



Place Services Scrutiny Committee

**Wildflower Sustainability and
Grass Cutting Spotlight Review**

September 2021

Councillors –
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Cllr Paul Hooton
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Chair's Foreword and Acknowledgements

I am pleased to present the final report of the Spotlight review of Wildflower Sustainability and Grass Cutting which was commissioned by the Place Services Scrutiny Committee as part of its work programme for the 2021/22 Municipal Year.

This review gave members and officers an opportunity to explore the issue of Wildflower Sustainability and biodiversity within the Borough, the Council's current approach to grass cutting and maintenance of road verges, and how this could impact on biodiversity and native species of flora and fauna. The review group also carried out extensive research to explore alternative approaches that have the potential to improve biodiversity.

Helping residents enjoy a good quality of life is a key Council priority and access to wildlife and green spaces can be a central part of this. We are fortunate to have access to so many amazing green space and areas of natural beauty in our Borough and the Council works hard to ensure that these are well managed for our residents.

Loss of biodiversity has however been identified as an issue both nationally and internationally – with a number of species in decline or disappearing from our environment in the UK. Our review identified that alternative approaches to management of road verges could present an opportunity to reverse some of this decline.

Roads have an essential role to play in the modern economy, but we also know that they have the potential to compromise the quality of the environment. For wildlife, roads can fragment important habitats, and put pressure on plant, animal and insect populations, particularly where they are already under stress from other factors such as changes in land use and climate change.

When managed well, road verges, can sustain an astonishing amount of wildlife. More pollinators are found on well-managed verges than in the neighbouring countryside and nearly 45% of our total flora is found on verges.

Across the UK there have been huge changes in our road verge flora arising from changes in the way we cut and manage verge habitats – increasing fertility of roadside soils, budget constraints and difficulties with the collection of litter and grass clippings have created a perfect storm – meaning verge habitats are under considerable pressure.

This isn't just bad news for flowers, it is bad news for wildlife that rely on plants for food. In addition, vigorous perennial plants and some invasive species are better at surviving tough roadside conditions, so these are increasing at the expense of more delicate species.

Our review identified that it doesn't have to be this way.

Road verges and associated land can be managed to provide areas of habitat, relatively free from human access. These verges can be used to connect fragmented habitats in the wider landscape, enabling plant and animal populations to move and interact, and become stronger and more resilient.

This review found that the adoption of a few basic principles can significantly improve the biodiversity and the natural capital value of our verges – in particular the number and diversity of flowering plants; reduce cutting frequency; reduce vegetation growth; help reduce costs and carbon emissions; and bring benefits for wildlife; for us and for future generations.

It is hoped that the recommendations from this report, if adopted, will go some way to help the Council to achieve its climate change objectives and could result in sustainable operational costs long term, reduce our carbon footprint, and support the natural environment for current and future generations.

I would like to record my thanks to Place Services Scrutiny Committee members: Councillors Robyn Hattersley, Jeanette Banks, Paul Hooton and David Smith. I would also like to thank officers from the Council, who contributed to this review in the context of already heavy work schedules.



Councillor Tracy Dickinson
Chair of the Wildflower Sustainability and Grass Cutting Spotlight Review Group

Members of the Spotlight Review Group



**Cllr Jeanette
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**Cllr Robyn
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**Cllr Paul
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**Cllr David
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Introduction and Terms of Reference

- 1.1. This Spotlight Review was commissioned by the Place Services Scrutiny Committee as part of its work programme for the 2021/22 Municipal Year at a meeting on 5th July 2021. This review was chosen as Members of the Committee had expressed an interest in the issue of Wildflower Sustainability and biodiversity within the Borough and what the Council was doing through its grass cutting strategies on green spaces such as highway verges to enhance biodiversity and support native species of flora and fauna. Given the current priorities of the Council and pressures on officers' time this review was conducted to aid them in the development of a strategy by considering the various approaches being taken elsewhere and providing the information to the Council in this report.
- 1.2. At the beginning of the review the Spotlight Review Group (Group) agreed the following aims and objectives:
 - 1.2.1. To understand the Council's current policy in relation to grass cutting and the Council's obligations in relation to the environment and public safety
 - 1.2.2. To research alternative grass cutting policies/strategies employed in other parts of the country/world
 - 1.2.3. To understand potential benefits to the environment and Council operations of alternative policies/strategies
 - 1.2.4. To submit findings to Cabinet and Officers for consideration
- 1.3. This review was conducted to support the achievement of Priority 5 - Create green and vibrant places that reflect our heritage and culture - of the Our Borough Strategy 2021-2030. The Group believes that this piece of work will contribute towards efforts to tackle climate change and protect our environment

Method of Investigation

- 2.1 The review began with each member of the group conducting their own desktop research into the subject of wildflower sustainability and the various grass cutting and other green space maintenance techniques being used by local authorities and other land managers around the country and in other parts of the world to increase the biodiversity of green spaces and support local wildlife whilst meeting their obligations and the expectations of the public.
- 2.2 Members of the Group met together on 29th July 2021 to share their findings and discuss an agreed approach to developing a strategy that would achieve their aims.
- 2.3 Next, the Group met with officers of the Council on 25th August 2021 to hear from them about the Council's current approach to managing green spaces and to share their findings and suggestions regarding an alternative approach.

- 2.4 Finally, the Group met on 1st September to discuss their findings and agree their conclusions and recommendations.
- 2.5 All of the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Group from the review are documented in this report which will be submitted to the Place Services Scrutiny Committee for approval before being submitted to Cabinet for consideration and response.

Background

- 3.1 This section outlines some global, national and local context and strategies and initiatives that this review is in some way related to.
- 3.2 **United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 15**
- 3.2.1 The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) covering a range of environmental and social issues¹. SDG 15 (Life on Land) is to “Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”². Within SDG 15 there are a number of targets that include: Conserve and restore terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems; Protect biodiversity and natural habitats; Prevent invasive alien species on land and in water ecosystems; and Integrate ecosystem and biodiversity in governmental planning. In November 2020, St Helens Council agreed a motion to commit to contributing to the achievement of the SDGs by ensuring all reports and policy papers include an SDG assessment indicating which goals will be impacted by decisions.
- 3.3 **National Government Strategies and Legislation**
- 3.3.1 The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is the Government department responsible for improving and protecting the environment³. Natural England is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by DEFRA that advises the Government’s on the natural environment in England⁴. Natural England was introduced by the Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006 to help conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment.
- 3.3.2 In November 2014 DEFRA published the National Pollinator Strategy⁵. The 10 year strategy aims to deliver across five key areas, one of which is “Supporting pollinators across towns, cities and the countryside” by engaging with a wide range of landowners and land managers from large-scale landowners to local authorities and the public and their gardens. The strategy refers to five simple actions individuals and organisations can take to help pollinators find food and shelter including: grow more flowers, shrubs and trees that provide pollen and nectar; leave patches of land to grow wild; cut grass less often; avoid disturbing or destroying nests; and think carefully about whether to use pesticides. The strategy provides examples of commitments secured from large scale land owners/managers which included a commitment from the Highways Agency to “undertake a programme of works to restore and enhance the grassland component of the soft estate

¹ [About United Nations Sustainable Development Goals web page](#)

² [About UN SDG 15 web page](#)

³ [About DEFRA web page](#)

⁴ [About Natural England web page](#)

⁵ [National Pollinator Strategy: for bees and other pollinators in England pdf](#)

(e.g. grass verges, embankments) to achieve a significant area of species rich grasslands estimated at 3,500 hectares by 2021.” The strategy also refers to actions being taken by local authorities such as Bristol City Council, Chesterfield Borough Council, Gloucestershire Council, Kent County Council and Wyre Forest District Council.

- 3.3.3 The National Pollinator Strategy Implementation Plan for 2018-2021 published in 2018⁶ indicates that DEFRA believes success will involve increases “in the extent, quality or connectivity of wildflower-rich habitat outside protected sites, e.g. in Local Wildlife Sites, farmland, public spaces, gardens and verges.”
- 3.3.4 The Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006, Section 40⁷, introduced a duty for public authorities to conserve biodiversity. The duty applies to local authorities as well as NHS Trusts, government departments and utility companies and requires bodies to have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of their policy or decision making. Conserving biodiversity can include restoring or enhancing a population or habitat. The Government’s website⁸ suggests that public authorities should be able to show their duty if they have identified ways to investigate biodiversity when they: develop policies and strategies and put them into practice; manage the planning system; manage woodlands and nature reserves, gardens, parks and public open spaces, and community amenities (e.g. sports grounds and cemeteries); and develop infrastructure such as roads.
- 3.3.5 The Environment Bill, at the time of writing this report, is at the report stage in the House of Lords⁹. The Bill is to make provision about targets, plans and policies for improving the natural environment including nature and biodiversity and regulation of chemicals among other things. The Bill will include provisions for “Habitats Regulation” to conserve and enhance biodiversity with the Government set to publish a Green Paper on those reforms later in 2021¹⁰. A new independent Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) will also be created to hold the Government and public bodies (such as local authorities) to account for their environmental credentials. The Local Government Association supports the principle set out in the Bill of increasing biodiversity net gain through the planning process by requiring that all developments deliver a biodiversity net gain to receive planning permission. Biodiversity Net Gain can either be delivered on the site of the development or through improvements to off-site habitats that combined with the impact of the development will produce a net gain. The LGA suggests that where net gain contributions from developers cannot be delivered on site, any financial “credits” should be retained by councils so that local people will have a say in how they are spent¹¹. This development might lead to a funding stream for the Council to invest more resources into biodiversity on sites in the Borough. The Bill proposes that local authorities or Natural England will lead on the development of new local nature recovery strategies (LNRS). Each strategy will include mapping of local sites and a set of principles for nature recovery.
- 3.3.6 In July 2021, the Biodiversity Metric 3.0 was introduced, led by Natural England in partnership with various stakeholders, replacing the Biodiversity Metric 2.0. The Biodiversity Metric 3.0 is a tool that can be used for the purposes of calculating whether a project has achieved the biodiversity net gain requirements set out in the Environment Bill. Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is “an approach to development, and/or land management,

⁶ [NPS Implementation Plan 2018 2021 pdf](#)

⁷ [Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006](#)

⁸ [About Public Authority Biodiversity Duty web page](#)

⁹ [Environment Bill web page](#)

¹⁰ [DEFRA Blog on Environment Bill Progress May 2021](#)

¹¹ [LGA's Position regarding Environment Bill July 2021](#)

that leaves nature in a measurably better state than beforehand”¹². The metric calculates the existing baseline value of a site and its predicted future biodiversity value, including any contributions provided by creating or enhancing habitats offsite.

3.4 **St Helens Borough**

- 3.4.1 In the Our Borough Strategy 2021-2030 the Council sets out six borough priorities¹³. Priority 5 is to “Create green and vibrant places that reflect our heritage and culture” which includes the outcome that “Our environment is protected for the future” and mentions a desire to: make St Helens a more sustainable place, adapting to climate change, ensuring good access to open space. As part of Priority 5, the Strategy includes a case study on Bold Forest Park which is a cluster of community woodlands located on former coal mining sites. The ambition is to develop the forest park to attract more visitors from further afield which should hopefully help to support local businesses.
- 3.4.2 In October 2007, the Council adopted its Community Green Space Strategy¹⁴ recognising the importance of green spaces and set out to improve the provision of high-quality, well used, spaces in the Borough. The Strategy takes account of all green spaces, such as parks, wildlife areas, outdoor sports facilities, cemeteries and allotments however does not cover grass verges on highways.
- 3.4.3 In July 2019, the Council declared a climate emergency following a notice of motion¹⁵ with a pledge to reach zero carbon status by 2040 to address the impact climate change is having on the Borough. The notice of motion also requested that scrutiny committees consider the impact of climate change and the environment when carrying out reviews. In response to the motion, the Council has established a Climate Change Commission¹⁶ made up of a mixture of public and private organisations working alongside the voluntary and third sectors as an independent board to help guide the whole borough towards zero carbon emissions. According to officers, a Climate Action Plan is due to be presented to Cabinet in November that will document the initiatives the Council and partners are commencing to reach the zero-carbon target.

Findings

- 4.1 Councillors found a number of sources of information and guidance on the topic of wildflower sustainability and biodiversity and found several examples from across the country regarding what other local authorities are already doing in this area, and these are set out in this section of the report. This section also provides an overview of the Council’s current approach to grass cutting and supporting native plants and wildlife.
- 4.2 **Best Practice Guidance**
- 4.2.1 The Group has identified Plantlife as a leading source of guidance that many other local authorities have used to develop their strategies for alternative verge and green space management. Plantlife is a British conservation charity working nationally and

¹² [Natural England blog regarding biodiversity metric 3.0](#)

¹³ [St Helens Council - Our Borough Strategy 2021-2030](#)

¹⁴ [St Helens Council - Parks and open spaces web page](#)

¹⁵ [St Helens Council - Motion to Council on mod.gov](#)

¹⁶ [St Helens Council News - Climate Change Commission](#)

internationally to save threatened wildflowers, plants and fungi¹⁷. On its website, Plantlife suggests that over 97% of meadows have been destroyed since 1930s and that road verges are vital land that can be used to bring back more wildflower areas providing sources of food and shelter for pollinators and other wildlife.

- 4.2.2 In 2019, Plantlife published 'Managing Grassland Road Verges' which Plantlife describes as a "best practice guide for highways managers, road engineers, operations managers, landscape architects and all those engaged with verge management and creation" which is available to download on Plantlife's website¹⁸. Plantlife also has the Good Verge Guide available to download which it describes as a "thorough introduction to all things road verge for both amateur and professional audiences"¹⁹.
- 4.2.3 The Managing Grassland Road Verges guide suggests that "there are nearly 331,500 miles of rural road verge in the UK" with "700 species of wildflower" growing on them, equating to "nearly 45% of total flora", however "there has been a 20% drop in floral diversity due to poor management and nutrient pollution". The guide also suggests that "for 23 million commuters, road verges can be their only daily contact with nature".
- 4.2.4 The guide acknowledges that there are safety concerns to be taken into consideration but suggests that safety need not be the only consideration with a focus on creating species rich habitats on areas of verge where there are no safety constraints restricting management. The guide suggests that by creating and managing species rich grasslands, improvements can be made to the biodiversity value of verges with an added benefit of reduced management costs long-term. The guide argues that with each highways authority (St Helens Council being one) having a statutory biodiversity duty, the way their manage their network of verges is a key part of meeting their obligations.
- 4.2.5 Throughout the guide reference is made to case studies carried out across the country which are available to view in detail on the Plantlife website²⁰. The guide suggests that to maximise the biodiversity and environmental potential of any verge, there are three steps to consider: Assessment – understanding what you've got; Management specifications; and Monitoring – performance management. The guide provides detailed explanation of possible approaches during each of the three steps across various different scenarios/environments.
- 4.2.6 The Assessment step involves carrying out ecological surveys of sites to understand what the current state of the site is with regards to the types of plant and wildlife it is supporting, the level of biodiversity and the type of soil. The Assessment step will help during the Management Specifications step to decide what sort of plants would thrive on that site or what needs to be done to a site for it to support the desired species. The results of the Assessment step also enable benchmarking for future assessments to evaluate the success of projects during the Monitoring step.

¹⁷ [About Plantlife web page](#)

¹⁸ [Plantlife's Managing Grassland Road Verges guide](#)

¹⁹ [Plantlife's Good Verge Guide](#)

²⁰ [Plantlife's Management Guidelines and links to Case Studies](#)

4.2.7 Plantlife's website provides a map that they use to track their interactions with highway authorities across the UK and other actions being taken by authorities²¹. References to activity by local authorities in the North West is limited. However, St Helens Borough's neighbour Knowsley is referenced with a link to a news article from June 2020²² suggesting Knowsley Council was going to introduce a small number of natural wildflower and tall grass areas along some of its roadside verges as a link to the council's Climate Emergency Declaration.

4.3 Other Local Authorities

4.3.1 During its review the Group has identified numerous examples of what other local authorities are doing in relation to increasing biodiversity and supporting wildflowers on highway verges and in other green spaces.

Dorset Council

4.3.2 In August 2014, Dorset Council adopted a new approach to managing highway verges motivated by the need to reduce the cost of managing verges substantially while at the same time maintaining high standards to allow safe passage along the highway, and to look after wildlife and landscape values of the roadsides²³. Dorset's strategy involves three principles: lowering fertility of roadside verges where possible to reduce grass growth; reducing the amount and frequency of cutting where it is viewed as not necessary; and working with local communities to provide information on the service they can expect, to gather information from them on performance, and identify opportunities to be more effective.

4.3.3 Dorset suggests that the new approach saved money, indicating in 2017 that the council saved c.£100k in 2015/16 and 2016/17 and was confident of saving c.£50k in 2017/18. Other benefits the council identified included improved environment, with a greater number of plant species able to thrive with decreased soil nutrition and decline in coarse grasses and 'weeds' like docks, ragwort and thistles. The use of cut and collect and sowing of yellow rattle (a species that naturally parasitises grasses by affecting the grass roots, reducing the amount of grass that grows) meant that the council only needed to cut the verges once a year, saving money.

4.3.4 Working with local communities the council also identified wide verges in urban areas where the grass had been cut 7 or more times a year for the sake of tidiness. Under their new approach, areas were treated in winter or early spring to remove the grass and seeded with an annual or perennial wildflower mix, depending on soil fertility. Where wildflower verges had been established they had proved to be very popular.

4.3.5 Dorset also established a "working together" initiative with local communities to get them involved in suggesting how verges should be managed in their local areas and potential taking on the management of some verges themselves should they be able and willing to

²¹ [Plantlife's Transforming the UK's road verges – Google My Maps](#)

²² [Knowsley News - Roadside natural wildflowers are on their way](#)

²³ [Dorset Council - Highway Verge Management Policy](#)

follow the ecological approach. With regards to complaints and compliments, Dorset suggests that in relation to verge management councils are in a “no win situation” as the complaints received reflect conflicting demands. Some complaints suggest the grass is cut too little and other suggest that grass was cut too early for wildflowers to set seed or that when risings are left behind they create a mess. By contrast, the wildflower verge trails had proven exceptionally popular with the public. In 2016, the number of compliments had outweighed the number of complaints.

Cambridgeshire County Council

- 4.3.6 In March 2021, Cambridgeshire County Council agreed a new approach to management of highway verges across Cambridgeshire to contribute towards better biodiversity and establish wildlife corridors as part of their Climate Change and Environment Strategy 2020²⁴. The council held a workshop in November 2020 to discuss a revised approach, drawing on a expertise from a range of organisations including: Dorset Council, Plantlife, Butterfly Conservation Trust, On the Verge and representatives of the County Council and its highway management contractors.
- 4.3.7 The County Council's revised approach was to trial 'cut and collect' in some villages across the county to reduce the fertility of the soil and help wildflowers to grow and thrive. Extra trees would also be planted along highways with a policy to replace any tree removed with two new trees (an increase from one previously) with the aim to improve air quality. The County Council's Highways Service set out to work closely with the Corporate Comms Team to develop some clear messaging on the new approach.
- 4.3.8 To maintain road safety, the County Council's management plan identified all vision splays, bends and junctions where a cut specification was designed with at least four cuts per year throughout the season, with an option to attend to any locations identified by routine highway inspections or correspondence from councillors/public as requiring further cuts to vision splays, bends or junctions.

East Suffolk Council

- 4.3.9 In 2020, East Suffolk Council created 40 wild spaces as part of the Council's 'Pardon the weeds, we're feeding the bees' campaign²⁵. In the wild spaces grass was left to grow longer and wildflowers were planted to help wildlife thrive with signs saying 'Pardon the weeds, we're feeding the bees' located at each site to inform the public about why grass had been left to grow. These spaces were cut back for winter and signs removed to be returned at the start of the next season. In March 2021, it was reported that 60 further sites had been identified to create a total of 100 wild spaces. The Council had also reviewed its policy on herbicide spraying to further encourage and protect wildlife with spraying reduced by 45% across council-owned land and trials were being carried out on using foam to control unwanted weeds, especially on pavements.

²⁴ [Cambridgeshire CC - Report on Highway Verge Maintenance March 2021](#)

²⁵ [East Suffolk Council - Pardon the weeds we're feeding the bees web page](#)

4.3.10 The Council reported a positive response from residents and visitors during 2020 to the wild spaces with pictures of the 'Pardon the weeds, we're feeding the bees' signs appearing on social media. The wild spaces are located in a combination of different places such as: highways, church yards, open spaces and cemeteries.

Cheshire West & Chester Council

4.3.11 In 2020, Cheshire West & Chester (CW&C) adopted its Wildflower and Grassland Strategy 2020²⁶, one of three related Environmental Management Strategies along with the Parks and Greenspaces Strategy and the Play Strategy. The strategy provides a framework for improving the biodiversity, abundance and connectivity of wildflower and grassland habitat within Council-managed land as well as providing advice to the public on gardening for wildlife and pollinators.

4.3.12 A survey conducted in summer 2020 uncovered a huge amount of support for altering mowing regimes and the creation of wildflower areas. The strategy comprises two tiers. Tier 1 provides a strategic overview and action plan, and Tier 2 provides more detailed information for management of sites by local area. The strategy's focus is on the management of the County's own land however also aims to increase awareness of the importance of biodiversity, wildflower grasslands and insect pollinators among the local community. Within the strategy, CW&C recognised that consultation and engagement with the community is essential in the planning and delivery of the management and creation of wildflower and grassland areas on council land.

4.3.13 The strategy refers to best practice management guidelines from Plantlife, case studies from across the country, an overview of the Council's land and options for improving biodiversity and potential cost savings and potential external funding opportunities.

Monmouthshire County Council

4.3.14 Monmouthshire County Council runs a project called 'Nature isn't Neat'²⁷ that aims to raise awareness about the importance of pollinators, the actions people can take to support them, and the positive impact on reducing decline in other wildlife or mitigating impacts of climate change efforts can have. A key element of Nature isn't Neat is the County Council's management of its grassland on verges, open spaces and parks to create space for nature.

4.3.15 The initial success of the project led to a successful bid to the National Heritage Lottery Fund and Welsh Government for a grant that enabled the County Council to buy special 'cut and collect' machinery capable of cutting longer grass and removing grass cuttings. The County Council also works with schools and community groups to explain the project and the importance of making space for nature and provides a survey to enable the public to provide feedback regarding changes in management of green spaces acknowledging that a different approach affects the way spaces look and the way they can be used.

²⁶ [CW&C - Wildflower and Grassland Strategy 2020 Summary web page](#)

²⁷ [Monmouthshire - Nature Isn't Neat web page](#)

Rochdale Borough Council

- 4.3.16 Rochdale's website provides information about the Council's decision to remove grass on a number of verges across the borough to turn them into nature-friendly zones where wildflowers will create natural corridors for bees and insects. The webpage²⁸ explains to the public what nature friendly zones are and how long it will take for them to look as intended (around two years). An area the size of 100 football pitches across hundreds of different grass verges was being turned into nature-friendly zones to make roadsides more attractive and contribute to bringing back wildflower meadows.
- 4.3.17 The Council usually cut grass 14 times a year, every two to three weeks between March and October, however they would only cut grass in nature-friendly zones twice a year.

Croydon Council

- 4.3.18 Croydon's Ground Maintenance Team developed a new approach to managing grass areas in parks and road verges in response to the climate emergency and varied pressure on resources²⁹. The new grass management approach was designed to: create green highways to establish and connect habitats for pollinators; increase biodiversity, lock in carbon, reduce maintenance costs while fulfilling statutory obligations, and reduce carbon footprint. This was achieved by modifying the grass cutting regime in parks and along road verges to reduce nutrient value to encourage wildflowers with twice a year grass cuts and the collection of risings. It was acknowledged that it would take a number of seasons to achieve the desired results, but the approach would lead to spaces only needed one cut and remove per year.
- 4.3.19 A number of trial areas were identified for wildflower seeding via a method called 'hydroseeding' with turf removed to give seeds the best chance to establish with those areas being cut once per year in September and all rising removed. The trials were due to be evaluated to measure success and see whether the scheme could be extended across other sites. Trial sites included verges and parks with different seed mixes identified to match the sub soils at each site and sites would be clearly marked with signs saying 'Wildflower Area – left uncut for bees and butterflies'.

4.4 **St Helens Council's Current Approach**

- 4.4.1 Green space management is carried out by the Council's in house Street Care Team which is part of the Director of Operations remit within the Place Services Directorate. The Street Care Team is currently staffed by 42 gardeners that provide services to 10 different types of clients including, for example: highways, estates management, leisure and library services and schools. The work carried out by the team for its clients is governed by service level agreements (SLAs) agreed between the team and the client for a management fee based on full cost recovery.

²⁸ [Rochdale Council - Grass cutting and grass verges web page](#)

²⁹ [Croydon Council - Wildflower verge trials web page](#)

4.4.2 The Team looks after over 1137 sites covering 1,342 Hectares (13,420,000 Sqm) broken down as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Parks and Green Spaces (ha)	Other Types of Open Space (ha)
22 Urban Parks (122.93)	636 Highway Verges & Public Rights of Way (73.07)
10 Country Parks (242.24)	East Lancs A580 and Rainford Bypass A570 (21.36)
6 Natural Green Spaces (96.39)	76 Schools and Academies (107.51)
37 General Amenity Green Spaces (119.13)	Libraires (3.0)
3 Green Corridors (39.62)	Other Open Spaces (77.83)
35 Outdoor Sports Facilities (274.36)	Other Green Areas inc. Estates Land (107.24)
71 Children's Play Areas (5.72)	Total – 390.01ha
15 Allotments (658 plots) (20.0)	Misc.
4 Cemeteries (31.84)	Highways weed spraying SLA
Total – 952.23ha	19 Private Sites

4.4.3 Management of open spaces such as school grounds, land around council buildings and road verges is carried out based on the specifications for each site set out in the corresponding SLA. The Street Care Team manages parks according to its own specification meaning it has full control over 30% of its workload. The main fields in the parks are cut fortnightly with tree lines around the edges of fields cut on a monthly basis (7 times per year). Sports fields maintained by the Council are cut once a week during football season (29 weeks of the year). Play areas are cut by hand mowers on a fortnightly basis with edges and detailed strimming carried out once per calendar month.

4.4.4 Currently, highway grass verges on urban roads are cut 10 times per year with highspeed rural roads cut five times per year. The first cut on highways is determined by how mild the winter had been however most first cuts are carried out sometime in May. In the past the service has collected risings under 'Civic Pride' some 10 years ago however grass is now left to decompose where it is cut; this change was made as collection of grass is more costly in machinery, time and green waste disposal costs. The SLA with the Highways & Infrastructure Team has been in place for many years and is reviewed on an annual basis with funding allocated to the SLA reducing over the years due to austerity. Different cutting regimes are used on different types of roads and safety assessments are carried out regularly when considering the need for grass cuts. Junctions, bends and roundabouts where key parts of the road network where visibility was most important, and these areas

were managed as a priority to avoid grass and flowers obstructing motorists' view of other traffic. It was suggested that when grass has been allowed to grow longer it takes longer to cut which could result in road closures which are disruptive to the public.

- 4.4.5 The Street Care Team sow seeds for annual wildflower beds each year. Sherdley Park was given as an example where deferred mowing has been carried out with a mixed reaction to the results from the public. The Team has received an increasing number of requests from Councillors for wildflowers in their ward and other community groups such as parish councils have funded wildflower sowing previously. The Group was also informed that ward councillors for Thatto Heath has recently allocated some of their CIF towards creating a nature reserve in the ward.
- 4.4.6 In relation to the use of chemicals officers confirmed that they had trialled using alternatives to chemicals such as vinegar and steam. It was suggested that vinegar hadn't been very effective at controlling weeds and that steam was a labour intensive/time consuming process. The Council currently uses what is considered to be the safest (in terms of potential harm to humans and the environment) herbicide product available on the market which contains glyphosate which is a contact herbicide. It is being used to spray obstacles, linear fence lines and buildings to protect them from damage and to keep areas tidy. The frequency of the use of herbicides has however been reduced where possible over recent years from four times to once a year on permeable surfaces with an additive of a residual herbicide. Officers informed the Group that if herbicides weren't used then the team would have to trim the areas by hand or leave them untouched. Officers informed the Group about the need to consider the welfare of operatives and the use of herbicides reducing the need for strimming and possible exposure to 'Hand Arm Vibration'. It was suggested that whenever areas are left unmanaged, the team often get complaints from members of the public through the contact centre and occasionally receive insurance claims for damage to fences. Also, if left untreated, weeds on highways and pavements could cause damage to tarmac surfaces resulting in repair costs and potential for injuries to members of the public which can result in insurance claims.
- 4.4.7 The Group was informed that at the same time as this review was taking place work was taking place in relation to an updated Parks and Recreation Strategy.

Conclusions

- 5.1 Having heard how the Council currently manages road verges and other green spaces and looked at the way various other local authorities and agencies have changed the way they operate, the Group believes that there is an opportunity for the Council to reconsider its current approach to managing road verges and green spaces to improve biodiversity, wildflower sustainability and make a significant contribution to the Council's zero carbon target.
- 5.2 While the Group was pleased to hear that officers are open to looking at doing things differently, that some wildflower areas had already been created in the Borough and that different methods had been tried over the years, it is felt that there needs to be a more strategic and sustainable approach to the management of green spaces and road verges to increase biodiversity and support native wildflowers, pollinators and other wildlife. St

Helens has a lot of potential with its parks, road verges and green spaces to contribute significantly towards this issue.

- 5.3 The Group is clear that with regards to road verges, safety should be the first priority and that the management of greenery around vision splays, bends and junctions should ensure good visibility for motorists and pedestrians. However, there are parts of road verges where visibility is less of a concern and these areas should be considered for approaches where grass is cut less frequently, or wildflowers are allowed to grow as required to better support pollinators and other wildlife. There are also alternative approaches to verge management that do not compromise road safety such as changing timing of cutting, top dressing and using plants that reduce growth.
- 5.4 The Group is mindful that the Council has a climate change strategy in development that may incorporate some of the themes of a wildflower and grass cutting strategy such as increasing biodiversity, rewilding or securing habitats for wildlife. Whether via a bespoke strategy relating to wildflowers and grass cutting or as part of a wider Climate Action Plan, the Council should adopt the principles set out in the Plantlife guidance and follow the example of many local authorities already showing success in this area. The Group is aware that these changes may incur a financial cost in the short term however believe that it would be worthwhile in terms of medium to long-term savings, a positive impact on our environment and contributing to the Council's climate goals.
- 5.5 The Group believes that the proposed changes need to be addressed quickly to in order to start contributing more to biodiversity and addressing climate change issues as soon as possible. The Group recognises that the adoption of a new more strategic approach across the Borough requires work to map, plan and implement fully, however the group would like to see sites in the Borough identified where trials of different techniques such as 'cut and collect' and the use of yellow rattle can be undertaken to assess the potential costs and benefits of making widescale changes.
- 5.6 What is evident from the Group's research, conversations with officers, and their own experiences as councillors is that public opinion is divided on how grass verges and other green spaces should be kept and that, whatever we do, we can't please everyone. As such, the Group believes that the Council should adopt an approach that it thinks is best in relation to its biodiversity duty and zero carbon target but also from a financial perspective and try to bring the public along with us by using a communication plan to explain to the public how we're doing things differently and what the benefits are. Examples of effective ways of engaging with the public over the issue of wildflowers and grass cutting are available from other local authorities and the Council should consider how these approaches could best be used in St Helens Borough.
- 5.7 One of the Council's new performance indicators related to Priority 5 of the borough Strategy is "More people reporting environmental issues and concerns". Leaving grass to grow where it hadn't previously might be perceived by some as untidy and a problem which might result in some complaints to the Council and have an impact on this performance indicator. Consideration will need to be given to whether these incidences should be included in this performance measure, or whether this should relate more to the reporting of fly-tipping or more serious environmental issues than something looking

untidy. Consideration should also be given to a standard response people should be given when they report issues or concerns with what they perceive to be untidy green spaces.

- 5.8 The Climate Change Commission includes the Council's partners in the public and private sector and the Group believes these organisations could also contribute to biodiversity and wildflower sustainability through their green space management. Social housing organisations manage significant portions of land as do local NHS Trusts, Schools, other public organisations, landowners and local businesses. As well as the Council changing the way it manages its green spaces the Group believes that the Council should encourage its partners and local stakeholders to consider their approaches to managing green spaces. When communicating with the public about why we're adopting new approaches the Council should share information with the public about how they can make a change in their gardens as well where they are interested in doing so as other local authorities have.
- 5.9 Giving consideration to the development of the Environment Bill, the Group is mindful that the Council will be required to work with developers to ensure plans for new developments produce a net biodiversity gain. The Council should, where possible, encourage developers to incorporate some of the Plantlife principles of using low fertility soil and planting wildflowers instead of manicured lawns into the green spaces on their sites. The Group also supports the idea that where a development may not be able to achieve net-biodiversity gain on the site that the funding for initiatives to off-set the impact of the site be retained by the Council to be used for biodiversity gain as close to the development as possible.
- 5.10 With regards to the use of pesticides, the group was pleased to hear that their use has been reduced from previous levels but would like consideration to be given to how the use of pesticides containing potentially harmful chemicals could be reduced further.

Recommendations

- 6.1 The Task and Finish Group recommends:
- 6.1.1 That the Council give consideration to the Plantlife Managing Grassland Road Verges guide and trial elements of the guidance at appropriate sites to assess the feasibility of adopting the guidance across the Borough;
- 6.1.2 That the Council develop a communication plan regarding moving to a new approach to ensure that the public is clear about why changes to the way we manage road verges and green spaces have been made;
- 6.1.3 That the Council consider undertaking a public consultation to gauge the views of residents regarding wildflowers, green space management and biodiversity to inform future plans and communications strategies in different communities;
- 6.1.4 That the Council consider organising a stakeholder event as part of the Climate Change Commission to bring partners together to discuss biodiversity and green space management in the Borough.

Wild Flower Sustainability and Grass Cutting Spotlight Review

Rec No	Recommendation	Responsible Officer	Agreed Action and Date of Implementation
1	That the Council give consideration to the Plantlife Managing Grassland Road Verges guide and trial elements of the guidance at appropriate sites to assess the feasibility of adopting the guidance across the Borough		
2	That the Council develop a communication plan regarding moving to a new approach to ensure that the public is clear about why changes to the way we manage road verges and green spaces have been made		
3	That the Council consider undertaking a public consultation to gauge the views of residents regarding wildflowers, green space management and biodiversity to inform future plans and communications strategies in different communities		
4	That the Council consider organising a stakeholder event as part of the Climate Change Commission to bring partners together to discuss biodiversity and green space management in the Borough		