

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Service Delivery Overview & Scrutiny Panel

5 June 2024

TITLE:	Mowing Regimes and Wider Biodiversity Projects
PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	Councillor Yates - Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Environment
CONTACT OFFICER:	Gareth Knapper – Senior Strategy & Partnerships Lead
WARDS INVOLVED:	All Wards

Appendices Attached – None

1. Reason for the Report

- 1.1 To seek approval to consider changes to mowing regimes at some Council owned sites.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Panel considers the approach outlined below to proposed changes to mowing regimes at some Council owned sites.

3. Executive Summary

- 3.1 Traditionally, the Council has adopted a more formal, manicured way of managing and maintaining its green spaces, keeping amenity grassed areas short and cut on a fortnightly basis. This approach still has its place in some of the more formal historic sites, areas where visibility is important and where public perceptions may be that certain sites should be maintained this way to encourage different forms of use.
- 3.2 This report outlines the considerations for a proposed change to the formal approach of green space maintenance in some initial locations and aims to develop certain sites where a more blended, sustainable approach could be implemented with regard to mowing regimes.
- 3.3 With the recent changes to the Council's corporate priorities and following the development of both the Plan for Nature and Green Spaces strategies, which commit to enhancing nature and biodiversity, it has been identified that changes to mowing regimes are required but that a strategic and well planned

approach is taken.

- 3.4 Pollinators like bees and butterflies are essential for our environment, but their populations are declining. By leaving grass to grow, we can provide important habitat for these insects, as well as birds and mammals. Adoption of this type of management on certain sites ensure that our green spaces contribute towards improving biodiversity, ecological connectivity and resilience to climate change impacts.
- 3.5 Green spaces across the district are maintained by our partner and contractor Alliance Environmental Services (AES). Changes to management, which include less frequent mowing, will require AES to assess the machinery required to deal with this approach. Specific machinery will be required which can cut taller grass, as well as needing the ability to collect arisings, which is critical to the management of long grass, meadows and verges. Discussions with AES will be needed to assess requirements for these sites, changes to machinery and the financial implications of these changes.
- 3.6 Changes to the management of our green spaces can be quite emotive within the communities we serve. Therefore signage, interpretation and clear messaging will be critical to ensuring the success of the changes to management regimes at the sites identified across the district.
- 3.7 The approach being proposed through this report is initially to reduce the mowing frequency on identified Council sites, to enable review and monitoring over the first year of changes (2025/26). It is important to make clear that the revision to mowing is a different form of management to the intentional creation of seeded areas such as wildflower meadows.
- 3.8 The creation of wildflower areas forms part of the wider considerations for biodiversity enhancement and, as such, would be the subject of more detailed biodiversity plans for individual sites, where the appropriateness of each site would need to be considered along with seeking advice and expertise from partners such as Staffordshire Wildlife Trust.
- 3.9 As well as developing a communications plan for the wider community, we will where possible look to involve and work with local community groups who are keen to support such initiatives, utilising expertise and advice where it may be available.
- 3.10 To ensure that the number of sites under review is manageable, it is proposed to seek approval to focus on implementing changes to the sites which have been agreed via the Green Spaces Strategy to have management plans written for them. These initial sites include;
 - **Biddulph:** Halls Road Recreation Ground and Biddulph Valley Park
 - **Leek:** Brough Park and Birchall Recreation Ground
 - **Cheadle:** Glebe Road, Brookhouse Way and Stanfield Crescent Playing Field

- 3.11 Other sites, especially smaller sites of incidental green space could be included in the changes where it is deemed appropriate, once the above changes have been implemented. Initial sites will be monitored throughout 2025/26 and the learning reviewed before other sites are progressed in a similar way.
- 3.12 It is anticipated that the next steps in this process will be to start discussions with AES around the proposed sites where we are looking to reduce mowing. We will also start engagement with relevant internal colleagues, community groups in these areas who may support, local Councillors and respective Town Councils.
- 3.13 A more detailed plan will be developed for each site with a view to the proposed mowing changes commencing from April 2025. This will also include the installation of on-site signage/interpretation boards where required, prior to the start in March 2025, to explain to residents why areas are being maintained in a certain way and the implementation of a full communications plan. A further Delegated Decision report will be brought forward for final approval by the relevant Portfolio Holder confirming the detail detailed arrangement for each site.
- 3.14 A communications plan will be developed with our Communication Team by the autumn and will involve a programme of press releases and social media posts setting out the intentions to reduce mowing at certain sites and the reasons for this, from early in 2025.
- 3.15 During the 2025 season we will review the success of the changes through continued discussions with AES and feedback from the local community. This will help inform whether amendments or changes are needed to certain areas and whether new sites can be included in following years.

4. How this report links to Corporate Priorities

4.1 Aim 4: Protect and improve the environment.

Objective: Meeting the challenges of climate change.

Objective: Provision of quality parks and open spaces.

Priority action: Implement the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plans in response to a declared climate emergency.

Priority action: Develop a Parks & Open Spaces Strategy.

Priority action: Develop and implement a Plan for Nature.

5. Alternative Options

- 5.1 To approval consideration of changes to mowing regimes at some Council owned sites. **RECOMMENDED.**

- 5.2 To not approve consideration of changes to mowing regimes at some Council owned sites. **NOT RECOMMENDED.**

6. Implications

6.1	<u>Community safety, including safeguarding and prevention of terrorism</u> None.
6.2	<u>Workforce</u> Consideration will be given to any impact on staff who currently deliver the grounds maintenance contract from AES within the review.
6.3	<u>Equality and Diversity/Equality Impact Assessment</u> None.
6.4	<u>Financial Considerations</u> All financial implications will be considered as part of the review. These could be both positive and negative and will be interrogated to fully understand and report back.
6.5	<u>Legal</u> None.
6.6	<u>Climate Change and Sustainability</u> The changes will directly impact the Councils climate change and sustainability agenda.
6.7	<u>Conservation and Enhancement of Biodiversity</u> The changes will directly impact the Councils conservation and biodiversity agenda.
6.8	<u>Consultation</u> The Council will seek local consultation with residents and site users through the review.
6.9	<u>Risk Assessment</u> New risk assessments will be developed for any areas which move to a changed cutting regime.

Mark Trillo
Executive Director (Governance & Regulatory Services)

Web Links and Background Papers

Green Spaces Strategy

https://www.staffsmoorlands.gov.uk/media/8679/Staffordshire-Moorlands-Plan-for-Nature---2023/pdf/Staffordshire_Moorlands_Plan_for_Nature_-_September_2023.pdf?m=1697009095627

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7. Detail

- 7.1 Traditionally, the Council has adopted a more formal manicured way of managing and maintaining its green spaces, keeping amenity grassed areas short, cut on a fortnightly basis between March and October, and areas of planting quite structured and heavily maintained.
- 7.2 This approach still has its place in some of the more formal historic sites, and where public perceptions are that certain sites should be maintained this way.
- 7.3 We know that biodiversity needs protecting more now than ever, and that by reducing mowing in certain areas, we can create important habitats for pollinators and support our local ecosystems.
- 7.4 This report outlines the considerations for a proposed change to the formal approach of park maintenance and identifies sites where a more long-term sustainable approach could be implemented with regard to mowing regimes.

8. Green Spaces Strategy and Staffordshire Moorlands Plan for Nature

- 8.1 The Green Spaces Strategy was formally adopted in 2024 and sets out the Council's vision for maintaining, developing and improving its green spaces over the next 10 years.
- 8.2 In 2019 the Council declared a climate change emergency and we realise that the environmental impacts of all planning and decision making relating to the delivery of the Green Spaces Strategy need to be carefully considered, so that green spaces contribute in the best way possible towards the Council's targets for zero carbon emissions.
- 8.3 Objective 1 of the Green Spaces Strategy outlines the Council's commitment to review maintenance regimes to ensure that our green spaces are maintained to a high standard, in an affordable and sustainable way, and make improvements to increase and enhance biodiversity.
- 8.4 The newly developed Staffordshire Moorlands Plan for Nature forms the basis of a Biodiversity Strategy, providing ecological expertise on the key opportunities and challenges facing biodiversity within the Staffordshire Moorlands. Priorities from the Plan for Nature will feed into the Green Spaces Strategy and relevant action plans within site specific Management Plans.
- 8.5 With these strategic documents now in place guiding our approach to protecting and enhancing biodiversity, it is an appropriate time for the Council

to consider its approach to reviewing and implementing changes to mowing regimes across some Council owned sites.

9. Benefits from Changes to Mowing Regimes

- 9.1 Pollinators like bees and butterflies are essential for our environment, but their populations are declining. By leaving grass to grow in appropriate places, we can provide important habitat for these insects, as well as birds and mammals. Longer grass improves conditions for bugs and insects, which in turn support the wildlife across the district.
- 9.2 Adoption of this type of management regime on certain sites ensures that our green spaces contribute towards improving biodiversity, ecological connectivity and resilience to climate change impacts.

10. No Mow May

- 10.1 No Mow May is a national campaign championed by the organisation Plantlife and has been very successful in raising awareness about the benefits to reduced mowing. It was borne out of encouraging individuals to avoid mowing their lawns during May, at a local community level.
- 10.2 Whilst the council has been part of this initiative over the last couple of years, there are wider considerations for large scale reduction in mowing across parks and open spaces for a single month, and considerations around how beneficial this approach actually is in a green space for one month only.
- 10.3 The Council has therefore decided to move away from this limited short-term initiative and would like to consider a more beneficial and long-term sustainable approach to changes to mowing regimes across the district at key sites.
- 10.4 This is also coupled with opportunities to further explore and develop other initiatives and changes to management to protect and enhance biodiversity.

11. Implications and Considerations

11.1 Biodiversity

Pollinators like bees and butterflies are essential for our environment, but their populations are declining. By leaving grass to grow, we can provide important habitat for these insects, as well as birds and mammals. Long grass improves conditions for bugs and insects, which in turn support the wildlife across the district.

- 11.2 Adoption of this type of management on certain sites ensure that our green spaces contribute towards improving biodiversity, ecological connectivity, and resilience to climate change impacts.

11.3 Maintenance and Management

Green spaces across the district are maintained by our partner and contractor Alliance Environmental Services (AES). Their current maintenance regimes,

and the machinery used to support this, are still very focussed on more formal management.

- 11.4 Changes to management, which include less frequent mowing, will require AES to assess the machinery required to deal with this approach. On a more infrequent mowing basis, cuts are usually just twice a year (spring and autumn) which means that on the final cut in the Autumn time, grasses will be long and other native species will exceed normal heights. Specific machinery will be required which can cut at length as well as needing the ability to collect arisings, which is critical to the management of long grass, meadows and verges.
- 11.5 Discussions with AES will be needed to assess requirements for these sites, changes to machinery and the financial implications of these changes. AES work across the Alliance area and the implications can be considered holistically across both Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak.

11.6 Community Expectations and Information

Changes to the management of our green spaces can be quite emotive within the communities we serve. Planned reduction in mowing can be seen by some as neglect, and the Council not delivering what may be required or expected. This can lead to complaints being made, however we will need to understand and appreciate the differences in opinion that changes to mowing frequencies can and will undoubtedly create.

- 11.8 Signage, interpretation and clear messaging will be critical to ensuring the success of the changes to management regimes at the sites identified across the district. We will utilise the Council's website, social media and on-site signage to communicate the changes to management.
- 11.9 The approach being proposed through this report is initially to reduce the mowing frequency on identified Council sites, to enable review and monitoring over the first year of changes (2025/26). It is important to make clear that the reduction in mowing is a different form of management to the intentional creation of seeded areas such as wildflower meadows.
- 11.10 The creation of wildflower areas forms part of the wider considerations for biodiversity enhancement and as such and would be the subject of more detailed biodiversity plans for individual sites, where the appropriateness of each site would need to be considered along with seeking advice and expertise from partners such as Staffordshire Wildlife Trust.

11.11 Community Involvement

As well as developing a communications plan for the wider community, we will where possible look to involve and work with local community groups who are keen to support such initiatives, utilising their expertise and local knowledge.

12. **Proposed Sites**

- 12.1 To ensure that the number of sites under review is manageable, it is proposed to seek approval to initially focus changes on sites that have been previously

agreed via the Green Spaces Strategy to have management plans written.

12.2 These initial sites include;

- **Biddulph:** Halls Road Recreation Ground and Biddulph Valley Park
- **Leek:** Brough Park and Birchall Recreation Ground
- **Cheadle:** Glebe Road, Brookhouse Way and Stanfield Crescent Playing Field

12.3 Other sites, especially smaller sites of incidental green space could be included in the changes where it is deemed appropriate, once the above changes have been implemented. Initial sites will be monitored throughout 2025/26 and the learning reviewed before other sites are progressed in a similar way.

13. Next Steps

13.1 It is anticipated that the next steps in this process will be to start discussions with AES around the proposed sites where we are looking to evolve mowing regimes. This will include identifying the specific areas on site to be left, producing site maps, agreeing possible mown strips to path edges and planning the process for the cut, collection and disposal of arisings in the Autumn. We will also start engagement with known community groups in these areas who are keen to support and be involved with this initiative.

13.2 Discussions with AES will commence this summer along with identifying key community groups with whom to engage and this will continue until autumn time. A more detailed plan will be then put in place for each site with a view to the proposed mowing changes commencing from April 2025. This will also include the installation of on-site signage, prior to the start in March. A further Delegated Decision report will be brought forward for final approval by the relevant Portfolio Holders.

13.3 A communications plan will be developed with our Communication Team by autumn this year, and will involve a programme of press releases and social media posts setting out the intentions to reduce mowing at certain sites and the reasons for this, from early in 2025. In March next year we will be in a position to launch the changes with further communication and utilising the Council's website for additional information.

13.4 During the 2025 season we will review the success of the changes through continued discussions with AES and feedback from the local community. This will help inform whether amendments or changes are needed to certain areas and whether new sites can be included in following years.