

## POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE - 24 JANUARY 2022

### PART I – NOT DELEGATED

#### 6. ALTERNATIVE GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT UPDATE (DCES)

##### 1 Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with information following debate on the motion put forward by Councillor Michaels and agreed at the Leisure, Environment and Community Committee of 24 November 2021, regarding alternative grassland management for the benefit of biodiversity.
- 1.2 The report and Appendix C includes potential costs as a minimum, to aid consideration by Policy & Resources Committee.

##### 2 Background and Context

The amended Motion put forward by Councillor Michaels, which was discussed at the 24 November 2021 Leisure, Environment and Community Committee states:

*Grassland is one of the most unique habitats for wildlife and pollinators in the UK. 97% of species rich grassland in Hertfordshire has been lost since the 1930's and 48% of species associated with it have noticeably declined since 1970*

- (1) Hertfordshire has predominately chalk bedrock  
(2) which often leads to conditions which support chalk meadows which have been called 'the UK's equivalent of rainforest'  
(3) Of the total publicly owned land in the District TRDC owns circa 30%.*

*LEC Committee recognises the time officers have spent developing various strategies to improve the natural environment in the District and the passion and contribution Councillors have shown in this area. TRDC resolves to look for opportunities to cease mowing up to 50% of the grassland it owns and manages and replace this with hay meadow management (cutting and clearing at least once a year) This will exclude unsuitable areas such as football pitches, areas used for playgrounds (etc.) and include verges, areas in parks and all other areas which are mown and do not need to be mown for a specific recreational reason (e.g. football pitch, playground). This motion will aim to decrease grass cutting by up to 50% of TRDC owned land and achieve concurrent gains in biodiversity. Costs for the cut and lift will likely fall into two areas. Firstly new equipment which may be paid for by cost savings, reduced mowing where possible, existing budgets or a request to P&R. Secondly disposal costs which should be mitigated by creating sacrifice areas wherever possible, or by sale to a biodigester (e.g. the plant at South Mimms which the council currently use already). Officers will revert to LEC prior to April 2022, which will take into consideration biodiversity any data gathered in District wide Biodiversity Audit carried out in over the summer and due in March 2022. TRDC will review relevant officers job descriptions within the Leisure department and ensure sustainability is incorporated to re-enforce this shifting outlook.*

- 2.1 The amended Motion was agreed by the members of the Leisure, Environment and Community Committee and recommended to Policy and Resources for further consideration.

2.2 Please refer to Appendix A for a glossary of terms.

### **Existing Cutting Regimes**

2.3 Currently, 54% of TRDC grassland is maintained as long grass. Members should note that this percentage refers only to the percentage of area that requires grass cutting, not a percentage of the entire grassland.

2.4 The 54% is broken down as follows:

2.4.1 22% is meadow or conservation cut (including, parts of Chorleywood House Estate, The Aquadrome; South Oxhey Playing Fields; Prestwick Road Meadows; Leavesden Country Park; The Green, Croxley Green; and the Pilot sites)

2.4.2 2% is cut once every three years, on rotation (sections of The Horses' Field at Leavesden) – this will cease once grazing is introduced to the site.

2.4.3 22% of land is conservation grazed by cattle (including parts of Chorleywood House Estate; Croxley Common Moor; and the Withey Beds) – this percentage will increase by 2% from summer 2022, when grazing is introduced at The Horses' Field

2.4.4 8% of land, primarily glades and grassland in woodland areas, has ride management (see Appendix A for description).

2.5 The remaining grassland areas are comprised of football pitches, bowling greens, play areas, dog walking areas, picnic areas and areas for informal recreation and leisure. These areas are cut up to 12 times per year, depending on the weather.

2.6 It should be noted that areas owned by TRDC, but managed by Parish Councils, are not included in these calculations. Notable areas include: Chorleywood Common, Manor House Grounds and The Green, Sarratt.

### **Pilot Sites**

2.7 At the 10 March 2021 Leisure, Environment and Community Committee (minute note: LEC 53/20), members discussed piloting a number of sites with alternative grassland management. Five pilot sites were agreed at the committee meeting, with a further five sites added, following consultation with the Lead Members for Sustainability and Leisure. These sites would be cut once in the autumn and the cuttings left on site.

2.8 The pilot was included within the Environmental Services Service Plan with Annual Council approval on 25 May 2021.

2.9 The pilot sites are detailed within Appendix B and make up a further 1% of TRDC grassland that has been left as long grass.

2.10 As part of the pilot scheme, a number of signs were installed to inform the local community as to why the grass was being left uncut. In addition to this, there were a number of posts across social media and information on the Council's website

### **Pilot Sites - Outcomes**

2.11 *Positives from the pilot project include:*

2.11.1 Bee Orchids and Pyramid Orchids recorded at Leavesden Country Park.

- 2.11.2 Good diversity of grasses at Mead Place and Carpenders Park, including: Crested Dogs Tail, Meadow Buttercup, Common Cat's Ear and Self-Heal.
- 2.11.3 Positive Comments on social media: "beautiful meadow effect", "enjoying the wildflowers and bees" and users saying it's good to see the Council taking this approach.
- 2.12 *Negatives from the pilot project include:*
  - 2.12.1 A number of complaints regarding urban areas looking unkempt, concerns over pet wellbeing and comments relating to it being a cost-saving exercise, rather than for the benefit of diversity.
  - 2.12.2 There was also some confusion between Hertfordshire County Council and TRDC over ownership and responsibility for the cutting of roadside verges, with HCC inadvertently cutting one of the identified pilot sites. This highlights the complexities of grass cutting regimes, particularly in urban areas.
- 2.13 Officers would recommend that there is a period of public consultation on any future changes to grassland management.

#### **Biodiversity Opportunities Audit – commissioned by TRDC**

- 2.14 Countryside Management Service (CMS) have been commissioned by TRDC to undertake an audit of land owned and managed by TRDC that do not have detailed site management plans. The audit is designed to identify opportunities for biodiversity improvements, including grassland management, bulb planting and tree planting. A total of 60 sites have been included within the audit, which includes the majority of the pilot sites.
- 2.15 CMS are preparing a full report, which will be presented to the 14 March 2022, Policy and Resources Committee and the 16 March 2022 Leisure, Environment and Community Committee. This report will include: biodiversity improvements, timescales and associated costs.
- 2.16 Headlines coming from the initial drafts of the report indicate the potential for a variety of biodiversity enhancements in the majority of locations, including new tree and spring wildflower planting. There also appears to be potential for a substantial increase in alternative grassland management, including cut and lift, in particular at locations such as: Fortune Common, Berry Way/Mead Place, Tanners Hill, Denham Way and Rickmansworth Park.
- 2.17 It is anticipated that the 54% of grassland maintained as long grass, will increase following the outcomes of the Biodiversity Opportunities Audit, although this cannot yet be quantified until the full report has been completed.
- 2.18 As previously highlighted, Officers would recommend that all of the sites included within the audit, along with their recommendations are publically consulted on. This is primarily to better understand how local communities use areas for informal play and recreation, and where any changes in management may conflict with these uses. This would be completed in partnership with the Communications team and the Council's Consultation and Partnerships Officer.

#### **Baseline Biodiversity Report – commissioned by HCC**

- 2.19 In addition to the Biodiversity Opportunities Audit, CMS are also undertaking a “Baseline Biodiversity Report”, which will be a countywide biodiversity stock take to establish a baseline for biodiversity at County, District and Ward level. This has been commissioned by Hertfordshire County Council.
- 2.20 The report will be a desk-top study to support an evidence-based approach to strategic planning for biodiversity investment and support the delivery of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). This report will support the Local Plan process and new Environment Bill.

### **Considerations for Implementing Alternative Grassland Management**

- 2.21 There are a number of biodiversity benefits that can be gained from alternative grassland management regimes and that will support the aims of the Climate Change Emergency and Sustainability Strategy. Some of these benefits have already been highlighted as positive outcomes from the pilot sites.
- 2.22 Alongside this, the Council has recently approved a new Tree Strategy and action plan, which includes items such as tree planting across the District. A new Community Biodiversity Officer has been appointed and will start in January 2022. Part of their role will be to assess the actions from the Tree Strategy and Biodiversity Opportunities Audit and produce an action plan for biodiversity across Three Rivers. This will be linked to the development of a new Biodiversity Strategy.
- 2.23 Officers will also review the detailed Management Plans of TRDC’s major open spaces, such as Chorleywood House Estate and South Oxhey Playing Fields. It may be possible to identify further opportunities for alternative grassland management alongside those that were included as part of the pilot sites. Any changes could be consulted on alongside the recommendations from the Biodiversity Opportunities Audit.
- 2.24 There are also a number of issues which need to be considered for any future alternative grassland management, as outlined below.

### **Labour**

- 2.25 Grounds Maintenance is a small team of 14, plus a supervisor, who carry out many and varied duties across the District including; litter picking; emptying dog and litter bins in parks and open spaces; inspections of the 31 play areas, five adult gyms and four skate parks; grave digging; maintenance of three cemeteries, three bowling greens and the Rose Garden at Three Rivers House, shrubbery and tree works, installing signage; and marking out of football pitches and district wide grass cutting. In addition they provide a reactive maintenance response where possible, such as incidences of damage and vandalism, cutting back overhanging vegetation, clearing smaller fallen trees; and assisting with flooding incidents and snow clearance, when necessary.
- 2.26 There are also four environmental maintenance staff that cover verge cutting across the district, as well as the following tasks; clearance of fly tipping, leaf clearance, mud/accident clean ups, shrub bed maintenance and hedge cutting, dead animal removal, emptying of dog bins (not including parks), drainage ditch maintenance at a number of sites, clearing up after traveller incursions, graffiti removal and garage site maintenance.

- 2.27 The Tree Strategy, currently in production, includes a draft action for an additional member of grounds maintenance staff. This is to assist with the play area checks and levels to water and care for newly planted standard trees. As a result there is growing pressure on the Grounds Maintenance team to carry out additional tasks and ad hoc work, and with increased use and misuse of the parks. During the pandemic, increased visitor use of local open spaces has substantially increased the work load of the Grounds Maintenance team.
- 2.28 Cutting of the pilot sites took considerably longer than it would have, had the grass not been left to grow. The quality of the cut would also have been better, had all the appropriate equipment, (as outlined in Appendices B & C) been available. The staff that were not used to cut the pilot sites throughout the season continued with other tasks as laid out in paragraphs 2.25 to 2.27.
- 2.29 Additional works that would need carrying out throughout the growing season also need to be considered. Strips of shorter grass will need to be maintained alongside footpaths edges, which may require a different grass cutting crew to attend. This is also the case where the sites have street furniture to cut around.
- 2.30 It also has to be considered that if all sites need cutting and lifting in a narrow window in late summer, then extra equipment and staffing may be required to achieve this, not only to carry out the cuts but also to ensure litter picking is undertaken first and ensure a good finish around street furniture (benches, bins, signs, etc.) is achieved.
- 2.31 Three Rivers currently has four Green Flag accreditations; Rickmansworth Aquadrome, Leavesden Country Park, Chorleywood House Estate and South Oxhey Playing Fields. Leavesden Country Park also has Green Heritage Site Accreditation. The Grounds Maintenance team are instrumental in the success of achieving these accreditations.

### **Equipment**

- 2.32 The need to purchase any new equipment will not be fully known until the recommendations from the Biodiversity Opportunities Audit have been consulted on and agreed. The pilot areas were able to be cut (but not lifted) with current equipment, namely a rotary ride-on mower although the standard of the cut is poorer than when more suitable equipment is used.
- 2.33 Obstacles to mowing, such as trees and street furniture frequently found in smaller residential sites will also increase mowing costs, as smaller less efficient machinery will need to be used.
- 2.34 The pilot sites also highlighted the importance of accurate mapping of management regimes on open spaces. Improvements to the Council's GIS system would enable areas to be mapped more accurately, greatly assisting the communication of different mowing regimes to the Grounds Maintenance team.
- 2.35 Appendix C highlights the various potential equipment that may be needed, their associated costs and what it would be used for.
- 2.36 These items would need to be purchased rather than hired or shared between Councils, due to the need to carry out the Meadow Cut or Conservation Cut at the same time of the year.
- 2.37 Another consideration is the procurement and delivery of equipment. Indicative timescales are detailed within Appendix C.

## **Disposal**

- 2.38 If cut grass cannot be baled and sold as hay, arisings would need to be disposed of at a composting facility, for example the one already used at South Mimms.
- 2.39 The Council would need to transport the arisings to a composting facility, which would cost approximately £25 per tonne for disposal in this way. The volume of grass to dispose of will fluctuate from season to season, dependant on the timing and number of cuts per year, with wetter weather resulting in higher grass growth.
- 2.40 It is estimated the pilot sites generated between 30 to 80 tonnes of grass, not including transport costs of a dustcart to run to South Mimms (the composting facility location). In addition there will be manpower costs for loading and travelling to and from the disposal site – these are detailed within Appendix C.

## **Environmental**

- 2.41 It should be noted that leaving grassland areas may encourage the spread of Ragwort and other undesirable weeds, which would need treating or pulling prior to the sale of hay, or the transportation of grass for composting, which would be an additional cost. There is Government guidance around the disposal of ragwort and the Weeds Act 1959 applies to owners of land, covering in addition to Ragwort the presence of Spear Thistle, Creeping or Field Thistle, Curled Dock and Broad Leaved Dock. Enforcement is by issue of a notice and the County Council has authority to do this.
- 2.42 Point 2.4 outlines that 24% of TRDC grassland currently has a meadow / conservation cut regime in place. However, there are other forms of grassland management which also benefit biodiversity, such as annual flail cutting, higher sward heights, and tri-annual cutting. The Biodiversity Opportunities Audit will assist officers in determining what alternative grassing cutting regimes might be appropriate in which locations, on a site by site basis.
- 2.43 Alongside the 24% of meadow / conservation cut currently in place, TRDC has 22% of land undergoing conservation grazing. Conservation grazing enhances overall biodiversity, supports wildflowers and creates a mosaic of habitats ideal for our native wildlife, with different structures of grasses and flowering plants that cannot develop with an annual cut and lift. The cow pats left behind by cattle are also important to meadow ecology, as a number of invertebrates and fungi (many of which are now very rare) need dung as part of their specialist lifestyles. Cattle grazing can manage grassland in a gradual, low intensity way, causing much less damage to wildlife and making it a more favourable option than cutting. In addition to the wildlife benefits, the introduction of grazing animals has been a popular addition to other local green spaces, with the cattle becoming an attraction in their own right.
- 2.44 In addition to production of hay or off-site composting of long grass, sacrifice areas on open spaces have been used in the past (such as at Chorleywood House Estate) to compost arisings generated by cutting. However, dry grass, particularly if tightly baled and not mixed with other compostable material, takes many years to decompose. Disposing of large volumes of grass in this way will require increasing amounts of space over time; may be considered to be unsightly by visitors; and could be a fire risk in some locations.

## **Public Engagement**

- 2.45 Following some of the negative feedback and complaints received from the pilot project, as detailed in point 2.12.1, Officers recommend carrying out a significant period of consultation and engagement with the public on any sites agreed for alternative grassland management. Officers propose that this would commence following the March LEC committee for a period of 4-5 weeks. This would be carried out in partnership with the TRDC Communications team and the TRDC Consultation and Partnerships Officer.

### **Officer Role Profiles**

- 2.46 There are a number of officers that have sustainability within their remit, including; the Climate Change, Sustainability and Recycling Officer, the Climate Change and Sustainability Strategy Officer, the Green Homes Grant Project Officer (fixed term) and the Community Biodiversity Officer.
- 2.47 Officers are in discussion with Human Resources on the process for adding Environmental Sustainability into the role profiles within Leisure and Landscapes. The current proposal for this is: *“to consider and implement environmental sustainability as a guiding principle within processes, activities and projects delivered.”*

Senior Leadership Team have also agreed that sustainability awareness will be included in all the job descriptions of all new posts advertised across the Council from 2022.

### **Timescales**

- 2.48 The following is an indicative timetable of the next steps for consideration:

Date	Item	Comments
14 March 2022	Policy and Resources Committee	Biodiversity Opportunities Audit Report and Recommendations
16 March 2022	Leisure, Environment and Community Committee	Biodiversity Opportunities Audit Report and Recommendations
March – May 2022	Public Consultation	Consultation on the recommendations from the audit
July 2022	Policy and Resources Committee Leisure, Environment and Community Committee	Final Biodiversity Opportunities Audit Report and Recommendations, along with the public consultation results

## **3 Options and Reasons for Recommendations**

- 3.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with information to aid consideration of the matters arising from the motion put forward by Councillor Michaels, regarding alternative grassland management for biodiversity.
- 3.2 The motion was agreed at the Leisure, Community and Environment Committee and recommended to the Policy and Resources Committee for consideration.

## **4 Policy/Budget Reference and Implications**

- 4.1 The matter comes to this committee at this time as having now been agreed by LEC, it would be outside policy and budget and would require expenditure by the Council estimated to be in excess of £10,000 (see Appendix C).

## **5 Financial Implications**

- 5.1 Whilst indications of potential additional costs have been provided in Appendix C, Officers need to fully review the recommendations of the Biodiversity Opportunities Audit, which will not be known until February 2022 at the earliest, before confirming what can and what can't be delivered within existing budgets and staff resources.
- 5.2 Once this assessment has been carried out, it will be possible to identify more accurately what additional financial and staff resources will be required, and the likely ongoing costs for alternative management regimes.
- 5.3 Members need to be aware that full costings are not known at this stage. Costs outlined within Appendix C provide an indicative estimate for the costs of procuring equipment. If the full range of equipment is required capital investment will exceed £100,000, for which there is currently no budget identified.

## **6 Legal Implications**

- 6.1 The motion was, as required under Rule 11(6) (set out below), referred to the Leisure and Environment Committee for discussion and debate as the motion, on present information, was contrary to the Council's Budget and Policy framework. The motion details were included on the Council agenda for the meeting on 13 July 2021.
- 6.2 "If a motion includes a proposal for the Council to take any significant policy decision which is contrary to the Budget and Policy Framework or incur any expenditure in excess of £10k it shall only be considered in principle to the extent that the matter is noted by Council and is referred to the relevant Committee for consideration. The motion shall not be moved or debated. The minutes of the meeting will record the motion being received. Any decision on the motion shall be made at a future meeting of the Council which shall not consider the matter without a full report on the policy, budget and financial implications together with any recommendations from the Committee to which the matter was referred."
- 6.3 The matter now comes to this committee following LEC having agreed the motion because there are policy and budget implications. When these are dealt with, the motion will be referred back to Council as provided in Rule 11(6), above.
- 6.4 The Council has a duty to have regard to conserving and enhancing biodiversity under S40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. This does not mean that the duty must be given greater weight than other matters and the audits presently being carried out should satisfy the duty, which is for the Council to 'have regard' when it exercises its functions. As a landowner, the Council would also be subject to the regime under the Weeds Act 1959, (as amended by the Ragwort Act 2003), this being referred to above.
- 6.5 Subject to what this Committee may resolve, it is anticipated a report in substantially these terms would be provided to Council in the normal way, when the matter is before it, as mentioned at 6.2, above.

## **7 Staffing Implications**

7.1 It is not possible at this stage to determine impact on staffing. Considerations on labour is outlined at points 2.25 to 2.31 and within Appendix C.

**8 Environmental Implications**

8.1 Continuing to seek alternative management regimes for the Council’s grassland areas, that enables vegetation to flower and support invertebrates, and other wildlife will have a positive effect on biodiversity in the district.

**9 Customer Services Centre Implications, Community Safety Implications, Public Health Implications**

9.1 None Specific

**10 Communications and Website Implications**

10.1 A number of signs were installed to inform the local community on why the grass was being left uncut. In addition to this, there were a number of posts across social media and on the Council’s website. Continued communication to the public is essential to reduce any negative feedback from residents, this includes public engagement as outlined in point 2.45.

**11 Risk and Health & Safety Implications**

11.1 The Council has agreed its risk management strategy which can be found on the website at <http://www.threerivers.gov.uk>. In addition, the risks of the proposals in the report have also been assessed against the Council’s duties under Health and Safety legislation relating to employees, visitors and persons affected by our operations. The risk management implications of this report are detailed below.

11.2 The subject of this report is covered by the Environmental Protection service plan(s). Any risks resulting from this report will be included in the risk register and, if necessary, managed within this/these plan(s).

11.3 If the Motion is rejected the risks are as follows;

<b>Nature of Risk</b>	<b>Consequence</b>	<b>Suggested Control Measures</b>	<b>Response</b> <i>(tolerate, treat, terminate, transfer)</i>	<b>Risk Rating</b> <i>(combination of likelihood and impact)</i>
The Council is criticised for not progressing with alternative grass management	Reputational damage and potential complaints.	Audits are being undertaken and an action plan will be put in place to manage alternative grass management in due course. Communicati	Treat	4

		ons can be managed around ensuring residents are aware that the Council does have a Climate Change Strategy.		
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11.4 If the Motion is accepted the risk are as follows;

<b>Nature of Risk</b>	<b>Consequence</b>	<b>Suggested Control Measures</b>	<b>Response</b> <i>(tolerate, treat, terminate, transfer)</i>	<b>Risk Rating</b> <i>(combination of likelihood and impact)</i>
Complaints arise from residents, particularly in urban areas in relation to the look of verges, pet wellbeing, litter etc.		Continue with marketing and comms of the scheme, including signage	Treat	9
The alternate grassland management put into place may not be sustainable in the long term if it is on unsuitable land.		This would need to be monitored – no suitable treatment at this stage	Tolerate	9
Land used for sport, leisure and recreation may be lost.		Identify specific areas for leisure activities – although this will be limited	Treat	12

The financial implications may be outside of Council budgets.		Budget to be reviewed. Growth item may be required	Treat	12
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11.5 The above risks are scored using the matrix below. The Council has determined its aversion to risk and is prepared to tolerate risks where the combination of impact and likelihood scores 6 or less.

<b>Very Likely</b> ----- <b>Likelihood</b> ----- ▼ <b>Remote</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Very High</b>	<b>Very High</b>
	4	8	12	16
	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Very High</b>
	3	6	9	12
	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>High</b>
	2	4	6	8
	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>
	1	2	3	4
	<b>Impact</b>			
	Low	-----▶		Unacceptable

**Impact Score**

- 4 (Catastrophic)
- 3 (Critical)
- 2 (Significant)
- 1 (Marginal)

**Likelihood Score**

- 4 (Very Likely (≥80%))
- 3 (Likely (21-79%))
- 2 (Unlikely (6-20%))
- 1 (Remote (≤5%))

11.6 In the officers' opinion none of the risks in paragraphs 11.3 and 11.4 above, were they to come about, would seriously prejudice the achievement of the Strategic Plan and are therefore operational risks. The effectiveness of the management of operational

## 12 Recommendation

12.1 Following LEC having agreed the motion, should the Committee recommend the Motion be taken forward, Members may wish to consider the following:

- the full resource and financial information is not known at this stage, and will only be known once the audits are complete and an action plan written, and the project may not be delivered within Council budgets;
- this may result in a large number of complaints if this was to include long grass in residential urban areas;
- the alternate grassland management put into place may not be sustainable in the long term if it is on unsuitable land;
- the results of the audits may mean work that has been carried out has to be partially undone and/or ignored.

12.2 Should the Committee recommend that the Motion is not approved Members may wish to consider the following:

- Members of the public may think the Council is not taking its approach to climate change seriously, although this can be managed through careful communications work to explain audits are being undertaken and the Council will be reviewing the results, producing and implementing an action plan.
- Officers will continue to work on the Biodiversity Opportunities Audit and revision of management plans to identify new areas for alternative grassland management, for the benefit of biodiversity.

12.3 Members could consider a further option, namely to defer making a decision until the audit results are available, and further information is brought back to this Committee.

12.4 As outlined above, the next stage of the process is to take the recommendation of this Committee to Council. The matter would go to Council on 22 February 2022, though if a deferral is the preferred option, the matter would return to Council at a later date.

Report prepared by:

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**Data checked by:**

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Data rating:

<b>1</b>	<b>Poor</b>	
<b>2</b>	<b>Sufficient</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>High</b>	

## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix A:** Glossary of Terms

**Appendix B:** Pilot Sites

**Appendix C:** Potential Equipment Costs

**Appendix D:** Hertfordshire update