

COUNCIL

MEETING OF 24 OCTOBER 2023

AGENDA ITEM 8 – QUESTION (3) ASKED PURSUANT TO COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE NO 5.5

The following question has been asked pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 5.5 by Councillor G Hines:

‘Can the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Regeneration and Property confirm when a review of the performance of all sites being treated as roadside nature reserves including River Lawn, Tonbridge will be reviewed?’

Local members were assured that a review would take place this year, officers have confirmed that is not the case. Given the fact that no base line study was undertaken to establish the previous number of species in the sward of grass at River Lawn, contrary to the agreed process how can the success or otherwise of the ‘rewilding’ at River Lawn be measured?

The overwhelming impression is that the only species which is flourishing at River Lawn is Dock and there is no effective management in place to prevent it taking over.

Will the Cabinet Member agree with the local members for Judd Ward that the trial has been unsuccessful and the sensible next step will be to return to the previous schedule of regular cuts?’

Response of the Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Regeneration and Property (Cllr R Betts):

The potential for supporting biodiversity on this Council’s owned sites was assessed through rewilding, or a Roadside Nature Reserve (RNR), trial at Darenth Avenue, Tonbridge in 2021. The Medway Valley Countryside Partnership were commissioned to proactively monitor the site for species diversity and a report on the success of the trial was taken to Members of the former Communities and Housing Advisory Board on 9th November 2021. At this meeting it was also agreed that further sites be brought forward to Members of the Board for consideration and approval ,and the report proposed that it was not considered essential spend to continue with monitoring.

Further additional RNR sites across the Borough were approved by the same Advisory Board on 15th February 2022, and included Basted Mill (edging the road and picnic area), in East Malling, Leybourne, other Tonbridge sites, and at the Council offices at Kings Hill. These sites are maintained on the Council’s behalf by its grounds maintenance contractor, Landscape Services, in accordance with the maintenance schedule agreed at the Advisory Board and previously applied to the trial site at Darenth Avenue. River Lawn was also separately agreed to be managed as an RNR

and the same management approach has been applied to this site as for all other RNR's across the Borough.

The decision to include River Lawn as an RNR followed a report to the former Street Scene and Environment Advisory Board on 23 November 2021 where it was recommended to partially rewild the land in partnership with the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership. This was supported by the local members at the time.

No problems with maintenance have arisen at the sites and whilst no formal monitoring has taken place or been recorded, visual inspections have seen a growth in the range of species compared to normal amenity grass areas. Dock has certainly been prominent at River Lawn and whilst no formal control measures are currently in place, ad hoc mechanical removal of Dock has been undertaken by Leisure Services Officers.

Officers are not aware of any agreed monitoring or any previous requirement for a base line study at this or any other RNR site, with the exception of the original trial at Darenth Avenue.

Should members wish to introduce monitoring for RNR sites in the future then they will need to identify budget provision for this given this is not considered essential spend and no other request has been made on any of the Councils other RNR sites.