

## **New Open Spaces grass cutting regime for pollinators**

<b>Cabinet</b>	18th March 2021
<b>Report Author</b>	Climate Change Officer
<b>Portfolio Holder</b>	Cllr Albon, Cabinet Member for Operational Services
<b>Status</b>	For Decision
<b>Classification:</b>	Unrestricted
<b>Key Decision</b>	No
<b>Ward:</b>	Thanet wide

### **Executive Summary:**

Section 40 of The Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 places a legal obligation on public bodies in England to have regard to particular living organisms and types of habitat which are of the greatest conservation importance whilst carrying out their functions, whilst also having a general regard for protecting all biodiversity. Under Section 41 of that same Act of Parliament bumblebees are listed as one of the protected species.

Pollinators such as bees, butterflies and moths are vital for our food, economy and environment, however, they are in serious decline.

Across Europe over a third of bee species are declining, along with two thirds of our moths and nearly three-quarters of our butterflies along with many other small insects.

We simply need to think back to when we were children in our parent's cars. The windscreen would be covered in bugs and they would often have to use the windscreen wipers to clear them. Nowadays we can drive down the motorway without even a single bug hitting our windscreen. We must act quickly to reverse their obvious rapid decline.

Not only is this an avoidable tragedy, but the loss of pollinators is a direct threat to our food supply. Without bees, hoverflies and other insect pollinators there would be no strawberries, chocolate, olives, cotton, or peanuts to name just a few. There would also be fewer flowers in our gardens or countryside.

The most significant cause of pollinator decline, and one which TDC Open Spaces can immediately address, is the loss and degradation of habitats. Wildflower-rich grasslands is one of the most important habitats for pollinators, however over three million hectares have been lost in England since the 1930s. Many of these areas are now small and isolated making it difficult for insects to find enough food and shelter.

The Climate Change Officer and the Open Spaces team have taken advice from The Bumblebee Trust and Plantlife UK on how to address this problem. They suggested a few simple changes in the cutting regime in order for more native wildflowers to grow:

- Reduced cutting on selected areas of large open spaces, such as those along the coast, to create native wildflower meadows. As we have a geology of chalk, the Bumblebee Trust advises that a simple reduction in mowing (no mowing between April and September) will reveal wonderful native chalk grasslands and flowers.

We will cut around the perimeter and a walkway through the middle of the allocations to show that the areas are still being managed and to allow easy access. The allocations will be next to areas that are cut regularly and so will not impact on social use of the space.

- No Mow May in our parks (apart from football pitches) to increase the number of smaller flowers for pollinators in our parks.

Signage will be installed throughout to inform the public and feedback will be monitored closely.

The cutting regimes in many areas around Thanet will not be changed, especially those with high footfall and areas of special value e.g. memorial grounds and ornamental beds.

Four levels of management for Open Space are therefore proposed:

1. Regular amenity cut in areas that need to be cut short
2. No Mow May in parks and some squares
3. Reduced cutting for pollinators in specific areas to create wildflower meadows.
4. Continue cut and collect, hay meadow management at Westbrook Undercliff and Foreness Point.

The specific areas are listed within the report and the attached maps show those areas designated for level 3 cutting.

It is hoped that these actions will start to create a beautiful wildflower corridor throughout Thanet for the benefit of pollinators, wildlife, residents and visitors.

In 2019, TDC called a climate and ecological emergency. This change in management forms part of the immediate action we will take to combat the ecological crisis and create beautiful native wildflowers for residents and visitors to enjoy. It is well documented that areas high in biodiversity lifts the spirits and improves wellbeing, having a positive effect on mental health. It is hoped that the wildflower meadows will attract more bees and butterflies and the presence of these will have a positive impact on all residents.

## **Recommendation(s):**

### **That the Cabinet**

1. Approves the proposed change in cutting regimes, with monitoring of public perception and feedback.

2. Delegates authority to the Director of Operations, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Operational Services, to approve minor amendments to the policy.

## **Corporate Implications**

### **Financial and Value for Money**

The change in management is considered to be a minor time saving exercise. Any time saved by the reduced mowing will be mainly offset by the time needed to put up signage and monitor the trial this year.

As this is a trial, which is subject to change depending upon feedback from the public, any time or cost saving will be quantified at the end of the year.

### **Legal**

There are no clear legal obligations around this, however, TDC declared a climate and ecological emergency in July 2019, we want to take actions in line with this commitment.

### **Corporate**

**Risk:** Public perception regarding the reduction in mowing and appearance of the sites. Some people prefer open spaces to be cut regularly, as has been tradition since the Victorian era.

### **Mitigation:**

The areas will be cut around the perimeter of the designations and a walkway will be cut through the middle. This will show that spaces are still being cared for, and not simply left.

The designated areas will be next to open spaces that have been cut short, also showing that they have been intentionally managed.

The frequency or design of the cutting can be changed as issues arise. The new cutting scheme will be reviewed on a monthly basis.

The traditional look of open spaces sought after by some residents, can create green spaces devoid of biodiversity and we want to address this issue.

**The communication plan** will also assist with public perception:

The No Mow May scheme will be promoted through TDC Comms team throughout April and May to ensure residents are aware of the change in management and our commitment to pollinators. The Comms team are aware of the plan.

Signage stating "Managing for pollinators" is extremely important next to the areas that we will not cut during the summer. The TDC Marketing Officer has agreed to assist with the design.

The signage will also hopefully include a QR code which, when scanned, will ask residents what they think. This will allow people to give immediate feedback whilst standing next to the site and may attract positive comments.

## **Opportunities**

People are becoming more concerned about the environment and biodiversity and therefore some residents may give positive feedback on this change in management.

It is one of the first steps taken since calling a climate emergency and shows our commitment to addressing the ecological emergency.

The biological monitoring of the site will also encourage resident participation through the Bumblebee Trust, KWT and local universities.

The scheme can also be used to inform and educate residents on the ecological emergency and we aim to link this with our work with schools.

This pilot scheme may also garner interest from KCC and other districts as an example of good practice.

## **Equality Act 2010 & Public Sector Equality Duty**

*Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to the aims of the Duty at the time the decision is taken. The aims of the Duty are: (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it, and (iii) foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.*

*Protected characteristics: age, sex, disability, race, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief and pregnancy & maternity. Only aim (i) of the Duty applies to Marriage & civil partnership.*

This report relates to the following aim of the equality duty:

- *(ii) advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it, and (iii) foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.*

Persons from vulnerable groups can sometimes have limited access to healthy, biodiverse spaces. In particular, families with young children, older persons and those with a disability can find themselves with limited access to quality open spaces with good biodiversity. Therefore, the grass cutting regime proposed with the extra signage will help to minimise disadvantage and contribute to the needs of many residents with protected characteristics.

The equality duty is a continuing one and should be considered and reviewed throughout the implementation of the regime. The cabinet member is referred to the community impact statement section of this report.

*A Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken and is summarised below:*

The EIA identified possible negative effects on access by the elderly, disabled and visually impaired. For example, the long grass in the designated space may reduce the area through which a wheelchair can be pushed. This is mitigated by cutting around the perimeter of the designated area and also through the middle of the designation to allow wheelchair access

and ease of walking. This impact is also balanced by the improved well being of the individuals due to increased wildflowers and biodiversity in the area.

## **CORPORATE PRIORITIES**

This report relates to the following corporate priorities: -

- *Environment*
- *Communities*

### **1.0 Introduction and Background**

- 1.1 In contrast to KCC and some other districts, TDC manages their open spaces in house and therefore does not need to wait for contract renewal dates to make changes to cutting regimes.
- 1.2 Currently, TDC carries out full amenity cuts, keeping the grass short across large areas of TDC Open Spaces. Although this has been carried out for many years and is the traditional look of open spaces sought after by some residents, it creates green spaces low in biodiversity.
- 1.3 We sought the advice of the Bumblebee Trust and guidance from Plant Life UK on how to better manage these areas for pollinators. We looked at each open space separately and noted the large areas of open space along the promenades such as Palm Bay and Westbrook as opportunity areas.
- 1.4 As we have a wonderful chalk landscape, a simple reduction in mowing frequency will reveal flowers, establish semi natural grassland along the coast and be exceptionally beneficial to pollinators. These areas will not be the typical wildflower meadows that people might think of, such as cornflowers and poppies, but instead will include yarrow, birds foot trefoil and clover, all of which are extremely important native species. These are already present to some degree in the grass along the coast and simple changes of cutting regimes will increase the abundance of these species for the benefit of pollinators.

### **2.0 The proposal**

- 2.1 We intend to keep many areas with a full cutting routine in spaces that demand a traditional maintenance scheme. These include areas such as memorial ground and ornamental beds. For those areas that do not need intensive cutting for the whole season, we intend to trial No Mow May promoted by Plantlife. This will begin this May in many of our parks and be fully advertised.
- 2.2 For large areas of open space, such as those found along the seafront and for some of our expansive parks, a proportion of some of these sites will be set aside for pollinators. These areas will be devised with the public in mind. They will not be fenced off and the public will not be prevented from walking over them, although walkways will also be created to encourage typical walking routes.

- 2.3 A perimeter cut will be carried out each month to show that they are being maintained, and not just left. The designated area will not be cut between April and August. They will be constantly monitored to ensure that any conflicts are mitigated. We intend to involve the Bumblebee Trust volunteers to monitor the increased flower and pollinator diversity on the site.
- 2.4 For those areas that have been completely set aside for nature through our previous work with the Bumblebee Trust, such as Westbrook Undercliff and Foreness Point, this will continue and hopefully be expanded upon over the next few years. This full management regime, otherwise known as hay meadow management, includes no cutting between April and August as in the wildflower creation method, however, when the grass is cut the arising are also collected and removed. This technique adds to the wildflower abundance by reducing the nutrients levels in the soil and preventing the grass species from outcompeting. Wildflowers are happier in low nutrient soil.
- 2.5 **Communication Plan:** The No Mow May scheme will be promoted through TDC Comms team throughout April and May to ensure residents are aware of the change in management and our commitment to pollinators. The TDC Comms team are aware of the plan.

Signage stating “Managing for pollinators” is extremely important and the TDC Marketing Officer has agreed to assist with the design.

The signs will also hopefully include a QR code which will ask residents what they think. This will allow people to give immediate feedback whilst standing next to the site and may even attract positive comments.

## 2.10 Specific area plan. **Please also see maps of specific areas under stage 3 cutting.**

### 1. Full schedule of cuts maintained

Marine Gardens, Buenos Ayres, Hawley Square, Sea Road either end of Sunken Gardens, Trinity Square, Dell Gardens, Newgate Gap, Oval Bandstand, St Georges Lawns, Pierremont Park, Spencer Square, Liverpool Lawn, Nelson Crescent, Albion Gardens.

Football and Cricket Grounds

### 2. No Mow May

It is proposed that No Mow May is initiated in most TDC parks, but not in ornamental areas / memorial parks / have high footfall as listed above.

The perimeters will be cut and a fire break will be cut through the middle.

### 3. Reduced cutting for pollinators, Semi-natural grassland creation.

These areas will have only their perimeters cut and the inner area will be left for pollinators and wildflowers. The perimeter will be cut once a month between March and September and a fire break will be created through the middle - commander width cut (2.5m) to encourage people to walk along those paths.

Please see maps of the designations attached.

Sections of following areas are proposed:

Minnis Bay area, Section on Cliff Road

Epple Bay (Birchington side of path down to beach)

Sea Road (Westgate side of Sunken Gardens).

Dane Valley Green (Section near the Windmill Allotment project)

Northdown House (Front of house, near the mini roundabout)

Palm Bay (Section near the tennis courts)

Nethercourt Park

King George VI Park (Wilder section of the park, Dumpton side)

Royal Esplanade, Ramsgate

Full cuts will take place from September.

These areas will be monitored and the design of the reduced cutting areas could be changed for the following year if conflicts arise.

#### **4. Cut and collect:**

A scheme of work was initiated in 2017 with the Bumblebee Trust and will continue this year. See Foreness Point and Westbrook Undercliff Management plan for full details. In summary, these large areas were separated into sections (compartments) which are managed for pollinators using a mixture of rotational cutting and cut and collect techniques. Cutting and removing grass arisings decreases the nutrients in the soil and allows native flowers to proliferate. Foreness Point is also a haven for Pyramidal and Lizard Orchids and in August last year a very rare brown-banded carder bumblebee (a S41 priority species) was found.

Habitat management of Foreness Point using a cut and collect system will continue in 2021: 3 compartments in July and 5 compartments in late October.

Westbrook Undercliff site (compartments 1 & 2) will have half cut in July and full cut and collect in October. Dumpton Gap 6 compartments in July and October. We will aim to include more areas in this cut and collect management stage in the future.

### **3.0 Monitoring biodiversity improvements**

It will be important to take photographic evidence of the increase in native wildflowers on the sites that we are managing for pollinators. We may also be able to carry out biodiversity monitoring in the summer with volunteers from the local university, Bumblebee Trust and KWT. This will result in plant and insect abundance and diversity scores which can be used in scientific reporting.

### **4.0 Options:**

1. Adopt the full changes proposed based on the 4 levels of management
2. Do not pursue the proposal
3. Adopt the changes for some of the sites as determined by a proposal of Cabinet's choosing.

## 5.0 Next Steps

Meeting	Date
Early feedback and comments have been sought by CMT	February 22nd
Cabinet	March 18th
Draft to Town Councils for information	End of March
Start comms plan	April
Install signs "Managed for pollinators" along the coastal native wildflower allocation	April
Add basic signs in parks regarding No Mow May	April
Monitor feedback from public	April - Sept
No Mow May	May
Cut only perimeter and walkway in allocations left for pollinators	May to August
Monitor wildflowers and pollinators in allocations	July/ August

Report Author	Dr Hannah Scott Climate Change Officer
Contact Officer:	Dr Hannah Scott Emma Penny - Open Spaces Manager
Reporting to:	Mike Humber- Director of Operations Jasmin Vickers- Acting Director of Environment Gavin Waite - Corporate Director - Communities

### Annex List

Annex 1: No Mow May and Native Wildflower Meadow Images

Annex 2: Equality Impact Assessment

Annex 3: Minnis Bay

Annex 4: Epple Bay

Annex 5: Sunken Gardens, Westbrook

Annex 6: Dane Valley

Annex 7: Northdown House

Annex 8: King George V1

Annex 9: Royal Esplanade

Annex 10: Nethercourt

Annex 11: Palm Bay Section

Annex 12: List of No Mow May parks



## **Background Papers**

None

## **Corporate Consultation**

**Finance:** Chris Blundell Director of Finance

**Legal:** Jennifer Phillips (Principal Litigation Solicitor)