



Corporate Management Committee

Thursday, 21 November 2024 at 7.30 pm

Council Chamber - Civic Centre

Supplementary Agenda

13. Recommendation from Community Services - Future Council Meadow Management Policy

The Community Services Committee is due to meet after the date of this agenda's publication. The Meadow Management Policy can be found [here](#), and the amended recommendations for this item can be found [here](#).

Any recommendations will be distributed as part of a supplementary agenda.

The Committee's approval was sought for the proposed future management of the Council's meadows which would form the basis of a Council wide Meadow Management Policy. This had arisen from a request from the Environment and Sustainability Committee and assigned to the Open Space and Community Development team to produce a policy to be implemented by the Green Spaces and Grounds Maintenance teams in Environmental Services.

Officers had focused on three key areas. These were: choosing which of the borough's existing meadows to enhance, consideration of their future maintenance and identifying potential opportunities to enhance designated meadow sites including how to involve the community and local residents in such projects.

The Committee was appraised of the general principles of Meadow Management, which were to encourage biodiversity and make a positive contribution to carbon sequestration. In addition, Councils were required to comply with the Environment Act 2021, to enhance and not just maintain green spaces.

The Committee agreed that the environmental, ecological and other benefits of properly managed meadows, made this policy a vital contribution to mitigating the effects of climate change as well as making huge improvements to the borough's green spaces. Members also noted the risks of continuing with the current regime.

Members were provided with a detailed summary of the condition of each of the 14 currently designated meadows and how it was proposed to manage them in future. Officers had prioritised the sites according to their current condition, size and potential for enhancement. It was proposed to return 6 sites to be managed as amenity grass. These were Barrsbrook Farm, Dudley

Close open space, Englefield Green open space, Pooley Green Recreation Ground and the closed churchyards at St John's Church in Egham and ChristChurch in Virginia Water. It was proposed to continue with the management of the following sites: Bourne Meadow, Chertsey Meads, Hare Hill, Homewood Park (also to extend so the meadow covered the whole site), Hythe Park, Marshall Place, Thorpe Green and Runnymede Meadows. Members agreed that as there was currently no contract in place (because it was awarded annually), it was an opportune moment to re-evaluate the Council's approach to meadow management.

Officers informed that Committee of the particular circumstances of each site and current management methods. For example, it was noted that at Chertsey Meads there was potential to significantly improve the biodiversity of the site by undertaking one annual hay cut in August to avoid ground nesting birds. However, the timing of the Chertsey Show would need to be balanced with the ecological needs of the grassland as well as other considerations, including fire safety. Bourne Meadow was also identified as a priority habitat which would benefit from two cutting operations per year to encourage wildlife and wildflowers.

The Committee was presented with four options for Meadow Management, as well as the potential funding opportunities to deliver the preferred way forward. A detailed specification for each site was appended to the report, setting out what would be required of a successful contractor. A full options appraisal and SWOT analysis had also been undertaken.

In respect of the annual hay cuts at the two largest sites; Chertsey Meads and Runnymede Meadows, it was acknowledged that the indicative cost of purchasing a Flail Collector, and a new, larger, tractor to undertake the proposed hay cutting regime was currently prohibitive. Additional staff would be needed and training for staff would also be required for full in-house provision. Members agreed that it would be too ambitious to bring all the grounds maintenance functions in house at this time and that a blended approach of bringing the cut and collect operation in house but contracting out the hay operation was the sensible route, pending a further assessment of the Council's financial position and available resources at a later date.

It was confirmed that, subject to the agreement of the Environment and Sustainability Committee, under whose remit the procurement of contractors to deliver the service fell; and once a new contract was underway for the hay cuts, initially for three years, with an option to extend for a further two years, a report would be submitted on the viability of transitioning to an in-house function. Officers were asked to discuss the options with colleagues in Procurement and Environmental Services the potential for a phased in-house transition subject to available resources and other practical considerations.

The Committee was presented with two options of what to do with the hay cut arisings from the identified sites. Officers advised that disposal as waste would result in increased revenue costs of approximately £145.57 (likely to rise in future years), with associated costs to transport to a waste transfer station with the need for an additional trailer. Therefore, it was recommended and agreed that arisings should be left on site in a discreet location to provide additional habitat and in mitigation for climate change apart from Chertsey Meads, where the Management Plan required the arisings to be removed. Officers were asked to enquire of the farmer tending to Chertsey Meads what they did with the resulting hay cut taken from the site. There was no obligation however to receive this information.

The Committee welcomed the new direction for Meadow Management and Officers were asked to provide Members of the Committee with some data regarding the estimated carbon sequestration benefits when the new meadow management policy was written.

Another strand of the Meadow Management Policy was how to involve the community and residents in projects to enhance the meadows and peoples' enjoyment of them. The potential contribution to the Council's Health and Wellbeing strategy was well recognised and the Committee was very supportive. Officers were asked to consider the inclusion of Green Social Prescribing projects within these opportunities.

Officers also outlined the funding opportunities associated with meadow management. Officers had discussed such matters with Natural England as currently Chertsey Meads was the only land subject to a stewardship agreement. The potential to also include Homewood Park, Thorpe Green, Hare Hill and Bourne Meadows in the new Countryside Stewardship or Sustainable Farming Initiative was discussed and approved, noting the significant funding that could be secured for a five year period if assessed as eligible by Natural England. It was important to note that any future meadow management policy would need to take into account the potential need for contribution funding from the Council in the event of funding ending, or the cost of meadow management exceeding funding received. Officers were asked to advise Members if implementation of the policy became subject to any budgetary concerns that might affect its delivery.

The Committee was pleased to recommend to Corporate Management Committee that a sum of £8,000 per annum from the Stewardship funding be devoted to Community Development projects to improve biodiversity. It was anticipated that if funding was forthcoming a healthy surplus in the region of £52,000 could be generated by entering the approved sites into the stewardship scheme. Members agreed that as soon as the applications were open to proceed with the bid, sometime in quarter 3 of 2024.

Resolved that –

- i) Members approve the proposed direction for a future corporate Meadow Management Policy as detailed in the report;**
- ii) Members approve an application for Stewardship/Sustainable Farming Incentive Funding for the eligible sites approved within this report; and**
- iii) On the proviso that the application in ii) above is successful, the Corporate Management Committee be requested to approve a supplementary estimate in the sum of £8,000 per annum for a period of three years (2024/25 – 2026/27), for the co-ordination of enhancements of meadow sites and community participation activities, to be managed by the Open Space and Community Development team in Community Services**

Recommendation iii) was subject to the approval of Corporate Management Committee.