

STAMFORD TOWN COUNCIL

NOTES OF THE CLIMATE ACTION WORKING GROUP MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 03 FEBRUARY 2021 AT 6PM AT 'VIRTUAL' LOCATIONS USING VIDEO AND AUDIO LINK

PRESENT

Councillor Mrs Amanda Wheeler (Chairman), Councillor Shaun Ford (Vice Chairman), Councillor Gloria Johnson (Deputy Mayor), Councillor David Taylor, Councillor Dave Dorson, Councillor Harrish Bisnauthsing, Patricia Stuart-Mogg (Stamford Town Clerk)

ALSO PRESENT Val Harvey (Vice Chairman), Paddy Jelen (Urban Group), Aled Pattinson (Plastic Free Stamford), Deanne Donovan (Sustainable Stamford), John Polkinhorne (Sustainable Stamford), Simon, Batty (Resident), Jane Bateman (Sustainable Stamford), Kayleigh Nicolaou (Extinction Rebellion), Hannah Gold (Christchurch Close Community Group) Kathy Joyce (Resident), Jim Irvine (Zero Emission Vehicles)

1. WELCOME

The Chairman Councillor Amanda Wheeler welcomed all to the meeting and the guest speaker Dr. Philip Sterling who had been organised by Deanne Donovan. Dr. Stirling had considerable experience in wildlife habitat creation and is Principal Ecological advisor for Dorset Council for 25 years. He managed the Authority's Highway verge maintenance programme for four years. With the introduction of ecological principles into his programme was able to establish considerable cost saving as well as environmental gains. He currently is working for the Butterfly Conservation charity as the Lead building habitats for butterflies. It is anticipated the Climate Action Working Group will obtain valuable information and guidance on creating wildlife friendly verges from Philip Sterling which is appreciated.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor Bill Turner (Town Mayor) and Michelle Martell submitted their apologies.

3. TO CONFIRM THE NOTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the last meeting held on 02 December 2020, which had been circulated, were reviewed. There were no matters raised and the content was confirmed as a true record of the meeting.

4. Dr Philip Sterling Presentation:

Since 2014 Dorset County Council (now Dorset Council) has adopted the policy of creating and managing its amenity grasslands, including road verges, using the principle of low soil fertility to reduce how much the grass grows in the first place. In 5 years since 2014 the verge maintenance budget has reduced by over 25%, and 'cut-and-collect' mowers are now standard across most urban areas, and tractor-driven flail collectors in many parks and open spaces. The time spent cutting grass in the summer has been reduced by about half, and there are increases in the abundance of wildflowers throughout. Information on why the changes are happening, and the financial and environmental benefits continues to be an important part of managing community expectations. The examples below are from road verges in Dorset but the principle applies to any type of amenity grassland on any soil.

If we reduce the amount that grass grows in the first place we will have less to cut, and this should cost us less. Lowering soil fertility is key to this, and as we lower soil fertility the number of wildflowers the grassland can support increases. There is a win-win to achieve. It remains standard landscape practice to cover subsoils or bare mineral with at least 150mm of high-quality topsoil and to sow an amenity grass mix. The resulting areas then requires regular mowing forever, and the grassland is frequently covered in clods of brown decaying cut grass making the areas unsightly and unusable. And if we leave the grass cuttings (arisings) where

they were cut, they rot down and return their goodness to the soil, encouraging more grass to grow. The cycle is endless, and with climate change extending growing seasons, the pressure is for more cuts per year when there is less money available. By contrast, if we control soil fertility, and reduce grass growth, we can overcome this problem with more wildflowers an important bonus. These two photos illustrate the difference of applying topsoil to the same road verge in Dorset, the two photos just 100m apart:



Amenity grassland with no topsoil - The photo below taken in 2020 shows a road verge in Dorset, created in 2010, where a limited range of wildflower seed was sown directly onto bare sandy clays, with no topsoil. Wildflowers are abundant and the verge has had no management at all in the 10 years since it was created. It costs the Highway Authority nothing to look after and brings the Council kudos each year when people enjoy and publicise the wildflowers.



Cut-and-collect mowing - Cutting and removing the vegetation during the growing season removes fertility drawn up from the soil and converted into leaves, flowers and seeds, and prevents it from being returned to the soil. Allowing the grass to grow long before cutting and removing, and repeating the operation two or three times in the season, effectively removes nutrients. The result is that the following year, coarse grasses are in decline, and fine grasses and wildflowers start to appear. The grass sward is also much easier to cut. Cut-and-collect leaves a neat and tidy finish to grasslands, which is important for visual amenity. Disposal of arisings is an issue but has largely been resolved in Dorset by disposing of the grass as close to where it has been cut as possible, in designated areas in parks, and in areas of trees and shrubs on highways.

It can take two or three seasons to get on top of soil fertility, but the results are usually good with grass that is likely to require half the number of cuts compared with the historical pattern, and with common wildflowers becoming increasingly abundant. The longer the time between cuts, the more that wildflowers can flower and provide nectar for pollinators. It can be beneficial to add in native perennial wildflower seed after the last autumn cut-and-collect, with the resulting increase in wildflower abundance c. 18 months later.



For more information see <https://butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/conservation-projects/building-sites-for-butterflies> which includes Dr Phil Sterling's contact details. Phil now works at Butterfly Conservation promoting the changes he began in 2014 while the Countryside Service Manager at the Council.



There was a valuable question and answer session and Dr. Sterling offered guidance and advice as to how to outline a stepped programme to deliver the aims and ambitions of the Climate Action Working Groups Wildflower verge project. He confirmed all over the country local councils are adopting a cut and collect regime. He would be able to steer the Town Council in the specification at their tendering stage. Cut and collect is first step to reduce the fertility of the soil to encourage wildflower verges. The Group were encouraged to start with the small locations in the first instance, with wildflower seeding in the first year. But the project will soon gain momentum. Councillors recognised that this would be a change from the norm and there is a need to bring the public along with the project so publicity is key.

Councillor Amanda Wheeler outlined the locations along North Street in Stamford which would be the most appropriate locations. It was suggested any pruning of trees in those locations would also support the ecosystem.

The Chairman Councillor Amanda Wheeler suggested that all other items on the agenda be deferred to the next meeting. This was supported by the members.

However, in respect of the Terms of Reference a special meeting would be arranged on Wednesday 10th February 2020 at 6pm to which all members are invited.

5. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING:** Wednesday, 03 March 2021 at 6pm

There being no further business the Chairman closed the meeting.

(The meeting closed at 7.30pm.)