
28 February 2023

Climate Emergency Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Head of Environmental Services
Portfolio of the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change

Highway Verge Wild Flowering

Summary

1. This report outlines the policy and decision making that underlies a range of projects carried out over the last two years to develop highway verges and grassland for pollinators.

Recommendations

2. The Scrutiny Committee is asked to:
3. note the following policy and decision making:
 - i. that the policy context is set by highway safety considerations and then by the pollinator strategy
 - ii. Wards and communities develop and lead projects
 - iii. Funding is likely to be through ward funding or external funding so the decision to instigate lies with the Ward Councillors
 - iv. Ongoing maintenance needs to be considered both in terms of a plan and funding
4. Provide any recommendations to the Executive for changes to policy or decision making.

Reason - To support the Pollinator Strategy.

Background

5. In March 2021 the Council adopted a Strategy to support pollinators. The Scrutiny Committee have previously received an update on this policy and made no changes to the policy.
 6. This report details activities which have contributed to two of the Strategies aims; *2.2 Increase the value of parks and other greenspace for pollinators* and *2.4 Make council owned land and buildings more pollinator friendly*. This report details examples of possible changes to the management of highway verges and amenity green space in support of the Strategy.
 7. To encourage Wards to take part the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change worked with officers to issue a short how to guide to all Ward Councillors which is attached as Annex 1.
 8. Over the last two years three different approaches to mowing regimes have been trialled. The first has taken place in Wheldrake on a verge which has traditionally been cut by a local farmer; the second and third trial areas are in an urban setting along Hull Road. Further details are provided below.
 9. In parallel the council has worked through Ward Committees to expand and improve grassland areas, such as the Fishergate side of the Millennium Bridge (Paragraphs 14 to 16). Further details are provided below.
 10. The Pollinator Strategy also makes clear that projects should be community led, those in parks will be developed locally in consultation with residents and friends group or through the Ward Councillors and teams.
 11. The rationale for this bottom up approach is to ensure that a local balance is struck between wild areas for biodiversity and pollinators and areas for active recreation.
 12. The Pollinator Strategy sets, the policy context to undertake wildflower schemes and sets a bottom up approach to this. However, the Pollinator Strategy does not come with funding or a budget and therefore is delivered through changing existing activity or using ward funds.
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Test projects

A. Wheldrake (for location see Annex 2)

13. As part of Ward led approach in Wheldrake Ward, a stretch of approximately 800m of rural highway verge on Wheldrake Lane has been developed through a partnership with Natural England and local volunteers, and the cooperation of a local farmer.
14. In this location the full depth of the verge on both side of the road was traditionally cut by a local farmer – some 7m from road to field boundary. The extent and time of the cuts did not take account of pollinator needs and cut grass was left in situ to decompose, adding to the overall nutrient enrichment of the verge.
15. In developing such a project, the first task is to find a suitable verge, one free of underground and overhead services and a safe to working environment for volunteers (i.e., a site with good sight lines, away from bends and having a suitable depth to be able to work a safe distance away from passing traffic). Road safety and site lines take priority in the way the verges are managed. The next task was to persuade the local farmer to stop cutting the verge.
16. Once these had been established the verge received a cut in early spring and all arisings were raked off and removed by volunteers. Specialist advice was provided by Natural England based out of Wheldrake Ings and seed and plug plants planted. In the autumn the area was cut and arising removed. The process was then repeated in year two. Going forward a mini baler has been purchased to make it easier to remove the arisings from site. The ward Councillor has written a more detailed review on this.

B. Hull Road / Field Lane (for location see Annex 3)

17. Hull Road ward committee worked with The Trust for Conservation Volunteers (TCV) to create a series of wildflower zones within an area of wide highway verges adjoining Hull Road and Field Lane. Here the areas to be developed were treated with weedkiller to create a sterile seed bed, rotavated, levelled and then seeded with a native wildflower mix. TCV then cut and removed the arisings in
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the autumn. Small temporary notice boards explained what was happening in the area.

18. In the spring of year two the wildflower areas were cut and tidied to remove invasive weeds and additional plug plants added. The zones created can still be seen today.

C. Hull Road central reservation (for location see Annex 3)

19. This ward project built on previous flower seeding activity at Hull Road / Field Lane roundabout and the A1036 Wetherby Road roundabout.
20. Both roundabouts and four sections of the Hull Road double carriage way towards Grimston Bar, along with a short section by Badger Hill were cleared and then seeded with a vibrant pollinator friendly floral mix. The ambition here was to have two years of floral displays with limited intervention for the second year. Whilst year one produced very favourable results, in year two the beds had less of a visual impact and suffered from weed growth.

D. Millennium Bridge green space (for location see Annex 4)

21. In Fishergate the Ward Committee have funded Friends of St Nicolas Fields (St Nicks) to improve the biodiversity of the amenity open alongside the River Ouse near Millennium Bridge.
 22. This area combines short mown amenity grassland useful for games and picnic, long grass areas with a single annual mow and woodland plantations. St Nicks were engaged by the Ward Committee to improve the care of the area by volunteer training, develop a management plan for the site and link up the areas of higher biodiversity value.
 23. As part of the training programme volunteers are taught how to use hand scythes in the area closest to the Millennium Bridge. Scything takes place at different times of the year depending on the desired aim, i.e., to remove nettles and clear long grass to allow higher value plants to thrive. Arisings are removed from the species rich areas and composted elsewhere within the site. A permanent interpretive panel explains what is happening on the site.
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Lessons learnt

Ward Led with Community Involvement Engagement

24. The importance of a bottom up community led approach has worked well. It ensures community buy in to the scheme and identifies and objectors to the scheme. Where this engagement has not been as thorough then issues have emerged with adjacent property owners.
25. All verge types require buy in from local stakeholders, be they a local farmer who thinks they are helping by cutting the verge to residents who may not appreciate the change of appearance or character of their local green space. On site information and social media can help explain what is happening and why.

Site Suitability

26. Prior to starting a verge development, it is necessary to confirm ownership, and to have the site checked for the presence of utility services and possible future highway improvement schemes and that site lines for road safety are maintained. For verges and open spaces, it may be prudent to consult with the council's highways, countryside, archaeological and contaminated land officers.
27. When involving volunteers, suitable arrangements need to be made for their management, include on site supervision, risk assessments, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and insurance cover. This is particularly true when the site being developed is adjacent to the highway.

Maintenance and budgets

28. The budget needs to be for more than the first years planting. Change is not a one-year activity. When seeking to change an existing rural verge repeated cutting and removal of the arisings is required to allow plug plants and native flowers to succeed over grasses. For seed mix-based sites, repeated cut, remove, spray and re-sow needs to occur otherwise more dominant weeds and grasses will take over. Therefore, when considering a scheme, options for ongoing management of the site and any associated costs need to be factored into decision making.
 29. Collecting and removal of arisings requires specialist machinery or significant volunteer input. A suitable repository for the arisings will be needed if they are taken for composting straight away.
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30. Accidental and deliberate mowing of wildflower areas remains a possibility. Signage, local buy in and good information sharing are possible means to counter this. This includes within the Council so that areas are not accidentally cut and project to improve the information management provide to operatives is underway.
31. The Council's public realm team will support schemes but the level of input will depend on existing work programmes as any requests will have to fit around the existing core work programme.

Pollinator Impact

32. Over the last two years it has not been possible to quantify visits to the test sites by pollinators. Going forward this will now be possible with the purchase of Agri sound monitors as detailed at a previous committee.
33. The optimum time to start developing a verge is in the autumn for a display the following spring / summer.

Council Plan

34. This report supports and contributes to the following Council Plan priority – a greener and cleaner city

Implications

- **Financial** – There is no additional funding for wildflower projects. Therefore, their implementation is either through ward funding or external funding. Whilst the savings from grass cutting may result in a saving this often does not offset the ongoing cost. Any additional funding would need to be considered within the Council budget process and considered against other priorities.
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Approved

Wards Affected:

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background papers

Climate Emergency Policy and Scrutiny Committee 13th December
2022 Pollinator Strategy Update

Annexes

1. Initial guidance on how to
 2. Wheldrake verge location
 3. Hull Road area verge locations
 4. Hull Road verge sample photographs
 5. Millennium Bridge area location
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