

**WEST SWINDON PARISH COUNCIL****Future Policy on Grounds Maintenance Report****1. Background**

- 1.1 Since April 2017, the Parish Grounds Maintenance team have been undertaking an annual cut of all hedges and shrubs on Swindon Borough Council land. The scale of the work is significant:
- 67,000 square metres of shrub bed
  - 69,174 linear metres of hedge
  - 999,136 square metres of grass
- 1.2 The Grounds Team work with a range of tools from the ground only. Early in the first season, the Grounds Team reported that progress was slow as many of the original and traditional shrub beds had not been regularly maintained by Swindon Borough Council and were no longer identifiable as shrubs. Many had grown in excess of six feet and brambles and self seeded trees and plants had taken hold. In response to this, the Parish Council funded additional support to the Grounds team through the addition of a tree surgeon and assistant. This has enabled the Grounds team to tackle taller greenery and reduce hedges and boundary lines that have grown too tall for the grounds maintenance team. Trees remain the responsibility of Swindon Borough Council however, in some cases the Grounds Team have removed smaller diseased or weak trees (primarily elder).
- 1.3 As at March 2019, the majority of hedges and shrub beds have been thinned out and reduced by the team. The capacity to tackle taller boundaries continues and the focus over the next few months will be parks and open space boundaries.

**2. Detail**

- 2.1 Traditionally the design and management of civic green assets has favoured a 'managed' appearance, however, with the current cycle of shrub and hedge cutting coming to a close, there is an opportunity for the Parish Council to consider plans for future years.
- 2.1 Last year, the Parish Council trialled wildflower meadows for the first time and whilst there were a small number of queries and complaints, generally there was very little feedback. We are aware though that the Parish Council receives numerous requests for reduction of hedges, and complaints if grass cutting is missed.
- 2.2 The Parish Council could continue with the regular three weekly cycle of grass cutting and sustain an approach to shrub and hedge maintenance that keeps greenery short and manageable. The advantage of this is that it enables the

team to visit all shrubs and hedges in the annual Autumn and Winter period and be time efficient with the maintenance cut.

- 2.3 The counter view to this approach is that this limits the potential of existing parks and greenery to be ecologically functional green spaces. The Parish Council has received feedback from a small number of residents in Old Shaw Lane/Cartwright Drive area that the shrub and hedge work this year has been too severe and they have asked for consideration of a more eco-friendly approach from the Parish Council e.g. reduced mowing, replanting hedgerows, allowing regrowth/taller shrubs and boundaries.
- 2.4 In order to enhance the opportunities for biodiversity, grounds management can be revised with the aim of encouraging more species-rich and structurally diverse vegetation. Common examples include reducing mowing to encourage wildflowers and the establishment of field and shrub layers under trees. This has been the approach led by John Ball (Swindon FAB) with the Shaw Ridge volunteers and also supported by volunteers at Greendown copse and work on local ponds in Toothill and Westlea.
- 2.5 It is important to look at how an individual site fits into a much wider network of spaces and how that connection can be strengthened. The Parish Council could also consider the role of private gardens, which extend the habitat available for wildlife beyond public open spaces.
- 2.6 Many articles are available for reference including 'Making Contracts Work' published in 2006 by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. The organization Plantlife produced 'The Good Verge Guide' (2016) which states *that the adoption of a few basic principles can significantly improve the biodiversity on our verges, bringing benefits for wildlife, for us and for future generations.* The Guide itself is targeted at verges on a more significant scale than the urban grassed areas and verges such as we have across West Swindon, however, the principles could still apply.

### **3. Options**

- 3.1 The Parish Council could commission work to produce a Biodiversity Action Plan for West Swindon. This would provide a detailed audit of the assets and habitats across the Parish alongside recommendations for future maintenance and management. This is likely to have a Consultancy cost but would be a relevant reference point for future maintenance specifications.
- 3.2 The Parish Council could continue with the wildflower meadow work and add additional plots to the current areas on Shaw Linear Park e.g. one side of park could be left as wildflower meadow. There is a cost for the Parish Council to commission the extra cutting and bailing however extending the scope on one site is more likely to be cost effective and feasible for the farmer/contractor undertaking the work.
- 3.3 The Parish Council could undertake wider community engagement to test out residents interest and appetite for a different or varied approach to grounds maintenance across the Parish.

- 3.4 As part of future contract management, the Parish Manager will be undertaking joint site visits with the Parish Council's contractor for grounds maintenance. Each of these visits could review work completed to date and wherever possible promote biodiversity and conservation principles. Current maintenance may be satisfactory or changes may be required.

**3. Recommendations:**

- 3.1 That Councillors note the report and considers the options above.
- 3.2. That Councillors consider further action to determine its policy on Grounds Maintenance for West Swindon.

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Parish Manager