

Report title	Future Council Meadow Management Policy
Report author	Chris Swatridge, Open Space & Community Development Manager Andi Roy, Biodiversity Officer
Department	Community Services
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:
To Resolve

Synopsis of report:

- **Following a question from Members in the January 2024 Environment and Sustainability Committee meeting, officers within Open Space Development were asked to consider options for a future Meadow Policy for the borough.**
- **This report outlines the considerations and proposed direction, for Members consideration, and which if supported, will form the basis of the subsequent policy to be written**

Recommendation(s):

- **Members approve:**
 - i) **the proposed direction for a future corporate Meadow Management Policy as detailed in the report;**
 - ii) **an application for Stewardship/Sustainable Farming Incentive Funding for the eligible sites approved within this report; and**
 - iii) **an allocation of a sum of £8,000 per annum for a period of three years (2024/25 – 2026/27), (through the funding anticipated in ii) above) 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.**

1. Context and background of report

1.1 In January 2024, a report on “No Mow May” was presented at the Environment and Sustainability Committee. Subsequently, Members enquired what the future direction of meadow management in the borough would be.

1.2 As a result, an action was passed to the Open Space and Community Development team in Community Services, to consider the future direction for meadow

management that potentially would form the Council's Meadow Management Policy.

- 1.3 Work in response to this request, has focussed on three key areas. Firstly, which of the existing designated meadow sites are felt the most viable and appropriate to seek to enhance through the Meadow Management Policy. Secondly, given the position of now having an in-house grounds maintenance service, how the basic maintenance relating to meadow sites would be undertaken in the future (considered in conjunction with colleagues in Environmental Services), and thirdly, identifying potential opportunities to enhance designated meadow sites and engage local residents and communities.
- 1.4 This report provides Members with a proposed direction for the management and development of meadow sites in Runnymede, which if approved, will form the basis of the Council's Meadow Policy.
- 1.5 Given the proposed management policy and its implementation is split between Community Services and Environmental Services, this report is also going to the Environment and Sustainability Committee for approval of the elements relating to the in-house Grounds Maintenance service and potential engagement of contractors.

2. Report

General Principles of Meadow Management

- 2.1 Wildflower meadows are one of the UK's most important habitats and over 97% have been lost since the 1930s. A meadow is a rich mix of native wildflowers and grasses, which were traditionally allowed to flower before a hay cut in the summer, followed by grazing from livestock.
- 2.2 Wildflower meadows are not only visually stunning, but also support a wide variety of wildlife, including small mammals, birds, and pollinating insects such as bees and butterflies. These species then support others above them in the food chain such as larger mammals and birds of prey. They also provide an aesthetically attractive display in mid-summer where the different colours of wildflowers bloom.
- 2.3 Managing a grassland as a meadow has many benefits including providing food sources for insects, shelter for invertebrates and ground nesting birds, carbon sequestration and flood alleviation through soil stabilisation.
- 2.4 Meadows need very careful management as the plants grow each spring and then die in the autumn. The vegetation needs grazing by animals or cutting, either by hand or machine and the arisings taken away. Removing the arisings ensures nutrient levels in the soil stay poor which inhibits grass growth as grasses can easily dominate meadows by outcompeting the flowers and thus, reducing the botanical species assemblage. Dead grass can also cause a layer of thatching above the soil if not removed which can also hinder wildflower growth.
- 2.5 Within Runnymede, there are two main ways in which our meadows are managed; traditional hay cutting, and the cut and collect method, using flail attachments to tractors. Both are currently carried out using contractors. This is due to the fact that this is a substantial piece of work which requires expensive specialist equipment, and which only takes place over a few weeks of the year.
- 2.6 Hay cuts are usually only practical if the site is large enough, there are only two meadows where this is currently practical: Chertsey Meads and Runnymede

Meadows though others could be added, such as Bourne Meadow, Thorpe Green or Homewood Park if the current meadows are expanded. Hay cutting requires several items of tractor-mounted equipment (mower, rake and baler) and several visits:

- i) cut the hay and leave it to dry on the ground,
- ii) turn it with a hay rake (to ensure it is completely dry)
- iii) rake into rows (can be done simultaneously as above) if weather hot and dry
- iv) bale the hay

2.7 Comparatively, only one site visit is required for a cut and collect operation and uses only one machine (flail collector) which is why hay cutting is only efficient for the larger sites.

2.8 Runnymede has several types of meadow habitat, including floodplain (adjacent to major rivers), acid grassland (soil pH is acidic) and wildflower (planted specifically for the floral assemblage). Most of these meadows are within dedicated open spaces, whether for conservation or recreation purposes.

3. Current Meadow Arrangements

3.1 Currently, all meadows (both cut and collect and hay cut operations) are maintained via an external contractor. This is contracted and co-ordinated by the operational Grounds Maintenance team in Environmental Services.

3.2 Contract arrangements for the above operations are made on an annual basis and as such there is no existing contract in place for these functions.

3.3 The budget for undertaking the above functions is contained within Environmental Services budget.

3.4 Currently procurement activity is taking place for the procurement of a contractor to complete the above works in 2024 only.

4. Current Meadow Sites

4.1 There are currently 14 designated meadow sites in the borough, of varying size and location type. The table below summarises the meadow sites:

Site Name	Size of Meadow (m ²)	Type of Cut	Ward
Barrsbrook	616	Cut and Collect	Chertsey Riverside
Bourne Meadow	30155	Cut and Collect	Chertsey Riverside/ Chertsey St Ann's
Chertsey Meads	661920	Hay cut	Chertsey Riverside
Dudley Close Open Space	511	Cut and Collect	Addlestone North
Hare Hill	5250	Cut and Collect	Ottershaw/ Woodham & Rowtown
Englefield Green Open Space	498	Cut and Collect	Englefield Green West
Homewood Park	23785	Cut and Collect	Ottershaw
Hythe Park	7282	Cut and Collect	Egham Hythe
Marshall Place	2378	Cut and Collect	New Haw
Pooley Green Recreation Ground	560	Cut and Collect	Egham Hythe
Runnymede Meadows	24220	Hay Cut	Egham Town
Thorpe Green	19692	Cut and Collect	Thorpe
St John's Church (closed churchyard)	1081	Cut and Collect	Egham Town
Christ Church (closed churchyard)	550	Cut and Collect	Virginia Water

- 4.2 A summary of existing site conditions can be found in Appendix A. The majority of sites are in poor ecological condition due to inappropriate maintenance and are largely dominated by undesirable ruderal weeds including nettles, thistles and docks. Chertsey Meads, Hare Hill, Homewood Park and Thorpe Green are in better condition and have greater restoration potential.
- 4.3 At present, the management of all meadows on RBC managed sites are contracted out and are not included in the current work programme of the in-house team. The contract is awarded annually as part of a tender process for cut and collect operations within Council Open Spaces. This is organised by the Green Spaces team with assistance from Procurement.
- 4.4 The larger hay operation had been carried out using a tenant farmer at Chertsey Meads. The tenant farmer retired in 2023 and so in 2023 and 2024 a contractor was used to complete this work. This operation is usually combined with the requirements for the Chertsey Show, but this has its inefficiencies as mentioned above.
- 4.5 According to the Idverde contract used prior to insourcing the Grounds Maintenance works in 2022, the cut and collect operation is specified to be completed at 12 sites in total (excluding Chertsey Meads): 10 Open Spaces and 2 Closed Churchyards. Please see Appendix B for maps. The Meadow cut areas are coded as MWO1 and shaded in yellow. The amenity grass cuts are shown in green for comparison.
- 4.6 The cut and collect contracted operation was not carried out in 2023 because the Green Spaces team were unable to procure a contractor with capacity at that time. With the fragility of meadow habitats, missing a cut usually has a significant impact on grassland condition. As referenced above, the vegetation grown during the spring and summer wilts and lays over, thus suppressing the wildflower growth the following

year. The nutrient build-up from the decay of these plants also favours grass growth in the following spring and the biodiversity of the meadow usually declines. Missing a meadow cut for more than one year can cause the local extinction of delicate species which will not return even when appropriate management is restored.

5. Risk Associated with Current Meadow Conditions

- 5.1 The current semi-natural grassland habitats within Runnymede Borough management that are meadows currently or have been previously and through lack of optimal management have deteriorated in quality. The potential number of meadows is greater still than those mentioned above, but management regimes will need to be established to manage them effectively. For example, the annual cut in 2023 was missed and there are a number of meadows where scrub encroachment is underway, or trees have been planted inappropriately.
- 5.2 If an annual cut is not carried out in the late summer/autumn after a growing season then it is usually good practice to try to carry one out before the commencement of the growing season in the following year, to prevent nutrient enrichment, and a thatch becoming established. However, this is very weather dependent and in the event of a wet winter and early spring, ground conditions do not allow for an early mow.
- 5.3 Once a meadow has been unmaintained for a period of a year or more, there are several options for restoration (see table below). Often the best method is to carry out a cut and collect and then harrow the soil to remove any thick vegetation. Harrowing is quite drastic if thatching is thick, but this may not be necessary for the meadows mentioned above, if a series of additional cuts can be scheduled for 2024.

Table of restoration options for grassland:

Option	Description	Positives	Negatives
Increased frequency of mowing	Following a missed year, the meadow will need to be cut before the growing season commences.	Creates bare ground for flower growth and removes nutrients	Weather dependent and often unachievable
Aftermath grazing	After a cut has been carried out, grazing animals are turned out on the grassland to remove the thick vegetation	Creates mosaic of habitats, often cheap too	Needs sites rural in nature with grazing infrastructure such as troughs, fences and corrals.
Power Harrow	Tractor-mounted powered device to turn over the soil for cultivation	Very efficient at breaking up vegetation and thatch	Quite drastic and can disturb seedbanks of undesirable plants (docks and thistles)
Chain Harrow	Device pulled behind a tractor to break up thatch and create smooth, flat soil	Cheap and easy to do, removes thatch effectively	Needs short grass and soft substrate to work correctly
Tine Harrow	Device pulled behind a tractor to break up thatch and large particles of soil to create fine soil (tilth)	Cheap and easy to do, removes thatch effectively	Needs short grass and soft substrate to work correctly

- 5.4 This is presented for information at this stage; a more detailed survey would need to be conducted on the meadows where the 2023 cut was missed to understand if

further maintenance is needed. This work is not included within any existing budgets at this stage.

6. Future Policy Direction

- 6.1 The table below sets out the future recommendations for the current meadows. Red (Stop) sites carry little strategic importance and so it is recommended that these are returned to management as amenity grass and sites listed as green (Continue) should be prioritised for meadow management. The main rationale for this is the site size, for example some sites such as Dudley Close are too small to carry much meaningful impact on biodiversity or climate change and so should be de-prioritised as such. The green sites are much larger and therefore carry much more strategic importance. The recommendation below for each site is also supported by the information contained within the Appendices.

Site Name	Meadow management recommendation (Stop = Red, Continue = Green)
Barrsbrook	Stop
Bourne Meadow	Continue
Chertsey Meads	Continue
Dudley Close Open Space	Stop
Hare Hill	Continue
Englefield Green Open Space	Stop
Homewood Park	Continue
Hythe Park	Continue
Marshall Place	Continue
Pooley Green Recreation Ground	Stop
Thorpe Green	Continue
St John's Church (closed churchyard)	Stop
Christ Church (closed churchyard)	Stop
Runnymede Meadows	Continue

- 6.2 The eight sites where it is recommended to continue will all require a cut and remove operation in the late summer or early autumn each year, as a minimum. The sites should be monitored subsequently to ascertain if a further cut or harrow is needed to enhance the meadow. Current cost estimates for a cut and remove operation for the above is estimated to be £24,500 (only costs available were £23,700 in November 2022).
- 6.3 This is based on approximate calculations from the costs used for 2022 and the total of m² of grassland being proposed. For information, Runnymede Meadows is currently not included in this sum due to an informal arrangement based on custom and practice with the National Trust. However, given this arrangement is informal and potentially will not continue, any forward plan should include the additional cost of its inclusion.
- 6.4 There are also other potential sites that have been identified, which could be included in future meadow management arrangements should this be the strategic direction of the Council and should finances allow. However, given the current situation, it is recommended that a focus on the existing and proposed future sites as set out in 4.1 would be most appropriate.
- 6.5 Where it is proposed to stop managing the sites as meadows as identified in the table above, consideration may be given to opportunities for community

organisations/groups to manage and maintain these smaller sites as part of community-led and funded initiatives. However, the priority in relation to this report is the adoption of the policy in 2025/26.

7. Funding Opportunities Associated with Meadow Management

7.1 In discussing opportunities with Natural England, it has been identified that the Council could apply for funding from the Countryside Stewardship scheme. This is funding paid to landowners who undertake environmentally beneficial approaches to the management of their land. These discussions have resulted in an indicative £33,800 that the Council could realise to support delivery of a Meadow Management Policy, based on the proposed sites within the table in 4.1 of this report.

7.2 Historically, Chertsey Meads is the only land that RBC has entered into a stewardship agreement. However, this funding ended in 2023 when the agreement was not renewed with Natural England. As a result, over previous years the Council has missed opportunities to generate additional revenue through the management of meadow sites and now receives no income since the lapse of the Chertsey Meads Stewardship.

7.3 The value of funding is dependent upon the botanical richness of a meadow at the start of an agreement. Approximately half of Chertsey Meads qualifies for the highest level of funding (£646/ha) because it contains high diversity of plant species. The remainder of Chertsey Meads could also qualify for this funding if we agreed a course of action with Natural England to enhance it over the stewardship period, otherwise it would only qualify for the lower amount of £151/ha for which poorer quality meadows are eligible. Similarly, Homewood Park, Hare Hill and Thorpe Green could qualify for the higher level of funding if we agreed and enacted enhancement plans with Natural England over the stewardship period, but would otherwise only qualify for the lower funding amount. Bourne Meadows is expected to only qualify for the lower amount (£151/ha) at present, but with appropriate management could potentially qualify for the higher level of funding in future as the botanical diversity improves. Hythe Park and Marshall Place are of an insufficient size to justify stewardship funding. Runnymede Meadows is not considered in this report due to the lack of clarity around management responsibility outlined in 6.3.

7.4 Officers have identified five sites that are considered appropriate for stewardship and these are detailed in the table below showing potential income for eligible meadow sites, based on their status as meadows, and as enhanced meadow sites in the future. The estimated income values are based on the sites being recognised by Natural England as being species-rich or having restoration potential.

Site	Area of meadow (ha) (1 ha = 10,000 m ²)	Estimated annual stewardship income for meadow management (£)
Chertsey Meads	62.3	40,264
Homewood Park (both halves)	9.9	6,160
Thorpe Green	2.1	1,333
Hare Hill	0.5	311
Bourne Meadows	2.4	358
Totals	77.2	48,426

7.5 Additional stewardship funding is available as a haymaking supplement in the value of £157 per hectare. To be eligible, meadows would need to be cut and arising

removed for a second time in autumn. Sites entered into this agreement, excluding Bourne Meadows due to unsuitability, could generate an additional estimated annual income of £11,667. The total estimated annual income from meadows being entered into stewardship agreements is therefore £60,093.

- 7.6 Entering into a Countryside Stewardship or Sustainable Farming Incentive agreement would secure funding for an initial five-year period, but it is implied that funding would continue beyond this initial period (subject to central government policy). Defra is currently trialling new funding options for environmentally beneficial land management which could result in the agreement transitioning to a different name, but funding levels are not expected to change. However, any future Meadow Management Policy would need to be considerate of the potential need for contribution funding by the Council. Such a requirement would be in the event of Natural England funding ending, or the cost of meadow management exceeding funding received.
- 7.7 Members are advised that the area at Homewood Park encompasses both meadows, only one of which is currently managed as a meadow. Open Space Development are seeking to engage with local park users to understand the views of changing the management of the other part of the meadow.

8. Delivery Options

- 8.1 Four methods of delivering meadow management requirements in the borough have been considered and are summarised below. For each delivery method, feedback from discussions with Environmental Services is also provided.

Option 1 - Do nothing and return all meadows (non-hay cut) to amenity grassland

- 8.2 Converting all existing meadow sites to amenity grassland is the likely cheapest and most simple solution to management of sites. This would see a change from meadow to amenity grass, with all sites managed in the same way and cut on a regular (approximately three-week basis). However, it is important to note that both Runnymede Meadows and Chertsey Meads would need to remain as hay cuts due to environmental and legal agreements relating to those sites.
- 8.3 Feedback from the operational ground maintenance team suggests that whilst converting meadow sites to amenity grassland would ensure continuity in operational management, it is uncertain whether additional three weekly cuts across the areas identified, would be able to be accommodated within existing resources, and therefore if deemed the direction to be taken, would require more detailed consideration of the operational impacts.
- 8.4 There are several risks to this approach in terms of climate change impact and loss to biodiversity. There is also the risk of loss of organisational reputation where the Council is seen to not be contributing to either nature conservation or climate change mitigation.
- 8.5 Given the corporate priority relating to climate change and the ambition of the Council to increase biodiversity within its parks and open spaces, this option, whilst included for reference, has been discounted by officers.

Option 2 - Bring all grassland management in-house

- 8.6 This option considers the potential for all functions relating to meadow management (both cut and collect and hay cutting), to be brought in-house, delivered by the Grounds Maintenance team in Environmental Services.
- 8.7 It is recognised that this delivery option would require significant capital investment by the Council, together with an increase being required in annual revenue budgets, relating to the delivery of the function.
- 8.8 Bringing all functions related to meadow management in-house would also increase the levels of operational risk to the Council, specifically because of undertaking the hay cutting and disposal functions. In particular, the comparable level of specialism for completing hay cuts compared to cut and collect grass cuts would mean an investment in training etc. This view is supported by the feedback from colleagues within Environmental Services who highlighted the need for significant resourcing and training to successfully deliver the requirements.
- 8.9 Given the financial and resource implications, required to deliver a fully in-house meadow management function, this option has been discounted.

Option 3 - Contract out all meadow cutting operations

- 8.10 Option 3 is the continuation of having all meadow cutting operations, both cut and collect, and hay cutting functions, contracted externally and managed by Open Space Development. This would need to be procured against the agreed meadow sites contained within 4.1 of the report or any variation of this proposed list.
- 8.11 Currently, the contracted operations have been legacy processes that have continued over the transition from externally contracted to the in-house service, for which there is an existing budget within Environmental Services budgets. However, whilst still being a revenue cost, this option represents limited impact to Environmental Services (as recognised by the Grounds Maintenance team) in terms of capacity, equipment and technical capability to deliver the operation, whilst also allowing for an immediate commencement to the implementation of future arrangements.
- 8.12 Given the limited impact this option presents to the existing Environmental Services team and given there is a current budget already in place for this function, this is considered a viable option for the Council.
- 8.13 In terms of risk or impacts associated with this option, two have been identified. Firstly, if longer term the Council should wish to increase its number of meadow sites, these would need to be added to the contract at additional cost, and without the potential for this to be offset by further stewardship funding income. Therefore, future sites may present financial growth.
- 8.14 Secondly, this option is felt to present only a limited mitigation of biodiversity loss, and climate change mitigation, through the functions that would be procured. Other work to enhance the sites to increase biodiversity, ensure appropriate maintenance of Meadows and increase the value of such sites, which in turn may result in a higher level of stewardship funding, will have to be completed in-house.

Option 4 - Bring cut and collect operation in-house but contract out hay operation

- 8.15 Option 4 proposes a blended approach, with cut and collect operations being brought in-house and hay operations contracted externally.
- 8.16 The rationale for bringing only some of the functions in-house is because hay operations require a greater number of suitably trained, operators, and specialist machinery that is not within the Council's current fleet. Therefore, to bring this function in-house would likely require significant capital funding and budget growth due to increased annual revenue costs. The cost of retaining this contract element is circa £8,500 currently.
- 8.17 The element under this option to be brought in-house is the cut and collect operations at all other meadow sites. However, even this will have a capital funding requirement, given that currently the Council does not have the correct equipment within its fleet to deliver this function.
- 8.18 The new equipment required to complete this activity is a Flail Collector. This is a tractor attachment that can cut and collect grass and other vegetation arisings and store it in a collecting bin rather than dropping it back onto the mown surface, a step which is necessary to encourage wildflower growth. The indicative cost for a Flail Collector is £20,000, whilst a small annual maintenance budget would be required. The exact cost of this equipment would be subject to the undertaking of procurement processes.
- 8.19 However, it is not possible to purchase this machinery without replacing the tractor currently within the fleet, due to it having insufficient horsepower to run medium to large attachments. Therefore, if proceeding with this delivery method, either a replacement tractor, or a second tractor, dependent on the operational implications relating to the need for the smaller tractor, would be required. This again creates a capital funding requirement of circa £45,000 for an additional/replacement tractor plus a small maintenance/operational budget provision. In the event the existing tractor could be directly replaced, this would provide an income through sale to offset the purchase and the same maintenance budget could then be applied.
- 8.20 In considering this option, initial feedback from colleagues in Environmental Services has suggested that whilst it is recognised there would be a need for a larger tractor, the existing smaller tractor would remain a requirement to access some of the smaller and wetter land sites across the borough. However, options have not been fully explored in relation to this.
- 8.21 The other area this option impacts are resources within the Grounds Maintenance team who would be delivering the function. It is recognised by all that an increase in resource may be required, However, the level is currently unknown, with Environmental Services (Grounds Maintenance) colleagues suggesting that if selecting option 4 at this stage, an additional two members of staff would be required.
- 8.22 One further element for consideration in the event of bringing functions in-house would be the requirement to dispose of or repurpose the arisings. Having considered this, two possible options for doing so include:
- a) Disposal as waste due to potential contamination of arisings with dog faeces etc. (creating an increased revenue cost for disposal per tonne (currently £145.47), and associated costs to transport to waste transfer station with the need for an additional trailer.
 - b) Arisings are left on site to decompose naturally in a secluded spot

- 8.23 In discussion with Environmental Services it was agreed that adopting option a) would add additional cost to this option because of the need to purchase additional equipment (trailer) and the ongoing costs associated with additional staff time, transportation and disposal of contaminated waste.
- 8.24 Therefore option b) is the recommended approach as that would also provide an additional habitat, reduced cost and climate change mitigation. Research of other Council areas has indicated that meadow grass arisings are composted in secluded spots on sites and there have been no significant risks associated with this approach, or reputational harm posed to the Council.

9. Recommendation Based on Above Delivery Options

- 9.1 From the above possible options, two options are considered the most viable way forward for the Council. These are option 3 (contract out all meadow cutting functions) and Option 4 (bring cut and collection function in-house and contract out hay cutting function).
- 9.2 There are arguments for and against both options. Option 3 is the cleanest and possibly most cost-effective approach in the short term (at least) to commence the new meadow management policy. However, the counter argument for this approach is that the Council has an in-house Grounds Maintenance service and that as far as is possible, our own offer should be used.
- 9.3 The counter argument outlined above therefore proposes option 4 as the preferred option, as this seeks to bring the function in-house into Grounds Maintenance. However, the initial capital outlay required for equipment to undertake the function, together with uncertainty as to the amount of human resource required, given the current situation of working to complete plans/schedules across all areas of ground maintenance activity. This, in turn will enable a determination of whether/how resources can be flexed in future to take on additional functions, means that selecting this approach immediately is not appropriate.
- 9.4 As a result, Officers recommend that the management of the identified meadows commences with the procurement of an external contractor for an initial period of three years plus optional two years, to undertake both the cut and collect and hay cutting functions on behalf of the council (option 3). This would, if approved, be co-ordinated by Open Space Development.
- 9.5 During this period, as the current Grounds Maintenance arrangements and delivery plans are established, consideration can be given to the cost and other related implications, of transitioning the function in-house (option 4). A further report will be presented on the viability of transitioning to an in-house function in sufficient time, to allow for transition to new arrangements or a decision to be made to extend or reprocure an external contract, if required.

10. Development of Meadow Sites and Other Maintenance Requirements

- 10.1 There are numerous opportunities for community development projects to be run in conjunction with meadow restorations. With a small annual budget, there is potential to harvest wildflower seeds from local sites such as Chertsey Meads using a brush harvester or handheld seed collector. The seeds could then be distributed on other sites except Chertsey Meads where management advice suggests seed introduction would not be best practice. This would be a cheaper and more ecologically sound option than purchasing seed from retailers. Bare ground could then be created at

existing sites using contractors with implements such as harrows or on small sites with volunteers using rakes.

- 10.2 Community events can then be run to disperse seeds onto the renovated meadows. Such events could focus on children making seed bombs or the community scattering seeds to create wildflower assemblages the following year. Further events could then include pollinator counts (e.g. butterflies) and wildflower monitoring using citizen science methods. There could also be site walks to educate residents on the benefits of meadows to include litter picks and invasive species monitoring.
- 10.3 Over the years of doing this, it would be hoped that the benefits of meadows would be realised by the residents of the borough which could lead to more areas being adopted by the community and a greater contribution towards conserving biodiversity would be achieved.
- 10.4 Any future tree planting schemes and projects should not include the meadow sites as detailed in this report. Given the intention to translate the decisions in this report to a single policy setting out the approach to meadows such parameters will also be included within this policy.

11. Financial Implications

- 11.1 The table below outlines the budget implications of contracting all meadow management functions externally for at least years 1 to 3 based on costs from the 2024/25 financial year.

Year 1 Cost		
Item	Annual Revenue Cost	Capital Cost
Chertsey Meads	£8,500*	£0
Runnymede Meadows (estimate based on area – not currently paid for)	£4,000*	£0
Cut and Collect Operation	£24,500*	£0
Expenditure Total	£37,000	£0
Current Budget Provision	-£37,000	
Net Cost	£0	

*Subject to full procurement process for 2025/26 onwards and therefore potential increase year on year

- 11.2 Whilst it is expected that the existing budget within Environmental Services would enable the works to be procured with nil growth, in the event that the cost exceeds the current budget, the new income of £60,093 from stewardship funding could be used to avoid revenue growth.
- 11.3 However continued use of external contractors is likely to increase year on year, whilst the Council's position of nil growth, combined with the potentially static levels of external funding, would mean that slowly this approach becomes unaffordable.
- 11.4 Given the current status of meadow sites detailed in this report, it is intended that a budget of £8,000 per annum from the stewardship funding is allocated to Community Development projects to improve biodiversity. When applied to the likely stewardship income of £60,093, and on the assumption that existing Environmental Services budget will be sufficient to procure a contractor without the need for additional contribution from the stewardship income, the annual financial surplus delivered by entering meadows into stewardship is identified in the table below:

Item	Cost
Meadow Enhancement Budget	£8,000*
Financial surplus	£52,093

- 11.5 Looking beyond the initial contract term, any financial implications linked to the further consideration of bringing functions in-house will be identified and reported as part of the review of the possible opportunity.

12. Policy framework implications

- 12.1 The Council's meadows provide many residents the opportunity to explore the larger green spaces within Runnymede and exercise often with their dogs. This has a positive implication for the health and wellbeing strategy which emphasises the importance of outdoor recreation.
- 12.2 The impact that the larger green spaces within Runnymede have on Climate Change is also positive. Grasslands have a positive impact of carbon sequestration, flood alleviation, biodiversity and reducing the urban heat island effect, particularly if they are managed as meadows.

13. Resource implications/Value for Money

- 13.1 Currently, a budget exists within Environmental Services to manage the current meadows. Should a concerted effort be applied to an application then there is a chance that some grant income could be gained to manage more meadows within the Borough.
- 13.2 Alternatively the grant income could be used to offset the cost of either an in house or contracted service.
- 13.3 Should any income be gained then this could lead to a saving within Environmental Services budgets. If the meadow operation can be brought in-house using the stewardship grant then the procurement costs for contractors could also be saved.

14. Legal implications

- 14.1 Whether the cut and collect part of the meadow management is outsourced or brought in-house, the process of either selecting a contractor or purchasing a new vehicle and or equipment, would be required to follow the relevant procurement process. In any event, the Hay Cutting process will need to follow the relevant procurement exercise to appoint a contractor. This will need to be started as soon as possible if we want to be able to procure a contractor in time for this season.
- 14.2 If provided in-house, the cut and collect work itself will also need to go through the usual Health & Safety checks on a regular basis, for the safety of the Council's crew.
- 14.3 Should the Council proceed with the application to receive stewardship funding then the land benefiting from this funding will need to be maintained and enhanced as per the management prescriptions as set out by Natural England.

15. Equality implications

- 15.1 There are no equality implications in relation to this report. However, in planning any community engagement events, consideration will be given to equalities implications.

16. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 16.1 There exists a requirement as part of the Environment Act (2021) for green spaces to be enhanced and not just maintained. Councils must have considered how to do this by the end of 2023 which Officers did. The onus on the Council is therefore to consider how better to manage its green spaces for the benefit of biodiversity.
- 16.2 Meadows support a wide variety of biodiversity and so managing grasslands as meadows improves the conservation value of the sites. The implication of moving towards managing more grasslands as meadows has positive environmental and biodiversity implications. This is realised in the support of nectaring insects and in-turn the species that depend on them. Meadows also provide habitats for small mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians.
- 16.3 Allowing meadows to grow annually also makes a positive contribution to carbon sequestration in that the plants respire as they grown. Furthermore, there can be carbon reductions achieved by not requiring petrol mowers to visit the site regularly to cut the grass. Work remains ongoing with colleagues in Planning Policy to quantify this carbon saving.

17. Risk Implications

- 17.1 The principal risk to the Council would be financial should the recommendation be to bring any operations in-house. The purchase of new equipment would bring added operation risk to the in-house team carrying out the management of the sites.
- 17.2 There are further risks to the Council with financial implications by relying on contractors for carrying out site management prescriptions, this could be mitigated somewhat by having lengthy contracts with built in options for flexibility to expand or contract the scope, but this might increase costs.
- 17.3 In not doing meadow management or failing to increase the number of sites managed as meadows could bring reputational risk to the Council in not maximising its contribution to both conserving biodiversity and mitigating climate change.

18. Timetable for Implementation

- 18.1 Based on the recommendation of officers being approved then the timetable for implementation would be as detailed below.
- Q3 2024: Stewardship application for RBC grassland submitted as soon as window is open
 - Q4 24/25: Procurement of three year meadow contract written and published with award in advance of Summer 2025
 - Late Summer 2025-2028: meadow works carried out as specified by contractor
 - Autumn 2025: Community events start – no. meadows dependent on resources available
 - Q1 2027: Completion of review to determine viability of in-house delivery
 - Q3 2027: Decision to proceed with implementation on in-house model from Summer 2029 or re-procurement of contractor
 - Summer 2029: New in-house operation commenced or new contract commencement

19. Conclusions

- 19.1 The request to consider a future meadow management policy for the borough, has effectively focussed initially on the core maintenance/management function that is required. This report considers several options and recommends an initial direction, via an external contractor which, in turn provides the time and opportunity to consider future in-house management options.
- 19.2 Whilst the Council currently has existing meadow sites across the borough, this report presents the opportunity to reset the requirements around meadow management and maintenance, to restore them to a good standard and encourage/develop the environmental benefits that can be realised within meadows. In doing so, the link between Open Space Development and Community Development can be realised by undertaking projects and engaging communities in the future meadow sites.

20. Background Papers

None stated.

21. Appendices

- Appendix A – Summary of existing site conditions
- Appendix B – Maps of existing meadow sites
- Appendix C – Meadow management stewardship income
- Appendix D – Options Appraisals and SWOT analysis