

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held via Video Conference on Thursday, 9 September 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Brian Blakeley, Hugh Irving, Tina Jones, Merfyn Parry, Peter Scott, Graham Timms (Vice Chair), Glenn Swingler, Cheryl Williams and Huw Williams (Chair)

Cabinet Member – Councillor Tony Thomas, Lead Member for Housing and Communities

Observers – Councillors Ann Davies, Meirick Davies, Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones, Martyn Holland, Barry Mellor, Rhys Thomas and Emrys Wynne

ALSO PRESENT

Head of Finance and Property (SG), Head of Highways and Environmental Services (TW), Ecology Officer (JW), Climate Change Programme Manager (HVE), Scrutiny Coordinator (RE) and Committee Administrators (KEJ & SLW [Webcaster])

Plantlife Representative – Dr. Kate Petty, Plantlife Road Verge Campaign Manager

1 APOLOGIES

Councillor Anton Sampson

The Chair welcomed Councillor Hugh Irving to his first meeting. Councillor Irving had been appointed by the Conservative Group to replace Councillor Rachel Flynn as one of its representatives on the Committee. The Chair thanked Councillor Flynn for her contribution to the Committee's work during her term as a member.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declaration of interests had been raised.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent matters had been raised.

4 MINUTES

The minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on 1 July 2021 and the special Communities Scrutiny Committee held on 26 July 2021 were submitted.

(a) Communities Scrutiny Committee (1 July 2021)

No accuracy points.

Matters Arising – Item 6: Section 19 Investigation Report on the February 2020 Floods in Denbighshire (page 10) – The Scrutiny Coordinator confirmed that the information requested from Natural Resources Wales would be presented to County Council at its meeting in October 2021 (rescheduled from September 2021).

(b) Special Communities Scrutiny Committee (26 July 2021)

No accuracy points or matters arising.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings held on 1 July 2021 and 26 July 2021 be received and approved as a correct record.

5 WILDFLOWER MEADOW PROJECT

Councillor Tony Thomas, Lead Member for Housing and Communities introduced officers present for this item which included the Head of Highways and Environmental Services and the Ecology Officer who had produced the joint report together with the Climate Change Programme Manager. Dr. Kate Petty, Plantlife Road Verge Campaign Manager was also in attendance.

Councillor Thomas explained that the report sought the Committee's support for the principle that residential/urban areas could be an appropriate location for wildflower meadows and proposals for improving publicity and engagement for the project. The project had started as a pilot in 2020 with 21 sites selected, further sites had been added and there were currently 58 managed wildflower meadow sites which contributed to improved species enrichment. Sites were managed by small border cuts, there was no cut between March and August, and the whole site was cut by specialist mower equipment enabling the meadow to set seed and provide the greatest benefit to wildlife with some extra wildflower planting undertaken if necessary. The project also supported the Council's Bee Friendly status.

The Head of Highways and Environmental Services added that the purpose of the report was to provide an update on the project and to address complaints/concerns received from some residents and members who believed wildflower meadow sites should not be developed in residential locations. Consequently the Committee's support for the project was sought subject to a more robust engagement strategy.

The Committee's attention was drawn to the following points –

- the project was an important element of the Council's Climate and Ecological Change Strategy adopted in 2021 and drive to become an Ecologically Positive Council by 2030 with all supporting the principle of tackling climate change
- the specific issue under consideration related to the appropriateness of residential/urban areas as locations for the wildflower meadows with opposition from some residents regarding a small number of sites generally based on aesthetic preferences and loss of municipal or amenity space
- having taken into account those concerns officers responded that (1) aesthetic preference was subjective with differing views in that regard but it was important to note that the project had not been undertaken for aesthetic purposes but in

responding to the climate emergency, therefore aesthetic preference was not considered a reason to continue or stop the project, (2) the loss of municipal/amenity space was considered a valid reason which was taken into account but there was little evidence to support concerns with only two known cases where parents had raised the issue about children not being able to play on those sites. In most cases no previous activity had taken place on the site that could not still be undertaken and planning officers had confirmed the change in management did not represent a loss of public open space. However, on larger sites where there was clear amenity use areas had been cut accordingly to ensure continuation of use, such as Violet Grove Park in Rhyl

- calls to remove any sites in residential/urban areas from the project were a cause for concern and would destroy the connecting wildflower corridors currently being established; the basis of the grant funding used for the equipment to carry out the project was to ensure everyone had access to nature on their doorstep and therefore sites needed to be close to where people lived
- in considering the complaints in context it was important to note that there had been almost universal support for the vast majority of sites with only a handful of the 58 sites subject to complaint, and there had also been support from local residents in areas where complaints had been received. Whilst most complaints had been allayed through subsequent dialogue with residents there were still some areas where people remained unhappy. Responding to complaints had been time consuming and the Committee was asked to confirm its support for the continuation of the project to make it easier to respond to future complaints
- the principle of developing wildflower meadows in residential/urban areas had been consulted upon in 2020 and unanimously supported by members when the Climate and Ecological Change Strategy was adopted by Council in 2021
- the project had been incredibly successful despite still being in its early stages, most sites had doubled or tripled the number of species recorded and rarer species had also been recorded
- it was acknowledged that communication on the project could have been better and some complaints had been received as a result. Consequently a new communication and engagement plan had been developed for the project (appendix 4 to the report) which would reduce the number of future complaints.

During a lengthy and detailed debate members took the opportunity to discuss with officers various aspects of the wildflower meadow project. Whilst all members fully supported the aims of the project and were committed to responding to the climate change emergency, comments and concerns were raised regarding a number of elements relating to the project. Main issues related to the initial communication on the project with assurances sought regarding meaningful engagement with members, residents and communities in the future; the management and control of weeds, in particular ragwort, thistles and docks within wildflower meadow sites; closer working with the North and Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency (NMWTRA) and Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB) to improve grassland management within the county, and the need to consider compromise solutions in areas where there were concerns or opposition to the sites including the potential to improve the visual appearance through the introduction of plug plants.

Members commented on the impact of the wildflower meadow sites within their individual ward areas with a range of views across the sites and it was recognised that the majority of sites had been supported by the community. However there were a number of sites where opposition had been encountered, some of which had been successfully resolved through compromise solutions but a minority remained ongoing. Councillor Ann Davies in particular highlighted the detrimental impact on residents in Ffordd Nant and Nant Close, Rhuddlan due to the wildflower meadow which had resulted in a petition presented to Council in July 2021 and she urged officers to reconsider that site. Councillor Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones added her concerns to the imposition of wildflower meadow sites against residents' wishes, specifically the use of small pockets of land within small communities for that purpose.

Officers responded to members' comments, concerns and questions as follows –

- the concerns raised regarding the initial consultation on the project had been accepted and assurances were provided regarding meaningful engagement going forward. A comprehensive communication and engagement plan had been developed to ensure members were made aware of potential sites at an early stage and for discussions on their suitability to take place before wider community engagement; any issues or concerns raised would be carefully considered. It was agreed that members be asked for suggestions on potentially suitable sites in their ward areas as part of the next phase of the project
- highlighted the complexities of ragwort which was an important pollinator but recognised concerns about its impact on livestock. An information factsheet on the issue was being prepared for publication on the Council's website. The Council's management type did not encourage ragwort growth, many control measures could exacerbate the problem, and there was a lack of capacity to deal with the issue across all sites. Therefore a balanced view in controlling ragwort was required on a case by case basis to ensure compliance with codes of practice, Weeds Act 1959 etc. and that serious problems would be addressed
- officers were unaware of the approach taken by the North and Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency (NMWTRA) in the management and control of weeds but agreed to contact NMWTRA directly in that regard and provide a response to members
- detailed the involvement of schools across the county within the project including the initial competition for the logo design and provision and planting of locally grown wildflower plants, creating wildflower areas in school grounds. There were plans to further engage with school children and involve them in planting out sites in their locality in order to learn about the project first hand
- noted comments by Councillor Graham Timms that references in the Wellbeing Impact Assessment to enhancing attractiveness of the area and improving the visual impact be tempered given that aesthetic preferences were subjective, and to ensure that the visual depictions of a wildflower meadow over time included in the report provided a true representation to ensure realistic expectations
- explained that standardised signage had been provided on sites, including those in the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB), but agreed to further discuss the issue with operatives in the AONB to ensure that signage was in keeping and sympathetic to that area
- mention had been made about the use of roundabouts as potential sites but road safety issues also needed to be considered as part of that process. Some

roundabouts referred to in Flintshire had been used for pictorial meadows which Denbighshire was not currently looking to take forward at present as they did not deliver the same biodiversity benefits and required greater management

- advised that there were often only small pockets of land available for use in residential areas in relation to the project
- officers would not support the vetoing of sites by councillors or communities which would result in the loss of current and future sites and project benefits; whilst there may be opposition to some sites there was also support for them
- the type of management to create more space for wildflowers would ensure that the visual appearance of the sites would naturally be improved over time with increases in wildflower species but where sites were more isolated or without those species present, work was being done via the Woodland Skills Centre to introduce plug plants grown from local provenance to those sites. Further work in that regard was also planned to enable more plants to be added to sites and within communities, primarily to increase the biodiversity value and create habitat for pollinators which would also improve the visual appearance
- in response to concerns that the wildflower meadow site at Maes Bedwen, Rhuddlan was excessively untidy officers agreed to look into the issue
- with regard to opposition to the wildflower meadow in Ffordd Nant and Nant Close, Rhuddlan officers empathised with residents' views but stressed the purpose of the project was to deliver environmental benefits and tackle climate change which was of paramount importance. Some background was provided to the site situation in Ffordd Nant/Nant Close together with efforts to engage residents. Officers did not consider such sites to be visually unattractive and referred to the wealth of public support for the project and visual appearance of the sites. However the intention was to introduce plug plants on the site to help address aesthetic concerns. It had to be accepted that 100% agreement on the issue would not be achieved
- assurances were provided that discussions took place with individuals regarding issues raised and most concerns had been allayed through subsequent dialogue and/or compromise solutions where possible. In general it was only possible to consider compromise options for larger sites and compromise positions had been implemented on some sites. However if a site was too small it would be ineffective and therefore not worth developing
- there had been other sites in the project subject of residents' complaints and concerns over the suitability of their location which had since been accepted in those communities and where some of the best results had been achieved with the recording of rare species, therefore the removal of sites when complaints were received would not be the right thing to do and best efforts were being made to allay concerns and engage with communities in those circumstances
- confirmed that the wildflower meadow sites had been mapped and published on the Council's website.
- officers agreed to respond directly to Councillor Martyn Holland outside of the meeting regarding his report on visibility concerns related to a site in Llanferres and also to Councillor Glenn Swingler regarding the potential for the Council to remove litter from overgrown land behind Denbigh Retail Park in order to encourage further plant growth
- confirmed that existing county quarries formed part of a review of all grasslands to consider how it could contribute to the climate change and ecological agenda

and the Climate Change and Ecological Manager agreed to contact Councillor Martyn Holland directly outside of the meeting regarding potential opportunities for disused quarries in private ownership in his ward area.

At this juncture the Chair invited Dr. Kate Petty from Plantlife to address members.

Dr. Petty explained that Plantlife had been running a campaign for approximately ten years to save wildflowers on road verges and provide advice and guidance to councils. She believed the Council's wildflower meadow project to be one of the flagship wildflower projects currently in the UK but recognised such projects also had some challenges. In terms of managing grassland in residential/urban areas a short turf full of low grain wildflowers could be created to provide a compromise in some areas. The short turf wildlife friendly approach was not suitable for all areas and the taller wildflower meadows being developed would deliver greater benefits in terms of restoration and conservation of wildflowers. Whilst the pictorial meadows in Flintshire had their place, for what Denbighshire wanted to achieve in terms of environmental benefits the approach taken would help capture the unique flora of the area and support the local natural character. Reference was made to the consultation and engagement practices of other councils which could prove useful. In closing Dr. Petty offered Plantlife's support to the project.

Officers responded to further questions regarding the different ways of managing grassland confirming that reduced height cutting was an option and compromise solution which would be discussed further with Plantlife as the project developed. The current approach to site management had been chosen to maximise impact and provide the greatest benefits; there were also operational issues around reduced height meadows and resource implications which needed consideration.

The Chair brought the debate to a close and highlighted a number of issues raised by members for consideration by the Committee when formulating their resolutions. After a final discussion on the resolutions the Committee –

RESOLVED, subject to the above observations –

- (a) *to confirm its support for the principle that residential/urban areas can be appropriate locations for wildflower meadows;*
- (b) *to require officers to improve engagement and publicity with local members, city, town and community councils, and communities themselves in relation to the project in their areas and its development going forward;*
- (c) *that 'injurious and noxious weed' species, such as ragwort, docks and thistles are controlled more effectively within the Wildflower Meadow sites;*
- (d) *request that officers liaise and work with colleagues from the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB) and the North and Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency (NMWTRA) with a view to ensuring that they all manage their grass verge and wildflower meadow areas in a similar way with a view to complementing each other's approach*

and supporting the biodiversity and ecological health of the area whilst safeguarding the health and safety of road users;

- (e) to request that an update report on the progress made with the delivery and development of the Wildflower Meadow Project be presented to the Committee in 12 months' time, and*
- (f) to confirm that as part of its consideration it had read, understood and taken account of the Well-being Impact Assessment, attached as Appendix 1 to the report.*

All the above recommendations were agreed unanimously apart from recommendation (c) which was approved by a majority decision.

6 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Coordinator submitted a report (previously circulated) seeking members' review of the Committee's work programme and provided an update on relevant issues.

Discussion focused on the following –

- the reasoning behind the amendments to the Committee's work programme since the last meeting together with potential future changes
- possible additional items to be allocated to the Committee following the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group meeting that afternoon for the October and December meetings in relation to flood defence schemes
- members were asked to submit any proposal forms regarding topics for scrutiny to the Scrutiny Coordinator in good time for the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group to consider at their meeting in November
- the Committee agreed to review the latest position with regard to items on their forward work programme at their next meeting in October.

RESOLVED *that, subject to the above amendments and observations, and subject to any revised recommendations that may arise from the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group which was due to be held that afternoon, to confirm the Committee's forward work programme as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report.*

7 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

Councillor Brian Blakeley reported upon his attendance at the Service Challenge meeting for Highways and Environmental Services on 23 July 2021 which predominantly focused on issues relating to Cemeteries, Waste Service Remodeling and Staffing. Councillor Meirick Davies highlighted the lack of response from the Council to issues of vandalism at Coed Bell Cemetery in Prestatyn and the Scrutiny Coordinator advised that it would likely be an issue for the Prestatyn and Meliden Member Area Group to consider but agreed to raise the issue directly with officers.

RESOLVED to receive the information provided on the work of the various groups by Committee representatives.

The meeting concluded at 12.05 pm