

# Brighton & Hove City Council

## Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee

## Agenda Item 97

**Subject:** Verge and weed management

**Date of meeting:** 15 March 2022

**Report of:** Executive Director: Economy, Environment & Culture

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**Ward(s) affected:** All

**For general release**

### 1. Purpose of the report and policy context

- 1.1 This report is seeking approval to pilot a new approach to verge management. This new approach is based on:
- The agreed policies within the Open Spaces Strategy
  - The Corporate Plan commitment to become carbon neutral by 2030
  - Biodiversity policies – to be added

- 1.2 This report also provides an update on weed management following this committee's decision in November 2019 to reduce the use of pesticides. It also provides a response to a Notice of Motion at this committee on 18 January 2022 which agreed to set out how the council manages weeds in the future, learning from the past few years of pesticide free removal.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee note the contents of this report.
- 2.2 That Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee approves the verge management pilot as detailed in Section 3.

### 3. Verge management context and background information

- 3.1 On 17 January 2017, this committee approved the Open Spaces Strategy. The Strategy was developed following a large and comprehensive consultation. 3,542 people gave feedback through the online portal, with around 100 further representations being made by email, post, telephone or letter directly to City Parks.

This large response reflects the importance and passion residents, visitors and other groups place on parks and open spaces.

- 3.2 Grass is at the heart of the city's open spaces and was voted the second most important asset in parks after trees in the 2017 Open Spaces Strategy consultation. It is the internationally important chalk grasslands in the north of the city that assisted in securing the UNESCO status for the Brighton and Lewes Downes Biosphere. Grass is arguably the most cost effective and dynamic asset that any local authority manages. It is where people: run, walk, sit, play, take part in sports, eat, sunbath, read, sleep, walk their dogs, relax, and attend test centres and events. Varied heights of grass can influence users behaviour and add to the perception of an area such as 'the village green.'
- 3.3 As part of the Strategy, committee agreed the future arrangements for management of open spaces in the city, including verges. This included agreeing to *small, grassed areas be managed as natural green spaces with reduced mowing, where this does not create a nuisance for the public or vehicles*. This policy was introduced in response to feedback from the consultation where:
- Smaller grassed areas were the third most used open spaces by respondents after parks and gardens and natural and semi-natural green spaces
  - Only 4.9% of respondents thought we should spend future resources on them, ranking this type fifth out of the seven open space types
  - 70% tended to agree or strongly agreed that we should cut verges less
  - Trees, grass and wildlife represent three of the four things the public thought City Parks should invest more in, within parks and gardens
  - Contact with nature was the second most popular reason people visited open spaces.
- 3.4 There are a number of other policy decisions which support the move to reduced mowing, including:
- The Corporate Plan commitment to be carbon neutral by 2030
  - The declaration of a climate and biodiversity emergency in Brighton & Hove in 2018
  - Committee approval to trial wildflower grass verges in Hollingdean & Stanmer ward in response to a letter from a ward councillor
  - A Carbon Neutral Fund allocation of £80,000 to increase wildlife and wildflowers in grass verges. This investment will allow City Parks to procure electric ride-on mowers and mowing heads designed for long grass
- 3.5 In addition, the 2005 Health and Safety Executive's Vibration at Work Regulations has placed greater pressure on local authorities to manage and reduce the risks faced by operatives using vibrating equipment, such as lawnmowers.

- 3.6 Therefore, it is proposed that City Parks completes a three-year trial of reduced mowing for small, grassed areas in order for them to be managed as natural green spaces and encourage biodiversity and nature.

#### Learning so far

- 3.7 Ashton Rise: In 2019, grass mowing reductions were introduced on the steep bank of Ashton Rise. It started by mowing around the cowslips, with the patch then getting bigger and bigger. Initially, there was negative feedback but now the residents take responsibility for the site and refer to it as their wildflower bank. Key to the shifting the negative views was clear communication about when the grass would be mowed and when it would be left. Some people have changed their route to work to walk past it. Two key lessons: involve the community early on and get their buy-in and early mow will suppress the grass, making it more manageable.
- 3.8 Lewes Road central reservation was wilded in Autumn 2009/Spring 2010. On this site the existing vegetation was cleared and a wild flower mix was sown. Initial results were spectacular with photographs of the road even making international magazines. As the perennial species in the mix have taken over from the annual plants the display has been less spectacular. Public feedback on this scheme has been very variable as there were a number of complaints about the wildflowers the maintenance regime was changed to include a May cut which still allows the wildflowers to flower but they do not get as big officers have reported that this has resulted in a decrease in complaints.
- 3.9 Some parts of the City have residents actively campaigning for more wildlife friendly management of their verges. Hollingdean and Stanmer wards did this so far the activities of the residents who want to volunteer have been restricted by Covid but ward members agreed a number of verges to have reduced cutting and residents are now keen to get on with wildflower planting in these and other verges.
- 3.10 Verges can provide wildlife corridors enabling wildlife to move around the city whilst close mown they provide little cover but once allowed to grow longer they provide a safer environment for wildlife to move through the city and an environment for wildlife to live. Work done by Cityparks on butterfly 'stepping stones' and butterfly banks shows how successful this can be with sightings of many of our chalk grassland butterflies on sites within the built up parts of the City.
- 3.11 Trialling of wildflower grass verges in Hollingdean & Hollingdean – to be completed

#### New pilot approach to verge management

- 3.12 In 2021, the Living Coast Biodiversity Officer produced a Wilder Verges map, identifying grass verges with the highest biodiversity potential. This is available in Appendix 1. It is proposed that this map is used, working alongside the Living Coast Officer, to trial the new approach. Conversations

will also take place with ward councillors to understand whether there may be other areas that would benefit from being part of the pilot. In addition, locations throughout Hollingdean and Stanmer will also be identified and piloted. Areas will be subject to review by City Park's expert gardeners to determine that they are suitable locations.

- 3.13 The citywide trial will test out a reduction of mowing from 11 times a year to approximately six, to understand how it enables wildflowers to grow, increases biodiversity and reduce the carbon costs of repeat mowing. Based on learning so far and advice from expert gardeners, the trial will involve around four mows between March and June, followed by typically two mows between October and November<sup>1</sup>. The two final mows will ensure the site is left neat and tidy at the end of the year.
- 3.14 As every season is different, officers believe a three-year trial is needed to fully analyse the impact of this new approach, through gathering data and feedback to understand the difference and how different seasons are impacted. Through the pilot, City Parks will work with community groups and volunteers to enhance the wildflower areas, potentially through wildflower seeding and plug planting.
- 3.15 It is acknowledged that there will be some areas that will need to continue to be mowed on a more frequent basis for safety reasons, particularly where long grass can cause obstructions and hazards for motorists, cyclists, pedestrians, those using a wheelchair or mobility scooter and maintenance operatives. City Parks will work closely with City Transport colleagues on this.

#### Benefits of new approach to verge management

- 3.16 By reducing the mowing regime from 11 mows a year to approximately six, the following benefits are expected:
- Increased flora and fauna
  - Improved flood alleviation as longer grass has greater water storage capacity
  - Improved pollution filtration from an improved root structure
  - Reduced fossil fuel consumption
  - Reduced noise pollution
  - Reduced exhaust pollution
  - Reduced whole body vibration for officers
- Further information is available in Appendix 2.
- 3.17 It is recognised that a reduction in mowing to promote biodiversity will not always result in aesthetically pleasing small grass areas. Wildflowers will be difficult to establish in some areas as the arisings will not be removed after mowing. This will make the soil rich with nutrients which is favourable to more dominant plants that could outperform the wildflowers. It is not practical for City Parks to remove the arisings after mowing due to the

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<sup>1</sup> This is only a guide as the weather plays a key role along with different sites will require different maintenance, and City Parks resources deployment.

resources required to collect them. This will be further explored through the trial.

- 3.18 It is also recognised that this new approach may lead to an increase in complaints. This is why it is so important to be clear on what the mowing regime is and that it is communicated effectively. Subject to approval, the pilot will be communicated to the city via a news story, a Member briefing, information on the council's website, social media posts and visits to and discussions with community groups. Small signage can also be placed in locations letting residents know that the grass is longer to encourage biodiversity. Other councils have adopted "pardon the weeds, we're feeding the bees" signage, such as [East Suffolk](#) and [Kettering](#).
- 3.19 Conversely, officers dealing with feedback from the public on service delivery have reported a marked shift in the type of feedback received:
- *Recently I noticed the council have reduced the frequency of grass cutting on verges and certain green public spaces (the Lewes Road area for example). Allowing the grass to grow is beneficial to wildlife and also aesthetically pleasing. Additionally it perhaps provides the council (or City Parks Department) an opportunity to save some much needed cash and reallocate resources elsewhere. Hopefully this measure is not temporary! Personally I love it and hope it stays. We all need to get used to the idea that long grass, and accompanying flowers that grow as a result, are beautiful.*
  - *Thankyou for the sympathetic cutting of grass, verges and "green space" especially at the bottom of Denton Drive in Patcham. Its much nicer to look at meadow grasses and flowers than sterile cut grass. The insects and birds that feed on them thankyou too!!!*
  - *I would just like to send my heartfelt thanks to the department who deal with cutting the grass on public greens. Last year I emailed to ask that the green on Plymouth Avenue be left natural, and not mowed, and the council has kindly listened to that request. My neighbours and I saw a wonderful array of nature on that space over the past year, from the different grasses and flowers that pop up each season, to the butterflies, bees and other insects enjoying some natural habitat. We have also noticed some natural pathways appearing through the grass, not only from people walking their dogs (although not all of them pick up the dog mess which is upsetting) but also from the local population of foxes and badgers who we see slinking across the area from time to time. Our children have also enjoyed playing in the soft grass, and it's generally given us all a wonderful connection to nature, which has felt so important over this past year. So, sincerely, thank you for listening to our request, and we hope that you will continue to leave the green natural, and not mow it. Thank you so much.*
- 3.20 Updates will be reported to committee as the trial progresses.

#### **4. Weed management context and background information**

- 4.1 On 26 November 2019, the Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee agreed to end the use of glyphosate by City Environmental

Management services with immediate effect, other than in exceptional cases to kill invasive plant species, such as Japanese Knotweed or to kill tree stumps. An update on the council's pesticide reduction activities was provided to committee on 16 March 2021 and this report provides a further update.

#### Weed removal on hard surfaces (footways and highways): 2021 review

- 4.2 The weeding season for hard surfaces takes place between March and October. Once again, a review of the weeding season has been completed by Cityclean. No glyphosate was used for weed removal during 2021. In low footfall areas, the intention was to employ six additional operatives to complete manual weeding. In high footfall areas, such as the town centre where roads and pavements are swept daily, existing operatives continued to manage and sweep weeds.
- 4.3 Unfortunately, once again, the recruitment of the six additional operatives was severely impacted due to a national shortage of manual workers, the furlough scheme and a reluctance from people to come out of the benefit system for temporary work. This meant that, on some days, there were zero operatives to undertake the weed removal work – fewer than were available in 2020, where on average, there were four a week.
- 4.4 In order to ensure that weed removal did take place, contractors were used for three weeks to target areas of the city. This was funded from the underspend of not being able to recruit operatives. If similar recruitment issues are experienced in 2022, Cityclean will look to introduce contractor support sooner. This meant just under 500 roads were completed in 2021; 472 were completed in 2020.
- 4.5 Similar to 2021, the areas targeted were based on feedback and complaints received, observations by Street Cleansing operatives and Team Leaders and experiences from previous years. 12 Stage one complaints were received between 13 February 2021 to 10 February 2022.
- 4.6 During 2021, a weed strimmer was trialled. Feedback from staff was positive and compared to other options, this is considered to be the most effective:
- it results in less vibration
  - it is easy to transport
  - they can be used for 30 minutes, followed by a 30-minute break due to the level of hand-arm vibration
  - they enable quicker removal
  - they are easier to manoeuvre
  - they are suitable for all hard surfaces and can be used anywhere
  - can be used for other tasks, such as cutting bushes
- 4.7 In comparison, weed rippers, for example, are heavy to transport and can only be used for a maximum of 20 minutes per hour due to high levels of hand-arm vibration. Due to their size, they can only be used on hard surfaces of a particular width. It also requires two operatives to use safely.

Using hoes is a slow process, can only be completed for a minimal period of time and can be noisy.

#### Weed removal on hard surfaces (footways and highways): plans for 2022

- 4.8 Three additional trimmers are to be procured for the 2022 season and budgets are to be reviewed to see if there are options to buy more. It has been calculated that 11 are needed in total.
- 4.9 For 2022, a small, mechanical electric sweeper with weed removal attachments is to be procured to remove weeds from larger hard surfaces such as parts of Old Shoreham Road, New Church Road and Lewes Road.
- 4.10 A new approach for Cityclean seasonal recruitment was adopted for 2022 to attract people where using computers to apply can be a barrier, such as people with dyslexia or where English is a second language. On 22 and 23 February, a recruitment day was held at Hove Town Hall to recruit 40 seasonal Street Cleansing staff. Senior Supervisors and Managers interviewed applicants on the day... [further information to be provided in the final version of the report]. However, it is important to note that even with six seasonal operatives (which is what the budget allows), this is not sufficient to cover the whole city.
- 4.11 A hot water trial will be completed in April 2022 to understand the effectiveness of this method of weed removal.
- 4.12 Cityclean will also explore how to support residents and community groups to complete weeding activities in their areas. Hoes, gloves and bags are currently provided to groups that approach the council, but further work will be completed on promoting this.
- 4.13 Cityclean will use the experiences of the upcoming season and the trial of hot water as a removal method to determine how to prepare for 2023.

#### Weed removal in City Parks: 2021 review

- 4.14 A review of the weeding season has been completed by City Parks:
- The volume of hard surface work for City Parks is considerably less than the volume required by Cityclean
  - City Parks was not affected to the same extent as Cityclean in terms of the resources available to do the work
  - The volume of complaints received is comparable to previous years
- 4.15 For 2022, no changes are planned.

### **5. Analysis and consideration of alternative options**

- 5.1 Section 3 of this report proposes a pilot to reduce the mowing frequency of some small, grassed areas. An alternative option to rollout this out across the whole city. However, the experience of changing the approach to weed removal suggests a phased approach is more prudent, both in terms of

having time to try out different methods and also managing and responding to the feedback received.

- 5.2 Section 4 provides an update on the council's weed removal activities. When adopting the manual approach, City Environment was open and clear that they would not be able to remove the weeds to the same extent and therefore, there would be more weeds. The most effective way to remove weeds using a strimmer, does not remove the roots and therefore, the weeds will grow back. City Environment will continue to trial other methods as detailed in the main body of the report.
- 5.3 Many other [councils continue to make plans to become pesticide free](#). Some authorities have sought the support of communities to remove weeds:
- Lambeth created a community weeding initiative, encouraging residents to take responsibility to keep their street free of weeds, and provided waste sacks and collections to support this
  - The Herbicide Free Streets scheme in Cambridge is seeking to work with community groups who may wish to volunteer to clear their street spaces to avoid herbicide use
  - Manningtree has a team of volunteers to implement selective hand weeding as a viable, non-chemical alternative to the blanket spraying of herbicides in the town's streets
- 5.4 Interestingly, York City Council decided in January 2022 to continue with the use of glyphosate-based treatments as the principal method of weed control. Their reasoning for this is "to ensure the most effective weed control" and [their report provides feedback on some alternatives](#).

## **6. Community engagement and consultation**

- 6.1 Extensive consultation on open spaces was completed as part of the development of the Open Spaces Strategy which is detailed earlier in the report. Through the trial, further feedback will be obtained from stakeholders across the city and shared at future committee meetings.

## **7. Conclusion**

- 7.1 This report outlines a trial approach for verge management in some areas of the city. The trial will be used to determine the impact of a reduced mowing regime on enabling wildflowers to grow, increasing biodiversity and reducing the carbon, health and economic costs of repeat mowing. Updates will be provided to future committee meetings as the trial progresses.
- 7.2 The council's weed removal programme continued to be affected by external factors in 2021 making it difficult to accurately assess the impact of the planned activities. 2021 provided further insight and this has been used to prepare for the 2022 season, particularly around recruitment of seasonal operatives and the use of strimmers.

## **8. Financial implications**

- 8.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations of this report. Mowing and weeding activities are funded from existing City Environmental Management budgets. Any significant variations to budget will be reported as part of the council's monthly budget monitoring process.

Name of finance officer consulted: John Lack Date consulted: 16/02/2022

## **9. Legal implications**

- 9.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from the report other than to note that the Council, as Highway Authority, has a duty to maintain publically adopted highway, including highway verges, and this duty requires that the highway is kept in a safe condition.

Name of lawyer consulted: Hilary Woodward Date consulted: 15/02/2022

## **10. Equalities implications**

- 10.1 City Parks do not anticipate an impact on those with protected characteristics as a result of a new mowing regime.

## **11. Sustainability implications**

- 11.1 These are detailed in the main body of the report and will be reported on further as part of the trial feedback.

## **12. Public health implications**

- 12.1 Parks and green spaces are recognised in the Happiness: Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy as an important determinant of health and wellbeing. There is significant and growing evidence on the health benefits of access to good quality green spaces. These benefits include better self-rated health; lower body mass index, overweight and obesity levels; improved mental health and wellbeing; increased longevity.
- 12.2 In the consultation feedback for the Open Spaces Strategy contact with nature was the second most popular reason people visited open spaces and a reduction on mowing should allow for this.
- 12.3 City Parks is aware that not everyone will be in support of allowing the grass to grow longer which may impact on wellbeing. Risks to dogs from *Hordeum murinum* ('Barley grass/flea darts'), going through their coats can be mitigate through appropriate management.

## **Supporting Documentation**

### **1. Background documents**

1. [Open Spaces Strategy](#)

2. [Happiness: Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#)
3. Report to Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee on 26 November 2019: [Reducing the use of pesticides](#) (item 48)
4. Report to Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee on 16 March 2021: [Pesticide reduction and weed management review](#) (item 81)

## **2. Appendices**

1. Appendix 1: wild verges map
2. Appendix 2: changes to mowing of small grass areas – potential benefits