

Title of meeting: Culture, Leisure and Sport Decision Meeting

Subject: Urban Meadows in Portsmouth

Date of meeting: 8 December 2017

Report by: Director of Culture and City Development

Wards affected: All

1. Requested by

1.1 Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Sport.

2. Purpose

2.1 To update the Cabinet Member on the success of the introduction of pocket Urban Meadows across Portsmouth in 2017.

3. Information Requested

3.1 Background

- 3.1.1 For many years, the city council's Parks Service have run an 'In Bloom' campaign for residents, schools and businesses to participate in, which has comprised of a friendly competition for the best in category display or horticultural feature.
- 3.1.2 The event has traditionally been funded by sponsorship, with generous contributions from Portsmouth Water and COLAS. It was agreed with the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Sport and the sponsors to adopt a fresh approach to the promotion of sustainable horticultural and floral displays across the city.
- 3.1.3 Meadow and wildflower planting has become a popular way to enhance open space with high impact, long flowering displays, often in replacement of other more traditional grounds management such as intensive grass mowing, bedding or shrub beds, giving the following benefits:
- Improved water management (reducing water consumption associated to traditional bedding)

- Optimising resources (where more intensive maintenance would otherwise be required or access requirements be required to carry out that maintenance ie highways)
- Contributes to biodiversity, offering benefit to a variety of insects, small herbivores and birds and increasing pollinators in urban environments
- Enhancing the aesthetic value of greenspace amenities for residents and visitors

- 3.1.4 In the last year, there has been increased nationwide press coverage on the conclusion of studies into the rapid decline of butterflies in urban areas, with numbers reducing by 69% over the last 20 years compared to 45% in rural areas. Authors of the studies have attributed this decline to heightened effects of climate change in cities, building on urban greenspace, domestic lawns being paved over with hard surfaces and greater use of garden pesticides.
- 3.1.5 In 2016, there was a successful trial of meadow mix seeding in Milton Park and Stamshaw Park that gave a sustained display of poppies, cornflowers and cosmos for around 6 months duration.
- 3.1.6 In addition to being a colourful display, provided the seed mix contains native and naturalised species, meadow areas will boost nectar and pollen levels in the urban environment and be of benefit to wildlife such as bees and butterflies, in turn helping the pollination of other plants and local ecosystem.
- 3.1.7 A letter was sent to former 'In Bloom' participants to inform of the city council's change of approach and to improve the appearance of a greater number of public spaces by introducing more meadow flower areas across the city. This was also communicated via a press release and the city council website.
- 3.1.8 It is recognised and appreciated that many of the former entrants would continue to brighten the city with their own floral displays and that help enhance the city as a nicer place to live and work.

3.2 Introduction of Urban Meadows to open spaces

- 3.2.1 The Parks Team considered suitable greenspaces for the seeding of Urban Meadows, within the £4,500 budget available through the sponsorship of Portsmouth Water and COLAS. It was felt that greenspaces along the city's arterial routes would be highly visible to residents and visitors and these were to be a key feature.
- 3.2.2 Schools who had either participated in previous 'In Bloom' campaigns or are maintained by the Parks Service were invited to submit proposals of suitable areas for meadow areas within their sites. Space is quite often at a premium in school sites.
- 3.2.3 When former 'In Bloom' participants were informed of the wider use of meadow seeded areas in February 2017, they were given the opportunity to suggest good

locations that could be considered in addition to those identified by the Parks Team. The team received 17 communications in respect of this.

- 3.2.4 There is a distinction between the numerous urban meadow seed mixes that are readily available and native wildflower meadows. Seed mixes should be considered a colourful and ornamental display that still require annual management, and established and maintained using horticultural techniques. They are not a replacement for sustainable grassland management, such as at Portsdown Hill, Hilsea Lines and other local wildlife sites. Nutrient poor ground, such as shingle or chalk, produces species-rich grassland that is distinctive to the established area and adapted to the local climate and soils. These areas are of value to insects that use a limited number of native plants and the long-standing presence of wildflowers gives rise to a diverse grassland community. Wildflower meadows of a high conservation value do not look conventionally attractive for most of the year (as the dead stems remain and provide good overwintering sites for invertebrates).
- 3.2.5 An annual seed mix requires the ground to be prepared with the grass and pernicious weeds being sprayed off with herbicide and cultivated before the seed is sown. This is likely to result in the most colourful display, before the whole process is repeated the following year with new seed.
- 3.2.6 A perennial seed mix will reduce the need to re-seed each year and is more sustainable than annuals, but flowering tends not to be as flamboyant. These areas may also quickly become dominated by grass and weed species, unless a management and maintenance programme is implemented. There are some mixes that blend colourful flowering annuals, biennials and short term perennials that are possibly more suited to areas where natural vegetation is also required.
- 3.2.7 Parks had trialled a perennial seed mix in 2015 at Milton Park and Kingston Park. The Euroflor 'Rainbow Perennials' mix was used, as this can be expected to flower for successive years and has an extended flowering period from June to September. It was considered to produce mixed results. Despite the necessary preparation being carried out, the areas became infested with annual weed growth, which smothered some of the flowers and required hand weeding. The floral display was not as prominent as had been expected and having been monitored in 2016 and 2017, the subsequent displays have disappointed. Perennial mix is approximately double the price of an annual mix and recommended to receive further over-seeding of weak areas. Given the results of the 2016 trial of an annual mix, this was considered preferable to using further perennial mixes for wider use across the city.
- 3.2.8 The Euroflor annual seed mixes, supplied by Rigby Taylor, in 2017 were:
- 'Rainbow Annual' mix - establishes from early season, displaying bright colours at a height of approximately 600mm
 - 'Sarah Bouquet' mix - designed to achieve maximum biodiversity, with pastel shades avoiding the dominance of bright flowers, growing to a height of approximately 1m

Both of these mixes are recommended under the Royal Horticultural Society 'Perfect for Pollinators' scheme.

A further mix of 'Discovery Box' was used at one site, as it contains both annual and perennial seed, as a further trial of a longer lasting mix.

3.2.9 Following review of suitable open spaces for sowing seed, and consideration of the available budget, the following sites were chosen in 2017:

- Collington Crescent, Paulsgrove (*RA, SB, DB*)
- Hempsted Green, Paulsgrove (*RA, SB*)
- Portsmouth Road, Cosham (*RA*)
- Mills Road, Stamshaw (*RA*)
- Lake Road, Landport (*RA*)
- Milton Park, Milton (*RA*)
- Queen Street, Portsea (*RA*)
- Clarendon Gardens, Southsea (*SB*)
- Cumberland House Garden, Southsea (*RA*)

The schools with suitable sites were:

- Cottage Grove Primary School (*RA*)
- Flying Bull Primary School (*SB*)
- Highbury Primary School (*RA*)
- Langstone Infants School (*RA*)
- Priory School (*SB*)

Key: (*RA*) *Rainbow Annual*, (*SB*) *Sarah Bouquet*, (*DB*) *Discovery Box*

There was a late request for College Park to be included, so did not receive the usual preparation and only a small area was sown.

3.2.10 Sites were sown in April and early-May by the in-house grounds maintenance team and ISS Facility Services (schools and those sites in the west of the city). The sowing rate was 4 grams/m², which is 1 gram more than the recommended rate.

3.2.11 Wind in the Willows Nursery located in Locksway Road paid for an additional area at St James Green. The Parks Team met with children to mark out the designated areas and who were later involved with the sowing of the seed, with the school making regular visits throughout the summer to monitor progress.

3.2.12 All sites had small information boards erected on posts to explain why the areas had been cultivated and the benefits the flowers would bring to the inner city environment.

3.2.13 This year's displays coincided with two other developments undertaken by Cultural Services:

- Opening of the new Waterfront Garden Centre at Avenue de Caen, Southsea where Rigby Taylor supplied 100 free packets of the 'Sarah Bouquet' mix to the first customers and enough for the recipient to sow an area of 3m² in their own garden (June)
- Opening of the new Butterfly House at Cumberland House Natural History Museum (August)

3.3 Outcomes and learning

3.3.1 All sites were monitored between June to September, with photographic records being taken of the displays. The outcomes and learning of this year's sowing were:

- Meadow seeds thrive best in low nutrient soils
- The annual mix planted at Stamshaw Park in 2016 was not over-seeded but established again this year, with poppies the dominant flower giving a good display for around 3 weeks, after which there was nothing of substance. This confirms the view that where areas have been established, new seed is required annually to give an impressive display, rather than be overtaken with weeds
- The areas sown in April required irrigation a number of times due to the very dry conditions, leading to additional costs, funded by the Parks Team. As the weather can be unpredictable at this time of year, a prolonged dry spell will cause resource issues, particularly if the number of areas are extended in future years
- Display of areas sown in early-May peaked in the mid-summer period, whereas those sown in April were slightly past their best at this stage
- The 'Rainbow Annual' mix at Queen Street looked stunning in June, fading off towards the end of July, with a resurgence of colour in August. Whilst dependent on the varieties of flower each coming into prominence, it is thought the use of the existing grass mound may have resulted in slightly drier growing conditions
- Planting in areas subject to shade should be avoided, with Lake Road highlighting the difference in quality of display along its length, relative to exposure to sunlight
- The planting at Clarendon Gardens, a slightly damp site, saw the height of display exceed expectations to well over 1m and 'went over' slightly in the summer
- The only vandalism observed was at Clarendon Gardens and Lake Road, with displays mostly left to flourish
- The information boards, secured only by a driven stake, largely remained in place
- Appendix A gives a sample of the displays across the city throughout the year

This Item is for Information Only

- 3.3.2 The Urban Meadows have been well received by residents and visitors, with the Parks Team receiving regular verbal, emailed and written compliments and feedback, as well as social media proving a popular way for residents and visitors to share images.

- 3.3.3 Subject to retaining the sponsorship of Portsmouth Water and COLAS, it is proposed to repeat the sowing of an equivalent total area across selected city sites in 2018. The sites will be reviewed, with amendments likely to consider a slight reduction in the extent of planting to some areas, so that additional sites can be sown. Additional sponsorship will be sought.

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Signed by:
Stephen Baily
Director of Culture and City Development

Appendices:
Appendix A: Photographic record of Portsmouth's Urban Meadows in 2017

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location