

Report to: Overview Committee

Date of Meeting 20.02.2025

Document classification: Part A Public Document

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Review date for release N/A



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## **Proposed Wildlife Improvement Policy**

### **Report summary:**

StreetScene has been establishing Wildlife Improvement areas for several years to achieve the objectives of creating and improving space for nature, reducing emissions, and reversing species decline, to comply with relevant plans, strategies, policies, and legislations. The creation of Wildlife Improvement areas also supports the Council's Countryside department's targets to provide evidence for increases in habitat value by auditing green infrastructure, which is an important part of Countryside's Nature Recovery Declaration objectives: via Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) duties for local authorities to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

The Council's Scrutiny Committee recommended to Cabinet on 13.06.2024 that the Wildlife Improvement strategy and its origins be reviewed, and for Cabinet to endorse StreetScene's approach and Wildlife Improvement practices; noting its contribution to the wider Nature Recovery work being led by the Council's Countryside department.

StreetScene proposed the Wildlife Improvement policy to ensure that the department's current and future Wildlife Improvement areas are managed, maintained, and improved to a high standard, whilst also supporting Countryside's role in meeting their new legislative targets.

The proposed policy will also help to increase residents' understanding of the gravity and the consequences of both climate change and biodiversity loss, and the urgency that mitigations to these crises need to be put in place and evidenced.

### **Is the proposed decision in accordance with:**

Budget? Yes ☒ No ☐

Policy Framework? Yes ☒ No ☐

### **Recommendations:**

- 1) That Overview recommends to Cabinet the adoption of the Wildlife Improvement policy as an official EDDC policy.
- 2) That Overview provides any other feedback on the proposed Wildlife Improvement policy.

### **Reason for recommendation:**

The proposed Wildlife Improvement policy, if accepted, will formalise and underpin the important work achieved by StreetScene in the creation of Wildlife Improvement areas across the district. In addition, the Scrutiny Committee set out a number of recommendations for StreetScene in June 2024 and, in particular, recommendations numbered 1, 2 and 5, which shaped the developing Wildlife Improvement policy proposition. These recommendations can be seen via the 'Minutes on the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 13.06.2024' link on the following page.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- ☒ Climate Action and Emergency Response
- ☒ Coast, Country and Environment
- ☐ Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- ☒ Communications and Democracy
- ☐ Economy
- ☒ Finance and Assets
- ☒ Strategic Planning
- ☒ Sustainable Homes and Communities
- ☒ Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

**Equalities impact:** Low Impact.

**Climate change:** Low Impact.

**Risk:** Low Risk. There are no risks relating to this report and the proposed Wildlife Improvement policy.

**Links to background information:**

Report presented to Scrutiny Committee on 13.06.2024:

<https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/documents/s23976/130624%20Wildlife%20Improvement%20Scrutiny%20Report%20-%202028.5.24.pdf>

Agenda for the meeting on 13.06.2024:

[Agenda for Scrutiny Committee on Thursday, 13th June, 2024, 6.00 pm - East Devon](#)

Minutes on the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 13.06.2024:

[Printed minutes 13th-Jun-2024 18.00 Scrutiny Committee.pdf \(eastdevon.gov.uk\)](#)

Research on global biodiversity:

[UN Convention on Biological Diversity](#)

Evidence from UNEP about failed attempts to increase biodiversity goals:

[United Nations Environment Programme](#)

The Environment Act aims to restore natural habitats, increase biodiversity and halt the decline in species by 2030:

[Environment Act 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

A programme of action to reduce emissions year on year, and mitigate against the threats that climate change places on our communities:

[Council Strategy - East Devon](#)

The Action Plan sets out the priority actions for the Council to become Net Zero:

[Action Plan - East Devon](#)

StreetScene's latest Service Plan targets improving sustainable management of green spaces to help protect the environment, improve biodiversity and meet Climate Change Action Plan aims:

[streetscene-service-plan-2024-2025-final.pdf \(eastdevon.gov.uk\)](#)

Set up to support DCC as the Responsible Authority in developing a Devon Local Nature Recovery Strategy in EDDC's role as a Supporting Authority as defined by the Environment Act (2021):

[Nature Recovery Declaration for East Devon.pdf](#)

A Nature Recovery Network (NRN) is a joined-up system of places (habitats) important for wild plants and animals:

[Devon Nature Recovery Network - Devon Local Nature Partnership \(devonlnp.org.uk\)](https://devonlnp.org.uk)

In 2024, legislation was developed to halt biodiversity losses due to development:

[Biodiversity net gain - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

This legislation places a duty on all public authorities to have regard, in the exercise of their functions, for the purpose of conserving biodiversity for the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity:

[Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)

This is the first revision (after 5 years) of the 25-year Environment Plan, which now has biodiversity as its top priority:

[Environmental Improvement Plan \(publishing.service.gov.uk\).](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

A new global compact to effectively protect and manage at least 30% of land, waters and sea for nature, known as 30x30, is just one of 23 global targets that were agreed in 2022 as part of the Global Biodiversity Framework:

[Link\\_30x30\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2024.pdf \(wcl.org.uk\)](https://wcl.org.uk)

A comprehensive and alarming report on state of the UK's nature, which everyone in the country should read:

[State of Nature 2023 - report on the UK's current biodiversity](#)

### **Link to: [Council Plan](#)**

Priorities (check which apply)

- ☒ A supported and engaged community.
  - ☒ Carbon neutrality and ecological recovery.
  - ☒ Resilient economy that supports local business.
  - ☒ Financially secure and improving quality of services.
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### **Report in full:**

#### **Introduction and background**

The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth, with the highest biodiversity losses in Europe. Since the 1970s, over 40% of UK animal species have declined, and over 25% of all UK mammals face extinction. Biodiversity has been lost by centuries of pollution, unsustainable farming, development, the use of pesticides, and a lack of awareness of the long-term damage that we have caused; all of which have led to substantial habitat losses. At the same time, climate change is affecting biodiversity due to changing weather patterns; variations in rainfall; extreme weather events; the sensitivity of habitats to climate change; life cycle changes due to warmer springs that cause mistiming/mismatches; the introduction of non-native pests and diseases that plants have no defences against; and native species moving to higher latitudes and altitudes to be cooler.

The Council has declared both climate and nature emergencies. Land management strategies that create protected habitats increase the likelihood that important species and habitats will endure and expand their range under climate change conditions. StreetScene has been committed with helping to mitigate climate change and the loss of a diverse range of flora and fauna by targeting biodiversity increases through the transition of suitable amenity green spaces to Wildlife Improvement areas.

StreetScene first transitioned amenity green spaces away from intensive grounds maintenance in 2010 to reduce carbon emissions from maintenance equipment and to improve biodiversity. The

number of these green spaces increased after the Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019, followed shortly after by a Nature Emergency, which manifested targets into an informal strategy to manage green spaces to improve wildlife, whilst balancing amenity access, use and enjoyment.

### **Strategic changes to current practices**

The number of Wildlife Improvement areas across the district remains low when compared with the number of regularly managed green spaces, notwithstanding plans, policies, strategies, and legislations that compel StreetScene to continue the former pace of the creation of Wildlife Improvement areas. However, continuing to add more Wildlife Improvement areas without addressing outstanding issues will create or exacerbate an imbalance for residents. The decision was therefore made by StreetScene management in 2024 that current Wildlife Improvement areas need to be better managed, maintained and monitored by grounds teams, contractors, volunteers, and Officers before other regularly maintained amenity green spaces, or sections therein, can be considered for transition to Wildlife Improvement. This will remain in place until a formal Wildlife Improvement policy provides an inclusive bridge between the district's residents and amenity green spaces that are designated for nature, and inclusive consultations with residents are coordinated by StreetScene's Parks and Gardens Officers (a two-Officer team made up of the Horticultural Technical Officer and the Parks and Open Spaces Improvement Officer) to understand residents' feelings about proposals, alongside their appreciation of the dual nature and climate crises. At such a time in the future, other sections of green spaces will be assessed and proposed for designation to Wildlife Improvement, in line with a formal policy to guide and oversee changes. To do this, ongoing consultations will be designed and implemented that assess residents' feelings about Wildlife Improvement at each stage, which will gauge the incremental successes of the long-term Communications strategy that is in development, as well as StreetScene's Parks and Gardens Officers' efforts to make Wildlife Improvement areas less dominated by grasses, more attractive (to residents, as much as to pollinators and associated fauna), and more engaging and educational.

### **Addressing residents' misconceptions**

A formal Wildlife Improvement Policy will help to address and redress many of East Devon's residents' expectations of Wildlife Improvement areas by inclusively engaging, informing, and educating them as to the reasoning for the creation and management of Wildlife Improvement areas. The implementation of a formal Wildlife Improvement policy will also help with residents' understanding of both the gravity of the situation and the urgency that changes must be made that protect our nature, our communities, and our future.

Implementing the above with combined strategies on the ground, in line with a formal policy, will help to systematically transform misconceptions about the Council's and StreetScene's intentions for establishing Wildlife Improvement areas, e.g., away from the conviction that Wildlife Improvement designations are a thinly veiled disguise for the Council to save money by reducing grounds maintenance.

The proposed Wildlife Improvement policy sets out ways to inform residents of the time and efforts involved in managing and maintaining Wildlife Improvement areas, such as the logistics of seasonally cutting, collecting, bailing and removing green waste from sites; grounds teams' efforts to scarify areas to reduce grass dominance and increase wildflower proportionality; Parks and Gardens Officers' sowing of wildflowers, including higher concentrations of yellow rattle; designing and installing signage for resident and visitor engagement; the mowing and strimming of boundary areas and paths through Wildlife Improvement areas by grounds teams; and Parks and Gardens Officers working with community groups and Countryside's Ecology Officers to survey and monitor the increasing diversity of flora and fauna in those areas, which Countryside can use to assist their habitat mapping and quantifying, to provide evidence of ongoing positive changes to habitat values.

### **Developing a Communications strategy**

A long-term Communications strategy is in development between Parks and Gardens Officers and the Council's Communications team, which is due to start engaging, informing, and educating

residents in numerous ways from the start of the growing season 2025. At the same time, a suite of new, more inclusive signage is being developed with Strata's Graphic Designer, with plans to install and promote the new signs at the start of the 2025 growing season.

The long-term Communications strategy aims to:

- embed the value of Wildlife Improvement areas in discerning residents.
- provide opportunities for other residents to help them to re-evaluate their reservations.
- increase the general levels of awareness of residents to enable them to develop informed attitudes towards and about Wildlife Improvement.
- encourage residents' further research into climate change mitigation, nature recovery, habitat improvement, and methods of increasing biodiversity.

The development of a communications strategy fits in with the ethos of the Council Plan 2024–2028, to *'...strengthen the ways in which we engage with you – our residents, businesses, visitors, and communities. We will do this by communicating openly and honestly, listening to your views, and developing new ways to work in partnership to improve our district.'*

### **Policy implementation**

Programmes of work will be developed to implement the proposed Wildlife Improvement policy, if adopted as a formal policy, and regularly reviewed and updated to improve practices. To do so, Wildlife Improvement areas will be visited during the year by Parks and Gardens Officers to assess how well maintenance activities are carried out by grounds teams, such as how well and how often boundary and through-paths are mown, and how appropriate this is for the look of amenity green spaces surrounding Wildlife Improvement areas, and how well residents can access, use and enjoy those green spaces. Management and maintenance plans will be revised to include changing characteristics and numbers of Wildlife Improvement areas to conform with StreetScene's biodiversity and climate change targets. These areas will be developed in line with collaboration with the Council's Communications team to create a clearly defined Communications strategy in multiple inclusive formats to increase residents' information for wider influence.

In addition, new and innovative management methods and maintenance equipment will be assessed/trialled with the aim of applying them to the future management and maintenance of StreetScene's Wildlife Improvement areas.

A formally adopted Wildlife Improvement policy will mandate the positive steps outline above, which are required initially and through each successive policy revision.

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### **Financial implications:**

"There are no direct financial implications resulting from the report."

### **Legal implications:**

"There are no substantive legal issues to be added to this report (ALW/002512/6/2/25)."