

## PLACE AND SUSTAINABILITY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL - 7 MARCH 2024

### PORTFOLIO – ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

## GRASS CUTTING PROGRAMME, SPRING 2024

### 1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That the Place and Sustainability, Overview and Scrutiny Panel note the approach to grass cutting in Spring 2024, with a “Let it Bee” campaign in support of the national No Mow May initiative.

### 2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 ‘No Mow May’ is a national campaign promoted by the environmental charity Plantlife, which advocates the cessation of grass cutting on all land during May, to encourage flowering plants and habitats for insects and butterflies reliant on pollen as a food source.
- 2.2 Further information on this national initiative can be found here:  
<https://www.plantlife.org.uk/campaigns/nomowmay/>
- 2.3 In 2023, the Council trialled this approach to grounds maintenance on certain selected sites. This report summarises the results of that and proposes a way forward for 2024.

### 3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 New Forest District Council has declared a ‘Climate and Nature Emergency’ and is committed to investigating practical ways to help sustain our planet.
- 3.2 As part of this commitment our Open Spaces team investigated the practicality of trialling the national campaign ‘No Mow May’ on selected areas where we implement grass cutting. Areas for which the council is responsible for grass cutting include urban highway verges, council housing land, and council offices such as Appletree Court.
- 3.3 Highway verge cutting is the responsibility of HCC. In urban areas only, NFDC are contracted by HCC to cut the verges. HCC provides funding for four cuts per annum, but under normal circumstances NFDC, at our cost, also delivers additional cuts, up to 7 in total, depending on growing season and ground conditions. This is to maximise amenity impact for residents and visitors. In recent years the grass growing season has been extended as a consequence of milder weather through the impacts of global warming.
- 3.4 More information on our grass cutting approach is found on the Council’s website at <https://www.newforest.gov.uk/grasscutting>
- 3.5 In discussion with HCC Highways, we identified suitable sites where there would be no safety implications (e.g. at junctions where sightlines must be maintained). These sites received one cut prior to May, but cutting was then suspended during May and recommenced in June. The area in the trial was 1.2km<sup>2</sup> – equivalent to 165 football pitches spread across a 300 square mile area. This revised regime would still deliver up to 5-6 cuts during the grass cutting season.

- 3.6 Grass cutting in and around sheltered accommodation and cemeteries was maintained as per normal schedules, but suspended on other areas of council housing land in line with the approach to verge mowing, and at Appletree Court.
- 3.7 Prior to implementation of the trial, our communications team worked to put out messages to town and parish councils and our own elected members in relation to the trial, then developed further messages to communicate to the wider public. Ahead of the trial, public messaging went on the council's social media accounts and in the council's resident's email in late March. After the trial period concluded in June, further public messaging was put out in the local media, on social media and in resident's emails explaining about the trial, and what had been done to support biodiversity.
- 3.8 During the time when grass cutting requirements were reduced, resources were deployed to other sites and other tasks, but it is important to remember that cutting remained in place for many sites across the district.
- 3.9 A range of feedback on the scheme was received - some residents for example felt that the schedule left areas looking untidy, whilst others applauded the biodiversity impacts. Some photos showing the outcomes of the scheme are shown in **Appendix 1**.
- 3.10 Local media coverage included [New Forest District Council goes wild with Plantlife campaign No Mow May \(advertiserandtimes.co.uk\)](https://www.advertiserandtimes.co.uk)

#### **4 PROPOSED APPROACH IN 2024**

- 4.1 The proposal is to continue to support "No Mow May" in 2024. Feedback received in 2023, plus our own operational learnings, have led to the following proposed enhancements for 2024:
- Sites which had safety concerns highlighted by the public i.e. because of impacts on sight lines, have been reviewed and if necessary will be mown.
  - To prevent larger sites appearing abandoned or unmanaged, we will frame larger sites by mowing around the periphery and provide access through selected areas for pedestrians to walk and enjoy the more natural environment.
  - The value of having space available for play/recreation will also be considered, to ensure we have a balance between mowing some areas for this purpose whilst others are left to grow.
  - The height of the first cut after May will be lifted to minimise wear and tear on grass cutting equipment.
  - Placing of signage on some larger grassed areas that explain that the area has been left unmown as part of the scheme.
  - Feedback from stakeholders, including the public, will be formally recorded and analysed in a central location.
  - Ecological sampling will take place pre- and post-scheme, to showcase some of the benefits for nature.
  - The Open Spaces team are also in discussion with the Housing section, to see where the relaxed grass cutting can be applied to certain areas of general open space on housing estates.
- 4.2 The 2024 scheme will be supported by a full communications plan. This plan will aim to:
- Inform residents and other stakeholders about the scheme.
  - Explain the importance of increasing biodiversity in the district.
  - Pro-actively answer queries that residents may have.

- Encourage wider participation from our residents – for example from their own gardens or through [The Greening Campaign : Climate change community support \(greening-campaign.org\)](https://www.greening-campaign.org).

4.3 Based on experience in 2023, some of our key messages need to include:

- Explanation of the timescales for remedial works we would undertake to return sites to their original condition. This is to reflect that once the no mowing period concludes, it is not possible to immediately visit all sites to cut the grass, so in practice some sites are unmown for a significant portion of June as well as May.
- Information on cutting heights and equipment chosen to reduce the level and impact of grass clippings. It is not viable to remove clippings because of the time and cost involved in doing so.

4.4 No Mow May is a national campaign, and we will continue to reference that in our social media communications so we can link into similar schemes across the country. However, the phrase “no mow may” doesn’t reflect the impact of this scheme across multiple months, nor the fact that we will be continuing to mow in some areas. Therefore, an overarching strapline of “Let it Bee” will be used to focus attention on the pollinator benefits.

4.5 In addition to the seasonal benefits of the “no mow may” scheme, there is a need to assess our approach to grass cutting and habitat management in a wider sense. This should include the level of verge cutting provided by NFDC, and the further opportunities for managing our land for nature benefit more widely, and over a longer timeframe. Along with strategies on litter and management of trees, this could form part of a single “public realm” strategy that would set out our long-term approach to maintaining and enhancing our local environment. This would be in place ahead of Spring 2025, to set out the longer term approach to this issue.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

5.1 The commitment to No Mow May is a way of visibly demonstrating commitment to the Council’s Climate and Nature Emergency and should continue in 2024, with the improvements and enhancements described above.

5.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel should consider the workplan and the timing for returning with more information on a “public realm strategy” at a future meeting.

## **6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 There may be some minimal savings on fuel, but there is also increased wear and tear on equipment once cutting recommences. Overall, the scheme is considered cost neutral. Any cost implications should be set against the environmental and climate benefits that schemes such as this deliver.

## **7 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 The scheme is designed to support pollinators and other wildlife. As described above, an assessment of the impact on local wildlife will be undertaken in 2024.

## **8 EQUALITY & DIVERSITY, CRIME & DISORDER AND DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are none.

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### **Background Papers:**

None



Photos from "No Mow May" 2023

