

Rewilding by North Somerset Council

Frequently Asked Questions

- **Why are you doing rewilding?**

The decline in insects and birds across the UK has been well documented. Pollinators, in particular, are suffering due to decline in habitat. Bird species are declining through reduction in nesting areas and their food sources of seeds and insects.

In February 2019 the Council declared a climate change emergency and we are actively seeking ways to become carbon neutral by 2030.

The idea of rewilding our urban areas goes hand in hand with this. Providing more tree canopy coverage across the region will help offset our carbon footprint. Trees provide a habitat for a wide range of wildlife providing both food and shelter.

Introducing areas of tall grass will provide a number of benefits for insects, birds and mammals such as shelter and a place to hunt, feed and breed.

Reducing the time spent cutting grass will also reduce our carbon footprint.

In order to maximise these biodiversity benefits we are rewilding parts of our parks and open spaces where we cut the grass regularly. This regular mowing means these sites have the least variety of wildlife (biodiversity) so rewilding them will make a significant change to this enabling more plants, insects, birds and mammals to flourish. Leaving the grass to grow tall enables both grasses and wildflowers in the sward to reach their potential by enabling flowering and seeding.

It is important to note that tall grass species are just as important for wildlife as wildflowers

- **How much of the parks and open spaces are you rewilding?**

We currently manage 254 hectares of amenity grass in our parks and open spaces and our current plans have identified 67 hectares for rewilding. This includes 26 hectares of tree planting and 41 hectares of tall grass.

Our current plans mean that we will be changing the management of 26 % of our parks and open spaces.

- **How did you inform people about rewilding?**

We ran a district wide consultation from November 2019 - January 2020. As part of this we released 3 press releases, including coverage in 3 North Somerset Life magazines. The local papers ran the story multiple times within their printed editions and social media pages. NSC also published it on their own social media pages a number of times, and we had posters in the libraries.

We also circulated information with a number of different organisations including all Town and Parish Councils and local volunteer groups and asked them to share this with their wider networks as well.

We have responded to feedback that not everyone knew about our rewilding this so we will be placing signs at locations where we are proposing to introduce rewilding. These signs will direct people to the Council's website to learn more about the proposals.

- **What can I do if I don't agree with rewilding?**

The consultation we held from November 2019 to January enabled residents to highlight concerns they had with areas we had proposed for rewilding.

If these concerns demonstrated a clear reason for an area to be excluded, then we have done so. We have also been working with resident and other groups this year to work through some of the other highlighted concerns.

In the future we will be informing residents in advance of areas that will be rewilded with signage on site.

If you do have any concerns, please contact the Council using the information provided on the signage.

- **Why did you choose to rewild these areas of open space?**

We are rewilding our amenity grass. Amenity grass covers most of our parks and open spaces and it is the grass we cut on a regular cycle of about 12-15 days.

This is our biggest landholding and least biodiverse land so changing the management of this land stands to make the biggest impact for wildlife.

- **Will the rewilding of grass areas create lots of flowers?**

We agree that flower meadows do look lovely. However, they are expensive to establish, and they are labour intensive to manage.

On the other hand, tall grass provides huge benefits to wildlife including; providing seed heads, pollen, shade, areas to hide/hunt/reproduce and areas maintaining moisture which is important for amphibians. As such the overall gain is very similar. More information is available on the website.

We will be monitoring our rewilded areas and will adapt our management to support wildflowers where we identify them growing naturally.

- **Will rewilded areas look untidy?**

We think this is a matter of personal taste.

We also recognise that this change to our traditional management of blanket mowing might take time to get used to. We hope that in future we will all be able to appreciate the colour variation and wildlife value of tall grass.

We are mowing edges and paths through areas to illustrate we are still actively maintaining this land.

Please also remember that approx. 180 hectares of our land is still being managed as amenity grass.

- **Will the rewilded areas attract vermin and ticks?**

Rats are part of the natural environment and are present in most locations. Tall grass and tree planting areas will not attract them any more than existing hedge rows and other vegetation. For populations to exist a constant food source must be present and tall grass and tree planting do not provide this.

Ticks are also part of the natural environment, but for them to proliferate a contributing host (such as deer) have to be present regularly. In most of our urban areas populations of both host animals and ticks in general are low. There will also be mown areas at all locations, so you do not need to enter tall grass areas if you do not wish to.

- **Will rewilded areas attract rubbish and dog mess**

Rewilding does not stop residents from still being responsible for not dropping litter or picking up after their dogs. Tall grass is not an adequate reason or excuse not to do so.

We will litter pick areas before we mow the grass at the end of the season.

- **How will you manage the tall grass?**

The grass will be cut once at the end of the growing season during September-October (exact timing will be dependent on the weather). Most places will be cut using a machine called a flail towed on the back of a tractor or situated on the front of a ride on mower. This equipment cuts the grass into lots of small pieces.

In a few locations we will cut and collect the grass. These areas will be chosen if they are particularly good for wildflowers because removing the cuttings will make the soil less fertile which is what wildflowers need to flourish.

- **How will you manage the trees?**

We will be working with volunteers to look after the newly planted trees to help weed and mulch them, keep them upright and renew the spiral protection as necessary.

During the early years the trees will be mulched. This suppresses weed growth helping the trees to establish quicker.

This type of tree planting (using small trees called 'whips') means that not all trees will get established and we expect a number to die (see answer below for more information).

Once the trees start to get established (about 10 years onwards) we will thin areas out to enable the stronger specimens to grow.

- **Will you return to previous years planting sites to replace trees that have died?**

We have assessed the areas that have been planted and have found, that despite a difficult growing year, most sites have established well.

We do expect a number of trees to die because of weather conditions, pests and diseases and the general rough and tumble of open space use.

Some limited sites have suffered more than others, at these sites it would seem people have damaged or removed trees that have been planted.

We will consider beating up some of these areas, we will advertise sessions for these separately. Some of the sites we will need to carry out weeding and

mulching, again we will be looking at some additional volunteers sessions for these.

- **Will volunteer sessions be COVID secure**

Due to ongoing restrictions relating to group sizes and ensuring that social distancing can be maintained on site we will be limiting numbers this year. To achieve this for this winter's sessions we will be using Eventbrite to enable attendees to pre-register.

Unfortunately, this does mean that you will not be able to attend a session unless you have pre-booked.

It will also mean that whilst we look for an alternative booking system that meets all our needs to conform to our health and safety requirements you will need to sign into each session individually. We will also require you to provide some basic information in relation to our H&S and Insurance terms.

We will also not be able to provide equipment to ensure we are keeping everybody as safe as possible. So, you will need gloves and a spade. We also recommend that you bring hand sanitiser to the session.

A risk assessment will also be available for each session which you will need to read and agree to.

- **Why are you using plastic spirals on the trees?**

These guards are important in helping to get these small and vulnerable trees established. They help to stop animals from nibbling on them, but more importantly they make the trees visible to people and contractors, so they don't accidentally get trodden on.

We will be removing these in 3-5 years once the trees are established.

- **What was the selection criteria for tree species?**

The trees are being supplied by the Woodland Trust for free and we have worked with them to enable us to plant only native trees, grown in the UK.

- **Do you water the trees?**

It is not normal practice to water whips because of the costs involved. It is normal to expect some to fail and this is factored into the overall large number that you plant.

- **How will I know which sites are going to be rewilded (grass and trees)?**

Following the feedback from previous rewilding we will be putting signs up, in advance, on the open spaces where rewilding will take place.

These signs will link to more information on our website including a map.

- **How can I volunteer to help with rewilding?**

We actively invite volunteers to be involved. We have approx. 300 people that have already asked to be involved and we will be circulating information to all volunteers going forward. We will be looking for help with tree management, surveys and possible improving tall grass areas (seeding/plug planting/raking and removing cuttings). This will also include training on how to look after the areas after planning.

We will also be looking for champions to help with ongoing care and leading future sessions.

Please keep up to date with opportunities via our Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/natureandclimatenorthsomerset>

- **Why are you not rewilding private land?**

This is not the current objective of the Council's rewilding project which is to rewild as much as our land as possible which is a significant task in itself.

We also do not have the resources to approach private landowners or have any powers to influence them. We are working on a green infrastructure strategy which will include ways to work in partnership with other organisations and landowners.

- **Are you doing rewilding just to save money?**

Rewilding is about improving biodiversity to help address the significant decline in species that is currently happening.