

<b>Report to</b>	<b>Communities Scrutiny Committee</b>
<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>9<sup>th</sup> September, 2021</b>
<b>Lead Member / Officer</b>	<b>Cllr Tony Thomas, Lead Member for Housing and Communities / Tony Ward, Head of Highways and Environmental (H&amp;E) Services &amp; Emlyn Jones, Head of Planning, Public Protection &amp; Countryside (PPP&amp;C) Services</b>
<b>Report author</b>	<b>Tony Ward / Joel Walley (Ecology Officer)</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>Wildflower Meadow Project</b>

## **1. What is the report about?**

- 1.1. This report provides an update on the Wildflower Meadow Project, which is a joint project between Highways and Environmental (H&E) Services and the Planning, Public Protection and Countryside (PPP&C) Services.

## **2. What is the reason for making this report?**

- 2.1. To update Members on progress with the project and to enable Members to undertake their scrutiny function.
- 2.2. To seek the ongoing support of the Committee for this important project, which has been subject to opposition within some communities. Specifically, the Council has received challenges about the appropriateness of residential/urban areas as locations for Wildflower Meadows, including a petition presented to Council on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2021 on behalf of residents of Ffordd Nant in Rhuddlan.

## **3. What are the Recommendations?**

That the Committee:

- 3.1. confirms its support for the principle that residential/urban areas can be appropriate locations for wildflower meadows.

- 3.2. supports the proposals for improved engagement and publicity that officers are proposing for the project.
- 3.3. confirms that it has read, understood and taken account of the Well-being Impact Assessment (Appendix 1) as part of its consideration.

## **4. Report details**

- 4.1. As a Local Authority, we have a statutory duty to enhance biodiversity and promote the resilience of our ecosystems under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. The Council has also declared a Climate Change and Ecological Emergency in July 2019 and adopted the Climate and Ecological Change Strategy in February 2021 including the Ecologically Positive Council by 2030 goal. It is within this context that the H&E and PPP&C Services have taken steps to enhance biodiversity by encouraging wildflower meadows to establish in suitable sites across the county.
- 4.2. Officers assessed sites managed by Street Scene for their wildflower habitat potential, and 21 sites were selected for the first-year pilot (2020). These were added to in 2021 and there are now 58 managed wildflower meadow sites that contribute to our improved species richness ambitions. These sites, along with our 11 roadside nature reserves, contribute to nearly 50 acres (equivalent to 30 football pitches) of native wildflower habitat in Denbighshire. This project also contributes to the Council's Bee Friendly status, signed up to in 2018, aimed at supporting the recovery of bees and other pollinators. Denbighshire is widely regarded as leading the way in Wales in relation to this work, and it is something that the Council, and our communities, should be very proud of.
- 4.3. These sites are *not* unmanaged or left to grow wild or to become rank. The sites are left uncut between March and August each year, except a small border mown around each site cut on a fortnightly schedule and a litter pick undertaken during this time too. More detail on the standard maintenance regime for Wildflower Meadow Sites is provided in Appendix 2. This management regime allows the flowers to set seed, and ensures that the meadow provides the greatest benefit to wildlife. At the end of the season, the whole site is then cut with specialist mowing equipment, and the cuttings are removed. This helps to lower the richness of the soil, and create the low-nutrient ground that our native wildflowers and grasses need to thrive. If necessary, we plant native wildflowers grown from local seeds or sow seeds collected from our other sites, to increase the species richness.

- 4.4. Wildflower meadows vary from site to site and usually contain a variety of native grasses and wildflowers. The wildflowers at our sites are mostly native perennial species, which return and flower each year. Wildflower meadows have a long flowering season and different species flower through the year.
- 4.5. Wildflower meadows sites are not pictorial meadows. Pictorial meadows are made up of mixes of plants and are often referred to as 'wildflower meadows'. Usually pictorial meadows include many non-native species, and no grasses. Pictorial meadows provide less benefits to biodiversity and need regular, costly maintenance. Our wildflower meadows often do still look beautiful, and some examples are provided in the resident letter template at Appendix 3.
- 4.6. The aims of the Wildflower Meadow Project have been stated objectives of the council for many years now. The project was included in our Biodiversity Duty Delivery Plan 2016-2019, which was debated at Partnerships Scrutiny Committee (11 July 2019) and adopted by Lead Member thereafter. The project also forms an important part of our strategy to achieve the biodiversity targets set out in our Corporate Plan 2017–22, and our ambition to become an Ecologically Positive Council by 2030.
- 4.7. On Page 43 of our [Climate and Ecological Change Strategy](#) we state to *"expand year on year the wildflower (deliberate non-cut) pilot conducted in 2020 to more areas the Council owns or manages e.g. more public realm sites, community housing sites, care home sites etc."* The strategy was subject to a public consultation during November and December 2020, and the final document was adopted at Council on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2021, via unanimous vote. Importantly, the principle of developing wildflower meadows in residential/urban areas was consulted upon in 2020 and unanimously supported by Members in February 2021.
- 4.8. As context to this work, the UK has lost 20 species of bee since 1920, with 35 species currently at risk of extinction. Honey bees declined 23% in Wales between 1985 and 2005, and since 1930 the UK has lost 97% of its wildflower meadows. 41% of species has seen their populations decline since 1970, with 15% of species now facing extinction. The Council has a duty to try to save our native flora and fauna, and we are determined to restore wildflower habitats and increase pollinator numbers within the County. That is why we decided to make some operational changes to the way we manage a number of Street Scene sites, which were previously mown regularly.
- 4.9. Although there has been almost universal support for the vast majority of the sites across the County, we have received opposition from some residents

regarding a small number of sites, generally based on 2 factors: 1) People are used to seeing neatly mown grass, and prefer how that looks; and 2) People object to what they see as a loss of municipal or amenity space.

- 4.10. To be clear, aesthetic preferences are not a relevant factor in the site selection process. It's true that some people like the look of these sites, and some people do not. It therefore needs to be accepted that we may never get 100% of residents to support all of these sites being developed as wildflower meadows. However, it is important to remember that we are not doing this for aesthetic reasons; we are doing it for the environmental benefits.
- 4.11. The issue of losing municipal/amenity space is a relevant matter for consideration, and something that is taken into account when sites are assessed and selected. It is the view of officers that there is nothing in the 58 current sites that would stop people using the site for any other recreational purposes that would have previously taken place at these sites.
- 4.12. After just one year of changing management at these sites, we have recorded common spotted orchids in Stryd y Brython, Ruthin, as well as Hound's-Tongue and Toothed Medick at two of our Prestatyn sites. Toothed Medick has never had a confirmed record in Wales and Hound's-Tongue is a near-threatened plant on the GB red list, and has only been recorded 18 times in Denbighshire in the last 116 years. These examples not only demonstrate the importance of this work, they are also relevant because, in the case of the Prestatyn sites mentioned, they are sites where we originally received complaints from residents on the grounds that they weren't appropriate locations. If we had withdrawn those sites as a result of those complaints, we wouldn't have seen these important results.
- 4.13. This leads on to the issue of engagement and communication about potential sites. It has been suggested that the Council could have done more to communicate the location of the current sites within the Wildflower Meadow Project before they were taken forward, and that is accepted to some extent. County Councillors were made aware of the Wildflower Meadow Project, and what we intended to do in terms of changing the maintenance regime at suitable locations in 2020 and 2021. Looking specifically at 2021 communications, a [press release](#) was issued about the project in April 2021 which was reported by local newspapers and a specific email was sent on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021, to all Councillors who have wildflower meadow sites within their ward. We have also put regular updates on our social media accounts over the

past year, and we have specific information about it on our [website](#), including [digital mapping](#) showing the location of all sites.

4.14. However, it is acknowledged that we possibly could have done more to publicise information about the specific sites prior to them being developed, and this is something we have addressed going forward. That said, the response to the project has been almost overwhelmingly positive. Out of the sites we have selected so far, we have only had negative feedback about a few sites, and those concerns have largely been allayed through subsequent dialogue with those residents. Therefore, it is important that we have a proportionate response to the concerns about engagement and consultation, given the vast resource that could be required for such processes. Moving forward, our plan for communication and engagement for this project is outlined in Appendix 4.

## **5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?**

5.1. The project forms an important part of our strategy to achieve the biodiversity targets set out in our Corporate Plan 2017–22, and our ambition to become an Ecologically Positive Council by 2030.

## **6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?**

6.1. The work to assess and select sites, and also the work involved in the revised maintenance regimes, has been absorbed within existing staff workloads and budgets. Additional equipment has been required, but this has been funded via Welsh Government grants. Customers and Communities Service continue to support the project via communications and Webteam.

## **7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?**

7.1. See Appendix 1 for full WIA.

## **8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?**

8.1. Please see Appendix 6 for detail.

## **9. Chief Finance Officer Statement**

9.1. As stated in section 6 there are no direct financial implications of this report with the work absorbed within existing workloads and budgets and use of grants.

## **10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?**

10.1. The risks mainly relate to public perception and criticism of the Council if residents don't understand or support this project. These will be managed via the engagement and communication activities highlighted in paragraph 4.14 and Appendix 4.

## **11. Power to make the decision**

11.1. See Appendix 7 for detail.