



Report of the Director of Place

Economy, Environment & Infrastructure Policy Development Committee

16 December 2021

Management and Maintenance of Open Space (Biodiversity)

Purpose:	A progress update on the review of the Council's management of its green spaces
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: 1) The Committee note the progress to date and direction of travel; and 2) The consultation recommendations are approved.
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Finance Officer:	Paul Roach
Legal Officer:	Scott Dummett
Access to Services Officer:	Rhian Miller

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 sub-

divided into sections each with a commitment to deliver a high quality, cost effective service. The Nature Conservation Team also manage a range of Council owned nature reserves and wildlife sites.

1.2 Biodiversity is declining globally, with rates of loss and extinction unprecedented in human history and accelerating. The impact on our biodiversity in Wales and Swansea is no different, with 1 in 6 species at risk of extinction, and 73 species lost from Wales since the 1970s.

- At the all Wales scale the State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR), tells us that many of our ecosystems are not resilient to unexpected or unforeseen change.
- Grassland habitats are especially vulnerable to a lack of management because of how rapidly sites can deteriorate in the absence of favourable management or fragmentation. There has been an astonishing 97% loss of lowland semi-natural grasslands in England and Wales in the 20th century.

1.3 All public bodies must maintain and enhance biodiversity and promote the resilience of ecosystems under the Section 6 Duty of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. The Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to halt the loss of biodiversity, promote healthy resilient ecosystems, and increase and enhance 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. Maintaining and enhancing Swansea's natural resources and biodiversity is a key objective in the Council's corporate plan and is also a priority in Swansea's Well Being Plan. Specific actions under this corporate priority include:

- Continue to deliver a programme of wildflower planting and management.
- Engage with local communities to encourage volunteering and to support them taking action to enhance and maintain their local greenspaces and wildlife sites.

1.4 This report provides an update on progress in managing our grass verges and open spaces for both biodiversity and people with an aim of increasing wildflower diversity and habitat for pollinators as well as maintaining space for recreation.

2. Progress to Date

2.1 Working Group

Following the PDC on 22nd April 2021 a working group was brought together, chaired by Head of Waste, Parks & Cleansing, with the aim of

ensuring appropriate expertise is engaged to deliver the expectations from the original approved report. Officers from the Parks Operations and Nature Conservation service areas have met at least monthly, to ensure the key principles are maintained as they explore options relating to the review of the Council's greenspace maintenance regimes. This group has made good progress facilitating the detail in this update report and conducted an extended meeting in October 2021 to plan activities for 2022.

The outcome of the 2022 planning meeting was an agreement on:

- Identifying numerous sites in addition to those already trialled to expand the trial and utilise different regimes for assessing outcomes.
- Agree cutting options for these sites ranging from cut, collect and remove to zero cutting and consider alternative use such as tree planting.
- Assigning a maintenance plan to each identified site based on their unique topography versus frequencies and equipment.
- Exploring use of contractors for various operational needs.
- Commence categorisation of roadside verges prior to considering the maintenance options for them.

2.2 **Purchase of Equipment:**

To enable the various trials and pieces of work to progress a number of purchases have been made to the sum of ~£140k, funded by Welsh Government grants, which include:

- Cut and collect flail units complete with medium sized tractors for cutting and collecting long grass in open park areas.
- Various walk behind pedestrian tractor and attachments for smaller sites including local nature reserves.
- A further purchase of a £36k ride on cut and collect mower is in progress, also funded by Welsh Government grant monies, which will cut areas of intermediate size.

2.3 **Engagement with Environmental Bodies**

The Nature Conservation Team have been engaging with grassland management experts, including Plantlife, to understand how other councils have been successfully switching to 'cut and collect', and 'cut less, cut later' methodologies. A representative of Butterfly Conservation presented to this working group and the Swansea Nature Partnership, and the main message was that you strive to reduce soil fertility in order to allow native

wildflowers to flourish. Cut and collect is key to this, to take away the nutrients in the grass cuttings. Over time the volume of biomass will reduce, leading to reduced frequency of cutting.

The council employed a Biodiversity Officer in mid-June, a new part-time role to implement the Section 6 Biodiversity and Resilience of Ecosystems Duty under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. This officer has taken a leading role in reviewing how we manage our green spaces for wildlife and has been utilising Plantlife's expertise and guides as well as drawing on the experience of other local authorities.

2.4 Surveys

Our Biodiversity Officer has undertaken an initial audit of parks and verges that have 'long grass' areas. These are areas of amenity grasslands that are only cut once a year, but the arisings are not collected. This audit highlighted which sites may be suitable for cut & collect, and which sites needed more detailed surveys. A local botanical consultant was then contracted to undertake fine scale plant surveys of a selection of sites. This report will provide a baseline for ongoing monitoring and inform how best to manage the variation across these locations.

It's important that long term monitoring is undertaken to understand how our grass areas are changing as part of this trial. We want to see an increase in biodiversity, which equates to an increase of wildflower species and an increase in nectar source for pollinators. Transects and plots will be set up across a small selection of sites and methodologies are being designed so non-plant experts (park staff / Friends of parks volunteers) can monitor key indicator species and count nectar availability.

2.5 Operational Trials

Initial trials were conducted in Singleton Park which proved logistically challenging and therefore yielded valuable lessons regarding the length of grass and the volumes of arisings having to be removed for composting, further trials were conducted in Morriston Park also. Cut grass removed amounted to approximately:

- Singleton Park 90,000sqm cut and collected 80 tonnes removed
- Morriston Park 22,500sqm cut and collected 40 tonnes removed

There is an associated cost to transporting and disposing of this material when sending for composting. Cut and collect sites are being monitored on a monthly basis with photographic records being kept.

Timing of the cut this year was dictated by the delayed delivery of the newly procured equipment and not ideal therefore in 2022, supported by the external advice received and surveying, we would seek to cut in April, July and September.

Other sites used with the pedestrian tractor cut and bale sites (all bales left on site with various benefits such as new habitats) were:

- Picket Mead.
- Newton open space.
- Mumbles Hill Local Nature Reserve, 2 meadows.

Arisings from these sites equated to:

Picket Mead = 11 bales @ 22.5kg = 247.5 kg

Mumbles Hill = 45 bales @ 22.5kg = 1012.5 kg

2.6 Preparation for expansion of Trials next Season

Informed by the surveys mentioned above and the practicalities of using the currently available machinery, the working group is formulating which sites should be prioritised for further trials next season.

The aim is to undertake 3 cut and collect operations in 2022 during April, July and September, following the external advice received, thus enabling nutrient removal in a manageable way. The grass length in April will be considerably less than during the cut and collect trials this year, and be more manageable.

Following further Welsh Government funding, a smaller ride-on type mower, with cut and collect for use on urban verges, is being purchased.

Each site will, over time, be required to be managed uniquely dependent on the way it responds to the changed maintenance regimes.

It is intended to continue to cut collect with pedestrian baler at Picket Mead and Mumbles Hill LNR whilst investigating new sites.

2.7 Information and raising awareness

The importance of explaining the reasons for changing grassland management regimes in our parks and roadside verges cannot be underestimated. As a start to this the Nature Conservation Team commissioned new bilingual interpretation signs to explain to local communities the biodiversity benefits of undertaking the changes in grassland management. This includes a poster/sign that is placed around the trial sites when the management is undertaken, a flyer for council staff to hand out to interested members of the public, and large signage attached to the new machines as they drive around. All of this is linked to a webpage providing more detail - <https://swansea.gov.uk/cutandcollect>

Signage



Fig1: Example of signage



2.8 Community Consultation

In addition to awareness raising, meaningful consultation and engagement with our local communities is important to ensure that any changes in the management of our parks and verges take into account the views of by residents. This could be undertaken at a strategic/county wide level and /or at a site specific level.

The timing of the former could be linked to other strategic consultations for example: the County wide Green Infrastructure Strategy, the Nature Recovery Action Plan and/or Section 6 Duty Action Plan.

Appendix A contains suggested questions for a strategic consultation.

At a local site level this could best be achieved through direct consultations with local residents, ward members and 'Friends of Groups' based around specific options and outline location/proposals maps. Timings for this will depend on the programme of works planned for each site. This could also be an opportunity to engage local people in the ongoing survey and monitoring work.

Any consultations would require additional resources.

3. General Issues

There is a general perception that reduction in cutting regimes or alteration of practices yields an obvious saving, this is not necessarily the case.

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 vary depending on scale and type of open space.

Any changes need to be communicated effectively with engagement, social media and signage to educate the public and reduce complaints.

The public were very curious/interested as to what the pedestrian cut/baler was doing and were pleased to be informed about how it worked and what the aims of the work were. There was a benefit in taking the effort to stop and talk to them however this also used operative time. The magnetic panel and information boards produced provided valuable information.

4. Integrated Assessment Implications

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.

All public bodies must maintain and enhance biodiversity and resilience of ecosystems under the Section 6 Duty of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

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

4.2 An IIA Screening has been opened however is not required until all trials are completed and a set of proposals reported. 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

5. **Financial Implications**

Three successful bids have been made to Welsh Government for a total of £176K for the purchase of cut and collect equipment.

6. **Legal Implications**

There are no Legal issues arising from this report.

Background Papers:

- Plantlife's: Managing Grassland Road Verges
- NPT Council Verge Management

Note: Background Papers are not printed. However, they are open for public inspection and must therefore be made available on request by the Report Author. Background Papers are those documents relating to the subject matter of the report which:

- a) Disclose any facts or matters on which, in the opinion of the Proper Officer, the report or an important part of the report is based; and
- b) Have, in his opinion, been relied on to a material extent in preparing the report.

Appendices:

Appendix A Draft Questions for Consultation

Appendix A – Draft Questions for Consultation

1. On average, how often do you visit your local park or greenspace?
 - Every day
 - Once a week
 - Once a month
2. Which site/s do you visit?
3. Why do you visit?
 - Exercise
 - Sport (tennis, football, basketball etc.)
 - Dog walking
 - Contact with nature
 - Relaxation (peace and quiet)
 - To meet friends
 - Walking to work/school etc
 - Other
4. On a scale of 1-10, how important is access to green space for your mental and physical health and well-being?
5. What improvements would you like to see made to your local park/greenspace? (For example):
 - More trees
 - More wildflowers
 - More biodiversity
 - More places to sit
 - A community orchard
 - More spaces for food growing
6. Are you interested in joining a local community group to assist with surveying your areas?