

Sustainable Planting Policy - (Corporate Head of Environmental Services – Helen Clarke)

Synopsis of report:

This report asks Members to approve a sustainable planting policy which will align with the Climate Changes Strategy approved by Full Council on 20 October 2022

Recommendation:

Approve a sustainable planting policy which will improve the green scene and street scene environments for residents and visitors in Runnymede Borough Council.

1. Context of report

- 1.2 In February 2022 Runnymede Borough Council's Corporate Management Committee approved an in-house grounds maintenance model from April 2023. Idverde later agreed to end their contract on 15 November 2022. A restructure of the open spaces team including manned parks commenced in July 2022. This restructure is ongoing and will conclude by the end of November 2022. One proposal likely to be adopted is the move from operating manned parks to running mobile ground maintenance teams from the Depot in Chertsey.
- 1.3 In November 2021 the former Head of Open Spaces left the service. In May 2022 the former Assistant Head of Open Spaces also left the service and from that point onwards new interim Managers with previous open spaces experience in several London and Surrey local authorities have managed the open spaces and manned parks services.
- 1.4 The change in management has offered the opportunity to review the whole service concurrently with the restructuring programme.

2 Report

- 2.1 One area under review is formal planting. At present Runnymede does not have an overarching planting policy.
- 2.2 Within the manned parks as a rule the individual allocated to a park manages all maintenance work including preparation of sports pitches. Our contractor Idverde was responsible for grass cutting across unmanned parks and open spaces together with street scene planting.
- 2.3 The Idverde contract ended early by agreement on the 15 November 2021 giving the new Green Spaces team a window over winter to build a new team of gardeners.

- 2.4 The policy and principles will be applicable across all green spaces including existing manned parks, all unmanned green spaces, and all street scene planters. The principles will guide resources whilst facilitating change and adaptation. For example, the policy will not preclude any formal bedding as this too has a place. Rather we would seek to zone green spaces. For example, we could incorporate zones suitable for small formal displays, perennial planting, naturalized planting, grassed areas or wildflower meadows.
- 2.5 The policy incorporates the following principles which align with the Council's Climate Change Strategy.
- Planting to be planned to encourage biodiversity and support for native wildlife by providing shelter and a food source.
 - Maximise use of native species with near native species being used to lengthen the flowering season
 - Where appropriate move from formal annual bedding to planting perennials.
 - Perennial species will be selected to offer a long season of floral display maximising food availability for wildlife.
 - Minimise use of plastic and recycle where plastic cannot be avoided
 - Minimise use of peat in compost and mulch.
 - Review and trial alternative weed control to replace traditional herbicides where practicable
 - Removal of invasive species with the minimisation of traditional chemical control and use of alternative weed control where practicable.
 - Increase drought-resistant planting.
 - Where appropriate revert large or remote areas of diminished formal bedding back to grass.
 - Consider naturalised areas of planting where appropriate
 - Consider wildflower meadows where appropriate
 - Where possible plant hedging to protect play areas and parks from road pollution.
 - Encourage and support local community engagement including residents' groups and local businesses who wish to participate within their local communities. All community planting will by agreement follow the approved sustainable planting policy guidelines.
- 2.6 The new policy incorporates planting principles that will help guide the Council to meet challenges posed by our changing weather systems, offer support to native species, and encourage biodiversity.
- 2.7 Bringing the service in-house offers greater flexibility including the opportunity to pilot new ways of working, review and amend arrangements in response to results.
- 2.8 Community engagement and participation from residents' groups and local businesses will be encouraged and supported within the approved principles.

Existing Position

- 2.9 The manned parks have been audited to see what bedding and displays are in situ, what condition they are in, whether any floral displays are best located to provide a positive experience to residents and visitors visiting the park and whether the planting has been designed to consider our climate change strategy or encourage biodiversity.

- 2.10 A similar sample audit of street scene planters within a selection of high streets was also undertaken and the results show a similar pattern across the piece.
- 2.11 High street planters have not been well maintained Many are overrun with weeds and not visually attractive.
- 2.12 Within manned parks large areas of garden are allocated to formal bedding with many areas now having diminished and unkempt appearance due to lack of maintenance resource. Traditional summer bedding displays are used in areas of parks that have been maintained.

Reasons for change

- 2.13 The current model presently requires the annual purchase of summer and winter bedding plants in plastic pots which may include peat compost. A programme of watering follows throughout the season and finally digging up of these plants to be composted. Large areas of former bedding displays are no longer managed due to resource restrictions.
- 2.14 Although there is scope for formal bedding schemes offering the right choice of perennials as an alternative facilitates year-round interest and reduces the need for watering and annual replacement.
- 2.15 Traditional formal bedding is very labour intensive to maintain. Neither the existing manned parks/Contractor model nor the proposed in-house grounds maintenance model offer the resources required to deliver the large, planted areas of formal bedding as laid out across the borough.
- 2.16 Production of formal annual bedding plants requires significantly higher energy use than production of perennials. Greenhouses are heated, plants are grown in single use pots and chemical fertilisers and fungicides used to maximize growth. Many annual bedding plants are sterile and offer little food value or shelter for insects, butterflies or bees. The energy hungry process is repeated annually and does not align with our climate change strategy.
- 2.17 In some parks the floral displays are focused on locations close to the sports clubs. In one park the only summer bedding on display was only visible to users of the sports facilities. We will review where we focus planting to try and provide interest and colour to residents who both frequent our parks and who visit our high streets.
- 2.18 Runnymede will continually review its planting policy and implement initial trialling where appropriate with the aim of replacing annual bedding with perennial flowering displays/wildflower meadows. The new sustainable planting will be made up of purely native or a mix of native and non-native beneficial species, depending on the site's location. These species are more drought-tolerant and require no or very little watering during establishment.

Training and recruitment

- 2.19 A small number of gardeners and supervisors have recently been TUPE transferred into the new Green Spaces team to join the staff formerly based in the manned parks. Once the restructure of Open Spaces and manned parks has concluded the service will commence a recruitment drive to recruit to fill vacant positions within the service.

This will include the new Green Spaces Manager and Assistant Green Spaces Manager.

- 2.20 The service will be looking to fill gardener vacancies over the winter and compiling a matrix of training needs across the wider team covering topics such as ground clearance and preparation, planting methods, composting, pruning etc.
- 2.21 Depending upon the success of the recruitment rounds apprenticeships will be available for people who do not have the relevant training and experience.

Recycling

- 2.22 All green waste, generated by the new service including pruning and dead heading will be recycled via Direct Services garden waste collection service.

3 Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The sustainable planting policy is aligned to the Council's Climate Change Strategy as approved at Full Council on the 20th October 2022.
 - Reduce Carbon emissions from Council operations to Net Zero by 2030.
 - Positively influence our environment by embedding climate change avoidance and mitigation, sustainability and promotion of biodiversity and conservation in all Council decisions and actions.
 - Positively engage with residents, businesses, community groups, national and local government, and universities to share information and encourage positive behavioural change to adapt to or mitigate climate change

4. Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 The new planting policy will be funded from existing budgets. Perennial plants are more expensive at the outset but given their longer life, cost neutral in the longer term. Replanting of existing beds and planters will be scheduled over a period of years. Maintenance costs will be incorporated into existing budgets.
- 4.2 The cost of training new staff and apprenticeships will be incorporated into existing budgets.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 None.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 None.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 Climate change and the move to net zero is incorporated into the new strategy.

8. Timetable for Implementation

- 8.1. The new sustainable planting policy and principles to be adopted as soon as they are approved.

- 9. **Conclusions**

- 9.1 To recommend approval of the new sustainable planting policy which encompasses a set of planting principles aligned to the Council's climate change strategy.

(To resolve)

Background papers

Climate Change Strategy approved Full Council 20th October 2022