

# CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## 1 DECEMBER 2022

### TACKLING THE ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCY

Relevant Officers: Cat Chambers, Joe Morshead

#### 1. What is the update about?

- 1.1 The Scrutiny Programme Board have requested a bulletin update on the current position of Biodiversity practices, and any future enhancements planned. This is in light of the ecological emergency declared on behalf of the Council in April 2021. This report will identify the history of ecology practice within frontline service, and the ongoing culture that sustains those practices. It will identify that, despite zero additional funding and a challenging financial climate, through collaboration with other organisations and community engagement, services have continued to ensure an improvement in operational practice wherever financially or operationally feasible.
- The progress and impact on biodiversity of the work to reduce use of glyphosate and next steps to reach nearly zero usage.
  - Updating of the biodiversity map from 2015 (?) to establish biodiversity trends in Exeter (land and water).
  - What measures are to be taken to improve biodiversity in the city – by the council and partners?
  - Funding for the above work.
  - Approaches to public engagement in tackling this emergency, and council messaging to support this.

#### 2. Background

##### Well Established practices:

- 2.1 Wild City is a long-standing partnership that moved the council onto an ecologically proactive footing. Established between 2008 and 2010, the Wild City Partnership with Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) was more than the wildflower project it is most associated with today (Picture 1). It paved the way for the originally named Exe Corridor Partnership between the Council, the Environment Agency (EA), and DWT. The establishment of which aimed to enhance the biodiversity value of the Exe Corridor with a series of funded projects, which included the creation of artificial otter holts prior to 2010. It also included the construction of the swift tower on Paris Street roundabout, and the use of swift nest bricks in the Council Residential Design Guide (Picture 2). The partnership has over the last fourteen years laid the foundation for the current rewilding programmes across public lands. It set the standards for collaborative and community-based working, and contributed to achieving greater biodiversity value, both through local action and through planning proposals such as the Monkerton Masterplan and associated woodland establishment project.

Picture 1. Wild City Wildflower Meadows

Picture 2. Exeter Swift Tower



- 2.2 Today, whilst both the funding and project manager roles originally associated with the Wild City projects have ceased, due to the ongoing difficult economic climate, the partnership has remained in place. This now operational partnership continues to take an active role in informing best practice, and in service and city green infrastructure management, as outlined by our current position. In addition, the Councils Strategic partnership with DWT has been further strengthened. In 2019, the Council transferred the Valley Parks into DWT care, and the Valley parks committee commenced. A collaboration resulting not only in much needed remedial works across the valley parks infrastructure, but also in new projects to enhance the city ecology such as the Northbrook Arboretum.
- 2.3 Whether it be the meadow grass areas left as standard in cemeteries over the last 10 years, to support local Goldfinch populations, or the councils long-term use of habitat stacking as a woodland and habitat management process. The council has committed to working alone, with partners, and with the community, towards ecologically sound and sustainable practices across its frontline operations.

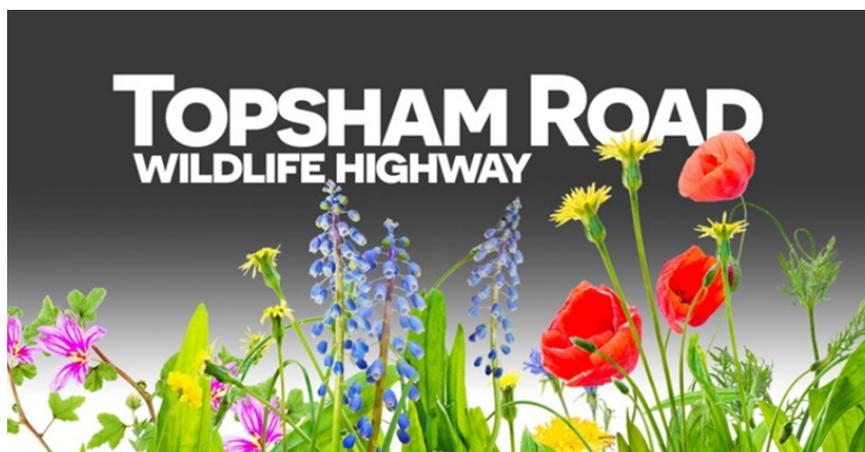
### 3. Current position

#### Arboriculture:

- 3.1 Currently officers take several approaches to ensure operational best practice, and improved resilience against climate change and the ever-increasing threat to tree stocks from pests and diseases. The Council undertake a program of annual tree planting, with on average 100 standard trees planted per year. When selecting planting stock, a variety of both native and exotic species are used, with consideration for the local site conditions, the existing tree stock, surrounding habitats and future climate change predictions. This 'right asset, right space' approach not only ensures the integration of genetic diversity across the councils existing tree stock, but also new tree plantings are positioned, and species are selected, with consideration for improved habitat connectivity, foraging opportunities and wildlife habitat.
- 3.2 In an extension to former habitat stacking practices, where possible, valuable deadwood habitat such as dead trees, branches, and tree surgery arising's, are left in situ wherever it is appropriate and safe to do so. This new habitat creation can provide habitat for bats, birds, invertebrates, small mammals, and equally fungi and lichen species that are also under threat because of species decline and climate change. In further support of habitats, extra value and resources are routinely focused on ancient and veteran tree management and the unique niche habitats that they provide.
- 3.3 A recent I-tree study showed that Exeter's tree cover is at 24.5%, which is above average for UK towns and cities. The council recognises the significant role that tree infrastructure will play in both the environmental and ecological emergencies that the city faces. Whilst not a majority landowner, it has committed to collaborating with other landowners and to increasing canopy cover in the city by 5% by 2030. This is a target that is integrated across council and included in the tree strategy and both NetZero and planning policy expectations. The I-Tree canopy cover map can be found on the following link: <https://urbantreecover.org/urban-forest-cover/>.

### Parks and Green Spaces:

- 3.4 Parks officers continue to work closely in collaboration with DWT and Wild City. Since the establishment of the first meadow in St Bartholomew cemetery in 2012, the city's meadow grass network has been expanded across Parks, and verge space since 2019, culminating this year in the first full 'Wildlife Highway'.



This linking corridor of meadow grass along Topsham Road offers its own ecosystem and habitat, not only supporting bees, butterflies, and moths, but also the birds and small mammals that rely on them. The programme of meadow verges citywide has only been possible through collaborative working and the partnership between ECC, DCC, and DWT.

- 3.5 Parks officers have also continued to work closely with community groups and to support community-based initiatives. The last twelve months have seen the establishment and extensions of two community gardens in Exeter. In addition, Exeter Wild City has engaged with many external organisations including Exeter University, Network Rail, and the Crematorium, to extend the meadow network beyond ECC land. Parks officers and DWT are now developing a local authority delivery team forum to share knowledge and best practice amongst local partners. This has already seen officers visit Plymouth to learn from their Future Parks Accelerator Programme, and current biodiversity projects. Finally, Wild City continues to operate seeding and planting through schools, engaging all schools locally in the wildflower meadow programme. These efforts outline the ethos of knowledge sharing, collaboration, and public engagement that are business as usual, for the parks and greens spaces team. Current practices and key operational projects can be found on the Council website: <https://exeter.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/parks-and-open-spaces/biodiversity/>.

### Glyphosate:

- 3.5 The usage of Glyphosate for 2022 stands at 120 Litres. The increase in usage from 2020 2021 seasons comes because of additional requirements in the form of Housing hard surface weed control. 2020 and 2021 saw no weed control carried out across housing footpath and drying areas resulting in significant weed growth, affecting council residents and resulting in additional work requirements to rectify the condition issues. To manage this, weed control needed to be reinstated across council housing sites, to ensure the safety and usability of housing hard surface infrastructure.

#### Recorded Usage:

2017 195L Used  
2018 160L Used  
2019 156L Used  
2020 90L Used  
2021 91L 150ml Used

- 3.6 This year several operational reductions were also made. The Wild City wild flower sites moved onto a zero weed control and over seeding process, in an impact benefit trial. The result of this was evidenced on Paris Street roundabout where there were not the characteristic floral displays seen in the past through herbicide usage. However, the extent of natural grasses, teasel, and other native flora, coupled with scattered wildflowers throughout has made the roundabout a rich habitat. Where this benefit to biodiversity remains high, and is mirrored across wildflower sites, the programme will now remain weed control free. In addition, operations moved to a pelargonic chemical for moss and algae treatment. Because of the low requirement for moss and algae treatment, pelargonic treatment is a cost effective alternative for moss and algae management. Finally, when planting saplings, Council arboriculture teams no longer utilise glyphosate to control grass growth around the sapling, instead mulch mats are used as standard to control growth.
- 3.7 Trials on alternatives options continue. The Councils parks and green spaces team undertook a concentration trial to see if aggregated reductions can be made by reducing the concentration of glyphosate within a mix. At the same time, new alternative non-glyphosate chemicals containing pelargonic acid and acetic acid were also trialled. The efficacy rate for alternatives remained poor in comparison to Glyphosate options, with regrowth in alternatives present within a month, and full regrowth within two months, whilst the clean label glyphosate options continued to suppress in full beyond the two-month window. The poor efficacy in alternatives mean that the chemicals are not cost-effective options, and can only be considered for integrated process use such as in the case of moss and algae growth (pictures 4-7).

Acetic Acid Alternative:

Picture 4. 24 Hours

Picture 5. 1 week

Picture 6. 1 month

Picture 7. 2 months



Glyphosate 250ml:

Picture 8. 24 Hours

Picture 9. 1 week

Picture 10. 1 month

Picture 11. 2 months



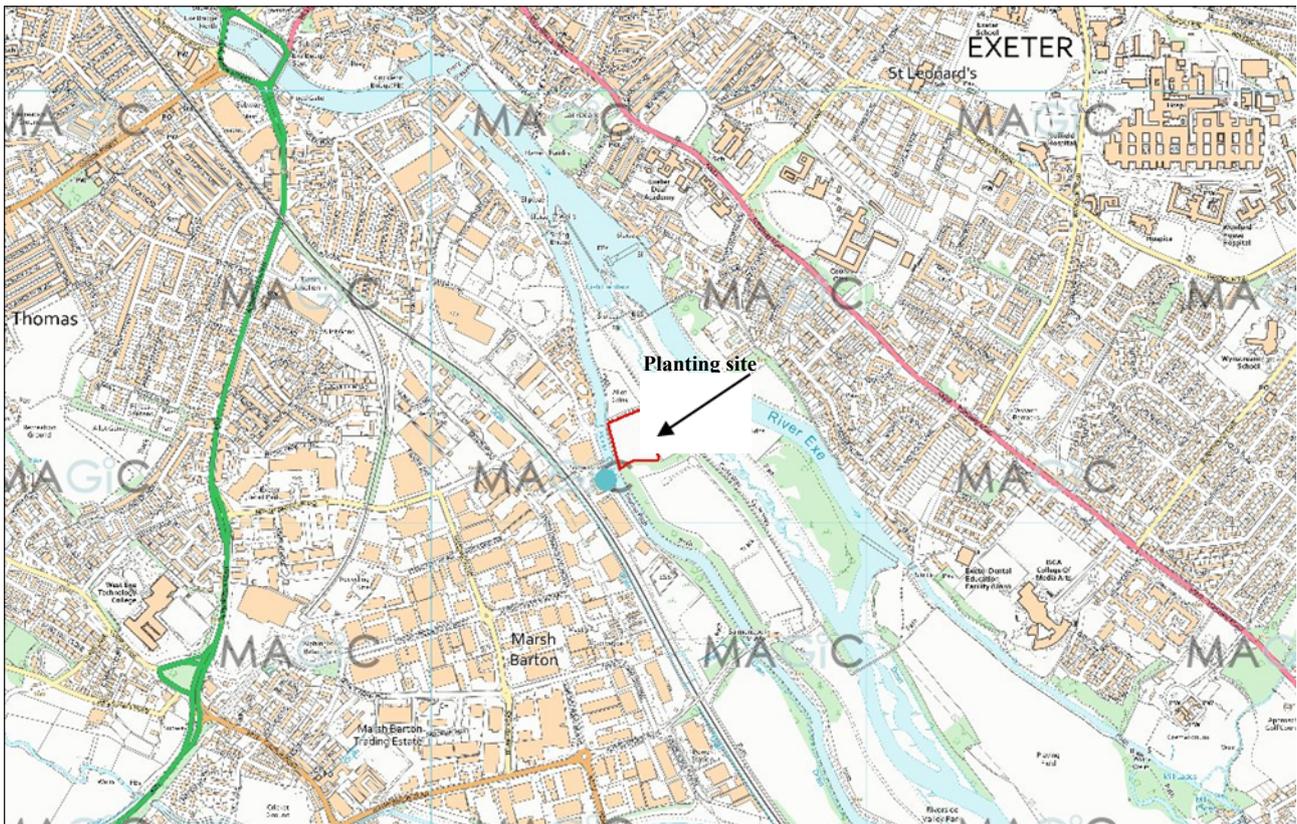
The results of the reduced concentration show that Glyphosate options can be reduced from 250ml per 10 litres of water, to 200ml per 10 litres of water, with no impact in efficacy. Lower concentrations than 200ml result in similar efficacy rates to alternatives and are not-cost effective. Operations will therefore utilise 200ml concentration for perennial grass management in 2023 season to further reduce Glyphosate use.

- 3.8 The council continues to operate an integrated process that relies on multiple methods to reduce aggregate use of chemical controls. To gauge current operational progress and to inform continuous improvement, the council took part in a Local Authority delivery team forum with the Pesticide Action Network earlier in the year. This included other southwest councils and DWT. At present, with the poor efficacy and the cost-pressures of alternatives, an integrated approach remains best practice, with reductions made where financially sustainable. The council will continue to investigate alternatives, optimise, and reduce glyphosate use as new opportunities arise in accordance with best practice and where it is cost-effective to do so.

#### 4. Future position

- 4.1 Arboriculture: there are two projects in initial stages that look to progress the Council's arboriculture development and diversity programme. The first is the arboretum in partnership with DWT. This went to executive in September where it was recommended that Council approve the allocation of £288,583 in total towards the project. Holistically the project will see a five-stage delivery programme to introduce tree species and habitat into the Northbrook site and develop community education and engagement. The second project is the New Haven Field woodland proposal. Saving Devon Treescapes (SDT) are providing funding to create a native broadleaf woodland in New Haven field (Picture 4). Much of the surrounding woodland is Ash, so the project serves to mitigate the loss of canopy through Ash Die Back and introduces mixed biodiverse native stock in its place. If successful, the woodland planting will be carried out through community engagement and volunteering and will mirror the Monkerton Ridgeline woodland project on a smaller scale, increasing the Councils woodland habitat.

Picture 4. New Haven Field Location



Map produced by MAGIC on 29 March, 2022.  
 (c) Crown Copyright and database rights 2022. Ordnance Survey 100022861.  
 Copyright resides with the data suppliers and the map must not be reproduced without their permission. Some information in MAGIC is a snapshot of the information that is being maintained or continually updated by the originating organisation. Please refer to the metadata for details as information may be illustrative or representative rather than definitive at this stage.

4.3 As the Council moves forward there has, and will continue to be, a change in how it approaches traditional concepts, and as advancements are made within the relevant industries. This change has been most aptly evidenced in the planting schemes at Saint Sidwell's Point and Riverside leisure centres. The plant choices maximise pollution mitigation through the use of Phyto-sensors (plants sensitive and absorbent to air pollution) and also species decline through use of heavy flowering perennial herbs. In collaboration with Exeter City Living, leisure, and other service areas, the use of purposeful mitigation planting will become more prevalent as the agreed path forward for Council established beds.

4.4 The Draft Exeter Plan is currently out for consultation. The draft sets out the need to conserve and protect Exeter's rich ecology and biodiversity and planning have consulted with frontline delivery teams throughout the development of the draft. The National Planning Policy Framework requires developers to provide at least a 10% measurable biodiversity net gain, and the strategy proposal includes the potential of funding through Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANG) payments for the first time, funded by developments. The Environment Act 2021 requires the production of a Devon Local Nature Recovery Strategy. This strategy will include a new and current habitat map for the Devon Nature Recovery Network, superseding its 2015 predecessor.

**5 Are there any other options?**

5.1 An Exeter i-tree project was undertaken by local urban tree specialists Treeconomics in 2021, with the support of Exeter City Councils Tree Team and local volunteers. The results of this survey provided us with some useful information and a better understanding of Exeter's overall tree stock. However, at present, there is only limited summary data available, but subject to funding, there is the opportunity to commission a full report, providing access to more comprehensive and useful information, including ecosystem services, climate change resilience, species and structural diversity. This information can then be used by Exeter City

Councils Tree Team to help make better-informed management decisions about Exeter's green infrastructure.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Council and its delivery teams continue to work together and engage externally, with both partners and communities, with a view to protecting, restoring, and enhancing Exeter's biodiversity. They do so as part of the services 'business as usual' operations. Funding, remains project specific with delivery undertaken where budget and resources allow. Whilst the pace of progress in funded development is swifter, energy and the Councils continuous development ethos is carried by council officers, has ensured that improvements continue to be made annually and that opportunities are taken where they arise. This, coupled with the work of the Draft Exeter Plan, will ensure that Biodiversity and ecology management remains a high priority.