

Title: Review of Warwick District Council's No Mow May Trial
 Lead Officer: Zoë Court, Neighbourhood Services Manager 01926
 456314
 Portfolio Holder: Councillor W Roberts
 Wards of the District directly affected: All

Approvals required	Date	Name
Portfolio Holder	13 September 2023	Councillor W Roberts
Finance	13 September 2023	Andrew Rollins
Legal Services		
Chief Executive	13 September 2023	Chris Elliott
Director of Climate Change		Dave Barber
Head of Service(s)	13 September 2023	Steve Partner
Section 151 Officer	13 September 2023	Andrew Rollins
Monitoring Officer	13 September 2023	Graham Leach
Leadership Co-ordination Group		
Final decision by this Committee or rec to another Cttee / Council?	Yes	
Contrary to Policy / Budget framework?	No	
Does this report contain exempt info/Confidential? If so, which paragraph(s)?	No	
Does this report relate to a key decision (referred to in the Cabinet Forward Plan)?	No	
Accessibility Checked?	Yes	

Summary

To report on the conclusions of a working group set up to review No Mow May 2023.

Recommendation

That Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the review of No Mow May and notes the changes for 2024.

1 Reasons for the Recommendation

- 1.1 The scheme was generally well received by public, with over 60% **of residents** who completed the survey were in support of No Mow May (NMM) but it is recognised that there are lessons to be learned from the first year of operation.
- 1.2 The review concluded that the Council scales back the areas to be included in 2024 to reduce the 'catch up', to plan timing and resources based on lessons learned and for communications to raise awareness ahead of May, including the benefits.

2 Background and benefits

- 2.1 For 2023, the Council was one of a significant number of local authorities that took part in the first wide scale introduction of 'No Mow May' which is a campaign organised by Plant life, a registered charity.
- 2.2 The charity's aim is to "make lasting positive change for wildflowers, plants, and fungi. The stated goal is to help mitigate the impact of climate change while rebuilding biodiversity within our ecosystems. They regularly join forces with others to ensure their money, influence and impact can go further.
- 2.3 By working together, they aim to protect the vital habitats which so many plants and animals call home".
- 2.4 By suspending grass cutting throughout May almost 2 million m2 of grass and wild plants in Warwick District were allowed to grow and flourish, the equivalent size of approx. 266 football pitches.
- 2.5 Over 700 species of wildflowers grow on road verges in the UK, nearly 45% of our total flora. Just 8 dandelion flowers can produce enough nectar sugar to meet an adult bumble bee's baseline energy need.
- 2.6 Additional benefits of longer grass are assessed as being:
 - Helps alleviate flooding – longer, thicker grass slows the flow of water and helps to store water during heavy downpours.
 - Longer, thicker grass also helps to protect against soil erosion caused by intense rainfall, wind, heavy footfall, etc.
 - Grass and other plants help to cool temperatures during periods of hot weather through the process of evapotranspiration.

- Grass and other plants capture carbon emissions from the atmosphere and lock up carbon in the soil.
- Increased absorption of pollution and help improve air quality.
- Helps the recovery of the grass sward following the harsh heatwaves and drought experienced last year by allowing the grass to reseed itself and make the sward thicker.

2.7 Officers had established a small project team to look at taking part in No Mow May 2023, including officers from : Neighbourhood Services, Green Spaces, Climate Change and idverde to review how the Grounds Maintenance/Street Cleansing contracts could add value to the Councils commitment to address Climate Change.

2.8 In March 2023 the team sought approval for the Council to take part in the national No Mow May campaign as its first piece of work. This request as supported by all Group Leaders, after consultation by the Chief Executive.

2.9 **Operational Plan for 2023**

2.9.1 Once approval was granted the team met to decide which areas of grass to leave unmown during May, and which areas needed to continue to be maintained.

2.9.2 It was agreed to suspend grass cutting in **all** areas from Monday 1 May 2023 apart from: cemeteries, sports pitches, children's play areas and our major 'premier' parks (Jephson Gardens, Pump Rooms, St Nicholas Park, and Abbey Fields) and grass paths. Grass cutting resumed on Monday 5 June 2023, in line with mowing schedules.

2.9.3 As the highway verges were included in the suspended mowing, Warwickshire County Council (WCC) were contacted and advised to notify the team of any highway concerns reported where long grass may be a risk to the visibility of motorists. WCC were supportive of the trial.

2.9.4 The Business Support team were briefed how to handle any enquiries from residents as to which areas were included and excluded and when mowing in these areas would recommence. Any highway safety concerns were logged and passed over to idverde to be dealt with as a priority, this process worked well.

2.9.5 Prior to commencement, it was anticipated it would take approximately 4 weeks to catch up on mowing i.e. by the end of June. However, a combination of climate factors that were more conducive to rapid growing of grass and plants meant that the height of grass was significantly greater than normal as the month progressed.

2.9.6 Towards the end of the trial, the Council's Grounds Maintenance Contractor, idverde raised concerns that as the grass had grown longer than anticipated, the electric mowers may struggle to cope and that they may need to consider hiring some diesel flail machinery, which is built to cope with dense long grass.

2.9.7 When idverde mowing crews resumed mowing in the areas included in the trial it was evident that flail machinery was needed as the electric machinery could not cope and there were several breakdowns. This included battery overheating

causing a small fire in a Leamington Spa chapel where they are stored/charged overnight. The Council gave authorisation to idverde to hire additional machinery at a one-off cost of £27,473.

2.9.8 Idverde and the WDC Officers met weekly to review progress and agree any operational changes which included prioritising housing sites, as these are effectively tenants’ communal gardens. Authorisation was also given for mowing teams to work overtime to help catch up on the backlog. The cost to the Council for this was £6,763 but it had a positive impact on the overall time it took to complete the mowing, which was completed in 4 weeks, rather than the anticipated 7.

2.9.9 The project team had a meeting with WCC Highways officers to review how the trial had gone from the WCC perspective and they continued to be supportive of the initiative and advised that May 2023 did see a higher grass growth than normal (Appendix 2) which confirmed the concerns raised by idverde. Examples of what other local authorities do in relation to improving biodiversity on highway verges were exchanged and the WDC Climate Change Adaptation Officer carried out benchmarking of other local council involvement in No Mow May which will be reviewed as part of improvements to this initiative. (Appendix 3 and 4).

2.10 Communication with residents

2.10.1 The project team worked closely with the Media team on a communications plan which included a press release, dedicated webpage with a comprehensive list of FAQs, social media campaign and posters using the established Plant life graphics and hashtag #nomowmay.

2.10.2 In addition, a short ‘online’ survey was set up to gather the views of residents on the Councils participation in the trial. This was open for 2 weeks from 1 June – 18 June and received 4292 responses. (Appendix 1).

2.11 Feedback and operational implications of initiative

2.11.1 Feedback was received via social media and service requests regarding grass cutting received by Business Support which increased by over 400% from 72 during May-July 2022 (inclusive) to 312 in the same period for 2023, although there were no formal complaints lodged.

2.11.2 The main concerns raised by customers and idverde to officers and Councillors are shown in the summary table below, along with mitigation measures for 2024 onwards.

2.11.3

Concern	Proposed mitigation for 2024
Poor visibility/risk for motorists	More communications, a dedicated webform to report potentially dangerous junctions and where the width of the roadside grass verge allows, a 1 metre strip be mowed

Unmown areas looked unkempt/scruffy	More communications on the reason for, and benefits of No Mow May
It was a cost cutting exercise	More communications and a visible plan on how resources saved in No Mow May will be redeployed
Risk to pets (grass seeds in dogs' paws, ticks in long grass, hard to walk dogs and clear up dog mess and cats not being visible to motorists)	More communications and alterations to areas included in mowing suspension to include a 1m mowed strip
Perceived increase in hay fever symptoms	Better understanding of the impacts of No Mow May to hay fever sufferers and communications on how to manage symptoms.
Loss of use of the gardens at communal housing areas	Exclude WDC owned housing sites from future mowing suspension
Uneven ground underneath becomes hidden in communal gardens	Exclude WDC owned housing sites from future mowing suspension
Sharper grasses and spikey weeds harming children playing in gardens	Exclude WDC owned housing sites from future mowing suspension
Reduced footway access in some close-knit grass areas and narrow paths	Alteration to areas included in mowing suspension to include a one metre mowed strip
Potential increase of fire risk as the longer grass during dry weather	More communications, in line with the existing Love your Park campaign which warns of fire risks and how to mitigate. Continued ban of BBQs and campfires in parks and open spaces across the district.
Grass cuttings left behind looked scruffy and risk of blocking drains/flooding during wet weather	More communications, operational changes where there is a history of flooding to potentially include a street sweeper following the mowing crew (as done in Cubbington). Although this will come at an additional contract cost.
Mowing teams reported high levels of litter and dog mess in the long grass	Alteration to areas included in mowing suspension, where the width of the grass verge allows, mow a 1m strip.

Verbal abuse by public towards the mowing teams	A press release was issued as soon as WDC became aware of this behaviour to advise we operate zero tolerance and this will not be tolerated, teams had Councils support to leave site if abuse continued. This seems to have helped as further reports were very low in number.
Mowing teams were demoralised and physically affected due to the length, working hours and machinery used	Reduce areas included and ensure correct machinery available at the start of 'catch up' period, building on experience from 2023.

2.12 Project Team Review Outcome

2.12.1 The outcomes of the review by the Project Team are as set out below.

- All WDC owned Housing sites are excluded from NMM.
- 1m strip cut at edge of all parks/open spaces which will hopefully help with litter/dog mess.
- 1m strip cut on amenity grass next to paths to help dogs/children walking on grass next to paths.
- 1m strip cut around meadow/tall herb areas to provide a firebreak and distinguish between areas under different management practices.
- Exclude very small highway verges and/or areas with visibility risks. We received 19 reports of potentially hazardous junctions during NMM.
- Where the width of the verge allows a 1m strip to be cut or a framing cut to highway verges to prevent visibility/safety issues
- Review selected verges to include in future, i.e., perhaps just wider/larger areas which can include the 1m strip.
- Consult WCC early in 2024 as to what they would like as part of NMM.
- Start planning for NMM earlier, which will include communicating with residents.
- Images need to show a more diverse range of NMM areas, not just common sites.
- Seek further feedback from other Councils who have taken part in NMM.

- Ensure idverde is put to other beneficial use when not grass cutting in May.
- Include some areas in principle parks.
- Look to hire flay equipment earlier in year or look at case for purchase.
- Ensure the correct equipment is available when needed.
- Review the number of cuts needed depending on the area.
- Social media posts to emphasise Zero Tolerance as cutting crews getting buse from public.
- Cut around the play areas to allow residents to access them instead of only the round the apparatus, including within fencing and the surrounding area and if not fenced leave at least a metre path to the get to the play area or apparatus. Also, include football goal areas within the open spaces.
- Issues with overgrowth climbing up residents' fence lines need to be considered.
- Link NMM to the Biodiversity Action Plan being developed including measurements and outcomes.
- Allow residents the opportunity to highlight areas they wish to be suspended from NMM with the support of either Cllrs, Town or Parish councils for consideration by the Contract Climate Change Project Team. Consider any recommendations that emerge from the Biodiversity Action Plan currently being developed.

3 Alternative Options

- 3.1 The report is provided for information only and therefore no alternative recommendations have been considered. However the Committee could suggest further refinements or options to delivering No Mow May.

4 Legal Implications

- 4.1 None

5 Financial Services

- 5.1 This will be reviewed as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process.

6 Business Strategy

- 6.1 Warwick District Council has adopted a Business Strategy which sets out key areas for service delivery.
- 6.2 Health, Homes, Communities – links to health and wellbeing of residents in promoting biodiversity and wellbeing of species.
- 6.3 Green, Clean, Safe – No Mow May is an annual campaign organised by Plant life, a registered charity. The charity’s aim is to “make lasting positive change for wildflowers, plants, and fungi.
- 6.4 Infrastructure, Enterprise, Employment – helps to maintain biodiversity within the district.
- 6.5 Effective Staff – the review promotes changes and improvements to the operation of NMM for 2024.
- 6.6 Maintain or Improve Services - by reviewing and improving operation of NMM.
- 6.7 Firm Financial Footing over the Longer Term – works within the MTFS.

7 Environmental/Climate Change Implications

By suspending grass cutting throughout May almost 2 million m² of grass and wild plants in Warwick District were allowed to grow and flourish. That’s the equivalent size of approx. 266 football pitches.

Over 700 species of wildflowers grow on road verges in the UK, that’s nearly 45% of our total flora. Just 8 dandelion flowers can produce enough nectar sugar to meet an adult bumble bee's baseline energy need.

8 Analysis of the effects on Equality

- 8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed as the scheme is part of the Council’s overall operation of its Grounds Maintenance Service.

9 Data Protection

- 9.1 None.

10 Health and Wellbeing

- 10.1 Include a summary of the health and wellbeing implications of the proposal.

11 Risk Assessment

- 11.1 The risk of continuing for 2024 and not making changes recommended by the project group are that there may be similar growing conditions in 2024 leading to a repeat of the time taken to recover at the end of May, with consequent risks to reputation and operational recovery.

12 Consultation

- 12.1 The recommendations are based on comments received in feedback from public consultation.

Background papers:

Supporting Document

[No Mow May Website](#)