

<b>Report to</b>	<b>Communities Scrutiny Committee</b>
<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>8 September 2022</b>
<b>Lead Member / Officer</b>	<b>Cllr Barry Mellor / Emlyn Jones</b>
<b>Report author</b>	<b>Joel Walley</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>The Denbighshire Wildflower Project Update Report</b>

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

### **The Denbighshire Wildflower Project Overview**

1.1. The Wildflower Project is a collaborative project between Biodiversity Team, Streetscene and other sections, that aims to create urban and peri-urban local provenance meadows through a reduced 'cut-and-collect' mowing regime. This project is vital to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity, and tackle the Climate and Ecological Emergency.

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

### **Denbighshire Wildflower Project: Update**

2.1. To provide information regarding the effectiveness of the steps taken to improve engagement and increase publicity with all stakeholders of the Wildflower Project.

2.2. Highlight the progress made to date in delivering its expected benefits.

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

3.1. That the Committee confirms it is happy with steps taken to improve engagement and increase publicity, the progress made to date in delivering the project benefits, and continues its support for the project.

## 4. Report details

- 4.1. Prior to the intake of new sites at the beginning of each season a full list of sites is put forward to Councillors and Community Councils for feedback. The report is accompanied by detailed online maps which allows Councillors and Community Councils to see the location of each site. Feedback from Councillors and Community Councils is encouraged before the sites are finalised.
- 4.2. A comprehensive ranking system has been established which identifies residential properties which require letters to inform them of the change of management on new sites. The letter includes information on the management regime as well as the Biodiversity Team email address.
- 4.3. The Biodiversity Team and the Communications Team work together to produce regular informative posts for social media, to ensure residents are kept well informed about the project. Since 10<sup>th</sup> May 2022 there have been 30 Facebook posts seen by 83,867 people and of those 4,369 people have directly engaged with the posts. During that same time, Twitter has had 20 tweets seen by 13,708 people and had 460 people directly engage with the posts.
- 4.4. Regular press releases highlighting the project are published. Many of these are distributed further afield by local, regional and national news outlets – since April 2022 there have been 18 articles published by other outlets.
- 4.5. The Biodiversity Team has presented the Council's Wildflower Project at national and regional conferences as well as to town councils, community councils, community groups and universities. Presentations uploaded to YouTube have currently been viewed a total of 1,146 times.
- 4.6. The Bee Friendly project has engaged with 55 schools in Denbighshire. During this time there have been 16 school visits, 5 Bee Friendly educational school days undertaken and 3 school trips to the county tree nursery.
- 4.7. The Biodiversity Team have undertaken 4 wildflower plug planting days which engaged county and community councillors, community groups and schools. Roughly 7,000 plug plants have been planted during these days.
- 4.8. There are 24 volunteers registered for weekly volunteering and who have attended 13 volunteer days at the county tree nursery as of 01/08/2022.

- 4.9. A Denbighshire County Council staff wildflower identification training day was hosted and well received. This is to be an annual event.
- 4.10. Two wildflower walks were conducted for officers and members. An additional 2 guided tours were undertaken for both the Wales and Britain in Bloom judges.
- 4.11. The project has attracted the attention of local experts from the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland who have been eager to contribute towards the record gathering. A tailored version of the project's surveying App was created which allows the recorders to conduct surveys on Wildflower Project sites.
- 4.12. Seed gathering across North East Wales has been possible through positive collaboration with colleagues in the Dee Valley and Clwydian Range AONB, Natural Resources Wales, North Wales Wildlife Trust and the National Trust.
- 4.13. The Biodiversity Team continue to share our methodology and surveying template with community groups, councils, North Wales Wildlife Trust, Natural Resources Wales, Plantlife and the Cairngorms National Park. Knowledge sharing has taken place with roughly half of all Welsh county councils and the project continues to be at the forefront of Welsh grassland restoration.
- 4.14. All records gathered during the monthly surveys are forwarded to Cofnod, the Local Environmental Records Centre. These are shared the largest national biodiversity database in Britain, the National Biodiversity Network Atlas. The records are available globally and give insight of species distribution and restoration ecology.
- 4.15. Restor is an online hub for nature restoration which has the largest network of conservation and restoration sites across the globe. Restor connects thousands of local communities, NGOs, governments, enabling the sharing and monitoring of projects. We received a personal invitation from Restor's creator (raised in Prestatyn) to host the Wildflower Project data on its website.
- 4.16. There are currently 101 Wildflower Project meadows (including our Roadside Nature Reserves) which contribute 56.9 acres of wildflower habitat.
- 4.17. A total of 420 surveys were conducted between April and July 2022. Total number of surveys conducted since 2020 – 789.

- 4.18. A total of 4,830 individual botanical records were gathered between April and July 2022. Individual records gathered since 2020 – 10,157.
- 4.19. A total of 253 different wildflower species were recorded across all project sites in 2022. Total species count since 2020 – 340
- 4.20. Notable species records for Denbighshire - 44 scarce, 7 scare/rare and 9 rare (including Hound's-Tongue, a nationally declining species, only recorded 18 times in 116 years in Denbighshire).
- 4.21. The average height of vegetation on new sites (2022) is 18.76cm, while the average vegetation height on established sites (1 year and older) is 20.81cm.
- 4.22. A new 4-acre local provenance wildflower meadow has been established at the County Tree Nursery. This meadow will provide a seed source for the project.
- 4.23. A total of 60 project sites have been identified as suitable local provenance seed sources and will be harvested for seed over the coming years.
- 4.24. An estimated 8,000 local provenance plants have been grown in 2022 at the county tree nursery. Roughly 40 sites have been allocated plug planting over the coming years. Planting days will be used to engage local communities, schools, community groups, Councillors and Community Councils.
- 4.25. A successful trial was undertaken at a site in Denbigh using yellow rattle seed (a hemi-parasitic plant which feeds off grasses). The results saw a decrease in grass abundance and density by ~30%. Building on the positive results 8kg of local yellow rattle seed has been acquired to improve additional sites.
- 4.26. 14 seed pods from the only known population of Bithynian vetch growing in Wales (located on a Denbighshire Roadside Nature Reserve), have been harvested to grow on at the county tree nursery.

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

- 5.1. The project supports biodiversity targets in the Council's Corporate Plan 2017 – 2022, which has identified bees as a priority species and aims to increase the biodiversity value of the county by protecting vulnerable species and habitats for the benefit of both wildlife and all the people who live and visit Denbighshire.

5.2. Additionally, the Council has declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency which is focused on undertaking immediate action to slow and reverse climate change and the devastating loss of biodiversity. A key area identified for increasing biodiversity is to increase the total area of the verge habitat within the biodiversity cut and to expand on the council's roadside nature reserve network, which represents some of the best habitats for rare species.

5.3. Since 1930 the UK has lost 97% of its wildflower meadows. England and Wales have less than 1% of the pre-war total area of unimproved lowland meadow remaining and Wales remains 16<sup>th</sup> from the bottom, in a survey of 240 countries for nature loss. Urgent and immediate work is required to restore nature and the project has shown that rapid restoration can take place through the creation of roadside meadows whilst also lowering the Council's carbon footprint.

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

6.1. The work associated with the project has been absorbed in existing workloads and budgets. Equipment has been funded via Welsh Government grants.

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

7.1. See Appendix 1 for full WIA provided to Communities Scrutiny Committee in 2021.

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

8.1. This is an update report, following attendance at Communities Scrutiny in 2021.

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

9.1. Not Applicable - there are no direct financial implications of this report.

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

10.1. The main risk is public perception and criticism of the Council if residents don't understand or support this project – the work to address this is outlined above.

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

11.1. Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2021

11.2. Sections 7.2.3, 7.3, 7.4.1(e), 7.4.2(b) and (c) of the Council's Constitution.