

**Agenda Item No:** 7  
**Report To:** Cabinet  
**Date of Meeting:** 28<sup>th</sup> October 2021



**Report Title:** The Creation of Meadows and enhanced Land Management Plans to support increased biodiversity, reduce impacts of climate change and connect people.

**Report Author & Job Title:** Tracey Butler, Head of Environment and Land Management, James Laidlaw, Aspire Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager

**Portfolio Holder** Cllr. Andrew Buchanan  
**Portfolio Holder for:** Environment and Land Management

**Summary:** The government set out its plan for improving the natural environment with its 25 Year Environment Plan in 2018. “By using our land more sustainably and creating new habitats for wildlife, including by planting more trees, we can arrest the decline in native species and improve our biodiversity.”

Increasing biodiversity within the Borough is reflected in the draft Corporate Plan, through objective GP1 “Green Pioneer” which sets out to increase biodiversity within our borough and encourage sustainable lifestyles.

As both an organisation and a borough we have committed to tackling climate change. This year particularly we have seen climate change in action, as weather patterns have become more unpredictable, leading to significant and prolonged wet and warm conditions and extraordinary vegetation growth. Going forwards, a changing habitat is altering the native trees we can plant and the species our environment will support. The creation of long term sustainable habitats that will support a wide range of diverse species, as well as encouraging public understanding, participation and support for these habitats must be a priority for us going forwards.

In response to government agenda, our own corporate plan and our commitment to tackling climate change, Ashford Borough Council is acting boldly and decisively to increase bio-diversity within green spaces owned by the Council. We are developing land management plans and subsequently opportunities to enhance biodiversity of sites by introducing a variety of habitats and varying maintenance regimes to grass areas accordingly, for the benefit of wildlife and people. We have an overarching aim of increasing biodiversity and the wellbeing of our residents by connecting them with nature, as well as continuing to maintain our open spaces in a way that promotes a sense of place and space.

**Key Decision:** YES

**Significantly Affected Wards:** all

**Recommendations:** **The Cabinet is recommended to:-**

- I. Agree to support the development of enhanced land management plans that further support increased biodiversity and connect people with the environment, to support health and well being.**
- II.**

**Policy Overview:** The council will shortly be adopting a new Corporate Plan to 2025 and also a Carbon Neutral Action Plan which both set out the council's plans for tackling climate change. This project will help with delivering the council's aspirations set out in this emerging policy framework.

**Financial Implications:** The capital cost of additional grass collection equipment to support the development of grass areas set aside for biodiversity is £40,000 be funded through the work Aspire undertakes locally for external partners on a cost recovery basis.

**Legal Implications:** none

**Equalities Impact Assessment:** See Attached OR Not Required because.....(delete as appropriate)

**Data Protection Impact Assessment:** Not required as the project does not involve any significant processing of personal data.

**Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement):** The project sits within the council's risk appetite. It will contribute to delivering the council's strategic aim to be a Green Pioneer as set out in the draft Corporate Plan to 2025. There are no significant compliance or financial risks associated with the project. It will contribute towards treating the council's strategic risk of not meeting our climate commitments.

**Sustainability Implications:** Positive for carbon reduction agenda and increased biodiversity

**Other Material Implications:** none

**Exempt from Publication:** **NO**

**Background  
Papers:**

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**Introduction and Background**

1. The government set out its plan for improving the natural environment with its 25 Year Environment Plan in 2018. “By using our land more sustainably and creating new habitats for wildlife, including by planting more trees, we can arrest the decline in native species and improve our biodiversity.”
2. The overall aim of the plan was to “become the first generation to leave that environment in a better state than we found it and pass on to the next generation, a natural environment protected and enhanced for the future.”
3. This 25 Year Environment Plan had several themes, three of which we will focus on in this paper (“using and managing land sustainably”, “recovering nature and enhancing the beauty of landscapes” and “connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing”).
4. Connecting people with the environment as a source of health and well being has never been more important than through the pandemic. Having the ability to be active in green spaces through lockdown brought people a renewed passion for local green spaces and a sense of ownership. This ownership has played out for Aspire in the overwhelming response we have had to our initiative to create volunteer tree wardens who are diligently learning and working alongside us in our custodianship of our beautiful borough, in the heart of the garden of England.
5. Increasing biodiversity within the Borough is reflected in the draft Corporate Plan, through objective GP1 “Green Pioneer” which sets out to increase biodiversity within borough and encourage sustainable lifestyles. This aim accords with the government aspirations of the 25 Year Environment Plan.
6. The themes from the 25 Year Environment Plan have been translated into the Kent Nature Partnership (KNP) Biodiversity Strategy 2020 – 2045. We are working as part of that partnership, to play our part in delivering a better natural environment for future generations. (See Appendix 1 for details of Partners in the KNP)
7. In the autumn this year we are expecting to see the publication of the Environment Bill. Currently in its third reading in the House of Lords, this Bill establishes a new Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), which will be responsible for oversight and enforcement of environmental law following the UK’s departure from the European Union.
8. This legislation will see the advent of the need for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) as part of the planning process. Additionally, for organisations and people that manage their own land, there will be an adjustment in emphasis from managing

land for Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOA) (which focus mostly on nature only) to Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) which focus on benefits for “recovering nature” but also on the other two translated themes of the 25 Year Environment Plan – “using and managing land sustainably” and “connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing”.

9. In an attempt to set a baseline for LNRS, we have been advised that the Kent Wildlife Trust have been commissioned to produce a “state of nature” report for Kent (it should be noted that reporting sources feeding this report do not represent all land owners or managers in Kent but those that lodge data with Kent Botanical Recording Group). It is likely to represent a “call to action” for further work in supporting nature across Kent.
10. This “state of nature” report should produce a local action plan and a Kent landscape management action tool, which should be available to support work across Kent.
11. Although the final details of the Environment Bill is still to be announced, it is anticipated that the strategic direction for LNRS will sit with KCC and be developed and reported on at the district level.
12. In anticipation of coming changes, 2020 / 2021 has seen staff in Aspire Landscape management undertake a series of training programmes aimed at providing an understanding of ecology and biodiversity. This has been to ensure our understanding, landscape management approaches and methods of work are in keeping with the promotion of the correct habitat creation in the correct places and enhanced connectivity for wildlife.
13. In addition we have worked (and continue to work) with KCC and KNP in understanding the need for changing / selective maintenance regimes to create new habitats overtime, aiming to introduce “indicator” species that can be used as a proxy for the natural biodiversity “pulse” of the area.
14. We are also considering the carbon footprint of our service. In doing so we are considering what vehicles and equipment we use and where we can change those to reduce the carbon impact of our work. We are also considering the land management regimes we operate and the sustainability of the practices we undertake.
15. The spring and summer of 2021 has been a challenging time for Aspire landscape management. The combination of wet and warm weather throughout the season has meant that the grass has grown all summer, rather than dying back and lying dormant. Additionally shrub and hedge growth has been substantial.
16. Shifts in weather patterns due to climate change need to be considered and future maintenance regimes and flexibility “built in” will be needed to allow resources to be deployed accordingly.
17. It would be fair to say that grass growth has elicited a very mixed response from residents. Whilst some have demanded that we stop / reduce grass cutting others have been very vocal in their expectations that grass is cut short and kept short and tidy.

18. We work with Kent partners on the Kent Environment Strategy and through the Kent Nature Partnership. As part of that we support KCCs "Plan Bee", which does see verges mainly in rural areas left longer to support pollinators and by extension the bee population. However, the majority of the urban grass under highway ownership continues to be currently cut regularly, usually to at least a metre back from the highway with the remainder left longer, for safety / line of sight reasons.

## **Proposal**

19. With the coming expectations of LNRS, we need to consider our carbon impact and the sustainability of our service. We need to be mindful of the potential for climate change to play a significant factor in the service's ability to meet the demands and expectations of our residents and the unpredictability of our weather patterns.
20. We are proposing to make some changes to selected areas of land we manage in support of increasing biodiversity and connectivity for nature and people. This will include introducing areas of uncut grass for meadow creation.
21. This will not be a "one size fits all" approach. Some areas will still see high horticulture for aesthetics / borough presentation and for areas that have a variety of functions. As part of a land management approach we will consider land use and determine sites suitability to have areas set aside as uncut for increased bio-diversity. Equally, we will consider the amenity value of land to our residents and will take account of usage ensuring that biodiversity improvements still support residents use of facilities and importantly educate and inform residents about maintenance / natural development opportunities. We are aiming to balance a combination of appreciated aesthetics, nature, and residential use and engagement. We believe the key component in successfully initiating these changes is assessing land use and its functionality.
22. This approach will be undertaken iteratively. Over time we will institute changes in selected areas and gauge the public's opinion whilst extolling the virtues of making changes for recovering nature and connecting people.
23. In addition, as we start to develop land management plans for areas, we would like to explore other opportunities for increasing bio-diversity over time, such as ongoing street and urban tree planting, the introduction of wild flower seed to uncut areas and the planting of hedgerows.
24. Without incurring additional expenditure in the development of these meadow areas, we have run a pilot project over the last 6 months. That pilot has run this season in Queen Mothers Park, with the support of our Portfolio Holder. Here we have developed an ecological management plan for the enhancement of bio-diversity, increasing the existing meadow areas. By altering cutting regimes of previous cut and managed grass areas to gauge public opinion on a new approach.



*Queen Mothers Park – Before Meadow Extension*



*Queen Mothers Park – After Meadow Extension*

25. We have received very positive responses from residents both verbally and via email, especially around the good mix of cutting regimes, supporting increased biodiversity whilst still allowing usage for people, with a large area of amenity space being maintained as “kick about area” and cut pathways throughout the meadow areas for dog walking.
26. Our proposal pilot and any future sites, includes the installation of signage and simple interpretation panels to be installed, allowing residents to understand why areas have been left uncut. As areas are identified and developed, signage will be strategically placed in key locations.



27. We will highlight the forward initiative on social media with positive posts throughout early 2022, asking residents to “look out” for these signs and areas, highlighting their importance.
28. The next stage of the development of Queen Mothers Park, will be the installation of 40 specimen broad leafed mature trees across 2 planting seasons. The funding for the project has been achieved through an Urban Tree Funding bid to the forestry commission and will make an exciting addition to the development of this park.
29. Creating new meadows and leaving areas uncut as part of this wider forward project will lead to an increased workload in the early autumn and the added need for “cut and collect” operations being required. Whilst we appreciate that this will marginally increase the costs of disposal, it is important to ensure

natural grass cutting arisings are removed rather than left to add back nutrients to the area, to ensure we can encourage wildflower species to flourish. Meadow production thrives on low nutrient quality.

30. Currently, our service does not collect the majority of arisings. Therefore, additional collection equipment will be required to support these changes in cutting regimes. However the capital cost associated with the purchase of this equipment (circa £40,000) will be funded through the work Aspire undertakes locally with external partners on a cost recovery basis. This will also allow us to explore other “cut and collect” commercial opportunities.
31. The impact and saving on resources throughout the period of the “non-cutting” is likely to be minimal as the surrounding areas of land will continue to be maintained. However, where the introduction of meadows leads to any tangible savings in deployable time, it is anticipated these resources will be diverted to support the maintenance of the remaining grass and/or potential enhancement of cuts in key areas such as communal areas in deprived locations to increase the usability and amenity value and local pride in these areas accordingly.

## **Equalities Impact Assessment**

32. N/A

## **Consultation Planned or Undertaken**

33. Feedback from the pilot within Queen Mothers Park suggests is that the changes have been positively welcomed and residents are pleased to see the balance and use of the open space; that wildlife and people have been considered and the mix of these elements has enhanced the entire park. This has had an overall positive impact on the appeal of the park.
34. The majority of comments received during the growing season of 2021, when due to weather grass was longer, suggested that people are accepting and supportive of relaxing grass cutting regimes in favour of enhancing biodiversity. However, this is recognised as something that needs to strike a balance with residents and needs considerable engagement and understanding to develop support. Through social media campaigns, supported by the Waste and Recycling Education Officer alongside expanding our newly formed team of volunteer Aspire Tree Wardens, we will explore new / expanded task groups who will champion bio-diversity alongside more community engagement in support of the proposed changes.

## **Other Options Considered**

35. This paper supports the draft Corporate Plan priority GP1 – Green Pioneer and the need to make changes to enhance biodiversity and engage with our residents to ensure they have an enhanced experience in our parks and open spaces. It demonstrates how small changes and investment in amenity

management regimes can have a positive impact on biodiversity and carbon reduction, with each square meter of meadow sequestering up to 300g of carbon per year (or 3t/Hectare/year). From work undertaken on the pilot project, we believe there is a ground swell of support that appreciates a change in management regimes for selected areas. We believe this approach supports our corporate plan agenda and wider government direction on future land management.

36. By continuing to manage all our land as we currently do would mean we would not be responding to this ground swell of public opinion and the need to enhance opportunities for further biodiversity. However changes to land management regimes will be made iteratively, in carefully chosen locations and with the full consultation of our Portfolio Holder.

## **Reasons for Supporting Option Recommended**

37. The initiative supports the draft corporate plan and the Environmental Bill in bringing forward opportunities to use and manage land sustainably, further recover nature and enhance the beauty of our landscapes and further connect people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing.
38. Aspire will introduce a measured and staged approach not “one size fits all or broad brush change to the way areas are maintained. As such they will gauge opinion and take forward changes iteratively and sensitively.
39. Further developing land management plans as a method of assessing land usage and developing simple operational maintenance plans around sites will allow Aspire to adopt a balanced approach to maintenance, enhancing biodiversity without detriment to the overall use of land.

## **Next Steps in Process**

40. With the support and guidance of our Portfolio Holder, Aspire will identify sites which are suitable for the development of areas to be set aside for biodiversity / changed land management regimes and set about altering future maintenance regimes for these areas accordingly. Interpretation signage will be installed and the initiative will be publicised through social media and reaction and feedback will be monitored. Direct engagement will be through community volunteer groups and parish councils. Management plans will be developed over time with additional sites being identified along with other biodiversity enhancement opportunities. Biodiversity management and enhancement will be an embedded part of the services Aspire deliver.

## **Conclusion**

40. This initiative supports the corporate plan and the Environment Bill. Ashford Borough Council is acting to increase bio-diversity within green spaces owned by the Council by looking to further develop and diversify land management

plans. Part of this process will be identifying opportunities to enhance biodiversity of sites by introducing a variety of habitats and varying maintenance regimes to grass for the benefit of wildlife. This will be with the overarching aim of increasing biodiversity and the wellbeing of our residents by connecting them with nature as well as continuing to maintain our open spaces in a way that promotes a sense of place and space.

## **Portfolio Holder's Views**

41. I very much support this initiative. It is a great opportunity to carefully select areas to alter land management plans, developing biodiversity and engaging and educating our residents about the change.
42. Never have our green spaces been more important to our residents and never have we had a greater opportunity to bring our residents on the journey with us as we improve and enhance our open spaces, to ensure we leave a lasting legacy for generations to come.

## **Contact and Email**

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## **Appendix 1- Partners in the Kent Nature Partnership**

- Ashford Borough Council
- Buglife
- Bumblebee Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- CPRE
- Ebbsfleet Development Corporation
- Forestry Commission
- Gravesham Borough Council

- Kent Bat Group
- Kent Botanical Recording Group
- Kent & Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority
- Kent Mammal Group
- Kent Reptile & Amphibian Group
- Lloyd Bore
- Maidstone Borough Council
- NFU
- South East Rivers Trust
- Swale Borough Council
- Thanet DC
- Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
- Woodland Trust
- Zoological Society of London
- Brett Aggregates
- Canterbury City Council
- Country Land and Business Association
- Kent County Council
- Kent Downs AONB Unit
- Kent Public Health
- Kent Wildlife Trust
- Medway Council
- Natural England
- Countryside Management Partnerships
- Dover District Council
- Environment Agency
- Folkestone and Hythe Borough Council
- Kent County Council
- Kent & Medway Biological Records Centre
- Kent Public Health
- Kent Wildlife Trust
- High Weald AONB Unit
- Medway Council
- Natural England
- RSPB
- Southern Water
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
- University of Kent