

Enhancing Grasslands for Biodiversity

Grasslands maintained by the Council's Public Realm Team fall into two main types

Short-mown Grassland Management

Much of the land maintained by the Public Realm team consists of grassland, especially grasslands within housing developments and along roadsides that are traditionally kept short mown.

The reasons for this are likely to be a combination of 'tradition', tidiness and road safety.

These short mown open spaces do provide a rather sterile environment for residents to walk in, play in or picnic in but have little value for wildlife other than those species that can withstand regular cutting. Dandelions and Daisies are common but are often cut in full flower on a regular 'grass cutting round.'

In Stowmarket over 240,000 sq m of grass is maintained by cutting it regularly throughout the year. In Sudbury, over 265,000 sq m and in Great Cornard over 165,000 sq m. Whilst many of these grass areas are small roadside verges within the towns, there are large grass areas that are routinely cut



Sudbury – new open space on Cranworth Road prior to cutting.

This area would be cut once every 3 weeks. In between, a range of flowers appear – including Pyramidal Orchids.



Stowmarket – wide mown grass verge along Chilton Way.

This area is cut every 3 weeks. No flowers evident other than 'lawn weeds'

Cut and Collect – Grassland Management

In a number of larger open spaces and nature reserves, the Councils have, for many years managed a number of grassland sites by allowing the grass to grow, cutting it in late Summer and collecting and disposing of the collected material.

This method allows flowers to develop, bloom and set seed whilst the removal of the cut material helps reduce soil fertility and discourages vigorous grass growth in subsequent years.



Hadleigh Railway Walk – meadow cut once a year and arising removed.

Meadow supports a variety of plants and butterflies. Grass Snake and Common Lizard present.



The Pennings LNR – meadow cut once a year and arisings removed

Main Sites where cut and collect grassland management takes place

The Mid Suffolk Grounds Maintenance Team undertake a cut and collect on the following countryside sites

- Needham Lake Local Nature Reserve – annual cut of meadows on Station Field (approx. 2.5ha).
- The Pennings LNR – annual cut of both paddocks. (approx. 1.4ha)
- Church Meadow LNR – annual cut of unfenced meadow (approx. 0.7ha)

The cuts have been taking place most years for at least 16 years. Some years were missed due to machinery issues or weather conditions. The impact has been varied due to the nature of the sites.

Needham Lake – annual cutting has seen a reduction in the amount of False Oat Grass (indicative of unmanaged meadows) present in the drier parts of the site and a shorter grassland is now present over half of the site. In the lower lying areas along

the river (which are prone to flooding) a taller vegetation is present. Both areas support typical flowers and insects though these are not 'flower rich meadows' yet.

The Pennings – annual cutting has produced a mosaic of vegetation in the two meadows that were once arable fields. Both meadows flood so nutrient enrichment from the river is ongoing and results in vigorous grass growth. One meadow supports a mix of plants associated with damp meadows (yellow flag, meadowsweet, rush and sedge). The second meadow has stands of reed and sedge in the damper areas amongst the taller grasses.

Church Meadow – annual cutting is having little impact on the meadow in terms of grassland structure. Tall grasses still dominate – probably due to high nutrient levels in the soil and infrequent cutting in the past. Annual cutting does reduce the thatch and minimises further nutrient build up

Hadleigh Railway Walk (c800 sq m) – a section of railway embankment is cut and raked each year with the arisings removed. This section is a flower rich meadow and maintenance minimises scrub encroachment and nutrient build up.

Purcell Road, Stowmarket (c1200sq m) - a section of open space has been left to grow long to enable a meadow to develop. This was agreed with the local community. The meadow will be cut and collected.

Ash Road, Onehouse (750 sq m). A small green within a housing development has been left to grow into a meadow at the request of local residents. One resident who objected continues to cut part of this as short grass. Too early to tell what impact this will have but it does highlight one of the main issues that if everyone is not on board then the scheme does cause neighbourhood tensions

Elmswell – The local 'Elmswild' Community Group have identified areas of MSDC open space that they wish to leave as wildflower meadows and we have ceased cutting those areas to enable flowers to develop

What more could we be doing to improve grassland management?

- We could stop the widespread mowing of open spaces as short mown grass and leave areas as longer areas of grassland. This will not necessarily produce flower rich meadows just long areas of amenity grassland if that was the grass seed mix original planted there
- We could introduce a cut and collect method of grassland management on specific sites so that we reduce soil nutrient and reduce grass growth. Flowering plants can then establish naturally. Additional scarifying and overseeding with a wildflower seed mix would add wildflowers to the sward.
- We could delay cutting on selected open spaces where wildflowers are already present (eg Cranworth Road – see above). The back edges of some

of the wider verges in Cedars Park support good numbers of Bee and Pyramidal orchids so could be left uncut early in the season to allow the flowers to bloom and set seed before cutting later

- We could positively enhance grassland areas by adding wildflower seed mixes either directly into existing grass swards or by preparing specific areas and sowing colourful mixes to create eye-catching displays in key areas.



Planted and natural road side verges
images from elsewhere in the Country

Can we identify some potential sites to improve?

Road verges can support a range of wildflowers naturally but 'enhancements' can be made through planting of wildflower seed mixes. These do however require maintenance and may not necessarily result in cost or time savings (information sought from other Councils re their schemes). There could be opportunities to manage some of the wider grass verges within urban areas (eg Cedars Park, Stowmarket) as wildflower verges without impacting on visibility. If this type of scheme is considered, then I believe sites need to be prominent so they can be viewed by many passing members of the public.

There is a long established 'Roadside Nature Reserve Scheme' managed by SCC (20+ RNRs in both Babergh and Mid Suffolk).

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/planning-waste-and-environment/suffolks-countryside-and-wildlife/landscape-and-wildlife/> Parish Councils and volunteers assist the Council's contractors in maintaining these sites. These are all natural verges and designated due to the presence of one or more rare plants in Suffolk

Creating 'Wildflower Meadows'

Advice was sought from Durham County Council and Swansea City Council who have both established wildflower verges and meadows across their areas.

Durham use two methods to establish wildflower meadows:

- 1) Sowing into existing grassland. Grassland cut very short, area then scarified (heavily raked) to expose 50% bare soil and then oversown. Would recommend that yellow rattle is added to whatever wildflower seed mix is used if mix does not specifically contain it. Yellow rattle is a parasitic plant. It sends out roots that grow into those of neighbouring grasses which reduces the vigour of grass and allows other plant species to develop.
- 2) Sowing into a prepared bed. Areas were cut short then sprayed with a total weedkiller to completely kill off existing weeds / vegetation. Area were then cultivated, prepared to create a seed bed and then sown.

Wildflower seed mixes can be easily obtained from many seed suppliers. The 'Restore and Enrich' seed mix used by DCC was chosen to enrich existing grassland areas by sowing into existing grassland, prepared as in 1. (above) at a rate of 3g/m². 1kg of wildflower seed would cost £100 - £125 and would cover an area of 330 sq m of existing grassland by over-sowing. With the huge areas of short mown grassland present across the Districts creation of meadows by over-sowing would need to target key areas – but would create long term meadows if managed correctly.

<https://www.bostonseeds.com/library/BSRE-Restore-and-Enrich-Wildflower-Seed-Mixture.pdf>

Costs can be reduced by sowing a mix of 80% grasses and 20% wildflowers. A typical 1kg pack costs around £40. This would be a more suitable mix where new grassland is being established as in 2. above. A 1kg bag covers around 200 sq m

<https://www.bostonseeds.com/products/wildflowers-seed/wildflower-seed-mixtures-20/>

If a brightly coloured mix is needed to provide an attractive roadside verge then a 'cornfield annual mix' or similar could be planted. As annuals, these plants bloom, seed, then die so the area would need to be resown annually – though some seeding from the original plants would be expected if the seed is allowed to fall and the ground is prepared for the following year.

<https://www.wildflower.co.uk/wildflower-seed-mixtures/cornfield-annuals.html>

Possible sites Mid Suffolk.

A number of sites in Mid Suffolk and Babergh have been identified where meadows or colourful verges could be created. There will be many more – these are just a few I have identified on maps or that I know about:

Verges

- **Cedars Park** – Guncotton Way and Mortimer Road, Stowmarket
- **Needham Road Central reservations**, Stowmarket (main road in from Needham Market)
- **Stowmarket Road verges**, Needham Market
- **Church Road, Elmswell**. Part of a wider open space. Possible opportunity to work with Elmswild who are supportive of changing mowing regimes
- **Norton Road, Thurston** – wide short mown verge on edge of village.
- **Church Street, Stradbroke**. Wide verge between main road and access road to housing

Possible sites in Babergh

- **Waldingfield Road, Sudbury**. Wide grass verge alongside main road close to 'Homebase Roundabout'
- **Acton Lane, Sudbury**. Wide grass verges
- **Newton Road, Sudbury**. Use existing herbaceous flower beds to create cornfield annual mix. (Need to involve Sudbury in Bloom)
- **Ann Beaumont Way, Hadleigh**. Either side of the entrance to the estate
- **Lady Lane, Hadleigh**. Enhancements of some of the long grass banks
- **Little St Mary's, Long Melford**. Wide grass verge alongside main road

Open Spaces across Mid Suffolk and Babergh

There are a number of larger open spaces in the main towns that could be enhanced by creating wildflower meadows.

- Cedars Park, Stowmarket
- Purcell Road, Stowmarket
- Beaumont Park, Hadleigh
- Easthouse Meadow Hadleigh
- First and Second Avenue, Sudbury
- Aubrey Drive area, Sudbury
- Cordell Road, Long Melford
- Wells Way, Debenham

There are also numerous smaller open spaces within developments. Many newer schemes include wildflower meadow mixes within their landscaping scheme. If the Councils adopt these areas there should be a maintenance plan to follow to allow the development of the wildflower meadows on these developments.

Prepared by the Babergh Mid Suffolk Public Realm Team