Deputation from Portsmouth Friends of the Earth to Portsmouth City Council Traffic, Environment & Community Safety Scrutiny Panel - 25th January, 2022

Thank you for inviting Portsmouth Friends of the Earth (PFOE) to talk to this Scrutiny Panel Review of Biodiversity Enhancement in Urban Portsmouth.

1. Preamble

PFOE is a small group of local volunteers who campaign to improve the environment both here in Portsmouth and globally. Past campaigns have included Bees, Clean Air, Walkability and Double Tree Cover. Our current campaigns concern Climate Action, Streets for People and Nature Everywhere. We have organised well over twenty community walks, several bike rides and three public meetings to raise awareness of these issues, and have fed back our comments and suggestions to the Council on numerous occasions. Our walks and bike rides have included visits to community gardens, 'urban meadows' and most of our city's green spaces, as well as exploring streets in all corners of our city.

PFOE members were pleased to be given the opportunity to contribute their views on the Council's Greening Portsmouth Strategy, adopted in March 2020. We are delighted to see that a recent progress report on the first year of this Strategy (2020 – 2021) states that 31 new wildflower urban meadow sites and 788 new trees were planted and 17 new rewilding and natural grassland sites created. We hope this good progress continues and extends to the many other initiatives highlighted in the Green Infrastructure Background Paper to the draft Local Plan eg hedges, green roofs, green walls, pocket parks and parklets.

Our walks and bike rides have highlighted the work of the Wildlife Trust's 'Waste of Space' and 'Wilder Portsmouth' campaigns, Portsmouth & Southsea Tree Wardens, the Charles Dickens Community Orchard Trail, Portsmouth Incredible Edible, and the many community and school gardening and rewilding initiatives across our city that are making a tremendous difference in greening our grey streets and bring people in touch with nature.

We know from our experience that local residents are unaware of many of the wonderfully diverse range of habitats that are scattered around the edges of our city. Our meanderings along many kilometres of our streets have included many delights including an abundance of plants growing in the smallest of forecourts, tree pits filled with flowers; planters filled with herbs and vegetables; pot plants and hanging baskets outside a variety of local businesses; and glorious patches of buttercups and daffodils next to blocks of flats and garages. We have also observed that large number of garden forecourts and tree pits that are completely covered with tarmac or concrete and that many wild plants have been sprayed or pulled up (*See Figure 1)*

Figure 1: Contrasting tree pits

2. The importance of cities for biodiversity

In the last three decades there has been a paradigm shift in the way in which scientists study biodiversity in cities. They have realised that the cities are an entire ecosystem. Our homes, gardens and streets are part of this urban ecology. The abundance of tarmac and concrete surfaces in cities leads to flooding when it rains and higher temperatures than the surrounding area. Cities contain a mosaic of habitats and for this reason are likely to have greater biodiversity than an equivalent area of countryside. Portsmouth has a huge range of habitats given its size (40.1 sq km) (*see Figure 1*). This needs celebrating.

Priority habitat	Extent (ha)
Grasslands	
Lowland Calcareous Grassland	55
Lowland Dry Acid Grassland	7
Lowland Meadows	20
Woodland, wood-pasture and parkland	
Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland	8
Wet Woodland	1
Wood Pasture and Parkland	10
Arable, orchards and hedgerows	
Hedgerows	66 (km)
Wetlands	
Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh	83
Reedbeds	21
Coastal	
Coastal Saltmarsh and Intertidal mudflats	58 & 1124
Coastal Sand dunes	0.3
Coastal Vegetated Shingle	25.7
Saline lagoons	3.6
Marine	
Seagrass beds	3.3
Total:	1,416

Figure 2 – List of Priority Habitats in Portsmouth [Source: Biodiversity and Portsmouth Background Paper 2019]

3. The importance of forecourts, backyards and streets for biodiversity

Recent studies have revealed that the biodiversity to be found in urban private gardens is significant. Small gardens can offer a broad range of microclimates and plant species and

may provide habitats, such as ponds, that are increasingly rare elsewhere. One of the most significant large-scale studies of biodiversity in urban gardens revealed that:

> "*Plant diversity is both vastly higher within gardens and across gardens than in any other UK habitat" [Biodiversity in Urban Gardens in Sheffield (BUGS)]*

The BUGS study showed that the biodiversity of private gardens was important because:

- private gardens account for a significant percentage of the area of cities [17.7% in the case of Portsmouth]
- there are a large number of private gardens in cities [there are 89,800 homes in Portsmouth, 52,882 of which are owner-occupied. Many will have backyards and/or forecourts.]
- because gardens are so small the vast number of habitats has a significant effect on biodiversity at a city scale.

Figures 3 and 4 below show the fragmented nature of Portsmouth's green spaces and the significant area covered by private gardens.

Figure 3: Map of Portsmouth's open spaces

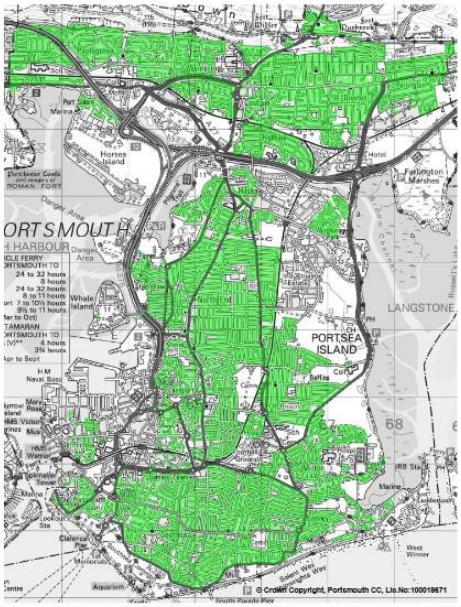

Figure 4.1: Coverage of the city by private gardens, note these will not necessarily all represent green infrastructure.

Figure 4: Map of Portsmouth's private gardens

According to PCC's Assessment of Tree Cover 31% of Portsmouth's trees are in private gardens. In some wards the percentage is even higher: Central Southsea 74%; Eastney & Craneswater 55%; St Jude's 49% and Drayton & Farlington 48%.

MoreThan Just Weeds surveyed of one Lambeth (London) street which had 'opted out' of glyphosate spraying and identified 47 plant species growing along walls, railings and in

tree pits. There are 8500 trees in Portsmouth's streets – that's a lot of tree pits that could have plants growing in them.

These studies suggest that the amount of biodiversity in Portsmouth will be affected to a significant extent, both positively and negatively, by even tiny changes in private garden forecourts and backyards and street tree pits as there are so many of them.

It is PFOE's view that PCC's policies and strategies need to acknowledge the important contribution of private gardens and streets for biodiversity in our city and celebrate the plants, insects and birds to be found in these spaces. Good practice information needs to be made readily available to Portsmouth residents and businesses because the choices made by individuals in their private space have an impact on our city's ecology.

4. The importance of soil

The importance of soils to biodiversity has been overlooked for far too long. Soils are home to ¼ of all living species on earth. Amongst other things, they are home to worms, ants, woodlice, springtails, spiders, slugs, mites, crickets, earwigs, moles, fungi and bacteria. Soil, together with the plants growing in it, provides important environmental services for our urban ecology. It improves drainage, acts as a carbon sink, and helps cool our city. Whilst many of the creatures living in the soil are so small they are hidden to us, a huge number of insects , birds and mammals depend on them for food [Soil Association, Saving Our Soils – Healthy soils for our climate, nature and health]. Portsmouth, in common with most other cities, has covered one of its most important habitats – soil - with a great deal of concrete, tarmac, paving slabs and artificial grass. Whilst growing plants in pots and planters increases plant diversity, uncovering small patches of earth - the soil in the ground - provides places for creatures to burrow and allows ground dwellers such as worms to access food on the surface. Even the smallest patches are sufficient for a variety of plants to grow. Plants in the ground need less care than those in pots as their roots have more space, are less likely to get waterlogged in winter and to need constant feeding and watering in summer [Time to give up the pot]. Soil in the ground holds more worms which will mean more birds and small mammals. PFOE members suggest that very small changes in forecourts and backyards, such as lifting one 60 cm x 60 cm paving slab to reveal the soil beneath and allowing plants to grow, will have a beneficial effect on biodiversity levels in Portsmouth. Removing the tarmac from around street tree-pits would also be beneficial. Many small changes add up.

5. The importance of weeds or wild plants

Weeds, or wild-pants, are important for biodiversity because they have evolved to support a broad range of native species. ¾ of British insects can only feed on certain wild plants and if these not available the insects disappear. The more insects we have, the more birds and small mammals. Some 'weeds' that we commonly remove are in fact good for a very wide range of insects. For example, dandelion flowers support many different pollinators: bumblebees, honeybees, solitary bees, butterflies, beetles etc. Dandelion seeds are eaten by many different birds including goldfinches, bullfinches, house sparrows and linnets. Buttercups support a vast array of different insect species, including bees, flies, wasps and

beetles. Chickweed is known to support over 80 insects from beetles to moths. Many attractive native wild plants are ideally suited to Portsmouth habitats because they have grown in this area for hundreds of years. They are able to flourish without any input from gardeners and support a broad range of wildlife. Allowing corners of gardens and streets to host a few 'weeds' or native wild plants would make a significant contribution to biodiversity in our city.

6. Suggestions for enhancing biodiversity in Portsmouth

PCC's Scrutiny Panel is a welcome start to identifying further ways in which to enhance biodiversity. PFOE members would like to make a number of suggestions.

i. **Develop a public communications strategy to raise awareness about 'Natural Portsmouth'**: The extraordinary variety of natural habitats and SSIs in our city should be celebrated as should the biodiversity in our parks, verges, streets, forecourts and backyards. Local residents and businesses need to understand the importance of our private garden forecourts and backyards for nature and the whole urban ecosystem in which we live.

ii. **Provide information about wild-life friendly(ish) surfaces for forecourts, drives and backyards**

Many of Portsmouth's forecourts, drives and backyards are covered with surfaces such as tarmac, concrete, paving slabs and artificial turf. The huge number of cars in our city means that many forecourts are used for parking. Pressure to turn even more forecourts into parking places is likely to increase with the demand for electric car charging facilities. The best way to enable front gardens and forecourts to become greener is to significantly increase the number of households they no longer need a car because there is safe active travel infrastructure and convenient, reliable and affordable public transport. Where local residents and businesses are considering whether to make changes to their forecourt, backyard or driveway surface, they should have easy access to information about (more) wild-life friendly approaches eg:

- The Wildlife Trust suggests that where a surfaced area is needed, gravel is the best alternative for supporting wildlife. 'How to make a gravel garden for wildlife'
- It is possible to grow plants under parked cars if the car is moved fairly often. The RHS recommends growing creeping jenny, bugle and thymes in planting pockets left in the hard surface. Otherwise, the best places to expose the soil are corners and edges.
- If concreting or paving leave a strip or small patches of soil uncovered so that plants can grow in the ground. Not only will this help creatures that live in the ground, this will provide more root space for plants than pots and planters resulting in sturdier plants without endless watering and fertiliser. [Time to give up the pot].
- Covering our soil blocks access to the soil beneath for burrowing insects and the ground above for soil dwellers such as worms, which will be starved of food. Artificial grass is bad for wildlife and leads to microplastics entering the soil.

iv **Review working practices in our streets and verges to improve biodiversity**

We recommend that PCC should ask Colas to:

- stop putting tarmac over street tree pits right up to the tree stump
- remove tarmac from tree pits
- stop killing weeds in tree pits unless an obvious trip hazard

When changes are made to street layouts eg new modal filters or build outs, these changes provide an opportunity for leaving a small unpaved area which could be planted with shrubs and flowers. This decision needs to be made at the time the street layout is changed, so it is essential that Transport and Planning Officers liaise about this potential well in advance or opportunities to green our streets will be missed.

PFOE strongly supports an experimental approach to increasing biodiversity in our streets. We are pleased to see that Colas' has agreed to experiment with removing occasional paving slabs to plant wildflowers where these would not be a trip hazard. PCC Parks and Gardens are already experimenting with different mowing regimes for our verges and have agreed to experiment with planting wildflowers along the fence next to Wimbledon Park. This is terrific. We suggest that small signs should be placed nearby in the ground or on a lamp post to explain why these experiments are happening.

v **Support small scale actions to increase biodiversity in forecourts and tree-pits**

- We love the HIWWT Wilder Portsmouth signs. Simple signs such as the words 'Weeds Feed Bees' would also help change public attitudes to weeds in front gardens and elsewhere. Perhaps children could make these at school and take them home to put in their garden?
- Could a 'lift a slab' campaign be developed to encourage as many people as possible to lift one 60 cm x 60 cm paving slab in their forecourt or backyard?
- There are many examples of tree pits that have been planted with flowers by Portsmouth residents. It would be good to encourage more residents to adopt a tree-pit. Where weeds take over we recommend that these are left to flourish and are not killed.
- In some countries there are 'adopt a tree pit' schemes, which provide information about suitable plants for growing in the space:

- Photographs are a great way for sharing and recording ways in which our streets transform into wildlife corridors. Perhaps residents, schools and others could be encouraged to record changes in their streets?

7. Funding

It may be possible to use money for flood risk reduction to fund some depaving and rainwater garden initiatives. See for example Grey to Green Sheffield , London Sustainable Urban Drainage Strategy and Lowden Road Traffic Island Rain Garden. The latter was created using funds to reduce the risk of flash flooding. Paving slabs were removed from a traffic island and replaced with rain gardens in all three corners. The gardens absorb rainwater that runs off the road.

When the Environment Bill comes into force all new developments will be required to demonstration 'a netgain in biodiversity' including 'connectivity'. Perhaps monies will become available as Defra specifically mentions trees and green corridors.