

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CLIMATE CHANGE STEERING GROUP

28TH JANUARY 2020

**CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT WILDFLOWER GRASS MANAGEMENT
POLICY FOR RHONDDA CYNON TAF**

**REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, PROSPERITY, DEVELOPMENT &
FRONTLINE SERVICES AND THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH,
PROTECTION & COMMUNITY SERVICES DISCUSSION WITH THE
CABINET'S CLIMATE CHANGE CHAMPION (COUNCILLOR RHYS LEWIS)**

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to consult the Steering Group on the draft Wildflower Grass Management Policy for Rhondda Cynon Taf.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Steering Group:

- 2.1 Comment on the draft Wildflower Grass Management Policy, and
- 2.2 That the feedback and comments of the Climate Control Cabinet Steering Group are reported to Cabinet to inform their decision with regard to the policy.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Land management has significant climate change and biodiversity impacts. The grassland management policy seeks to address these, whilst continuing to meet the Council's Corporate priorities.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 Two earlier reports (2015 and 2017) have been considered by Scrutiny committee regarding wildflower grass management and pollinators. For a number of years, grassland management pilots have been underway on a limited number of sites in parks, on road verges and key countryside sites. These pilots have enabled the Council to explore the issues, to test sustainability, to monitor the biodiversity impact and inform the development of this draft Wildflower Grass Management Policy.

- 4.2 In recent years, the loss of wildflower grassland habitats and the pollinating insects they support has become an issue of public concern. Publically owned grasslands and grass verges have significant potential as reservoirs of wildflower rich habitat that can contribute to reconnecting and restoring grassland biodiversity. As these areas are in public view, they also offer opportunities for awareness raising, local community support and action. A number of the pilot projects were suggested by residents or Councillors and some local communities helped to develop 'Grab a Rake' (see Appendix 2).
- 4.3 The management of Council owned land for biodiversity has been an important priority within 'Action for Nature: the Local Biodiversity Action Plan for Rhondda Cynon Taf'. In recent years, grassland management has also been recognised in the actions undertaken to meet the Council's Biodiversity Duty under S6. Environment (Wales) Act 2016. Cross departmental working is fundamental to this, in particular as grass cutting has been transferred from Parks and Countryside to Streetcare.
- 4.4 It is important to appreciate that a wildflower management approach is not about abandonment. Active management is required for native wildflowers and their pollinators to thrive. Grass is left uncut until the flowers have set seed but later in the year it is cut and the grass is collected into 'habitat piles'. The collection of the cuttings is an essential part of the process. It removes nutrients, lowers the soil fertility and prevents a 'thatch' of dead grass inhibiting wildflower seed growth. Over time, the percentage of grass decreases and the percentage of wildflowers will increase. On larger sites, conservation grazing may be the most sustainable option.
- 4.5 In Rhondda Cynon Taf, we are very fortunate to have a wide range of native wildflowers growing naturally in our fields, verges and woodlands. All these plants are perfectly adapted to the soil, climate and habitat and are part of the 'ecosystem' providing food not only for pollinators but for many insects and other animals. This is the foundation of our unique biodiversity. Sadly, this has been lost in some other parts of the UK.
- 4.6 The proposed Rhondda Cynon Taf grassland and grass-verge biodiversity management policy is **'to increase the area and extent of wildflower rich grassland habitat in the County Borough in support of the Council's Biodiversity Duty and 'Action for Nature: the Local Biodiversity Action Plan'**.

The key principles in support of the policy are:

- To identify sites where there are no over-riding health and safety constraints to changed grassland management.
 - To ensure changes in grass and grass-verge management are broadly supported by local people.
 - To pick sites with the highest potential for biodiversity improvement. The measure of potential includes consideration of:
 - a) Existing wildflower composition;
 - b) Larger sites being better than small ones;
 - c) Sites which help to create habitat connectivity within the local landscape;
 - d) Sites which help 'fill in' gaps in the network of sites across the County Borough.
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- To pick sites where appropriate vehicle access is available.
 - To ensure sites have necessary 'eco-pile' composting capacity.
 - Where appropriate, to establish conservation grazing sites on large sites.
 - Integrate management with Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam and other invasive plant control.
 - Develop site interpretation at a scale and form appropriate to the site and location, and co-ordinate via the Council web site using the 'brimstone butterfly' emblem as the project logo.
 - Where appropriate, link local communities and interest groups with site management for awareness raising, training, the recording of wildflowers and insects and to promote 'Grab a Rake' community raking.
 - On 'cut and collect' sites, visibility splays and access paths will continue to be cut more regularly.
 - In some cases not all the wildflower grass needs to be cut and collected each year. Staggered biennial cutting can ensure even better pollinating insect habitat and that some wildflower seeds are available to seed eating birds as winter food.
 - Even grassland that initially has few wildflowers can quickly diversify with biodiversity management, however in these cases the floristic improvements can be accelerated by planting spring bulbs. These will provide an instant reaction to new management and the 'hay meadow' management will ensure the plants can photosynthesize after flowering and develop strong bulbs for flowering the next spring.

- Map, record and report progress through the Biodiversity Duty and the Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

4.7 The draft Policy on Wildflower Grass Management is set out in Appendix 1. In 2020, it is proposed that the number of sites in wildflower management will be increased and that website and social media will be utilised to engage with local communities. Local Members, residents and officers have identified a number of suitable sites and it is anticipated that this will continue in subsequent years. If the policy is adopted by the Council, it will provide clear guidelines for the future development of the programme.

5. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no equality or diversity implications as a result of the recommendations set out in the report.

6. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

6.1 The draft policy has been developed in consultation with Council staff who have responsibility and practical expertise in grassland management as well the Council's ecologist. Local residents and Councillors have contributed to the pilot projects, some being actively involved in 'Grab a Rake' to remove cuttings from small sites which are unsuitable for 'cut and collect' machinery.

6.2 The future development of the wildflower grass cutting programme will continue to involve local Councillors and residents. Website and social media are proposed to provide a channel for information, awareness raising and involvement.

6.3 The views of this Steering Group will make an important contribution and inform the deliberations of Cabinet.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

7.1 There are likely to be some minor financial implications associated with this report. The Council's grassland management budget is significant and the changes proposed can largely be accommodated within this. There may be additional costs associated with removing cut material, however this should be balanced but the reduced frequency of cuts on these sites. The pilots have demonstrated that, over time, the volume of cut material decreases as the wildflower percentage increases.

7.2 Site signage is likely to be expanded, using the brimstone butterfly emblem, to mark sites in conservation management. The machinery required for 'cut and collect' is different to routine grass cutting and its use requires training for the operatives. The current tracked machine

has a large capacity and is suitable for cutting wet ground outside the routine grass cutting season. The machine and the initial staff training was largely funded by grant aid from Natural Resources Wales. As the programme develops, there will be a need for additional machinery (in particular for smaller sites) for repairs and eventual replacement and for additional staff training.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 8.1 The Council has a statutory biodiversity duty under S.6 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and general responsibilities with regard to land management under various Acts including Highways legislation.

9. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

- 9.1 The draft policy on Wildflower Grass Management contributes to the Council's PLACE priority for creating neighbourhoods where people are proud to live and work. It also contributes to 'providing essential services well', 'help people and communities to help themselves' and to 'build a sustainable County Borough' as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2016-2020. The Council is currently undertaking initial discussions with regard to the next Corporate Plan for the period 2020-2024 which is likely to contain further consideration of the climate emergency and biodiversity loss.
- 9.2 The draft policy reflects the five ways of working of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. It has been developed collaboratively, drawing on the skills of practitioners, other local authorities and NRW with the involvement of local residents and Councillors. It is designed to deliver sustainable, long-term benefits and prevent the loss of native wildflowers and the biodiversity that depends on this habitat. The Policy seeks to integrate this approach within the existing grass cutting service, expand the number of sites gradually, learn from experience and share this via social media.
- 9.3 The draft policy relates most closely to the Resilience and Global Responsibility goals of the Act but the extension of the programme more widely across RCT will contribute to the Equality and Cohesive Communities goals. The impact on the Prosperity, Health and Cultural /Welsh Language goals is likely to be positive.

10. CONCLUSION

- 10.1 Members of the Climate Control Cabinet Steering Group are requested to consider the information presented in this report and are invited to comment on the Draft Policy on Wildflower Grass Management

<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Council/CouncillorsCommitteesandMeetings/Meetings/EnvironmentalServicesScrutinyCommittee/2015/04/20/Reports/item4actiontosafeguardpollinatinginsectsinrct.pdf>

<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Council/CouncillorsCommitteesandMeetings/Meetings/PublicServiceDeliveryCommunitiesandProsperityScrutinyCommittee/2017/12/12/Reports/AgendaItem3TheEnvironmentActWales2015BiodiversityDutyandPollinators.pdf>

Appendix One

A Policy on Wildflower Grass Management

This note sets out the policy position for biodiversity grass verge and open space management in Rhondda Cynon Taf. For a variety of fortunate reasons, highway grass verges, open spaces, parks and school grounds in Rhondda Cynon Taf are often rich in native wildflowers and support 'priority' grassland habitat. In recent years, the loss of wildflower grassland habitats and the pollinating insects they support has become an issue of significant public concern. Strategies to restore grassland biodiversity have been developed and publically owned grasslands and grass verges are increasingly seen as important reservoirs of wildflower rich habitat. A resource which if managed sympathetically, can help to reconnect and restore grassland biodiversity. Being in the public view, these areas also offer excellent opportunities for awareness raising and local community support and action. Wildflower grassland and grass verge management also involves integrated cross department working in support of Action for Nature: the Local Biodiversity Action Plan for RCT and the Council's new Biodiversity Duty.

It is important to recognise that wildflower management is not abandonment of land. Wildflowers need management to thrive and wildflower grasslands are traditionally maintained either by cutting or grazing. In very simple terms, biodiversity management requires grass to be left uncut in the spring and summer in order for flowers to 'flower and seed' , and only then are cut, with all 'arisings' collected. The collection of the cut grass is essential, because in doing so it removes nutrients from the soil which has the dual impact of reducing grass growth and increasing wildflower diversity and abundance. Collection also ensures that dead grass isn't allowed to form a mulch which can smother the wildflowers beneath. On grasslands where cut material is not collected, wildflowers will not flourish. Indeed changes of management which see grasslands cut once or twice a year but with the cuttings left is proving worse for wildflower diversity than traditional regular grass cutting. Again, it is important to re-iterate that wildflower grassland management is not abandonment.

Once collected the cut material can often be composted on site in special 'eco-piles', which act as hibernation areas and refuges for reptiles. Where there is no space, the cut material can be removed for composting elsewhere. The removal of cut material is essential. It is also the most difficult element of wildflower management and it is one of the first questions that need to be considered when changing management to a wildflower regime. In most cases cut and collection will be by machine, however on some small sites community raking up of cut grass through the 'grab a rake' initiative with the green bagging of cut grass for waste collection is a viable option. On larger sites, where opportunities arise, conservation grazing is a very effective wildflower management tool. RCT Council runs a number of conservation grazing sites.

On steep banks collection of cut grass by machine is impossible. Here gravity assists, as cut grass 'works down' to the bottom of banks, leaving at least the upper parts wildflower rich. In such circumstances, where community volunteer help is available, hand raking can help the bottom of the bank.

The RCT grass and grass-verge biodiversity management policy is **'to increase the area and extent of wildflower rich grassland habitat in the County Borough in support of the Council's Biodiversity Duty and 'Action for Nature: the Local Biodiversity Action Plan'**.

Key principles in support of the policy include:

1. To identify sites where there are no over-riding health and safety constraints to changed grassland management.
2. To ensure changes in grass and grass-verge management are broadly supported by local people.
3. To pick sites with the highest potential for biodiversity improvement. The measure of potential includes consideration of:
 - a) Existing wildflower composition;
 - b) Larger sites being better than small ones;
 - c) Sites which help to create habitat connectivity within the local landscape;
 - d) Sites which help 'fill in' gaps in the network of sites across the County Borough.
4. To pick sites where appropriate vehicle access is available.
5. To ensure sites have necessary 'eco-pile' composting capacity.
6. Where appropriate to establish conservation grazing sites on large sites.
7. Integrate management with Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam and other invasive plant control.
8. Develop site interpretation at a scale and form appropriate to the site and location, and co-ordinate via the Council web site using the 'brimstone butterfly' emblem as the project logo.
9. Where appropriate link local communities and interest groups with site management for awareness raising, training, the recording of wildflowers and insects and to promote 'Grab a Rake' community raking.
10. On 'cut and collect' sites, visibility splays and access paths will continue to be cut more regularly.
11. In some cases not all the wildflower grass needs to be cut and collected each year. Staggered biennial cutting can ensure even better pollinating insect habitat and that some wildflower seeds are available to seed eating birds as winter food.

12. Even grassland which initially have few wildflowers can quickly diversify with biodiversity management, however in these cases the floristic improvements can be accelerated by planting spring bulb. These will provide an instant reaction to new management and the 'hay meadow' management will ensure the plants can photosynthesize after flowering and develop strong bulbs for flowering the next spring.
13. Map, record and report progress through the Biodiversity Duty and Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

Appendix Two

A brief guide to managing grass for Biodiversity

What changes are taking place in terms of grass management?

At present, most of our grass verges and parks are cut regularly (every four weeks or so). However, this does not give a chance for wild flowers to flower and go to seed as the grass is cut quite short. Less wild flowers mean that there is less food for insects and in turn, less insects mean less food for other animals. In addition, when we cut the grass, some of the clippings are left on the surface; they then get washed into the grass by rain, people walking through etc. These clippings then sit at the surface of the ground, suppress some of the light which stop wild flowers from coming up and as the clippings break down, they feed the grass. This improves the growing conditions for the grass so the grass gets stronger and the wild flowers cannot compete with it. It is important to note that for wild flowers to grow successfully, they need to grow on poor soils. By cutting the grass the way we do, we are encouraging more grass and less flowers; therefore, less biodiversity.

To change this trend, we have identified areas in some parks, grass verges and cemeteries where we could let the grass grow for a longer period of time. This will help wild flowers to complete their life cycle (namely: come up, flower and go to seed) before being cut and collected. By doing this, over time, we will see less grass and more wild flowers coming through. More wild flowers means more pollen and nectar for insects which means that they are more likely to breed and increase their numbers.

What is 'Grab your Rake'?

'Grab your Rake' is a campaign devised to involve the local community in the management of some of our grass verges left for biodiversity.

It is aimed at anyone who would like to spend a couple of hours outdoors to help us rake an area after it has been strimmed; pile up the clippings and bag them ready to be recycled/ composted. On some sites, we may be able to create habitat piles for other animals such as reptiles which are also species under threat.

What tools/ equipment is required?

The only things needed are: a rake and a pair of gloves.

Taking Health and Safety into consideration

The areas selected under the 'Grab your Rake' campaign may be located near busy roads. It is therefore important to brief people beforehand and to ensure the following:

- **Remind individuals to be mindful of the nearby road and their positioning when working**
- **Signs should be on site to forewarn drivers**
- **Cones may be used to create a safety buffer away between the road and the work area should this be needed**
- **When using a rake, rake towards you – not away from you. This will reduce the amount of physical stress on the body**
- **Safe distances should be maintained when working so as to prevent hitting each other with tools**
- **Gloves should be worn at all times especially when bagging the clippings**
- **Bags should not be overfilled so as to cause injury when lifting. Remind individuals to lift with their knees not with their back – good manual handling technique**
- **Remember to wash hands before eating**

Other community activities

As the 'Grab your Rake' campaign will take place primarily over late summer and early autumn, we would like to invite the community to help us plant some of those biodiversity areas with bulbs or even some devil's bit scabious which is one of the main food source for insects in RCT.

This is a good project to involve young children and teach them about planting bulbs in grass as if they had always been there. This will also provide some colour and interest until the rest of the wild flowers start to come up.

Method of planting daffodils:

The best way to plant daffodils is to lift a patch of turf and scatter the bulbs. Where the bulbs fall is where they to be planted. All of this will give a more natural look once the daffodils are in flower. Make sure however that you leave plenty of space between each bulb so it has space to spread. Before replacing the turf, you need to score the underside of the turf to loosen the soil, replace it and only if possible water the area. As a rule, planting depth should be 3 times the height of the bulb.

Tools required: spade; fork; hand trowel and gloves.