



Report of the Director of Place

Economy, Environment & Infrastructure Policy Development Committee

22 April 2021

Management and Maintenance of Open Space (Biodiversity)

Purpose:	To review the Council's management of its green infrastructure
Policy Framework:	Swansea Council Corporate Priority: Maintaining and enhancing Swansea's natural resources and biodiversity
Consultation:	Access to Services, Finance, Legal, Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management, Cabinet Member for Investment, Regeneration & Tourism, Nature Conservation Team
Recommendation(s):	It is recommended that: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) It is confirmed that the scope of this review is confined initially to the maintenance of grassed areas; and2) The Parks Operations and Nature Conservation Teams liaise with Plantlife and other relevant organisations in a review of the Council's green space maintenance regime.3) That a further report will be brought back to the PDC in due course setting out the proposed future policy context prior to seeking approval by Cabinet.
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Parks Service is responsible for maintaining the diverse range of Parks and Open Spaces within the City and County of Swansea. This service offers the community and visitors to Swansea locations the opportunity to enjoy recreational activities, improve health and well-being, participate in sports, relax, learn and play. The service is subdivided into sections each with a commitment to deliver a high quality, cost effective service.
- 1.2 The Council has committed to halt the loss of biodiversity, promote healthy resilient ecosystems, and strengthen green infrastructure to adapt to and mitigate for the impacts of climate change, and ensure that our natural environment and the benefits and services it provides are protected for the benefit of future generations
- 1.3 This report summarises current maintenance practices and strives to offer areas of consideration on how the Council could manage its green spaces differently to achieve the corporate priority of maintaining and enhancing Swansea's natural resources and biodiversity - so that we maintain and enhance biodiversity, reduce our carbon footprint, improve our knowledge and understanding of our natural environment and benefit health and well-being.

2. Scope

- 2.1 The scope of this report:
 - Encompasses the main greenspace areas maintained by the Parks Service Area namely parks, roadside verges, housing and school land, green amenity spaces etc.
 - Considers the needs of these spaces.
 - Identifies the current maintenance regimes.
 - Explores the potential range of alternative ways to maintain.

3. Roadside verges

- 3.1 The importance of roadside verges, as an integral part of the Highway network, is to provide strips for services, soft edges to highways for safety and aesthetic reasons, and vision splays at junctions and bends.
- 3.2 Currently urban roadside verges, where there are often a high level of pedestrians, are cut on average 9 times a year using ride on mowers. Areas around street furniture and trees etc. used to be sprayed to keep grass short, however predominantly these areas are now strimmed periodically through the cutting season. This does result in longer grass at these locations, but significantly reduces the use of herbicide.

- 3.3 Rural verges, where there are generally far less pedestrian movements, are cut twice a year using tractor mounted flails. Vision splays are still cut on average 9 times a year for highway safety and all grass is currently left to lie.
- 3.4 Roadside verges do hold the potential to be an effective tool for increased biodiversity and pollinator conservation with a revised maintenance regime. The Council could identify areas where verges, or sections of verges could be safely and aesthetically acceptably, be left to grow longer to facilitate pollinators and a wider variety of plant life.
- 3.5 A UK observational study of mown roadside verges found that on average they had 67% less flowers and 61% fewer pollinators across the summer season, compared to unmown verges. Another experimental study found that the combination of 2 cuts per year and removal of grass cuttings ('cut and collect') resulted in the greatest flower species richness, density and pollinator density. Other studies provide evidence on the benefits of delayed mowing (late summer) and partially mowed verges (1m strip).
- 3.6 Plantlife are a British conservation charity who work both nationally and internationally to conserve native flowers, plants and fungi. Their most recent roadside verge campaign aims to work with local authorities to restore roadside verges, create a practical management plan for roadside verges and generally support the introduction of diverse verges in both rural and urban areas. Consideration could be given to utilising their best practice and management tools in assessing the existing biodiversity value of the verges under our management as an important first step.

4 Other grassed areas and amenity spaces

- 4.1 The Parks Service also maintains a variety of Council owned green spaces and amenity land including parks, sports pitches, school grounds, cemeteries, Housing land, and other general estates land.
- 4.2 The cutting frequencies vary dependent upon the nature of the area. They vary from leaving areas uncut throughout the summer, with pathways cut through them, to cutting amenity areas 2 times a year. The cutting frequencies on sports pitches is on a needs basis.
- 4.3 Apart from fine turf management such as bowling greens and cricket squares, grass is not collected due to the high collection and disposal costs.
- 4.4 Demand for public parks has massively increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and has refocused our attention on the role they play in our society and 'nature got to shine'. Recent restrictions have demonstrated how vital parks and green spaces are for both physical health and mental wellbeing and their importance in delivering the active travel agenda.

- 4.5 Again the Council could identify grassed areas could be left to grow longer to facilitate pollinators and a wider variety of plant life, however a balance would have to be struck with other uses for the areas, including recreation, sports, tourism, and events.
- 4.6 Working with colleagues in Nature Conservation, cut and collect machinery has been purchased to aid in managing areas of long grass differently, with the aim of recreating native meadowland flora to encourage biodiversity and increase pollinator populations. This trial is a positive start, however a wider strategy would be required for it to be expanded further.

5 Potential areas for consideration for review

5.1 Whilst consideration has to be given to alternative land uses, and the balance between the benefits of those uses and the benefits of increasing of biodiversity, the following are some examples which could be considered:

- Areas which are adjacent to hedges, woodland or other ecological corridors. A reduced frequency of cutting will maximise the benefits to wildlife
- Areas that contain trees. Limiting a full cut to twice per year will increase the benefits to wildlife
- Areas that already contain a higher number of wildflower species meaning they are important for biodiversity and regular cutting may prevent them from flowering and setting seed
- Larger urban verges that have low amenity value (eg. are not used for children's play)
- Slopes and banks which have low amenity value

5.2 Broad aims of a review:

- Managing our grass verges and open spaces with a balance of biodiversity and recreational space in mind. Promoting the native seed bank. Managing, not abandonment.
- Enable public access and enjoyment through path creation and citizen science projects – community engagement.
- Increase the number of grass verges/ parks/ cemeteries managed for pollinators year on year, where resource levels allow.

5.3 It is recommended that the Parks and nature Conservation Teams liaise with Plantlife to review the maintenance regimes for our grassed areas,

and feedback the range of practical options available, including their benefits, dis-benefits, and potential financial impacts.

6. General Issues

- 6.1 There is a general perception that reduction in cutting regimes or alteration of practices yields an obvious saving, this is not necessarily the case.
- 6.2 Financial implications are generally unidentified at present due to surveying required prior to management planning however, several local authorities in Wales have undertaken or are in the process of undertaking trials and the consensus to date is that any alterations in maintenance regimes usually require capital investment initially. Revenue cost neutrality or savings varies depending on scale and type of open space. Overall there will be reduced costs in terms of purchasing chemicals and bedding plants, savings in staff time, and increase in biodiversity.
- 6.3 Any changes need to be communicated effectively with engagement, social media and signage to educate the public and reduce complaints.

7 Legal Issues

- 7.1 There are no Legal issues arising from this report.

8. Integrated Assessment Implications

- 8.1 The Council is subject to the Equality Act (Public Sector Equality Duty and the socio-economic duty), the Well-being and Future Generation Act 2015 Welsh Language (Wales) Measure, and must in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Acts.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Deliver better outcomes for those people who experience socio-economic disadvantage.
- Consider opportunities for people to use the Welsh language.
- Treat the Welsh language no less favourably than English.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2005 mandates that public bodies in Wales must carry out sustainable development. Sustainable development means the process of improving the economic,

social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the 'well-being goals'.

Our Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) process also takes into account other key issues and priorities, such as poverty and social exclusion, community cohesion, carers and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Welsh language

8.2 There has not been an IIA Screening undertaken for this initial "setting the scene" report, however IIAs will need to be considered for any proposed amendments to policies and procedures as an essential part of the review. The purpose of an impact assessment is to consider:

- Sustainability - analyse whether a proposal balances immediate needs with the well-being of future generations; and
- Equality - help officers and elected members to analyse policies and practices to determine whether they are likely to discriminate or disadvantage people. mitigation - if proposals will result in adverse impacts

Background Papers: Plantlife's: Managing Grassland Road Verges

Appendices: None