

---

**REPORT TO THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE 14 APRIL 2021****PORTFOLIO: ENVIRONMENT****REPORT FROM: ASSISTANT DIRECTOR PLACE & ENVIRONMENT****SUBJECT: 'PARKS FOR NATURE' INITIATIVE****1 DECISION BEING RECOMMENDED**

- 1.1 To approve the approach outlined in this report to adapt and improve parks and green spaces and contribute to the Council commitment to make Rochford District Council carbon neutral by 2030.

**2 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 This report outlines the proposed approach to be taken in the delivery of Open Spaces services in adapting parks and green spaces for the effects of climate change and contributes to corporate targets to make Rochford District Council carbon neutral by 2030 as set out in the Council's Carbon Neutral 2030 Action Plan ([Environment | Rochford District Council](#)).

**3 SALIENT INFORMATION**

- 3.1 On the 16 July 2019 the Review Committee resolved to form a Member Working Group to consider suitable actions that could be taken by the Council to reduce its carbon footprint. This culminated in the production of the Rochford District Council Carbon Neutral 2030 Action Plan, which was subsequently approved by Council on 14 July 2020.
- 3.2 The Carbon Neutral 2030 Action Plan identifies the need to intensify action and develop ambitious plans to plant more trees and create more resilient habitats that benefit pollinators and alleviate flood risks. This will be done in a way that improves the recreation value of those who visit and contribute to health, wellbeing and social cohesion.
- 3.3 A further meeting of the Member Working Group has been held to consider the proposed approach, set out in the appended 'Parks for Nature' paper. The recommendations of the Member Working Group to the Executive are reflected within this report.
- 3.4 Parks and green spaces play a role in mitigating climate change by directly helping to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, reduce the effects of extreme weather events, and build more resilient habitats to help sustain species and food production. This role can be summarised as follows:
- Trees and other vegetation remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store carbon.

- Trees in particular help cool down urban centres, provide shade and capture harmful particles.
- Suitable vegetation helps address flood risks by storing and slowing down water flow upstream.

Parks and green spaces provide a range of connected habitats to sustain species resilience and diversity.

3.5 The key issue to address is how parks and green spaces in Rochford District can fulfil this role in a better way. The 'Parks for Nature' initiative sets out how management in Open Spaces services can be altered in a way that adapts to climate change whilst continuing to fulfil the key role that parks play in recreation, social cohesion along with promoting health and well-being.

3.6 The Parks for Nature initiative identifies the following management options where open space could be altered:

- Tree and Woodlands – The planting of groups of trees, thickets, orchards, and creation of dead wood habitat piles.
- Relaxed Mowing – Reduction of grass cutting to allow semi-natural conditions to flourish and increase height of grass sward with some left for overwintering shelter for insects and bugs.
- Cemetery Maintenance – Creating a mosaic of grass heights around the historic parts of Rayleigh Cemetery and closed graveyards, to allow wildflowers to bloom.
- Ponds and Wetlands – The creation of ponds and areas of flooding.

### 3.7 Consultation and engagement

3.8 It is proposed to develop a 'plan on a page' approach. These will aim to capture key information and developments at a site level. Significantly it will capture and illustrate proposed management changes for each relevant park.

3.9 These plans will initially be developed in conjunction with the relevant Ward Members for each identified Council-managed Open Space, and the Portfolio Holder for Environment. Members will be invited to attend a site meeting with Officers to identify potential changes to the management of the open-space, and to develop the proposed draft 'plan on a page' for that particular site.

3.10 Upon approval by the Portfolio Holder for Environment, the draft plans will be circulated and promoted for consultation to seek further comments and views from members of the public. This will also provide an opportunity to promote information about the benefits that adapting parks and green spaces can bring, with the aim of enabling residents and visitors to gain an understanding and acceptance of the importance of proposed changes. This community

engagement phase will also allow people to comment and influence the development of site plans ahead of implementation.

- 3.11 A further report will be brought into the July meeting of Executive to formalise the proposed changes as set out in the site plans. The July report will also identify the resources and approach needed to deliver the 'Parks for Nature' initiative, recognising that the current Green Gateway Trading contract arrangement would need to be revisited to accommodate any changes.

#### **4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 An alternative would be to identify and develop the 'plan on a page' for each site, without any consultation. This would allow the proposed subsequent report to the Executive (as stated in 3.11) to be brought forward to an earlier meeting of the Executive. This would give earlier certainty to the resource required, and whether current grounds maintenance arrangements with Green Gateway Trading are to continue.
- 4.2 There is no statutory requirement to consult but the Council has the discretion to carry out an exercise to consult and ascertain any potential impacts on the proposal. There is no statutory procedure, but the Cabinet office states that "thought should be given to achieving real engagement rather than follow a bureaucratic process." The lack of consultation or engagement, on what could be deemed a significant change to a service, would in all likelihood draw heavy criticism from residents, and risk of legal challenge.

#### **5 RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 Any change to the parks and open-spaces that proposes to 'relax' the maintenance regime, may receive negative comments, with the changes being perceived as a cost-cutting exercise. This could potentially impact upon the Council's reputation. The outlined consultation will seek to reduce this risk through highlighting the positive environmental benefits of the scheme. Further proposed promotion and branding of the initiative will be presented in the report that is to be brought to the Executive in July.

#### **6 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 The 'Parks for Nature' initiative presents an opportunity to adapt parks and green spaces for the effects of climate change and contribute to corporate targets to make Rochford District Council by carbon neutral by 2030 as set out in the Council's Carbon Neutral Action Plan.

#### **7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 The proposed initiative will be delivered within existing budgets.

**8 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 There is no statutory process, and it is a matter for the Council to decide and ensure that the level of engagement is proportionate to the potential impact of the proposal. The Cabinet Office has given guidance that the Council should aim to achieve “real engagement rather than following bureaucratic processes” and sets out the consultation principles which would ensure that a fair consultation is achieved.
- 8.2 In some circumstances there will be no requirement to consult, and this will depend on the issues, the nature and impact of the decision and whether interested groups have already been engaged in the policy-making process. However, if the proposals could have a significant or serious impact on those affected then consultation should take place before a decision is taken.
- 8.3 The Council also has a general equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. To ensure compliance and pay ‘due regard’ to equality, an Equality Impact Assessment on decision that directly affect the communities that we service must be undertaken. This will inform and underpin good decision-making processes.

**9 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and found there to be no impacts (either positive or negative) on protected groups as defined under the Equality Act 2010.

I confirm that the above recommendation does not depart from Council policy and that appropriate consideration has been given to any budgetary and legal implications.

LT Lead Officer Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



**Assistant Director – Place & Environment**

---

**Background Papers:-**

None.

For further information please contact Marcus Hotten on:-

Phone: 01702 318117

Email: [Marcus.hotten@rochford.gov.uk](mailto:Marcus.hotten@rochford.gov.uk)

If you would like this report in large print, Braille or another language please contact 01702 318111.

**PARKS FOR NATURE**  
**Carbon Neutral Working Group**  
**Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

## **1. Introduction**

This report outlines the proposed approach to be taken in Open Spaces services in adapting parks and green spaces for the effects of climate change and contribute to corporate targets to make Rochford District Council carbon neutral by 2030.

## **2. Background Information**

In July 2020 the Council passed a motion to support the Carbon Neutral 2030 Action Plan. In doing this the Council made a commitment to make the Council carbon neutral by 2030.

Parks and green spaces have an important role to play in meeting this target. The Council's Open Spaces team manages around 310 hectares of land in the district of which 190 hectares is natural or semi-natural, including around 140 hectares of trees and woodland.

Parks and green spaces mitigate climate change by directly helping to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, reduce the effects of extreme weather events, and build more resilient habitats to help sustain wildlife.

This role can be summarised as follows:

- Trees and other vegetation remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store carbon
- Trees in particular help cool down urban centres, provide shade and capture harmful particles
- Suitable vegetation helps address flood risks by storing and slowing down water flow upstream
- They provide a range of connected habitats to sustain species resilience and diversity

## **3. Parks and Green Space Management – General Principles**

### Create more habitat

The options in this report are based on a simple principle – that biodiversity benefits by increasing the amount and types of available habitat.

- You can increase the amount of habitat by adding more vegetation to your park – add wildflowers, long grass areas, shrubs and trees..
- New types of habitat can really make a big difference for biodiversity. Something as simple as allowing grass to grow long creates new habitats such as long hollow stems and seed heads. Creating a pond will enable a whole host of new species to use your park.

### Allow natural processes to happen

Natural processes can create new habitats. Here are some examples:

- Dead wood – dead wood is valuable habitat for a range of invertebrates, fungi and plants. Think about keeping dead wood within your park if there are no other concerns such as health & safety. You could even move the dead wood to a quiet corner of the park, or chip it to create mulch.
- Succession – this means the slow, natural change of habitats. Grasslands left to their own devices will be seeded with shrubs and trees and eventually develop into woodlands. In you park it may be sensible to allow succession in some areas, for example if you have a waterlogged patch of grass you could let wetland plants take over and eventually willow and alder may grow there.
- Flooding – minor, temporary flooding creates waterlogged patches and allows wetland plants and animals to thrive.

### **Key Challenge**

The key issue to address is how parks and green spaces in Rochford District can fulfil this role in a better way. This report therefore sets out how action in the delivery of Open Spaces services can be intensified in a way that adapts to climate change whilst continuing to fulfil the key role that parks play in recreation, social cohesion along with promoting health and well-being.

This report identifies the following areas for intensified action which are each considered in turn:

- Tree and woodlands
- Parks and green space management
- Relaxed mowing
- Cemetery maintenance
- Parks and green space development
- Ponds and wetlands

## 4. Trees & Woodlands

The “Biodiversity in Urban Gardens” (BUGS) research project (<http://bugs.group.shef.ac.uk/favicon.ico>) studied urban gardens to work out which aspects of a garden made the biggest impact on biodiversity. It showed that the presence of trees made the biggest positive impact on both the number of species (biodiversity) and the number of individual organisms present (biomass) in a garden.

The positive effect of trees on biodiversity applies to parks as well as gardens, so it is really important to maintain a good range of tree species and ages in parks.

### Tree and woodland planting

Given these benefits, trees clearly have an important role to play in meeting climate change commitments and there is anticipation that nationally the tree canopy will need to increase. The scale of this increase will clearly involve private as well as council land but there is scope for appropriate tree planting in parks and green spaces as follows:

- Identifying land suitable for tree and woodland planting
- Shelter belts / fringe planting in parks
- Banked areas on verges & parks

It should be emphasised that any tree planting should be appropriate for the location with suitable species and growing conditions (including underground service checks) to prevent issues that could occur when trees mature.

There is scope to review some banked areas which are difficult to access with mowing machinery with a view to planting trees or relaxing the mowing.

### Single standard trees

Single trees can be of great value to biodiversity if allowed to mature and reach a good size. Tree species which flower and produce fruit are valuable to pollinators in summer and birds in winter.

#### Single tree options

- Leave grass uncut underneath single trees, to a radius of 50 metres or more
- Leave dead wood in place on trees unless it poses a safety risk



## **Deadwood habitats**

Standing and fallen deadwood are important habitats for a huge range of invertebrates and fungi. Deadwood includes fallen branches, felled trees, log piles, dead branches on living trees, and standing dead trees.

Similarly compost heaps provide additional resources of dead plant matter for fungi and invertebrates to feed on and inhabit, and of course the compost can be used in horticultural operations once it has broken down.



## Deadwood options

- Leave old tree and shrub stumps to decay naturally
- Create a woodpile from cuttings of various thicknesses, leave in contact with the ground, in light shade, and in a compact pile
- Plant or encourage climbers to ramble over the wood or log pile to help retain Moisture

## **Traditional orchards**

Traditional orchards are defined by their management – which must be in a low intensity manner, avoiding chemical inputs from pesticides and inorganic fertilizers. It is generally accepted that a group of 6 or more trees constitutes an orchard.

### Traditional orchard options

- Plant a new traditional orchard consisting of 6 or more fruit trees (usually apple or pear) and manage without chemicals. Manage like a regular park copse where ground vegetation is allowed to grow between and around trees.

## **5. Relaxed Mowing**

An obvious intervention is to reduce mowing intensity and allow grassed areas to revert to more semi-natural conditions. This reduces energy requirements of grass cutting with fewer cuts along with greater benefits to biodiversity.

Where relevant this approach can be supplemented by the creation of perennial meadows (allowing native wildflowers to flourish), but this approach does however involve higher costs of establishment and management compared to a relaxed mowing approach. Alternative habitats can be more appropriate such as woodland planting or establishing wetlands.

An example of relaxed mowing is at Sweyne Park where an alternative approach has been adopted whereby paths are maintained through areas of longer grass that are cut once a year.



### **Biodiversity grassland / meadow areas**

Biodiversity grassland / meadow areas are of high value to biodiversity due to their relaxed mowing regime which allows flowering plants to compete with grasses and allows all vegetation to grow higher and develop to maturity.

This provides a range of vegetation structures (e.g. rosettes, stems, leaves, flowers, seedheads) which can support high diversity and high overall numbers of invertebrates, in turn supporting greater numbers of predators such as birds and mammals.

#### Biodiversity grassland /meadow options

- Increase plant species diversity and user perceptions by planting vigorous bulbs and wildflowers along edges
- Cut in rotation so there is always long grass available, leaving an area uncut over the winter months
- Allow an area to develop into scrub (e.g. brambles, shrubs and tree seedlings) to increase habitat diversity

### Compost heap options

- Create a compost heap in an out of the way area of the park, feed with grass cuttings, strimmings from herbaceous perennials, old bedding plants, and cuttings from shrubs and trees (chipped if possible)

### **Shrub beds**

The value of shrub beds to biodiversity depends on the species and cultivar of shrubs used. Most shrubs are valuable to biodiversity due to the range of structures and habitat niches they provide (e.g. woody stems, foliage at varying height from the ground, flowers, seed heads/hips/berries).

With regard to pollinators - shrubs with many flowers and a long flowering period are good, especially if they flower early or late in the season when pollen and nectar sources are in short supply. On the other hand shrubs which flower briefly, or have highly modified flowers (e.g. double-headed roses) are of little value to pollinators.

### Shrub options

- Reduce intensive trimming of shrubs, allowing a variety of shrub heights to develop
- Replace cultivated or mulched soils around shrub bases with locally native woodland wildflowers and herbaceous groundcover
- Coppice shrubs periodically to regenerate the shrub and to provide light for herbaceous groundcover
- Use flowering and fruiting shrubs that provide food sources for birds and animals

## **6. Cemetery Maintenance**

Horticultural maintenance of cemeteries can present challenges particularly with traditional and historic memorials of a sufficient age that there are few, if any, visits from family members.





A national charity 'Caring for God's Acre' has developed an alternative management approach that is focused around conservation and habitat creation. Rather than attempt to sustain close mown grass around historic gravestones, a more creative approach is taken with mown margins and a mosaic of grassland of varying heights to help wildlife flourish. For example:

- Close mown – to encourage ground feeding birds and colourful fungi
- Medium – to help clover and other flowering ground cover plants
- Tall – less visited areas enabling wildflowers to flourish and support pollinating insects

There is scope to utilise this approach in an older area of Rayleigh Cemetery that has not received any burials within the living memory of relatives. It is important to emphasise that this is a changed management approach and should not be perceived as a failure to maintain or allow to grow wild.

## **7. Ponds and wetlands**

Some public parks and other green spaces have ponds or lakes within them. Predicted changes in rainfall patterns will mean that ponds may dry out partially or wholly in hot, dry weather and may flood more frequently in wetter periods. There will be an increased need for new ponds to contribute to sustainable local drainage. There will also be an increased need to capture and retain winter rainfall for use at other times of year and retention ponds may be an option for this. As climate change puts increasing pressure on biodiversity there will be a greater need for ponds and associated wetlands to contribute to biodiversity and local habitat networks.



### **Ponds and marshy areas**

A well-designed pond with fringing wetland is excellent for biodiversity in a park and its surrounding area.

### **Wet woodlands**

Wet woodlands can occur on poorly-drained or seasonally wet soils, often on flood plains, and tend to be dominated by alders, birches and willows.

Wet woodlands are excellent for biodiversity as they can support a range of species which depend on wet or seasonally wet conditions.

## **8. Engaging Communities: Planning for Change**

The Carbon-Neutral 2030 Action Plan has already sparked considerable interest from local ward members and community groups keen to make a difference in their local area. This shared commitment and enthusiasm will be vital in helping to lead change and gaining a shared understanding of the benefits that the proposals and illustrated examples can bring when turned into action.

A 'plan on a page' approach is proposed focused on the 45 parks & open spaces in the district aiming to capture key information and a side of A3 paper. proposed climate change actions within the context of the overall park. This approach will also be applied to other parks and green spaces where climate change actions are identified. This will include land for tree planting, local green spaces where different approaches are proposed or for example the introduction of a 'caring for God's acre' approach in cemeteries.

These plans will then be shared with ward members, parish councils and consulted upon to facilitate general comments from members of the public. This will also enable

more general information about the benefits that adapting parks and green spaces can bring with the aim of enabling residents and visitors to gain an understanding and acceptance of the importance of proposed changes. This community engagement phase will also allow people to comment and influence the development of site plans ahead of implementation.

This process for change will be developed over the spring 2021 and will enable an overall climate change improvement plan to be developed. It will also provide opportunity to map potential changes to illustrate and quantify benefits as well as review implications that might arise for example to machinery utilisation and skills.

## **9. Resources Implications**

This report considers the benefits of alternative approaches to parks and green space management and development. Whilst there will be resource implications, it is not anticipated that there will not be a significant impact arising from these proposals. In some cases funding provision may be necessary which will be dealt with on a project by project basis. Funding will be sought where relevant to implement specific improvement projects that deliver climate change benefits identified.

A further report will be presented to the Executive outlining the resource required and changes needed to deliver this approach.

## **10. Conclusions**

Parks and green spaces in Rochford already deliver considerable benefits and contribute to the effects of climate change as part of an integrated network of habitats. There is opportunity to intensify action by planting more trees and woodlands, develop alternative approaches to managing grassland and generally adopt a more environmentally sustainable approach to managing parks and green spaces whilst continuing to deliver the benefits to health, wellbeing, recreation and social cohesion. .

## **11. Recommendations**

- A report accompanying this document is presented to the Executive, to approve the approach outlined in this report to adapt and improve parks and green spaces, and contribute to the Council commitment to make RDC carbon neutral by 2030.