

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet – 8th October 2024

Review of Town Centre Floral Arrangements

Accountable member:

Councillor Izaak Tailford - Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Public Realm

Accountable officer:

Adam Reynolds - Green Space Manager

Ward(s) affected:

N/A

Key Decision: No

Executive summary:

The Council has a long tradition of planting its central green spaces with seasonal bedding plants in the Spring and Summer, as well as installing hanging baskets and window boxes through high footfall areas of the town centre during the summer.

The Council declared a Climate emergency in 2019 and carried a motion earlier this year declaring recognition of the nature emergency and committing, amongst other things, to embed nature's recovery at the heart of all strategic plans, policy areas and decision-making processes.

This report considers the suitability of the current planting strategy in the town centre against these wider corporate and national priorities, and takes into account the savings target set by the Council from its environmental maintenance activities to achieve a balanced budget.

Current planting practices utilise seasonal plants that are not considered favourable in terms of their production costs, benefit to nature, and intensive maintenance requirements.

Recommendations: That Cabinet:

- 1. approves the introduction of an alternative, and permanent perennial-based planting scheme on the Long Gardens;**
 - 2. approves the retention of the existing annual bedding-based planting scheme on Imperial Gardens;**
 - 3. approves the reduction of the number of hanging basket put out in the town from three hundred and six to one hundred (including removing from the municipal offices), and to focus them in the centre of the town to gain maximum effect with minimum maintenance**
 - 4. agrees to eliminate all window boxes from the Town Hall and Municipal Offices**
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1. Implications

1.1 Financial, Property and Asset implications

The Council will continue to manage its green space assets in an attractive, but more cost-efficient way.

Signed off by: Ela Jankowska, ela.jankowska@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.2 Legal implications

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Changes to the grounds maintenance provisions of the Ubico contract will be required in accordance with the change control provisions within the contract.

Signed off by: One Legal, legal.services@onelegal.com

1.3 Environmental and climate change implications

Perennial schemes utilise less water and energy in their production and maintenance. They are far more beneficial to pollinating insects, and contribute to the recovery of nature by maximising the use of the urban green space network. The Climate Assessment Summary Report is attached to this report as Appendix 2.

Signed off by: Maizy McCann, maizy.mccann@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.4 Corporate Plan Priorities

The importance of tackling climate change within Cheltenham is highlighted within the Cheltenham Corporate Plan 2023-2027 which sets out priority objectives for the attainment of carbon-neutrality by 2030. The Corporate Plan, in conjunction with the Climate Impact Assessment Tool can be used collaboratively to ensure the effective delivery of a cleaner, greener and carbon neutral Cheltenham by 2030.

1.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

The change will have little or no impact.

2 Background

- 2.4 Cheltenham has a proud reputation for high standards of horticultural maintenance and is often referred to as a “town within a park”.
- 2.5 In 2017, the then cabinet approved a recommendation to start replacing seasonal bedding plant schemes with permanent perennial schemes apart from Imperial Gardens and the Long Gardens. This has largely been accomplished with the introduction of many successful planting schemes throughout the town’s parks and green spaces. The response to which has been overwhelmingly positive.
- 2.6 In July 2019 Cheltenham Borough Council declared a climate emergency. In doing so, Members agreed that greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced to a level which is compatible with keeping global warming below 1.5C above pre-industrial levels. To achieve this reduction, the Council has prepared a Climate Change Strategy (2019) and adopted a target of becoming carbon neutral in its own activities by 2030.
- 2.7 The Cheltenham Borough Council Climate Impact Assessment Tool has been utilised to consider the climate impact of the current bedding, and hanging basket operation and the summary report forms Appendix 2 of this report.

3 Climate Impacts

- 3.1 Bedding plants are categorised into Spring and Summer and planted out twice per year, with the old plants dug up and new ones planted in May/June and September/October of each year. The plants cannot be reused and are disposed of by transporting to an allotment site where they are composted. There are approximately 16000 plants bedded out in Imperial Gardens each year and 14000 in the Long Gardens. There are 306 hanging baskets (including the Municipal Offices) and 96 window boxes on the Town Hall and Municipal Offices. The life cycle of a bedding plant is effectively over within one year, which means a large amount of energy is required to germinate 30,000 plants from seed and have them reach full maturity within six months.
- 3.2 During their production they are sown by specialist seed companies who then sell and transport them to specialist nurseries who grow them on in heated greenhouses ready for transportation to customers. Throughout this process they will require continual heat and water to ensure optimal growing conditions.
- 3.3 Once delivered to Cheltenham they will be planted out after which continual watering will be required during summer months to keep them in a healthy and colourful condition. Mains water is used to undertake this.

4 Biodiversity and Nature Impacts

- 4.1 Seasonal Bedding plants have been bred and developed over the years to produce colourful and double headed flowers in order to achieve bright and intensive displays of colour. The result of this in many cases is that little pollen is available to insects and is not easily accessible because of the density of the flowering heads. This is not true of all bedding plants, but generally the ones that are favoured for high impact colour.

5 Maintenance Considerations

5.1 Seasonal bedding schemes, hanging baskets and window troughs require intensive maintenance to produce immaculate displays of colour. This entails having them being dug up and replanted and the ground prepared twice per annum, and in the case of baskets and window boxes transported to our contract grower in south Wales where they are planted, grown on, and transported back to Cheltenham, Continuous watering and dead heading is required to each plant throughout the summer. Failure to undertake watering can quickly lead to wilting and plant loss, so the process has to be kept going at the expense of other desirable activities. Bedding plants are not robust and any that are damaged or squashed generally do not recover, and need replacing.

6 Reasons for recommendations

6.1 Perennial planting represents a style of planting that is better aligned to the Council's climate change aspirations. The planting is largely permanent, and the energy/resources associated with producing and maintaining them is significantly reduced. Some of the plants can be dug up and split over winter to fill gaps or used elsewhere. The water consumption of baskets and window boxes is considerable during the growing season despite the use of self watering containers, as the plants are reliant on continual manual irrigation from a bowser.

6.2 Perennial planting is more beneficial for biodiversity, in particular pollinating insects. The plants are better suited to assist with nature recovery and will help to strengthen the urban habitat by linking green spaces and creating pathways for wildlife and insect to move through the built environment. There is a greater variety of plant material to choose from to provide pollen and nectar sources from early spring to early autumn.

6.3 The change in planting style and reduction in baskets and window boxes will generate annual savings, as set out below, towards the Council target of £500K reduction in spending on environmental services. Following the introduction of the new planting schemes and the smaller number of hanging baskets which will require watering, Ubico will review resource requirements, in conjunction with the digitisation of grounds maintenance services, to identify any time savings which can be realised or diverted to other parts of the service.

Long Garden perennial scheme – plant costs	£14,500
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Reduction of Hanging Basket and Window Boxes	£28,500
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Reduced water consumption estimated up to	£5000
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6.4 Alternative forms of perennial planting have been successfully utilised elsewhere in the town over the past seven years in place of seasonal bedding plants, and feedback has been extremely positive. Making a similar change in the Long Gardens represents the next logical step in the development of Cheltenham's green spaces as well as setting a good example of horticultural practice in a high profile location.

6.5 Ubico grounds maintenance teams have gained sufficient horticultural skill and

experience over the past seven years in order to maintain the proposed new perennial planting to a high standard.

6.6 The same proposal is not proposed for Imperial Garden as the site is utilised for the annual Science Festival in June and Ice rink between November and January. During this time the planting beds are largely covered with event structures making it impossible to establish perennial plants. The planting of seasonal summer bedding plants in July followed by spring plants in February is the only viable planting strategy in this location and will preserve one show piece location for this style of planting in Cheltenham.

6.7 The 95 Cheltenham BID baskets and troughs do not form part of this proposal.

7 Alternative options considered.

7.1 Grassing over the beds would yield larger savings, but damage Cheltenham's horticultural and landscape reputation. There would be no biodiversity gain.

8 Consultation and feedback

8.1 Customer feedback from schemes created in Pittville, Sandford Park, Berkeley and Oxford and Priory Gardens have been extremely positive, as has the response from green space volunteers. Sandford Park was the most recent park to achieve the prestigious national Green Flag Park award in 2022 following the introduction of extensive perennial planting to the Unwins Fountain, and new LINC Garden.

9 Next Steps

9.1 If approved the Council's Green Space Team will devise a planting plan utilising a mixture of herbaceous perennials, evergreen shrubs, grasses and bulbs to create a scheme that maximises both the length of sensory interest, and benefit to pollinating insects.

9.2 Temporary information panels will be displayed on the Long Gardens explaining the proposed new arrangement whilst adjustments are made to the bed pattern to accommodate the new scheme which it is envisaged will be planted in early Spring 2025.

9.3 Adjustments will be made to the nursery contract to reduce seasonal bedding, baskets and containers.

9.4 It is proposed that the remaining 100 baskets be utilised in the town centre to strengthen the urban habitat by linking existing perennial planting schemes between Clarence Fountain, Cambray Place, and John Lewis. Where possible hanging baskets will be planted with flower varieties with open single flower heads that benefit pollinating insects. Spreading them thinly across the entire town will not yield the required saving and have very little visual impact.

9.5 Officers will continue to work with Ubico to review grass management, and alternative maintenance regimes that may generate further savings as part of the review referred to in 6.3 of the report.

10 Key risks

10.1 None

Report author:

Adam Reynolds – Green Space Manager 01242 264260

Email: adam.reynolds@cheltenham.gov.uk

Appendices:

1. Risk Assessment
2. Climate Change Assessment Tool Summary

Appendix 2 – Climate Impact Assessment Tool Summary Report

Perennial Planting in Long Gardens and reduction of Hanging B



Key

	Significant and/or long-term positive impact identified. No changes needed.
	Slight or short-term positive impact identified. No changes needed but could be reviewed to improve.
	Not applicable or no cause for concern.
	Slight or short-term negative impact identified. Review to identify possible improvements.
	Significant and/or long-term negative impact identified. Changes needed before proceeding.

This summary of the CIAT should be used to aid your decision making. Please note that red/amber segments simply mean that mitigations and changes should take place not that the project cannot go ahead.

Environmental	Scores	Justification	Recommendation
GHGs	2	Once the planting scheme has been transitioned to perennials the reductions in resources used to produce and maintain the annual plants will be saved in all future years	0
Air quality	0	There will be no impact in air quality changing from one style of planting to another	0
Sustainable Transport	0	This is a landscape project	0
Land use change	0	The land use remains amenity / landscape	0
Biodiversity	8	Perennial plants are more beneficial to pollinating insects than seasonal bedding plants, and the Long Garden will enhance and better connect the urban habitat network	0
Soil and waterway health	0	There will be no change in land use	0
Climate Change Adaptation	4	The plant selection will take account of the changing climate and utilise plant species that require less irrigation and can cope with extended spells of dry weather. The scheme has the potential to act as a showpiece of good practice in a high-profile location	0

Energy Use	8	Once plants are established permanently in the ground there will little or no energy costs associated with producing seasonal bedding plants annually in heated green houses, significant reductions in irrigation water, and transportation costs between seed house germination, nursery and end customer.	0
Sustainable Materials	8	Energy costs associated with the production of perennial plants are encountered only once in their initial production unlike seasonal bedding plants which are twice annually. Similarly material resources, such as compost and pots are only used only once. The Long Garden currently utilises 14000 plant containers, albeit they are sent back to be recycled or reused if possible	0
Waste	#VALUE!	The current practice requires all the plants to be dug up and disposed of twice per annum, albeit they are transported to a Cheltenham allotment site where tenants can reuse them as compost or soil conditioner. Plants in the new scheme will remain in the ground and will not be required to be dug up and disposed of. Some of the herbaceous material will die back and need removing from site, where it will also be composted.	0

Social	Scores	Justification	Recommendation
Food	0	This is an amenity landscape scheme	0
Health	4	The Long Gardens contribute significantly to the quality of green infrastructure in the town. Access to and interaction with good quality green space (particularly semi-natural), are proven to benefit peoples mental well being	0
Housing	0	This is an amenity landscape scheme	0
Education	0	The perennial scheme could serve as an exemplar scheme showcasing good sustainable horticultural practices	0
Community	4	The Long Garden	0
Culture	0	People will still be able to experience and enjoy the visual impact of the Long Gardens as a free and accessible public amenity	0
Accessibility	0	People will still be able to experience and enjoy the visual impact of the Long Gardens as a free and accessible public amenity	0

Local Economy and Jobs	0	Part of Cheltenham's attraction to visitors is its environmental quality with prized green spaces set amongst Georgian architecture. The Long Gardens will continue to be an important piece of the green space network at the centre of the town. Loss of hanging baskets and window boxes may be viewed as a loss to environmental quality where they are no longer hung out	0
Safety	0	Well maintained public spaces are known to deter vandalism and anti-social behaviour due to the implied attention they receive from maintenance teams and the many people that frequent them	0
Equity	0	The Long Gardens will remain accessible for everyone to enjoy in an accessible, and central location close to a central transport hub	0
Democratic Voice	2	Previous engagement with green space volunteer groups has generated support for this style of planting. The last customer survey undertaken by the Council indicated high levels of satisfaction with Cheltenham's parks, and indicated support for nature-based approaches to garden maintenance	0

