

Report to: **Executive**

Date: **8 July 2021**

Title: **Meeting the Biodiversity Target**

Portfolio Area: **Climate Change and Biodiversity**
Cllr Holway

Wards Affected: **All**

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: After the call in period for expires (5.00pm on Monday, 19 July)

Author: **Chris Brook** Role: **Director – Place and Enterprise**

Contact: **Chris.Brook@swdevon.gov.uk**

RECOMMENDATION:

The Executive is RECOMMENDED to:

- 1. Agree to the principle, where appropriate, of managing Council owned land to deliver an increase in biodiversity and meet our declared biodiversity target of 10% by 2025.**
- 2. Support a consultation with our communities on the proposals to inform the detail and locations of its role out. Consultation design and detail to be delegated to the Director for Place and Enterprise in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Biodiversity.**
- 3. Include a report on the forward plan in the Autumn to consider the detailed proposals, equipment specification, revenue and capital expenditure.**

1. Executive summary

- 1.1. Farming represents 15% of our economy and relies on pollinators to secure food production. A dramatic reduction in pollinators is occurring, with some insect groups such as bees showing a ~80% decline.

- 1.2. Whilst the impact the Council can have is limited, it must play its part. As a result the Council declared a target for 10% Biodiversity Net Gain in habitat value of land by 2025.
- 1.3. This net gain can be achieved by managing the land differently, (where appropriate) to achieve wild flowers, grasses and enhanced habitat for wildlife.
- 1.4. Whilst the principle of this is clear, it is important that our communities are given a say on the approach and it is proposed to offer a 4 week public consultation.
- 1.5. The results of the consultation and the details of how the scheme implementation could be achieved will be brought back to the Executive in Autumn 2021.

2. Background

- 2.1. Farming represents 15% of our economy and relies on pollinators.
- 2.2. Wild insects improve crop yields and pollinate an estimated 84% of EU crops (valued at £12.6 billion) and some 80% of wildflowers rely on insect pollination.
- 2.3. Some of our communities are already doing or considering adopting this approach where appropriate; Yealmpton, Wembury, Kingsbridge, Ivybridge, Totnes and South Brent.
- 2.4. Plymouth City, Exeter City, East Devon, Dorset, Cornwall, Devon and a host of other Councils in England already adopt an approach to managing their land to benefit wildlife.
- 2.5. Pan Devon community groups (supported by Universities and national partners) are supporting community join up and ensure best practice.
- 2.6. South Hams amenity grass areas amount to about 50 Ha. Of this, as little as 10Ha may be appropriate for a biodiversity led approach, and 3.5Ha for wildflower meadows. The rest requires a more traditional regime, as it is formal play space, sports pitches, small scale and unsuitable.
- 2.7. This approach requires different equipment. Our ground maintenance service is already being asked to undertake this approach through a number of contracts within South Hams on 3rd party land. Without investment in the appropriate equipment, the service will not be able to respond to further demand, and remain inefficient where it currently offers it.
- 2.8. A review of the Grounds Maintenance service in its entirety was undertaken in 2019 to benchmark the service. The service was found to be of a good standard but there were a number of operational efficiencies to be implemented to drive improvements and develop a commercial strategy to generate income to grow and reinvest back into the service.
- 2.9. Many of these have been realised and the team have successfully grown the income in year from an original forecast of £18,000 to

a projected outturn for 20/21 of £51,000 whilst delivering a budget saving.

2.10. The successful modernisation of the service, coupled with an approach to offer a range of services from traditional grass cutting to improving and enhancing biodiversity will enable the Council to offer enhanced services to other parties potentially generating further income whilst meeting the future needs of the Council.

3. How can we meet the biodiversity target?

- 3.1. Where it is appropriate we will actively manage our land to deliver wildflowers, grasses and pollinator friendly plants.
- 3.2. The Council will sow wild flower seed where needed, whilst maintaining tidy margins, paths, and active play space.
- 3.3. Clear signage and community engagement will underpin it, as per the examples below.



Above left - Signage example from Corby Kettering Council
Bottom right - Example from Yealmpton

- 3.4. Removal of cuttings over time will reduce soil fertility leading to even better biodiversity, and less cost of maintenance as a side benefit.

- 3.5. Implemented in a conscientious, community focused, **flexible** way this will achieve ~12.5% biodiversity net gain by 2025, as measured by the current metric used in our planning assessments.
- 3.6. Further examples from within the county are below by way of illustration. Top two images are Plymouth, bottom image is Wembury.



4. **Outcomes/outputs**

- 4.1. Subject to the exact areas of implementation, the approach will achieve in excess of 10% increase in biodiversity on the land owned by the Council, the politically binding target set in 2020.
- 4.2. A well-publicised, short public consultation, including targeted engagement with key communities, Parish and Town Councils, will inform the specific implementation plans, which will be reported to the Executive in Autumn 2021.

- 4.3. Should the measures be adopted, a business case will be brought back to the Executive setting out the capital costs of plant and equipment required to deliver it at the scale required. This will ensure the service can also offer it commercially to 3rd parties.
- 4.4. At the current time it is not anticipated that there will be any revenue implications of adopting the approach.

5. Options available and consideration of risk

- 5.1. A politically binding target of 10% net increase in biodiversity has been adopted by the Council. The principle of managing a small proportion of our land as set out in this report is the only realistic way of achieving it by 2025.
- 5.2. Our GM service needs to be equipped to deliver the service demanded of it by its clients, further investment will be required to ensure that continues.
- 5.3. The change in approach, should it be adopted, will require a strong and clear communication plan to support delivery. Inevitably, it will be supported by some, but not all. A flexible approach will be needed to manage this.
- 5.4. Experience from Dorset County Council who have been doing this successfully since 2014 shows that results aren't instant but do improve over time. Commitment will be required to achieve the best outcomes and this will need to be clearly communicated.
- 5.5. The revenue cost of cuttings disposal, which will mostly be taken offsite for disposal will need managing, so as to ensure the approach remains revenue neutral.
- 5.6. Inaction to meet the Council's biodiversity target will undermine the Council's credibility to deliver on this and other commitments.

6. Proposed Way Forward

- 6.1. As set out in the recommendations.

7. Implications

| Implications | Relevant to proposals Y/N | Details and proposed measures to address |
|------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Legal/Governance | N | <p>The Council has a general power under the Local Government Act 1972 to maintain land that it owns either for the purpose of its functions or the benefit, improvement or development of the Council's area.</p> <p>The Council also has a duty to have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of its policy and decision making under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.</p> |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Financial implications to include reference to value for money | Y | Detailed proposals will be set out in a future report. |
| Risk | Y | See section 5 |
| Supporting Corporate Strategy | Y | Climate change and biodiversity |
| Climate Change - Carbon / Biodiversity Impact | Y | Measures proposed would achieve the target set of 10% increase in Biodiversity from our own land. |
| Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications | | |
| Equality and Diversity | | No implications. |
| Safeguarding | | No implications. |
| Community Safety, Crime and Disorder | | No implications. |
| Health, Safety and Wellbeing | | No implications. |
| Other implications | | None at this stage. |

Supporting Information

None

Appendices:

None

Background Papers:

None