

BARNSLEY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

This matter is not a Key Decision within the Council's definition and has not been included in the relevant Forward Plan

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR PLACE TO CABINET ON 22 SEPTEMBER 2021

Public or private: Public

GRASS CUTTING BRIEFING

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To note the recent service changes that have been made to improve the overall quality of grass cutting across the borough and to support the proposed development of the service for 2022 onwards; to improve the grass cutting service whilst simultaneously focus on our biodiversity levels.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 To support the continued review the grass cutting and weed killing management regime currently in place.
- 2.2 To work with Area Councils and key internal and external stakeholders to develop plans of how managed grass areas can be improved, whilst simultaneously identify and set out areas where rewilding and wildflower management regimes can be introduced.
- 2.3 To work more closely with Area Councils to improve service transparency by providing greater levels of service information to allow better coordination and a better customer experience.

3. INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 Our mobile grass team currently cut circa. 6,500,000M² of grass on an 18-day cycle which was reduced in July 2021 from a 21-day cycle. Albeit this year we have experienced both a difficult and challenging climate which initially stunted the grass and weed growth through May and early June, whilst accelerated growth rates in the warmer conditions of late June and July. An added factor to this has been the continual demand on the service to support waste and recycling teams through the pandemic and successive waves of staff infections and isolations. The reduction in the cutting days was made possible by taking on additional resources at a cost of £110,000 per year.

- 3.2 In June 2021, an Assistant Service Manager was appointed to oversee the grass cutting function and has had a positive impact on the service delivery and performance. At the time of appointing the ASM, the grass team were cutting at an average of 23 days on the 21-day cycle, currently the team are now cutting at an average of 17 days on the 18-day cycle.
- 3.3 In recent years, through for example the 2030 engagement work, we are witnessing a growing and welcome understanding of climate change and the importance of improving our green spaces and biodiversity. Research to support this paper has shown that many local authorities are reviewing their grass management regimes in favour of increasing the biodiversity values of land under their control. Currently the Government's proposed Environmental Bill similarly will place requirements for Local Authorities to provide a net gain in biodiversity of 10% when developing land.
- 3.4 Therefore, in considering improving our services in this area, rather than increasing resources levels, making changes to the grass management regime to allow resources to be deployed in different ways to improve the quality of the traditionally-managed areas, whilst simultaneously improve the overall biodiversity levels of the borough is the strategic focus of this paper.
- 3.5 There has been a significant loss in recent years of natural grassland habitats for pollinating insects which has become an ever-growing environmental concern. Council owned grassland and roadside verges have significant potential to be able to contribute to restoring grassland and wildflower biodiversity throughout the borough.
- 3.6 Land management has significant climate and biodiversity impacts, a project of rewilding areas across the borough will go some way address these, whilst continuing to meet the Council's Corporate priorities.
- 3.7 In terms of ecosystems this borough has many important locations throughout. It has a phenomenally successful record of increases in biodiversity through projects such as Dearne Valley Old Moor and working to increase Willow Tit numbers and contains critically important heathlands in the Peak District National Park around Dunford Bridge.
- 3.8 By allowing a proportion of the 6,500,000M² of grass in the borough to rewild it is anticipated that the average cutting days can be reduced even further at no additional cost, further improving the appearance of the maintained grass plots throughout the borough.

4. PROPOSAL AND JUSTIFICATION

- 4.1 Improvements to grass management regimes for managed areas. The recent changes to reduce the number of days between cuts will continue. We plan to keep staff based in areas to increase the sense of ownership. At the same time we will improve contingency arrangements to deploy selected staff in other areas to keep a more consistent service quality across the borough. We are and will continue to develop better working relationships with Area Council Area managers to improve the overall transparency of service offer. The benefits of adopting this approach will be more consistent service offer and better coordination of services between grass cutting teams, area- commissioned services and volunteering groups.
- 4.2 In recent years we have worked with local parish councils, area councils, area-commissioned service providers and key stakeholders like RSPB and local volunteering groups to reduce our verge cutting regimes across the borough. This consultative approach has proved successful in increasing biodiversity in selected areas, whilst improve understanding of why we are taking this approach. It is recommended that we continue to work with these stakeholders across wider areas of the borough to select plots locations.
- 4.3 It is proposed that that a project of rewilding be considered across the borough to allow select plots of currently maintained grass to grow uninhibited. Leaving the grass to grow will, over time, improve biodiversity, encourage wildflowers to establish and help create new habitats and vital shelter for invertebrates and pollinator species.
- 4.4 This will also tie in with the Neighbourhoods Future Council Review which recommended a programme of land divestment work. This this we can seek to change the use of the land and encourage rewilding or plant trees, create orchards etc. in key locations of our grounds and parks across the borough.
- 4.5 A staggered process of allowing grass to grow uninhibited with some selected areas sown with wildflower seeds will allow a more cost-effective solution to increasing the biodiversity of the borough than a more targeted approach of planting full wildflower meadows from seed. This will also allow us to fully understand which areas of the borough may be suitable for full wildflower meadows in the future.
- 4.6 It is important to understand that a rewilding and wildflower initiative is not about neglect. Active management of these areas is crucial for the success of grassland and wildflower pollinators to flourish. Areas of rewilding will need to be cut once per year and the resulting grass and wildflower arisings need to be collected as this removes nutrients, lowers the soil fertility, and prevents a 'thatch' of dead grass inhibiting wildflower seed growth. Over time, the percentage of grass will decrease, and the percentage of wildflowers will naturally increase. Additionally, some larger areas chosen for rewilding will still need to have perimeter and desire line cuts to allow residents to navigate around and through these plots.

- 4.7 In order to meet our Zero40 targets as a local authority, the rewilding of areas throughout the borough will not only increase the biodiversity of the town, but will reduce our mower fleet emissions through the reduction of cuts. It is proposed that where we introduce wildflower areas that we do this by using seeds of indigenous plants.
- 4.8 Where applicable, arisings that have been collected after cutting at the end of the season can be left at the edge of the site to form 'habitat piles' which act as hibernation and refuge areas for wildlife. Where this is not possible, all arising will be removed for disposal.

5. CONSIDERATION OF ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

- 5.1 The do-nothing approach would maintain the status quo of cyclical grass cutting of council owned grassland and verges on the existing 18 day cutting cycle. In doing so the grass is kept to a specification of 3 to 5 inches and the arising are left on the surface after cutting. This improves the growing conditions for the grass and in turn suppresses the natural proliferation of wildflowers meaning less pollen and nectar for insects which reduces their numbers therefore reducing the biodiversity of the borough.
- 5.2 An alternative approach to rewilding would be to create artificial wildflower meadows, whilst this method would produce a striking visual effect it is an expensive solution which is not guaranteed to be a success. Wildflower meadows require a low fertility soil, if the area is too rich in nutrients for wildflowers to thrive then the result would be a jungle of nettle, dock, and aggressive grasses rather than a colourful wildflower meadow.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL PEOPLE/SERVICE USERS

- 6.1 The implications for local people directly are that some plots within their residential area will no longer be maintained to their usual standard. Whilst these sites will still have some form of maintenance such as regular perimeter cuts to stop growth onto footpaths and/or property boundary's, a targeted marketing and communication strategy will need to put in place to inform and educate the residents.
- 6.2 The implications for wider service users and residents alike would be an improvement of the biodiversity of the borough. Additionally, once established these areas of rewilding can be used as educational tools for local schools and involvement from local community groups can also help in maintaining these areas when they are cut at the end of the season.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Consultations on the financial implications of this report have taken place with representatives of the Service Director for Finance and S151 Officer.
- 7.2 Proposals are presented for how managed grass areas can be improved whilst simultaneously introducing areas of rewilding and wildflower management for improving our green spaces and biodiversity.

- 7.3 The changes will result in reducing the average cutting days (and slightly reduce running costs) but there will be some new tasks and new costs, for instance, there is a need to hire a cut and collect mower for a brief period at the end of each season to enable the rewilding areas to be reset for the following growing year and the cut grass may need to be baled and taken away. The sites will also need active management. There will also be some additional costs for new signage at each of the locations.
- 7.4 The full fiscal impact of the changes, including the additional equipment that may be required will only become clear once the full scope of the changes to the cutting areas is agreed but the service has confirmed that all proposed changes will be managed within existing operational budgets. This budget includes the £110k additional base budget provided in 2021 to facilitate the reduction in cutting days from 21 to 18. Any savings identified will be used to address.

8. EMPLOYEE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Existing BMBC staff will deliver the scheme including Neighbourhood Services Management who will co-ordinate the project. Operational staff from Neighbourhood Services will deliver the operational needs on the ground in relation to the maintenance of the rewilding areas.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are no legal implications arising from this project.

10. CUSTOMER AND DIGITAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 None

11. COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Before the commencement of the project a communications plan will be developed in collaboration with key stakeholders which will include a proactive communications campaign along with signage placed by each rewilding site to inform and educate people as to why we are rewilding and the benefits it will bring.

12. SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS



The main sustainability impact of this project is the positive effect that it will have on biodiversity in the borough, with land being managed in a way that increases the number of pollinators and other insects as well as species of native grasses and wildflowers.

There is also the smaller positive impact that the decreased frequency of cutting in these areas will reduce the amount of fuel used and reduce the greenhouse gas emissions associated with this. Residents will also benefit from the change in cutting frequency in terms of the quality of their local areas, whether this is through proximity to higher quality natural environment or because the targeted reduction in cutting will allow for more frequent maintenance of sites which are not being managed for wildlife.

13. EQUALITY IMPACT

13. Not applicable.

14. THE CORPORATE PLAN AND THE COUNCIL'S PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

14.1 None

15. TACKLING THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

15.1 None

16. TACKLING HEALTH INEQUALITIES

16.1 None

17. REDUCTION OF CRIME AND DISORDER

17.1 None

18. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

18.1 None

19. HEALTH, SAFETY AND EMERGENCY RESILIENCE ISSUES

19.1 There are no increased H&S and Emergency Resilience issues arising from this project.

20. COMPATIBILITY WITH THE EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

20.1 None

21. CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY

21.1 None

22. GLOSSARY

None

23. LIST OF APPENDICES

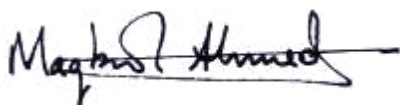
Appendix A: Financial Implications

24. BACKGROUND PAPERS

If you would like to inspect background papers for this report, please email governance@barnsley.gov.uk so that appropriate arrangements can be made

Report author: Paul Castle

Financial Implications/Consultation



*To be signed by
senior Financial Services officer where no financial
implications)*