

LEOMINSTER TOWN COUNCIL

VERGE PLAN

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In April 2019 Leominster took over the management and maintenance of the majority of verges and play areas in Leominster under licence from Herefordshire Council. The maintenance is restricted to grass cutting and litter picking. Tree maintenance and play equipment repair remains with Herefordshire Council, although any small works that have health and safety implications will be carried out by the Town Council.
- 1.2 This agreement to take the licence over has enabled the Town Council to proactively manage much of the visible and used open space in Leominster. It has provided a level of local control that has not been in place since 1997 when Leominster District Council ceased to exist.
- 1.3 This report is in response to the following resolution agreed by the Environment & Services Committee at its meeting held on 15th July 2019:

“Committee **RESOLVED** to identify areas under Town Council management to designate as areas to encourage wildlife. A full review of the areas proposed would be carried out and a revised management and mowing programme would be developed, agreed and implemented for the 2020/21 season.”
- 1.4 Also at that meeting it was agreed to look into alternatives to weed spraying, and as the Council has declared a climate emergency it needs to review its use of plastic rubbish sacks, tools, equipment and vehicles, as well as recycling waste including composting.
- 1.5 The process to reduce the Council’s carbon footprint and its use of single use plastic will be an on-going process with no immediate solution. However, as well as reducing its consumption it can contribute to reducing carbon in the atmosphere locally by implementing a long term strategy to encourage plant life and trees.
- 1.6 An important resource for advice is Plantlife <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk> The organisation provides specialist advice, consultancy and also has a library of useful documents such as “The Good Verge Guide”.
- 1.7 Natural England also provides support for land managers trying to create wildflower meadows.
- 1.8 One local resource already in place is the Leominster Riverside Millennium Green Management Plan developed in 2010. There is also a very proactive and knowledgeable Leominster in Bloom group that has been very successful in recent years providing and improving planting and flowers in Leominster

town centre. This has been acknowledged by winning two gold awards in 2017 and 2018.

- 1.9 The reality is that the Town Council will have to start small and build up. There will be a need to educate local people on the reasons behind wildflower verges and meadows and time will need to be taken spreading the word and improving understanding.
- 1.10 Already in place are the wildflower meadows in Ginhall Green, the orchard at Ginhall Green and the Riverside Millennium Green, and wildflower areas, now not managed, in the Riverside Millennium Green.
- 1.11 It should be noted that the Riverside Millennium Green is owned by the Millennium Green Trust (although it is understood that the area may have been transferred to the Leominster Area Regeneration Company) but that the management rights of the area are Leominster Town Council's.

2. PREPARATION OF AREAS AND ADVICE DOWNLOADED

- 2.1 Prior to any areas being suitable for wildflowers, which in turn encourages wildlife, a process has to be undertaken. The process outlined below has been obtained from the Natural England website:
 - Targeting is important - some sites have inherent constraints (such as high fertility), but high quality wildflower meadows can be restored from impoverished starting points where there is good management.
 - Site preparation is key, and so is ensuring the most appropriate species are introduced.
 - Effective cutting and/or grazing management is vital, particular during early stages.
 - Management may need to be delivered adaptively to get the best results.
- 2.2 To create a small area of wildflower meadow the following steps are suggested by Natural England. Further details can be obtained from their website:
 - Collect your native wildflower seed mixes.
 - Choose a sunny patch for the wildflowers to grow. This can be as small or large as you have space for.
 - Prepare some bare ground (aim for about 50%), either by digging and creating a fine seedbed, or scarifying a patch of grass. Cast the seed over the bare ground, typically in late August or September.
 - Tread in the seeds, and water regularly. No need to cover with soil.
 - Allow your meadow to grow up and flower in the spring and summer. Take a late 'hay cut' after 15th July, removing the clippings to avoid putting too much nutrient back. Your meadow should then flower again in the early autumn.
- 2.3 The following national case study has been identified following research on the internet:

- The grass on this site had been an uninspiring, regularly mown verge with very little wildlife value. The council would mulch the vegetation during the mowing season, and it was even used as a storage area one summer when a drainage pipe was laid through the village and various barriers and signs were seen flattening the grass and generally degrading what vegetation was present.
- In late August 2014 we were able to begin a restoration process by giving the area its first proper 'hay cut' after allowing the vegetation to grow out for the first time.
- With the area cut and raked off hard we spaced out and planted a selection of robust native wildflowers in 9cm pots which we knew would manage to survive against coarse and vigorous grass species. The species chosen were suited to the local soil type, and the same species were also present about a mile away in a roadside verge with existing populations of wildflowers.
- After watering the plants in well they were monitored over the following months, and all survived with lush growth put on by Spring 2015.
- Many of the wildflowers flowered during the Summer of 2015, however by July it was obvious the coarse grasses were really growing too well, and so something had to be done. We carried out an earlier hay cut that year to remove more nutrients from the meadow, and gave the area another very thorough raking off, an important factor in any meadow creation or restoration project.
- 2016 proved to be a great success, with much more knapweed (*centaurea nigra*) flowering for a long period, backed up by a few field scabious (*knautia arvensis*) and sorrel (*rumex acetosa*). The project was really beginning to work well, although there was still some heavy growth of coarse grasses to contend with.
- We cut the area towards the end of September and raked everything off hard once more.
- After leaving the verge for about a month we returned when the weather was cooler and damper to mow and collect the regrowth, expose plenty of gaps in the sward and again plant some additional 9cm potted wildflowers.
- We also sowed a good quantity of fresh viable yellow rattle (*rhinanthus minor*) seed for the first time, a parasitic annual plant which is an excellent way of reducing the vigour in grasses, aiding the establishment of wildflower species.
- 2017 has been a fantastic season for this flourishing strip of wildflower meadow. The grass growth has been vastly reduced thanks to a good show of yellow rattle. This has enabled the many wildflowers the room they've needed to get established and spread.

2.4 The case study above strongly suggests that any area identified for this type of management in Leominster will take around three years to fully establish. It will be essential for the management of that area to be robust and specific, and it will need to be included in annual maintenance schedules.

- 2.5 The following advice on weed management has also been found following research on the internet:
- To clear an overgrown growing area, slash down the high standing weeds and then cover with a thick compost manure mulch (at least 20 cms) and/or a plastic sheet. Without light the weeds will weaken and eventually die off. Use the slashed foliage and stems on the compost heap.
 - Dig up deep rooted weeds, such as dandelions and docks. Put foliage on the compost heap, and drown the roots in a bucket of water for a month or so. The water can be used as a liquid feed.
 - Persistent weeds such as bindweed and ground elder have to be dug over regularly, removing as much root as possible. Every little bit. In some cases, it is worth digging up individual plants which you want to keep, cleaning their roots of the weed's root fragments, and then replacing in the bed which has also been dug over. Persistent digging, removing roots, will eventually – perhaps over a couple of years – weaken the plant and make it easier to keep on top of. Put foliage and roots (but not flowers or seed heads) into a black plastic sack. Tie up the top and leave in an out-of-the-way corner until it turns into gooey sludge, then compost it.
- 2.6 This method of weed management will not be suitable for footpaths and other locations such as the highway. This is the advice on the Hounslow Council website regarding the use of herbicide:
- The weed spraying programme ensures all footway and carriageway hard surfaces that are on our Project Network are treated. This is best completed when weeds are at their strongest, during Spring and Autumn.
 - The weeds are sprayed with a non-toxic herbicide, which acts only on contact with the plant surface. This spot spraying is completed by our partner, who has expertise in weed control.
 - Following spraying the vegetation will need to be left in situ for over 2 weeks before removal is arranged. In some instances removal of the treated weeds will be brought to coincide with routine street cleansing activities within the borough. This length of time is required to ensure that the treatment substance has time to activate effectively to control growth of the weed.
 - The treatment is cyclical, and occurs in the Spring and Autumn each year. Ongoing treatment to the same areas may be required to control significant weed growth. With ongoing improvement of the footways within the Borough, we will see a decrease in the number of weeds requiring treatment.
 - Why is there a 2-3 week delay between spraying and removal? We follow an effective weed programme which is consistent with the 'Well maintained Highways' publication from the Department for Transport.
 - Could the work be delayed? Yes, the spot treatment of the weeds is very dependent on the weather conditions at the time of spraying. Glyphosate is sensitive to weather conditions (temperature and rainfall).
 - Is the weed treatment substance hazardous/toxic? We do not use toxic, harsh or seriously damaging products to control weeds on our network, due to the danger of run-off or leaching into groundwater or protected water courses. We use a non-residual (does not remain in soils) herbicide

which meets requirements set out by Environment Agency and Health & Safety Commissions Code of Practice. This substance is called Glyphosate, which only affects plants where there is direct contact.

- Can we remove all the weeds? No, our focus is weed control rather than weed eradication. Complete removal of weeds from our network in Hounslow is unrealistic and expensive.
- Why do we need to complete more than 1 treatment per year? Treatment is carried out at the most active growing times, therefore the weed spraying is undertaken when the weeds are at their strongest, and they are sprayed again if they have not died off.
- When are the weeds sprayed? This is best completed when weeds are at their strongest, and will be programmed for Spring and Autumn.
- Why do you have to spray chemicals onto the Highway? The only way to effectively control weeds is to treat them with the recommended substance at the appropriate time; if weeds are allowed to grow the root system will affect the structure of the highway.

2.7 Based on the above information regarding weed management it is suggested that Leominster Town Council continues to use Glyphosate until a management strategy can be fully developed which will enable the discontinuation of weed spraying in future.

3. INITIAL AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 The creation of wildflower meadows and verges will take a good amount of capacity from the Environmental Team. In order to extend the programme Council will have to seriously consider enlarging its Environmental Team in the future.

3.2 Therefore, in the short term, whilst the Environmental Team consists of three full time employees and one part-time employee, the following areas are suggested for consideration:

3.3 *Millennium Green*

Wildflower grassland areas along the fence by the railway and under the orchard. Nettles will need to be strimmed back and cleared on a regular basis to enable wildflower seeds to germinate and grow.

3.4 *Tranquil Garden*

This area is sited directly behind the Millennium Green and suffers from virulent nettle growth which has destroyed previous attempts to create a planted area. Once again, regular strimming and clearing of nettles will be required to encourage growth.

3.5 *Ginhall Green*

Continue to develop the wildflower meadow on the western side of Ginhall Green and consider better management under the community orchard at the same location. Suggest a site visit to identify other small areas that might benefit from similar management. There may be some grass areas by the hedges that could be allocated for wildflowers similar to Millennium Green.

3.6 Morrison's Roundabout

An opportunity to implement an innovative management plan for the roundabout. The Town Council is already cutting it, so planting it up and encouraging some wildflower growth would be an opportunity.

3.7 Barons Cross Road

The verges along the Barons Cross Road lend themselves to potential wildflower verges. They meet the criteria set out in Plantlife's Good Verge guide and with proper management could enhance this entrance into the town whilst helping to address some of the air quality issues in this area.

3.8 The Nut Grove, Sydonia

The Nut Grove, planted in 2015 with funding obtained by Leominster in Bloom, would benefit from better management and a focus on developing wildflower meadows under the trees. Paths are cut in the existing long grass, but colour could be added if managed in an alternative manner.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 It is suggested that at this stage six sites will be more than enough to commence experimentation and develop an educational programme for residents and visitors. Similar experiments are taking place at the Discovery Centre, Craven Arms in the Onny Meadows and with Balfour Beatty and Herefordshire Council throughout the county.
- 4.2 Partnership development is essential to ensure this initiative will work. Funding wise there is adequate resource within the Leominster in Bloom budget, which Council could consider increasing in 2020/21 to help develop and expand this initiative. It is imperative that the Town Council and Leominster in Bloom work closely together on this, as well as engaging with Herefordshire Council and Balfour Beatty to support any of their initiatives.
- 4.3 An assessment of capacity requirements will need to be undertaken and compared to any savings achieved by not cutting the identified areas. All the areas apart from Millennium Green and Ginhall Green have been regularly mowed by the Environmental Team.