

# Chelmsford City Council

## Policy for creating and managing species-rich grassland

*Investment in our natural capital is more crucial than ever. Connected grasslands, rich in native wildflowers, support more wildlife, are more resilient to environmental change, enhance ecosystems and promote biodiversity*

### Context

1. On 16 July 2019, the Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency reflecting growing concerns about the impact of climate change on the local environment, natural resources and the conditions in which people live and work.
2. The Climate and Ecological Emergency Declaration focused attention on reducing carbon and greenhouse gas emissions and on developing plans to create a more sustainable future for the area. The Declaration also embraced a commitment to take appropriate action to make the Council's activities net-zero carbon by 2030 and to protect, enhance and connect natural wildlife habitats and increase biodiversity.
3. The Declaration is accompanied by a Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan, one of the key priorities of which is to implement measures to improve the green infrastructure of Chelmsford, in particular protecting and expanding natural habitats, promoting greater biodiversity and improving the environment around and along rivers and waterways.
4. In May 2020, the Chelmsford Green Infrastructure Strategic Plan 2018-2036 was adopted to support the delivery of the Local Plan, providing a framework for the planning, protection, and management of green infrastructure in the locality. This Plan was informed by a comprehensive 'evidence base' that examined and assessed green infrastructure assets and identified the key opportunities to expand and significantly improve their environmental, health and wellbeing benefits.
5. The policy for creating and managing species-rich grassland also takes into account designated *local wildlife sites*, i.e. areas of land deemed to have substantive nature conservation value. The most recent review<sup>1</sup> of designated sites in Chelmsford was undertaken by Essex Ecology Services Ltd in 2016.
6. For roadside verges, the policy considers the best practice guide published by Plantlife<sup>2</sup>. This is widely regarded as offering the most practical framework for shifting the balance of land management practices so that species-rich habitat becomes predominant across the road network [where there are no safety constraints that otherwise determine maintenance frequencies]. The principles of this guidance has been applied to the policy in Chelmsford.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Chelmsford City Council Local Wildlife Site Review' [Essex Ecology Services Ltd., April 2016]

<sup>2</sup> 'Managing grassland road verges – A best practice guide' [Plantlife, 2019]

7. In the context set out above there is a need to refresh Chelmsford City Council’s policy and approach to the management and maintenance of grasslands that are within its control. This includes parks and communal green spaces, general recreational areas, common land, green corridors, country parks, residential open spaces and roadside verges.

## **Approach**

8. Maintenance regimes vary markedly according to the type of grassland, its location and use. In general, grassland in residential areas, in the past, has been cut every three weeks during the growing season, usually April to the end of November. Rural road verges usually have been cut twice a year. So-called ‘wildflower areas’ have been cut once a year in late August. Specialist grass surfaces for example sports pitches, bowling greens and alike, are subject to a much more intensive maintenance regime commensurate with their use.
9. Over the years the Council has adopted a programme to selectively relax maintenance regimes for grassland area where it is considered that this will benefit wildlife and promote biodiversity. This is most apparent in the creation of large-scale ‘hay meadows’, for example in Hylands Park, and some roadside verges, for example the embankments alongside the Great Leighs by-pass.
10. Approximately 165.33 hectares [20%] of grassland in the City Council’s care benefits from a more relaxed cutting regime, designed to encourage wildflowers, wildlife and greater biodiversity. However, there is scope to extend the areas to which a more relaxed cutting regime is applied.
11. If the aspirations set out in the Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan and Green Infrastructure Strategic Plan are to be realised, a quantum change in the approach for the management and maintenance of grasslands will be required. This change in policy will have an impact of the way grasslands are perceived, valued and used; welcomed by many, but perhaps less so by others, where adjustments to new and unfamiliar maintenance regimes may take time.
12. The policy change involves a reversal of the previous approach whereby, as a matter of course, grassland is regularly mown unless, and by exception, there is a reason not to do so, to one where the assumption will be to adopt a maintenance regime to encourage species-rich grassland as the first option; overridden only if circumstances and use demands otherwise and it is appropriate to do so.
13. It will be important to try to achieve a balance between competing needs, retaining frequent cutting for areas used for more formal recreational activities, whilst relaxing maintenance regimes where a more natural approach is desirable.
14. It is also worth noting that, contrary to perceptions, reducing grass cutting frequency is not necessarily a low-cost option and whilst it may reduce ongoing maintenance activities to a certain degree this will not result in significant cost savings.
15. Frequent large-scale grass cutting has a very low unit cost per square metre and, when maintenance regimes are relaxed, this is replaced by grass cutting perhaps just once or

twice per year, also usually requiring the clearance of cut vegetation, the unit cost per square metre of these operations being much higher.

### **Managing species-rich grassland**

16. The approach to creating and managing species-rich grassland will be multi-layered, embracing options ranging from dedicating whole areas to be managed as nature reserves, the creation of hay meadows, through to locally adjusting the mowing regime of specific areas of grassland in order to accommodate the presence of unusual or rare wildflower species or particular fauna.
17. The key the principles of the policy are as follows:
  - Maintenance regimes need to be fit for purpose according to the functionality and use of grassland
  - Management and maintenance regimes need to be consistent and meaningful, i.e. avoiding ad-hoc and apparently random designations
  - In certain areas frequent maintenance of grassland will be imperative on safety grounds [for example preserving sight lines on road junctions]
  - The existing and potential biodiversity value of specific areas of grassland need to be assessed to determine the most appropriate management and maintenance regimes
  - Regular maintenance [not necessarily frequent cutting though] is essential to create the conditions in which species-rich grassland can thrive and to control competitive or invasive species – the timing of maintenance activities is important, but will vary according to seasonal conditions
  - Creating ‘structural diversity’ [that is different vegetation heights] benefits both flora and fauna
  - Wherever possible green corridors should be continuous and interconnected
  - Negative public perceptions [for example about areas being untidy or neglected] need to be addressed through informative communications and promotion

### **Local nature reserves**

18. The designation by the City Council of a site as a local nature reserve and the adoption of a management plan for the ongoing maintenance is often the most obvious manifestation of a commitment to protect and enhance natural habitats and manage the land for the benefit of wildlife and to increase biodiversity.
19. To date the City Council has declared five local nature reserves, [as listed in Schedule 1] comprising 88.83 hectares of green space in total. Plans are in place to declare another local nature reserve due course at John Shennan Field, comprising a further 6.82 hectares.

## **Meadows and grazing**

20. In 2005 a programme commenced to adapt some areas of established grassland in Hylands Park into 'spring meadows' with a hay crop taken in June. This was a cost-effective option for the management of grassland areas that would be used for events and other activities later in the summer. Adopting a hay making regime increases the species composition of the grassland and improves the wildlife value, particularly for invertebrates. Habitat surveys carried out in 2005 and 2015 confirmed their value as 'local wildlife sites'. The character and composition of these meadows will continue to change over time.
21. Around 70 hectares of grassland in Hylands Park are now managed using a haymaking and meadow regime. This practice is only suitable for larger areas that can be accessed by tractor-mounted machinery, but hay-making regimes are also now in place in a number of other areas throughout the City Council area, with a further 27 hectares of grassland managed on this basis [as listed in Schedule 2]. Further opportunities for introducing haymaking, grazing and water-meadow practices will be explored.
22. In 2016 livestock grazing was introduced to some selected sites to further improve the diversity of management practices. Around 6.50 hectares of land, mainly the area known as Widford Fields alongside the River Wid, are grazed by Red Poll cattle through the Legacy Grazing Countryside Stewardship scheme.

## **Wildflower areas**

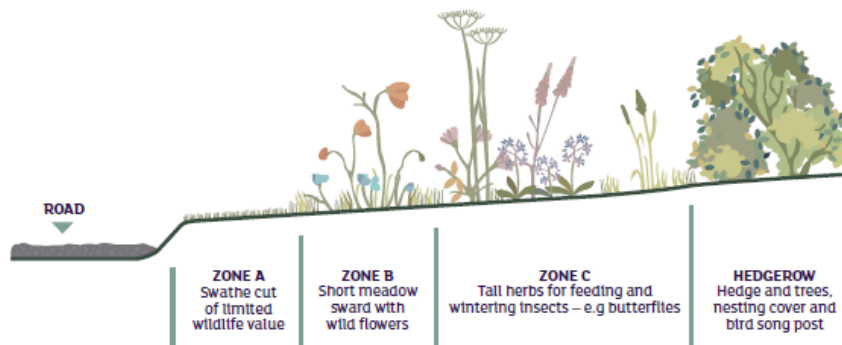
23. This includes some small areas sown exclusively with a wildflower seed mix; the maintenance regime for these areas allows seeds to drop or disperse, before cutting and clearing the arisings once per year. This reduces the return of nutrients into the soil allowing wildflowers to thrive at the expense of more vigorous grasses, which would otherwise 'out-compete' wildflower species. Creation of species-rich meadows by sowing with wildflower seed of appropriate provenance can be very expensive, so is limited to a small number of selected sites.
24. Other areas, although not seeded specifically, have a naturally evolving species diversity. These areas are left to grow naturally and then cut with the arisings left in situ. Low intervention maintenance in such areas has allowed existing flora and fauna to thrive and spread, with cutting once per year helping to control more invasive and woody species.
25. Although arisings are left and therefore will add to the soil nutrient, this is still considered a valuable technique for creating a diverse grassland for pollinators and foraging fauna particularly in areas where access is difficult.

## **Roadside verges**

26. Whilst the majority of roadside verges are part of the adopted highway, [therefore owned by Essex County Council] the City Council usually takes responsibility for the maintenance of the vegetation that is growing on them. Measures have been taken to reduce the grass

cutting frequency on some roadside verges, particularly in the more rural areas, where it has been appropriate to do so.

27. The new policy approach is to adopt the ‘idealised management’ approach to roadside verges as promoted by Plantlife, [depicted below], for all roadside verges with some exceptions in highly urbanised areas. On some verges only two zones will be possible – Zone A and a combined Zone B & C.
28. In some circumstances very narrow verges located between the road and an adjacent footpath may be cut on a more regular frequency if there are circumstances that warrant this. This will be determined by a ‘site by site’ assessment.



Idealised management zones across the width of a roadside verge



Examples of maintenance on roadside verges

### **Grassland areas containing ‘naturalised’ bulbs**

29. Whilst predominantly created for seasonal aesthetic interest [i.e. the bulb varieties are not usually native species naturally occurring], grassland areas containing ‘naturalised’ bulbs provide further opportunities to encourage species-rich grassland.
30. Typically, in areas where bulbs have been mass-planted [mainly crocus or daffodils] the grass is left uncut until the bulb foliage dies down. This increases diversity giving an opportunity for other species to establish and for pollinators and other fauna to forage in the long grass.
31. Previously the areas are ‘cut to tidy’ around the end of June. To further encourage species diversity the period before the ‘cut to tidy’ operation will be extended to late summer or early autumn.

### **Species protection areas**

32. This includes several sites that are identified in the Local Wildlife Sites Review and some that are designated ‘special roadside verges’ or ‘protected’ verges.
33. These areas of grassland provide a habitat for distinct species of flora or fauna that may be unusual or rare in the area or that have ecological merit. Maintenance practices – for example the timing and frequency of cutting these areas – will be adjusted accordingly to allow the target species to flourish.
34. Four sites have been identified as ‘species protection areas’ across the City Council area, with species present including bee and pyramid orchids.
35. There is scope to identify further locations that contain species of merit, whilst being mindful to avoid creating a ‘patchwork’ of unconnected habitats that diminish their ecological value.
36. Species protection areas are as listed in Schedule 3.

### **General amenity areas**

37. For amenity grassland areas in the more urbanised locations a maintenance regime needs to be found that balances potentially competing priorities such as aesthetics and informal recreational use with aspirations to create a more natural environmental, considering the practicalities of any management practices applied.
38. Proximity to homes is also a key factor; a more relaxed grass cutting regime that is several metres away from a dwelling may be a different, and more attractive, proposition for someone than one that may be immediately adjacent to their property. Regularly mown margins will be considered if the circumstances warrant a defined ‘separation’.
39. It is suggested that the policy for managing grassland in these areas favours less frequent cutting for the benefit of wildflowers and wildlife, where it is practical to do so, but

considers those other priorities, particularly if an area is more intensively used, where longer grass would prevent recreational use or would create a potential safety hazard.

40. Once an area of grassland is designated for a lower frequency of cutting this will not be reversed in response to local pressure, lobbying or campaigning, unless exceptional circumstances arise.

### **Sportsgrounds**

41. Given the use of and specific requirements for sports pitches, opportunities to create wildlife habitats or to manage grassland to improve biodiversity will be limited to the marginal areas of sportsgrounds. However, where there is scope and suitable land available a more relaxed cutting regime will be introduced adopting similar principles for the management of roadside verges i.e. a gradient of vegetation height up to boundary hedgerows and alike.

## Schedule 1 – Local nature reserves

	Description	Area
Chelmer Valley LNR	Located along the eastern banks of the River Chelmer. It runs approximately 2.5km from Valley Bridge to Victoria Road Also designated as LWS Ch 68	17.60ha
Galleywood Common LNR	Also designated as LWS Ch 61	43.79ha
Marconi Ponds LNR	Also designated as LWS Ch 165	1.24ha
Admirals Park LNR	Declared 13 July 2021	22.00ha
Frankland Fields	Declared as LNR 7 June 2022 Also designated as LWS Ch 149	4.20ha
	<b>Total:</b>	<b>88.83ha</b>

Planned:	Description	Area
John Shennan Field	Due to be declared as LNR in 2024	6.82ha

## Schedule 2 – Meadows and grazing

	Description	Area
Hylands Park	Meadow land	70.00ha
Chaucer Meadows	Water meadow	4.59ha
Galleywood Common	Meadow land	8.25ha
Widford Church Field	Grazing pastures	6.50ha
Admirals Brickfields	Water meadow	1.68ha
Kings Head Meadow	Water meadow	2.85ha
Swan Pasture	Meadow land	1.00ha
Brewhouse Hoppit	Meadow land	0.50ha
Pollards Meadow and Springfield Green	Meadow land	0.70ha
Andrews Park	Meadow land	2.20ha
Riverside corridors – West Chelmsford	Water meadow	4.29ha
Bunny Walks	Water meadow	2.89ha
	<b>Total:</b>	<b>105.45ha</b>

Planned:	Description	Area
John Shennan Field	Meadow land	1.80ha
Chatham Green	Meadow land	0.71ha
Hylands North of Greenbury Way	Meadow land	0.90ha
Green Wedge - Beaulieu	Meadow land	1.50ha



Springfield Hall Park receptor site	Meadow land	1.65ha
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### Schedule 3 – ‘Species protection’ areas

The following sites are listed in the Local wildlife Sites review 2016 –

- Ch13 Roxwell [designated Special Roadside Verge]
- Ch16 Boyton Cross [designated Special Roadside Verge]
- Ch26 Cow Watering Lane Writtle [designated Special Roadside Verge]
- Ch70 Court Hill Road Verge, Little Leighs [Essex Protected Road Verge 10]
- Ch74 Lavenders Bridge Verge, Little Leighs [designated Special Roadside Verge]
- Ch127 Colam Lane Verges, Little Baddow [private ownership but forms part of the public highway]
- Ch154 Pleshey Road Verge [private ownership but part of the public highway]
- Ch 163 Penden Hill Verges, Great Waltham [private ownership but part of the public highway]
- Ch167 Chalk Farm Road Verges, Littley Green [private ownership but part of the public highway 0.32ha]
- Ch182 Mayes Lane Verges, Danbury [private ownership but forms part of the public highway]