

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2014/ 2015

**ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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**REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR
COMMUNITY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

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Agenda Item.4

**ACTION TO SAFEGUARD
POLLINATING INSECTS IN RCT**

BRIEFING NOTE ON ACTION TO SAFEGUARD POLLINATING INSECTS IN RCT

In recent years attention has become focused on the decline in Britain of pollinating insects. From a biodiversity perspective the conservation of pollinating insects (which include bees, wasps, hoverflies, butterflies, moths, beetles etc) and their wildflower habitats is a worthy goal in itself. However, more recently concern for this issue has been further promoted in line with the 'ecosystem service' that insects provide as pollinators of fruit and crops. Fewer pollinating insects are being equated to reduced agricultural outputs.

In the last 50 years, land management changes in Britain have massively reduced the flower-rich grassland habitats which once support the populations of the insects which pollinated fruit trees and crops in nearby fields and orchards and gardens. There is a huge body of evidence to prove that many insect species have declined and as a result there are fears that agriculture will suffer. In response to these concerns Welsh Government has launched a Pollinator Action Plan aimed at encouraging land managers to do more to help pollinating insects. This paper is in response to queries and enquiries made to the Council's Parks and Countryside Section in relation to this initiative.

In RCT, through our on-going Local Biodiversity Action Plan, we have for number of years looked to manage certain sites as wildflower rich habitats. That works has shown that the potential exists to integrate a variety of biodiversity and visual amenity benefits into site management programmes. More recently, budgetary pressures have further focused attention on opportunities to deliver environmental benefits through revised programmes of Council grass cutting.

For several years a number of pilot projects have been run in the Llantrisant area, developed in partnership between the Parks, Countryside and Cemetery departments to test some of the issues involved: as a result we know that significant biodiversity gains can be realised if effective working arrangement can be developed. We believe that there is a sustainable and cost effective model that could be developed across RCT, but that model needs to reflect the particular circumstances of RCT and it needs to be based on practical, pragmatic and deliverable actions.

The first fundamental question to ask is, how do we encourage more wildflowers? Much of the attention afforded to the WG Pollinator Plan is based on sowing nursery produced wildflower seed. This is not a model which suits the particular circumstances in RCT. For a series of fortuitous reason RCT has a rich network of wildflower rich habitats and these include many of our grass verges, parks and cemeteries. If managed appropriately these areas quickly and naturally respond with fantastic and diverse wildflower floras.

So to realise positive pollinator action in RCT we can avoid the expense, carbon-foot print and ecological problems of sowing nursery produced wildflower seeds. For our area, pollinator action will be much better served by focussing on existing grass management and identifying areas where relaxed management can allow existing wildflowers to flower, and seed and to provide pollen and nectar sources for insects: in essence where can we change management to allow grass areas to become conservation hay meadows and not lawns?

So in our opinion positive pollinator action in RCT is primarily a land management issue. As with all land management there are a series of practical questions which need to be considered. These include:-

- Focussing attention on those verges and grassland areas which have that wildflower and pollinator potential.
- Finding areas where changes in grassland management do not conflict or cause irresolvable problems for vehicle and pedestrian sight line, health and safety issues, litter and other practicalities.
- Ensuring that local members and residents are appropriately informed of proposals and that feedback and response to queries and enquiries is quickly available.
- Recognising that if verge or grassland management is relaxed and areas are uncut for the summer, or perhaps (where circumstances allow) longer (leaving sites uncut for more than one year between cuts is more beneficial for insects/birds etc) these areas will need to be cut at some point and that cut material needs to be picked up. Wildflowers only thrive in nutrient poor soils and if the cut grass is left it fertilises the soil and create a mulch through which only rank grasses, hogweed and nettles benefits. So the picking up of the cut material is vital.
- Given that collection of cut material is key and it is the most expensive part of the process, how do we successfully do that? In simple terms the Council needs the correct machinery to cut and collect tall grass. The Parks and Countryside Section have two tractor driven machines which can remove material and through investigation of NRW grant we are exploring the potential purchase of an even more effective machine. In addition we also need to compost cut material somewhere on the Site. This can create further wildlife habitat, but it requires grass areas to be large enough to successfully accommodate a discrete composting area.
- On steeper banks cut material can be allowed to fall to the base of the slope and collection is less of a problem.
- Where it is possible to do conservation grazing then that arrangement is by far the most cost effective measure assuming that a) stock proof fencing is

intact or b) NRW (or other) grant aid is available to fence the sites. The Parks and Countryside section successfully manages a number of conservation grazing sites at minimal on-going cost.

- In some circumstances (e.g Cefn Parc Cemetery at Llantrisant) where the hay is clean, then the cost of cutting can be reduced by using a local farmer to take the cut and use the hay.
- In all cases it is important to maintain tidy edges to relaxed management areas, and in certain circumstances (especially cemeteries and parks etc) the use of appropriate interpretation notices.

If the above circumstances can be satisfied and the costs of revised management is significantly lower than the previous site management regime there would be potential to realise sustainable wildflower, biodiversity and pollinator action. In addition shifting to a more relaxed regime could spread management over a large part of the year (conservation hay cutting could take place in the autumn or winter) and could therefore reduce pressures in the main summer cutting season. We are still honing the management processes and learning from the pilot project sites and for 2015 it is proposed to continue to work on the pilot sites and, where opportunities arise, to expand that programme.

More refinement of the management prescription is important, as is the continued input of management and monitoring expertise of the Parks and Countryside Section. In the longer term the use of machinery better suited to hay cut management will be important and the capacity to use NRW and Welsh Government Biodiversity funding to achieve that is seen as a key action. If the model described above can succeed we believe there will be long term sustainable biodiversity and pollinator benefits which can be realised with budget savings and positive publicity.

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