

1. Plans, strategies & responsibilities

How can I find out where our parks and local nature reserves are in Chelmsford?

A [list of the parks and green spaces](https://loveyourchelmsford.co.uk/green-spaces/) in Chelmsford, with their addresses, can be found on the Love Your Chelmsford website. You can also find a list of play areas for children, allotments, fishing sites and information about Green Flag Awards.

<https://loveyourchelmsford.co.uk/green-spaces/>

How much green space do you maintain across the city?

Chelmsford City Council manages and maintains approximately 692 hectares of grassland, including local nature reserves, hay meadows, parks, sports grounds, and verges.

We have more than 12 teams of parks and grounds staff who go out to cut grass within the city. They cut over 150,000 square metres in a four-week cycle.

How do you manage the council's grassland?

There are many types of grassland:

- amenity grassland (open grassy area such as a park, playing field and green space),
- grassland habitats (including acid, magnesium and chalk downland grasslands),
- agricultural pasture,
- waste (grass) lands and
- common land.

Our grassland/land management strategies also tie into our climate change priorities and goals. Not cutting the grass has been shown to improve the flood absorption properties of these areas by up to 60 per cent.

2. Definitions

What is the difference between a 'park', 'green space' and 'local nature reserve'?

Amenity green space and urban parks are similar in that they both provide green spaces in urban areas, but they are not the same thing.

Amenity green space refers to any green space that is provided for the benefit of the local community, such as a small park or a community garden, often within housing estates and developments.

Urban parks, on the other hand, are typically larger, more developed spaces that are designed for recreational use, such as a playground or sports fields. Urban parks may also include amenities like public toilets, picnic areas, and playgrounds.

Local authorities can create **local nature reserves** (LNRs). Town and parish councils can create LNRs if the district council has given them the power to do this. Local nature reserves are sites that are chosen because they are locally important for wildlife, geology, education, and enjoyment (without disturbing wildlife). Local authorities can run LNRs independently or you can involve: 'friends of' community groups, wildlife trusts and other recognised conservation bodies, site-based rangers, local school children and Natural England (who can give advice). They are publicly accessible where visitors would not damage or disturb wildlife.

What is a meadow?

A meadow is a field made up of native wildflowers and finer grasses left uncut until late summer. Before cutting, grasses and wildflowers may grow to about knee high. In a traditional hay meadow, the cut grass is collected as hay, which is used to feed animals in winter.

We can copy the management of traditional hay meadows, by cutting and collecting at the right time. Letting wildflowers grow and set seed allows them to increase year-on-year. We need to be patient. After a few years, our verges and amenity grasslands could become native wildflower meadows.

In late summer, meadow-like areas may start to look untidy. Plants put energy into making seeds for next year's wildflowers. These areas are still very important for wildlife to complete their full lifecycle. They continue to provide shelter and food for insects, mammals, reptiles and birds.

A wide range of wildlife lives in meadows with native wildflowers. A typical natural meadow can support more than 1,400 species of invertebrates. Over many thousands of years, they have all adapted to live together.

Do the parks have different areas depending on the activities you can do in them?

Our parks are made up for different distinct landscape character zones:

- Sports & activity zone e.g., Tennis, Basketball, Cricket & Football
- Play zone
- Biodiversity zone
- Picnic zone
- Forest zone
- Formal garden zone
- Social meeting zone
- Art & sculpture zone

3. Grass cutting

Who is responsible for grass cutting?

Chelmsford City Council is responsible for grass cutting in most areas across Chelmsford. The grass cutting schedule includes local nature reserves, hay meadows and grazing, parks and sports grounds, rural roadside verges rural verges with special verge protection and residential areas including urban roadsides.

More than 12 teams of parks and grounds staff cut over 150,000 square metres of grass on each four-week cycle.

Essex County Council and some landowners and housing developers are also responsible for maintaining certain areas in Chelmsford.

Motorways and Trunk Roads are cut by National Highways. You can report a grass issue to them by calling 0300 123 5000.

How often is the grass cut?

There's no set period between cuts.

We're only able to give a rough guide of four weeks between cuts during growing season, which is between March and September:

- Times vary according to weather conditions
- Difficult conditions can often have a knock-on effect when cutting is being carried out
- Long periods of dry weather may mean we don't need to cut the grass

While there are areas across the district that have to be cut to specified standards in line with maintenance obligations, the City Council recognises the habitat and wildlife benefits of long grass in providing vital shelter for invertebrates to breed, protecting and improving biodiversity and supporting pollinator species.

Open spaces, verges, and sports fields next to housing areas are cut at different rates.

When do you start and stop cutting the grass?

We start our grass cutting programme in March.

The grass will be cut once at the end of the growing season during September-October (exact timing will be dependent on the weather).

Are there designated tall grass areas?

In some areas we'll let the grass grow longer:

- Where suitable, large highway verges in both rural and urban areas will be left to turn into grassland habitats, but with grass cut regularly around the fringes to ensure grass does not encroach onto pathways, roads or obstruct sight lines
- In parkland and other open spaces where appropriate we'll allow margins of grassland to develop instead of cutting right up to the park boundary
- We will avoid cutting grass right up to the bases of trees and instead allow the grass to grow to prevent possible damage to trees

Where we have introduced long grass areas, we are ensuring that there are still plenty of areas of regularly cut areas for all to enjoy.

Why do you not cut the grass in certain areas?

Some areas of grass are cut much less often to allow grasses to flower and encourage biodiversity.

These areas include:

- grass on highway verges
- non-sponsored roundabouts
- banks
- many open spaces

Areas in our parks are left to grow or cut later in the season to promote wildlife. These areas contribute to our success with the Green Flag Award, whose judges have praised our park's variety of habitats.

Most meadow grass is cut once a year when the wildflowers have set seed.

Some areas will not be cut at all, though a path may be cut though for walking.

Strips alongside roads may need to be cut shorter to maintain sightlines for traffic.

In areas where daffodil and tulip bulbs have been flowering, we'll leave the grass until six weeks after the flowers have finished blooming to ensure they return the following spring. We'll cut the grass during the next round of cutting.

If we get reports of rare wildflowers, birds or animals in an area, we won't cut the grass in the area to protect the species for a time, for example until the end of the nesting season.

If there's standing water in an area which is stopping us cutting the grass, we'll leave it and try to cut in the next round.

Why is there a mixture of short and tall grass in the same area?

You may see that some grass verges and green spaces are left long in the middle but cut short of the edges.

In meadow areas, cutting narrow strips along the edge of hard footpaths will keep them clear. Short cut grass footpaths allow people to walk through areas of longer meadow grass with wildflowers. Cutting in this way shows that the longer grass is being left intentionally.

Why do you leave tall grass around the base of trees?

Leaving areas around the bases of trees uncut means that the tree roots become less compacted; we can reduce chemical use which in turn protects pollinator species, such as bees, as well as their habitat and local flora and fauna.

What would cause you to stop your regular grass cutting programme?

We may suspend grass cutting if there is:

- a long period of wet weather
- a risk of causing damage
- a risk that the job cannot be done safely
- very dry grass which is not growing
- areas planted with naturalised bulbs

We stop grass cutting for two weeks in the summer - normally in July or August - to cut back hedges from footpaths.

How does wet and dry weather impact on mowing schedules?

Our mowing schedule is weather dependent and subject to change in the event of extreme weather or poor ground conditions.

In very wet weather some areas can become waterlogged. To prevent damage to the grass and our mowing machines we avoid cutting these areas until they have dried out.

During prolonged dry weather grass growth is minimal so we suspend our mowing operations to avoid damaging the grass roots and soil.

If we are unable to mow an area, we will monitor it and resume cutting as soon as conditions allow.

Why are you mowing less?

Our reduced mowing and grass cutting programme aims to improve habitat for a variety of flora, fauna, animals and insects, including our crucial bee population, by letting grass and flowers grow wild.

Pollinating insects have been in decline for decades due to habitat loss. We therefore want to create wildlife-friendly areas, rich in nectar, by mowing selected areas less frequently and allowing these potentially abundant grasslands to grow, where possible. This also helps to increase the amount of carbon captured by our green spaces.

Areas are selected based on being large enough to provide an environmental benefit without presenting any safety issues for local communities.

Our parks team, town and parish councils, as well as grounds, maintenance and highway partners such as Essex County Council, will monitor the areas to remove litter and control any invasive plant species.

What do you use to cut the grass?

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.

Why have grass cuttings been left?

In most places it is impractical for us to remove the cuttings, so they are left on the ground. We use mowers equipped with special mulching blades to cut grass. The grass is shredded finely and blown into the turf. This returns nutrients to the soil and helps retain moisture. After the grass has been cut operatives with blowers clear any cuttings that have fallen onto nearby hard surfaces.

We only remove the grass cuttings from biodiversity rich grassland such as flowering lawns or wildflower bee road areas, high maintenance ornamental lawns or bowling greens.

Removing the cuttings is particularly good for wildflowers because it:

- prevents the build-up of dead vegetation, which can smother delicate plants
- leaves more exposed ground to allow seeds to grow
- reduces the fertility of soil. This slows down the growth of nutrient-loving grasses that choke wildflowers and finer grasses

Is cutting the grass less often an excuse to save money?

This isn't about cutting costs or just leaving areas unkempt. Our carefully managed reduced mowing and grass cutting programme is motivated by our commitment to protect and enhance the environment. It is a positive way for us to manage our grasslands for the benefit of diversity within the city.

Changes in the way we do this may create some cost savings; however, where this happens the funds are re-invested to create more volunteering opportunities and local biodiversity and wildlife projects that benefit our local community and green spaces.

Tall grass makes areas look untidy

We think this is a matter of personal taste. Remember beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and hopefully through this project everyone will be able to appreciate the natural beauty of semi-natural grassland.

We also recognise that this change to our traditional management of blanket mowing might take time to get used to. Some of the sites may take a few years for the fine grasses and wildflowers to become more dominant than the vigorous grasses. But with each year it will look better, and 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. 140 hectares of our land is still being managed as amenity grass.

Is tall grass more likely to cause fires?

Fire behaviour within grass is greatly affected by how 'cured' it is – this means what proportion of the grass is dead as opposed to green.

Weather and seasons determine the state of vegetation, including grasses. This is because the moisture content of dead grass is significantly affected by the moisture content in the air, or relative humidity. The wind also plays an important role in determining how fast a flame front will travel.

If the grass is very green, typically over 50% green, then it is very unlikely that a fire will spread, as the heat of the fire is used in drying the grass before being able to ignite it.

Grass fires are generally less intense than other fuel types, and less likely to significantly damage the soil below.

The most common causes of grass fires are from cigarettes and disposable barbeques, where the smouldering ash and embers are carried by the wind onto areas of dry grass. Litter, such as glass bottles, left on or near dry grass, can magnify the sun and start a fire.

All of the council's parks and open spaces are regularly monitored for hazards, including fire hazards.

How does tall grass affect wildlife?

Tall grass provides a wide range of benefits to wildlife including providing seed heads, pollen, shade and areas to hide, hunt and reproduce. The tall grasses help maintain moisture, which is important for amphibians, as well as small mammals such as hedgehogs. Insect populations will thrive in a tall grass habitat which provides a plentiful source of food for songbirds, bats and owls too.

Will tall grass 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 hedgerows and other vegetation. For populations to exist a constant food source must be present and tall grass and tree planting do not provide this. It is discarded food and food wrappers that attract rats.

We have sympathy for dog owners, and we don't want to reduce the enjoyment of walking your dog. Ticks live in areas of dense vegetation such as grassland and woodland locations, so we encourage those enjoying these environments to take care along with pet owners.

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.

Ticks are easily removed, and it is important to examine your dog after a walk regardless of whether they have been taken through woodlands or grasslands.

Top tips to avoid ticks include:

- Keep to footpaths where possible
- Wear long-sleeved tops and trousers when in woodland and grassland areas
- Use insect repellent on exposed skin
- Keep a look-out for ticks after being in a tick environment so any can be removed promptly

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 tall grass attract rubbish and dog mess?

We believe that it is every owner's responsibility to collect their dog's waste and that the benefits of biodiverse areas outweigh the potential increase in dog fouling.

It is the dog owner's responsibility to collect all waste regardless of the grass height or environment.

Tall grass also does not stop residents from still being responsible for not dropping litter. We will litter pick areas before we mow the grass at the end of the season.

Does tall grass increase the risk of hay fever?

We sympathise with hay fever sufferers; however, studies show the wider health, wellbeing and ecosystem benefits from allowing grassland areas far outweigh the negative impact on hay fever sufferers.

In grassland and meadow areas, we will time cuts of grassland areas when the pollen becomes more dense and less dispersed, this is typically outside the critical period of May, June and July.

Does cutting release more pollen?

Generally, most types of grass release pollen only when they grow tall. The pollen comes from a feathery flower that grows at the top. If you keep your lawn mowed, it's less likely to release pollen. However, some types of grass can still release pollen even if you keep it short.

Pollen counts are generally lower in the evening.

How do you manage the cutting of bridleways in Chelmsford?

A bridleway or bridle path is a trail or a thoroughfare that is used by people riding on horses. These areas are the responsibility of Essex Highways but are contractually managed and maintained by Chelmsford City Council. They are part of the scheduled grass cutting programme.

3. Verges

What is a verge?

A road verge is a strip of vegetation (grass, flowers, trees, hedges) beside a road or pavement.

Does long grass on verges impact on road safety?

It is important that we keep the road safe for all users. But we can also improve spaces for nature along road verges. Having biodiverse verges does not mean roads will be less safe. Certain areas such as sightlines and junctions may be cut more often to ensure safety.

Why has the grass verge near me been missed?

There are times when we can't cut grass on a verge. This could be due to a number of reasons, including:

- An obstruction i.e. a parked vehicle / wheelie bin
- Daffodils which cannot be cut until June
- A dedicated wildlife/flower verge

Our grass cutting teams log missed cuts and where possible we return to reported missed areas.

What is 'edging back'?

Edging back mean 'pushing back' overgrown verge which has spread and narrowed the existing footway and is usually done between October and March when the ground is softer.

Resources are directed at priority sites. For example, where concern is raised that the footway width is reduced so much that it is making it difficult for parents with pushchairs or wheelchair users to pass.

Is there a difference between cutting of road verges?

Whereas an urban area is classified anything within a 30 mph zone (or less) in towns and villages, a rural area would be anything that falls outside of this definition – these are the roads that link towns and villages.

On the first cut we only cut junctions and bends in the road – our subsequent cuts will include a nominal 1 metre swathe along the cut kerbside.

Junctions and bends in the road are cut right back for safety purposes – we have a duty to ensure visibility is maintained for road users.

The rural network is 3.9 million linear metres and our contractors' tractors travel the equivalent of the length of the UK three times over on each cut!

Where there is a private access, it is the responsibility of the property owners along the rural roads to keep their entrance clear and safe to access in and out of the property grounds.

4. Trees, hedges, plants & weeds

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.

How do you choose which tree species to plant?

We only plant 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.

Do you spray weeds?

We carry out weed spraying on paths and pavements four times a year, around March, June, August, and November.

A systemic biodegradable herbicide is used which is absorbed by leaves and degrades on contact with the soil.

Do you have a daffodil and planted bulb programme?

Daffodil cutting will take place during the third cut in June.

Even though they look dead, the plant leaves absorb energy from sunlight (through photosynthesis). That energy is converted into sugar producing chemicals – food that keeps bulbs blooming year after year. If we mow them too early, bulbs are stunted, resulting in smaller and fewer blooms the following year.

Is there a hedge and brambles cutting programme?

The council cut hedges between October and March to avoid disturbing bird nesting season.

We use a tractor flail to cut hedges, as well as hand-held hedge cutters.

Hedges are only cut for safety reasons to ensure branches do not overhang the carriageway or footway/cycleways.

Hedges are cut once a year but sides facing onto footpaths where new growth could potentially cause an obstruction will be faced back in the summer between June and September.

If there are nesting birds, we will not normally carry out work.

When do you prune shrubs?

The council prunes shrub beds between October and March.

If you want to cut back shrubs on council land, you need to contact us to arrange a site visit.

All woody cuttings from our maintenance of hedges, shrubs and trees are collected and shredded, pulverised and composted. This material is used as a soil conditioner for the town.

Do you actively plant wildflowers?

No, the City Council does not actively plant wildflowers.

Should I use wildflower mixes in my garden to help with biodiversity?

Wildflower seed mixes often contain non-native species. Our pollinators need the native wildflowers they have evolved alongside. Studies have shown that the seeds in many wildflower seed mixes are imported from other countries, and are not native, despite what the packet might say.

Sowing wildflowers with colourful non-native annuals looks attractive. It can provide pollen and nectar-rich plants for pollinators. But it has drawbacks:

- it may provide a quick fix for pollinators. It will not support the wide range of invertebrates that feed on native meadow flowers
- they are sometimes called 'wildflower meadows' but they aren't meadows
- mixtures of annual, often non-native species, can be expensive to buy. They can be labour intensive to maintain, and they may need to be sown each year
- herbicides are often used to clear areas before sowing
- planting generic mixes of wildflower seed does little to conserve our native wildflowers. It can also threaten their uniqueness

If you decide to buy wildflower seed, you should source it carefully, and please only ever plant in your own garden and not in the wider landscape.

What are Invasive Alien Species (IAS)?

Invasive Alien Species are animals and plants that are introduced accidentally or deliberately into a natural environment where they are not normally found. They represent a major threat to native plants and animals in the local area.

The Essex Wildlife Trust Records Centre (<http://www.essexwtrecords.org.uk/>) holds records for a variety of invasive non-native species. These include non-native plant species such as Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan balsam and Floating Pennywort.

6. Biodiversity corridors

What is biodiversity?

Biodiversity is short for biological diversity. It is the variety of all living things in the natural world, both common and endangered. It is not only about the rare or threatened species.

Biodiversity:

- is about more than the number of species living in a place
- is about all the interactions within the same species and between different species
- covers whole communities of plants and animals and the places where they live

The biodiversity that surrounds us provides us with clean air to breathe, fresh water to drink, clothes to wear and food to eat. We all need biodiversity to allow us to live our lives.

What is a bio-diversity corridor?

Bio-diversity corridors are vital as they provide 'stepping-stones' through an area, offering food, shelter and safety for birds, bees, bats, and all types of wildlife.

A bumblebee can only fly for about 40 minutes between feeding stops. So, every wildflower you allow to grow, or pollinator-friendly flower, shrub or tree you plant, could be a fuel stop that saves a bumblebee!

Bats need roosting sites, water, and insects to eat. Bat-friendly habitats include the river, native trees, and insect friendly planting throughout the area.

Birds need safe nesting sites in trees and hedgerows, and insects, fruit, and seeds for food. Bird-friendly habitats include trees/native hedgerows; fruiting trees/shrubs, native insect friendly trees, shrubs, and flowers.

What are pollinators and why do they need our help?

Pollinators and other insects need pollen-rich flowers or food, and safe nesting sites.

Our wild pollinators include:

- bumblebees and other bees such as honeybees
- butterflies and moths
- flies and various other insects such as beetles, wasps, and thrips

The decline in wild pollinators is mainly due to habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation.

Pollinators need flowers to feed from. They need habitats to live in, to lay eggs and for young to feed and develop. So, providing habitat, with food sources and shelter will help their survival.

Pollinators are essential for the maintenance of biodiversity and the wider ecosystem.

Having more meadow-like verges and amenity grassland is one way to help pollinators.

7. Wildlife

What wildlife species are we trying to protect and nurture in Chelmsford?

We want to ensure the green spaces in Chelmsford provide suitable habitats that help all wildlife thrive. From insects, to small mammals, to birds and bats, we want to be a good neighbour to all species, and we encourage Chelmsford residents to also do what they can to build nature networks and support biodiversity within their own outdoor spaces.

What can I do to help?

There are plenty of ways to get involved in supporting local wildlife.

- **Volunteering** - Chelmsford City Council's parks team runs a popular volunteering programme. Volunteers can support the council's work and the environment in many ways: from helping to manage habitats, surveying wildlife, volunteering in formal gardens, planting trees, assisting on a litter pick day, to even helping with the construction of new park features such as footpath bridges. You can volunteer as an individual, as a family, as a business or as part of a school or college.
- **At home** - The Love Your Chelmsford website offers simple [tips on how to encourage wildlife into your garden](#). You can help make green spaces friendly places for wildlife with small changes, such creating holes in fences to allow hedgehogs to pass through, planting pollinator-friendly plants, and building bird boxes and bug hotels.
- **Recycling** – In Chelmsford, we ask residents to separate their waste to ensure that the materials collected and sorted are of high quality. Recycling is fantastic for the environment as it saves energy from extracting raw materials; saves money in disposal costs and saves landfill space. It protects our ecosystems and wildlife from the destruction and damage caused to our natural world from extracting raw materials. It also conserves natural resources, such as ancient woodlands which are chopped down for paper and wood, and it conserves oil, which in turn reduces the amount of polluting single-use plastics in circulation.
- **Sustainable living** – The Love Your Chelmsford programme helps to educate and encourage Chelmsford residents on the small changes they can make to benefit our local environment. Whether that's through making use of the cycle networks, or shopping second-hand in Chelmsford's charity shops, there are plenty of ways to live more sustainably which in turn will help our local wildlife. Visit <https://loveyourchelmsford.co.uk/> for ideas and information.

Do we have beehives in Chelmsford?

There is a beehive in Chelmsford Museum that the public can observe. The museum is free to visit, and the beehive is one of its most popular exhibits. The Domestic Honeybees fly to and from the flowers of Oaklands Park, collecting pollen to bring back to the hive and produce honey. The bees also help to pollinate the plants in Oaklands and the surrounding area.