4.1 In April 2018, Environmental and Development Services and Housing and Community Services Committee agreed a set of standards for how the Council manages a number of its public facing services including:
- parks and open spaces
 - grass cutting and street cleansing
 - Housing estates and communal areas.
- 4.2 These standards set out the frequency and the nature of the services that would be delivered and have since been underpinned by Key Performance Indicators in the Council Plan on:
- Improving local environmental quality (measured through a bi-annual survey supported by Keep Britain Tidy)
- 4.3 South Derbyshire District Council cuts grass to ensure that people can use the roads and pavements safely. The Council cuts the grass on all Council-owned land, highway verges (as an agent for Derbyshire County Council), public open spaces, parks, town centres and memorial gardens.
- 4.4 As a guide, areas outside 30mph signs are cut two or three times a year, depending on the road designation and traffic sight lines are cut four times a year. Under the Agency Agreement with Derbyshire County Council the Council is required to cut a metre strip of the verge in two of every three years with the third year requiring a full verge cut back to the highway boundary. Derbyshire County Council require areas within the 30mph zones to be cut five times a year, South Derbyshire District Council currently cut these verges 16 times a year.
- 4.5 The Council uses large ride on mowers, within the 30mph zones, to make cutting as efficient as possible. Sometimes, these machines cannot cut close enough to trees and bases of obstacles so strimmers are used to ensure a consistent cut across all areas on every cut. Grass cuttings are not collected.
- 4.6 On the rural road network, the Council uses tractor-mounted flails to cut grass verges. Due to logistical and resourcing issues it is not possible to trim around trees and posts outside the 30mph zones. Again, grass cuttings are not collected.
- 4.7 In 2020, the Council undertook a wildflower planting pilot on four sites across the District. The County Council granted cultivation licences to the District Council to enable this pilot planting to take place. It did, however, indicate that it did not have the resources to support the pilots, neither did it support just leaving the grass to grow as this creates safety/visibility issues. The pilot sites selected were as follows:
- Hartshorne Road, Repton – Right hand side of road heading towards Hartshorne just after the Knights Lane junction.
 - Ticknall Road, Ticknall – Left hand side of road heading into Ticknall
 - The Mease, Hilton - Derby Road end nearest to A50.
 - William Nadin Way, Swadlincote
- 4.8 Unlike the standard grass cutting arrangements, wildflower planting on these sites required a different management and mowing regime. This involved:

- Autumn
 - Marking out the area to be planted
 - Spraying to eradicate weeds
 - Rotavating
 - Seeding
- Spring/Summer
 - Once the seeds flowered and set seed the verges were cut, raked, bailed, and cleared.
 - The arisings were then disposed of. With standard grass cutting, cut grass is blown back on to the verges with no disposal costs.

- 4.9 Continuation of this wildflower planting requires the above management process to start again with repeat sowing necessary to maintain the full impact of the wildflowers for the following year.
- 4.10 The initial outcome of the pilots was mixed. The sites at Repton and Ticknall were planted with a cornfield mix of seeds and were both considered to be successful, in terms of planting, with a colourful display stretching for between 200-300 metres of verge. The site in Hilton was planted with a 'Magic Carpet' mix of seeds and also produced a colourful display in two 100 metre blocks. The site in Swadlincote failed. It is considered that the adjacent building work may have compromised the planting.
- 4.11 The feedback from local residents on the trials that succeeded was extremely positive, with no negative feedback for the site that failed. The trial was budgeted to continue for five years and it is considered that this will give a meaningful insight into what works and what does not, therefore, it is proposed that the Council will continue with the pilot on all four of the identified sites.
- 4.12 It is not recommended, however, that a further extension of this type of wildflower planting is undertaken elsewhere in the District in the immediate future as the majority of the wildflowers displayed on these sites would not occur naturally on grass verges in the countryside. From a biodiversity perspective, the preference would be to encourage appropriate indigenous wildflowers to prosper, leaving pictorial planting, of the kind used in the pilots to parks, urban verges on new developments, roundabouts (as has been agreed by the Housing and Community Services Committee recently as part of a District-wide roundabout sponsorship scheme, financed by the private sector) and urban public open spaces. The option of naturalistic perennial planting, a low maintenance form of planting used throughout the UK and internationally, would provide an alternative long-term approach, promoting biodiversity with stunning visual displays.
- 4.13 In addition to the above sites there are already two verges in the District identified by Derbyshire County Council as Road Verge Reserves, these are located at Rosliston Road and Staunton Lane and have a specific maintenance regime to encourage wildlife habitat and maintain the diversity of wildflowers present.
- 4.14 Derbyshire County Council is currently reviewing the Road Verge Reserves across the County and has commissioned Derbyshire Wildlife Trust to undertake the review, advise on any capital works that might be required and to revise the management plans for each site as appropriate.
- 4.15 The Council currently manages large areas of grassland habitat for biodiversity value, including Salt's Meadow in Swadlincote Woodlands, part of Rosliston Forestry Centre, Sandholes in Midway and Croft Orchard in Overseal. These are cut and cleared annually using agricultural contractors at relatively low costs. There are

proposed improvements to various Council grassland sites as a mitigation project using specific S106 mitigation funding from a recent bypass development. This will give the opportunity to trial a variety of approaches on sites with different topography, drainage, soil conditions. It is also intended that all the Council's nature sites will have ecological surveys, and, where appropriate, propose prescribed biodiversity opportunities for grassland/ habitat recovery/ improvement and future biodiversity net gain.

4.16 In recent discussions with Derbyshire County Council regarding the Highway Agency Agreement, it has been proposed that South Derbyshire District Council trials a different mowing regime on four rural verge sites across the District and at two "Gateway" sites into the District for 2021 with the aim of rewilding these verges by encouraging native species to flourish.

4.17 These sites are as follows:

Gateway Sites

- B5008 towards Willington
- A516 Etwall to Mickleover

Rural verge Sites

- Rural verges A514 Ticknall to Stanton
- A50 Shardlow to Elvaston
- Walton Road, Drakelow
- Catton Road, Walton on Trent

4.18 Habitat recovery with minimal intervention, is considered the more sympathetic approach to local biodiversity but can take between three to five years, or potentially longer, to show a real difference. In trialling a new approach this would, over time, demonstrate that the Council has a long-term strategic plan for the District (part of its emerging Plan for Nature). And if successful could signal a step-change in the Council's approach to managing the local environment for the next generation.

4.19 The Council has a statutory duty to consider biodiversity in exercising its functions and not disturb or destroy habitat. Where there is potential to affect long-established habitat such as old hedgerows and verges, unimproved grassland, former meadow, woodland edge etc. ecological surveys and impact assessments must be considered as essential good practice. It will be important to provide evidence of improvement with 'before' data to compare the 'after' data

4.20 These rural sites are likely to have abundant wildlife in terms of invertebrates, mammals, birds, reptiles etc. even if the flora is not species rich. They may have historic or archaeological interest and hold specialist species that need protection, especially at the base of hedgerows, including reptiles and the endangered hedgehog. Many of these verges and hedgerows are seen on District maps from the 1800s and some may date to medieval times. They may be remnant meadows/ woodland edges which have residual seed banks which flourish under changed management regimes. They can be improved/ recovered, but these require careful bespoke, (often one-off) interventions depending on a variety of ecological factors such as shade, orientation, soil-type, drainage, topography, tree proximity etc. Changing the mowing regime to an autumn cut and clear will generally impoverish the soil over a number of years and increase species richness, but is a long-term process which sees no immediate results and has no visual 'wow factor' to stimulate debate and discussion, but has greater ecological integrity.

- 4.21 Cutting grass between April and July generally reduces floral diversity over time and can encourage the vigorous growth of robust, long-lived, often invasive species that are more likely to spread vegetatively.
- 4.22 Cutting long grass which is left to lie in situ results in the build-up of a thick 'thatch' of dead and dying vegetation forming a mat over the soil, suppressing growth of many smaller plants and encouraging the more vigorous often invasive, species. Many of our wild meadow flowers which we hope to establish on verges rely on open soil for seed to germinate. The longer the grass at cutting time, the greater the suppression.
- 4.23 Prescription for improvement of rural roadside grass verges including those with old hedgerows all require-
- Full wildlife/ flora survey/ impact assessment of site, an approach will be made to Derbyshire Wildlife Trust to undertake the appropriate survey on the trial sites.
 - Bespoke prescriptions to be created for each proposed improvement site based on survey results.
 - Native perennial hedgerow flora and meadow species can be selected depending on site conditions and should include Yellow Rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) which reduces grass dominance due to its semi-parasitic habit, along with species which are the most important of food sources for pollinators and invertebrates
 - Mow the grassed area as closely as possible prior to any interventions
 - Mark out defined area and map for recording
 - Remove invasive weeds such as ragwort as necessary over growing season
 - Pesticide should not be used
- 4.24 There are a number of options for habitat recovery on grassed areas of which the following have proved successful.
Options include
- Option 1: Cut the whole of the verge once a year in September, rather than the current 4/5 cuts. This will not stimulate as many wildflowers as other options but could be appropriate in more rural locations. It is relatively low cost. This approach could be accommodated within existing resources if the number of sites were limited.
 - Option 2: Cut the whole of the verge twice a year once mid-February to mid-March and once in September, this should stimulate a quicker "rewilding" than Option 1; this approach could also be accommodated within existing resources again with a limit on number of sites. Arisings can be left to lie, but removal is preferable (see 4.18 above). The early cut must not take place after mid-March to avoid damage to emerging flora in spring.
 - Option 3: Adopt the same cutting regime as above but the cut vegetation is removed to allow the germination of the seeds and to reduce the soil fertility over time. Arisings can be removed either by hand or by using equipment that collects as it cuts. Some Councils have attempted to utilise help from parish or town councils or from local interest groups where manual grass removal is adopted. This will require resources to co-ordinate and could lead to a decline of a specific site if volunteers disappear.

- Option 4: More intensive management including some site preparation at the start including harrowing and sowing or reducing soil quality by removing turf or topsoil, preparing ground and using green hay or sowing an appropriate indigenous seed mix and managing as option 3.
- Option 5; Disc overseeding. This involves close mowing, sow area in March using disc overseeder with chosen seed mix, planting perennials/ bulbs if required, Early cut once mid-February to mid-March and clear in September. Arisings can be left on surface for two days before removal, but not critical. A further cut in late autumn/ early winter is recommended. This is a less costly method than option 4 and has shown exceptional results where used for inserting perennial native meadow species into existing grassland.

4.25 In the absence of further available funds, it is proposed that option two be adopted for the six rural verge locations and that site-specific plans are developed for the gateway sites based on site context, budgets, resources and highway safety. It is likely that the gateway sites may have a combination of approaches including enhanced cutting regimes for the sight lines/visibility splays.

4.26 The County Council has indicated that it would be supportive of the Council trialling a new management regime for the sites selected. The outcomes would be monitored carefully by comparing species counts from the initial survey each year and if successful could become the blueprint for a revised Agency Agreement specification with the County across Derbyshire. If only option two can be afforded it could be a number of years before any improvements are evidenced, and any blueprint can be created. In the light of the current ecological emergency this may not be considered sufficient to deliver the biodiversity intentions in the Corporate Plan.

4.27 The only caveat to the pilot schemes taking place is that highway safety should continue to be a primary concern so the mowing of sight lines/visibility splays should continue in line with existing standards.

4.28 The changes proposed would need to be underpinned by a accompanying Communications Plan. It is proposed that this is badged as “First Impressions” - to explain the public what the Council is doing and the visual and environmental impact it will have on the look and feel of the District in the coming years as you travel through it.

5.0 Financial Implications

5.1 The costs of the initial pilot planting, which was agreed by the Committee in 2019, included year one two cuts and clearances and two herbicide treatments plus full coverage seeding, subsequent years include for one cut and clearance and top up seeding.

	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	Total
Manpower	£3,822	£1,912	£1,950	£1,989	£2,028	£11,701
Equipment Hire Costs	£2,250	£750	£ 765	£ 780	£ 795	£ 5,340
Materials	£1,214	£447	£ 456	£ 465	£ 474	£ 3,056
Total	£7,286	£3,109	£3,162	£3,234	£3,297	£20,088

- 5.2 The Council will continue to hire the type of equipment required to undertake the management of the pilot sites during the pilot phase.
- 5.3 In the long-term, investment by the Council in specialist equipment would need to be considered, dependent on the range and type of maintenance approach adopted. Wildflower management is more intensive than conventional mowing on rural verges, but can often be less intensive in urban settings, the right approach could balance out any additional employee needs. Therefore, consideration about the number of staff and appropriate training will need to be factored into any longer-term undertaking.
- 5.4 Whilst the proposed trials can be accommodated within existing budgets, once the outcome of the trial has been considered, and if a decision is reached to increase the number of sites receiving enhanced maintenance regimes, then any additional long-term costs will need to be evaluated and reported accordingly.

6.0 Corporate Implications

Employment Implications

- 6.1 In the short-term, workforce requirements can be accommodated from existing resources. The long-term implications are unknown and will be very dependent on taking a balanced approach.

Legal Implications

- 6.2 Renegotiation of the Highways' Agency Agreement with the County Council could be required in the longer-term.

Corporate Plan Implications

- 6.3 In the light of the success of the wildflower planting pilots and the proposed trials of revised verge management arrangements on the sites identified, changes to the agreed Service Standards will need to be considered. This will be the subject of a future report to this Committee.

Risk Impact

- 6.4 There is increased awareness from the public of the potential for public land owners to improve their impact on the built and natural environment; there is momentum throughout the Country to be seen to be doing something, particularly following the National Pollinator Strategy in 2014. Failure to continue with the planting in the pilot areas or to consider longer-term approaches to sustainable verge management as part of its Plan for Nature, and the Corporate Plan commitment to biodiversity, could have a detrimental effect on the Council's reputation.

7.0 Community Impact

Consultation

- 7.1 Prior to implementing the trial verge management approach, the Council will need to develop a communications plan, as highlighted above, to inform and in some cases persuade an often-skeptical public about the benefits of not cutting the grass. Where appropriate community groups and residents may wish to be involved in activity related to wildflower improvements

Equality and Diversity Impact

7.2 Not applicable

Social Value Impact

7.3 Wildflower planting increases biodiversity, ornamental wildflower planting enhances the aesthetic appearance of otherwise bland green spaces, improves the livability of the District and encourages wildlife.

Environmental Sustainability

7.4 In August 2018 the Council established a Corporate Environmental Sustainability Group (CESG) to consider ways in which the Council could improve its environmental credentials. This was timely, given the most recent Council Motion in June 2019 for the Council to declare a Climate Change Emergency signed up to by over 100 local authorities across the country.

7.5 The Group's remit is to move the Council towards becoming a beacon of environmental good practice. Its key focus is on retaining accreditation to the International Environmental Standard ISO14001 which was successfully achieved in December 2019 for the eleventh year in a row, but the Group is also focusing on a range of other environmental projects including:

- Implementing the approved Staff Travel Plan by encouraging staff to walk, cycle and use public transport both to work and in the course of their duties to reduce carbon emissions and improve the health and well-being of staff.
- Improving the way in which the Council manages its own waste, water and energy
- Improving its procurement practices to ensure consideration is given to environmental factors during the procurement process.
- Developing a biodiversity plan for the District – a Plan for Nature - which has the potential to fundamentally change the way in which the Council manages its own land, public open space and land it manages on behalf of others i.e. highway verges.

7.6 This Plan for Nature will be a long-term Strategy for the District and will form part of the evidence base for the next Local Plan. It will help and support the Council to provide more clarity to developers on the way in which the Council would like to see net biodiversity gain being delivered as part of any future development. An update on its development will be presented to a future Committee.