

NOTICE OF MOTION – CLLR A KIRBY – POLLINATOR PLAN FOR WOKING

Executive Summary

At its meeting on 29 July 2021, the Council referred the following Notice of Motion to the Executive.

Councillor A Kirby

“Pollinator Plan for Woking

This Council notes the systemic importance of pollinators to our food supply and economy, as well as their intrinsic value to nature in Woking Borough. This Council also notes the success and popularity elsewhere across the UK of the ‘No Mow May’ campaign, during which grass verges were left undisturbed by mowing during this critical month for flowers, wildlife and pollinators in particular.

The Council acknowledges the existing local work in this area of the ‘Planet Woking’, ‘Woking Environment Action Group’ and other voluntary organisations, in supporting bees and other pollinators through the sowing and planting of wildflowers. The Council recognises the importance of wild meadow spaces to the public realm, residents’ enjoyment of the Borough – and the benefits to the visual appeal of our communities.

The Council also acknowledges the success of its own existing wildflower strategies, which have so far been run on a more site-specific basis.

Accordingly, this Council resolves to instruct Officers to arrange for a broad and Borough-wide set of policies, classifying our grass cutting activities in each location according to the frequency of mowing required. This should result in a set of Borough-wide ‘wildness grades’ associated with different levels of mowing.

This system should be designed to achieve four key things:

- 1) Maximise the level of diverse wild flora and fauna in all council-maintained grassland, with the first assumption for maximum biodiversity
- 2) Continue to ensure public safety and amenity where essential (such as sports pitches or road verges)
- 3) Create an easily understandable set of ‘wildness grades’ to enable residents to understand and engage with the Council’s grass cutting policies
- 4) Allow Council contractors to refocus on keeping public footpaths clear of vegetation

This Council resolves that the vast majority of grassland within this scheme will be left unmown during the entire period 1st May – 1st June, excluding only the most exceptional of locations within the ‘least’ wild category, as outlined for exceptional reasons of safety or public utility mentioned above. Beyond this initial distinction of inclusion in the ‘No Mow May’ principle, further grades of reduced cutting should be considered – up to and including a policy in some locations of cutting grass only once per year in August.

Council instructs Officers and the relevant Portfolio Holder to create a clear set of such ‘wildness grades’ for Woking grassland and to allocate all grassy areas maintained by Woking Borough Council to one of these ‘grades’ – with a preference for the most wild to suit each location.

Notice of Motion – Cllr A Kirby – Pollinator Plan for Woking

Council also resolves that Officers should report back to Full Council at their earliest convenience with estimates of the potential net savings from such a systematic and organised policy of reduced grass-cutting, so that all Councillors can debate the best use of these savings for other purposes.”

Officer Comment

“Woking Borough Council (WBC) has a clear and strong commitment to supporting local biodiversity and local people’s access to and enjoyment of nature. This is set out in the Borough’s biodiversity and green infrastructure strategy, Natural Woking, and in its accompanying Supporting Information (see <https://www.woking.gov.uk/nature-and-sustainability/natural-woking>). A climate *and ecological* emergency was declared in 2019, reemphasising this commitment. Since Natural Woking was adopted in 2016 a wide range of conservation initiatives have and continue to be implemented by WBC and partner organisations to deliver Natural Woking’s objectives.

The topic of wildflowers and longer grass, and the benefits these offer for our native wildlife - large and small, as habitat and food source - has grown greatly in our national awareness over the last decade. We have come to recognise just how rare native wild flower meadows have become; some 97% of these have been lost in the UK since the 1930s. Together with significant recorded declines in insect numbers and the other wildlife that relies on these, and the increasing challenges of our changing climate, taking action to expand wildflower areas is an important step in supporting the local environment and its species.

The 2020/21 lockdowns increased many people’s access to and appreciation of nature. However, feedback from local residents on this subject remains very polarised. For example, Officers received these two separate requests from residents on the same day in May 2021:

‘Many councils and organisations are signed up. It saves costs and is great for nature - which is so important at a time when people are looking for something positive. Mowing the grass... is really not necessary and sets back flowering plants such as dandelions which provide much needed food for bees, and pollination. Please reconsider and join the growing no mow May movement.’

and,

‘Myself and some of residents are getting fed up with the grass not being cutting outside the houses, the people in the flat don’t own gardening equipment and we have noticed there are a lot of rats around... we do pay a service charge and we are not getting the right service. I know there are houses empty but no one is cutting the grass in front of them and its getting really high. Thank you.’

In pace with the increasing national awareness of the benefits of wildflowers, and pursuant to the Council’s desire to help wildlife to thrive, WBC and our environmental partner Serco have over the last ten years developed local management approaches that deliver more wildflowers in suitable locations.

The cross-party Climate Change Working Group has led evolution and expansion of the Council’s approach, which is explained in the ‘Wildflowers in Woking’ webpage www.woking.gov.uk/wildflowers. The Working Group discussed and agreed this current policy and approaches in December 2019, taking into account the many factors to be considered across the variety of grass-cutting sites throughout the Borough. Given also resident’s wide-ranging views on the subject, the Working Group’s central aims have been to provide more wildflowers and longer grass every year whilst still maintaining a cared for appearance and a safe environment.

WBC and Serco work closely to ensure quality delivery of the agreed locations each year, monitoring these each summer and planning expansion of the number and extent of locations for the following year. New opportunities are regularly identified (including through resident suggestions) and explored. New information and news of relevant national projects, such B-Lines, are discussed with partners such as the RHS, Surrey Wildlife Trust and Surrey County Council.

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A wide range of factors need to be considered to determine the best management regime for a given site including: the nature of its location and use(s), climatic conditions, safety, access for maintenance, as well as the potential biodiversity and visual benefits. As a result, WBC utilises a number of different management regimes across its sites. These range from sowing annual seeds to perennial plants, bulb planting, continued regular mowing, less frequent cuts that allow longer growth and shorter wildflowers to bloom ('flowering lawn'), bulb planting, through to meadows, cut only once each year in late summer. In this way, WBC already classifies grass-cutting sites according to the different ways in which each is managed, including by their frequency of mowing.

More wildflower sites are being delivered year on year. However, for a number of reasons including site suitability and finite operational resources, it is not possible or desirable to move even every suitable area of grass WBC manages to a once a year only cut. The Motion suggests financial savings would be achieved by doing so however this is not always the case. Wildflowers require low fertility soil, necessitating removal of grass-cutting arisings (which we would not otherwise do) at a cost to the Council.

Officers also continue to assist environmental volunteer groups in a number of locations in their efforts to bring forward more wildflowers and other community garden initiatives.

Planet Woking (<https://planetwoking.co.uk/>) was launched in September 2020 to help the Council and our communities to share news and inspire all to be even more sustainable and wildlife friendly. This popular brand has already featured wildflower news, encouraging residents, businesses and community groups to get involved through initiatives like No Mow May and Every Flower Counts. Simple ways we can all help to 'green' our towns and villages were also covered in Planet Woking's online events this year, in February and May.

The Motion put forward makes a number of valid points and recognises some but not all of the above existing practices. The proposals it sets out are in large measure already being implemented, in accordance with the Climate Change Working Group's agreed wildflower policy.

Where the proposals are not already being implemented on the land WBC mows - the suggestion to undertake little or no mowing in May each year - reduced cutting is in place in many locations and not doing so elsewhere is for sound pragmatic reasons. The wider national No Mow May campaign is also promoted to residents to try in their own private gardens, which represents a considerable area of the Borough's total green infrastructure footprint.

Creation of a separate pollinator plan risks duplication given the work already invested in this topic, and could divert Officer time from delivery of new wildflower sites on the ground.

An update report to the Climate Change Working Group on WBC's wildflower/grass-cutting policy is already planned for this winter (December). This is intended to review progress and learning through experience over the preceding two years and will highlight new opportunities (such as B-Lines and the Blue (Hearts) Campaign), through which Officers consider additional biodiversity benefits and increased resident engagement can be achieved, whilst still striking a careful balance that respects the wide range of residents' views on this topic.

It is recommended that the Motion not be pursued in its current form and instead the Executive requests consideration of Cllr Kirby's suggestions by the Climate Change Working Group as a part of the already planned discussion. Cllr Kirby would be welcome to attend that meeting as a guest to hear and, with the agreement of the Chairman, to participate in the discussion".

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Background Papers: None.

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