

Grass Cutting in Potton

**Produced on behalf of:
Potton Town Council
the
Parks, Allotments and Burials Sub-Committee
and the
Green Infrastructure and Neighbourhood Plan Sub-Committee**

Introduction

The 2016 State of Nature Report highlighted over half the country's native wildlife has declined, with 25% showing strong to moderate declines. About a sixth of our native species natural heritage is threatened with extinction from Great Britain.

Invertebrates are doing particularly poorly, with over half the species in decline, thus they need help to create homes that provide them with the food, shelter and somewhere to breed. Invertebrates also provide the food on which other wildlife need to survive. Among those in trouble are our wild pollinators (Box 1) who play a vital role in our food production, with an estimated value of £430 million each year to the UK economy. This indicates why we should value their existence by providing them with flower rich grasslands in which to feed, breed, shelter and move safely through the countryside.

The benefits of wildflowers for people and nature

Through the popular press and social media coverage, the public are gaining an increasing awareness of declines in native flora and fauna and a growing interest and enthusiasm for displays of wildflowers and pictorial meadows generated through exhibits such as those in the Olympic Park during the 2012 London Olympics.

Research increasingly demonstrates the health and wellbeing benefits experienced when exposed to green space and nature. Social cohesion increases when communities are exposed to improved green space and people deviate from normal routes to walk or drive past flower rich verges. Some examples are those which can be seen at Clapton Park Estate, the bee verges of Blackheath and the Sustainable Drainage rain gardens in Sheffield, as illustrated in Figure 1 on the following page.

Longer grass has many environmental benefits, helping to:

- Slow run-off, preventing sediments washing into roads and drains
- Cool the atmosphere during hot weather
- Reduces drought stress to grass and tree roots
- Reduce soil compaction
- Provide habitat and food for wildlife:
 - ◇ It may provide seed and insect food for birds (see the case study in Appendix 1)
 - ◇ Enhancing with wildflowers provides pollen and nectar for pollinating insects such as bumblebees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths (see Box 1, below) In addition, it enables them to move through the landscape and disperse to colonise new areas and habitats.

Box 1: Pollinating insects

There is common misconception when we refer to 'pollinators' we mean honeybees. However, the term really applies to wild pollinators such as bumblebees, solitary bees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths.

Wild pollinators collectively contribute over 75% to the ecosystem services of pollinating our food resources, compared to less than 25% delivered by honeybees. Furthermore, domestic honeybees compete negatively for pollen and nectar with wild pollinators.

Unlike honeybees which are farmed, wild pollinators are in serious threat of extinction due to loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitat, herbicides and insecticides. Many species such as the shrill carder now require direct conservation action and intervention, while species such as the short-haired bumblebee which became extinct have been the subject of a successful reintroduction programme.

Therefore, there is drive by Government and nature conservation organisations to deliver strategies to protect and recover populations of wild pollinators such as bumblebees. See What is happening across the country?

Figure 1: Verges in Clapton Park and the Blackheath Bee Verges in London and the Sustainable Drainage rain gardens in Sheffield



What is happening across the country

How are the Government helping?

The UK Government has committed itself to improving the state of our bees and other pollinating insects, wanting to build an understanding of populations and the causes of their decline. The strategy builds on existing Government policies and initiatives and those of many other organisations. The aim of the strategy is to bring together the collective skills of a partnership of key stakeholders across the country to implement a united effort to make positive changes for our pollinators.

Its vision: *'is to see pollinators thrive, so they can carry out their essential service to people of pollinating flowers and crops, while providing other benefits for our native plants, the wider environment, food production and all of us.'*

Based on evidence that loss of quality natural and semi-natural habitats that feed and shelter pollinators is a key driver of population change, most actions are about expanding food, shelter and nesting at a landscape scale so our 1,500-pollinator species can survive and thrive.

How the Government wants Potton to help

Support pollinators across towns, cities and the countryside

Working with large-scale landowners, and their advisers, contractors and facility managers, to promote simple changes to land management to provide food, shelter and nest sites.

Ensuring good practice to help pollinators through initiatives with a wide range of organisations and professional networks including managers of public and amenity spaces, utility and transport companies, brownfield site managers, local authorities, developers and planners.

Encouraging the public to take-action in their gardens, allotments, window boxes and balconies to make them pollinator-friendly or through other opportunities such as community gardening and volunteering on nature reserves.

The Governments **25 Year Environment Plan** is also in strong support of new and existing green infrastructure to extend wildlife corridors into towns and cities, and provide opportunities for conserving wildflowers and insect pollinators.

How are Central Bedfordshire Council helping?

The Local Plan has policies for new development which support the Government Pollinator Strategy and 25 Year Environment Plan.

Section 15.3.4 states developments be designed around existing ecological networks and include for example verges and identified networks of routes for pollinators (known as 'B-lines')

Section 15.5.12 states planting schemes should include '.... flowering mixes to support wildlife, including pollinators'.

CBC are also supportive of both the Buglife B-lines and Plantlife road verge projects, see below.

How is the Potton Neighbourhood Plan helping?

Under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, every public body, including Town Councils, have a legal obligation to protect and enhance biodiversity. This is further supported by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the commitment within the Potton Neighbourhood Plan under the revised Green Infrastructure Plan, to make changes to the grass cutting regime to benefit wildlife.

Within the Neighbourhood Plan and Annex B is the revised Potton Green Infrastructure Plan, April 2018, where Aspiration D states the town will: *'Adopt a mowing regime on publicly owned grassland within town to maximise wildflowers and biodiversity interest'*

Who else are 'doing their bit'?

The Buglife B-Lines project

Run by Buglife, B-Lines is an imaginative solution to the problem of the loss of flowers and pollinators. The B-Lines are a series of 'insect pathways' running through our countryside and towns, along which communities are restoring and creating a series of wildflower-rich habitat stepping stones. They link existing wildlife areas together, creating a network, like a railway, that will weave across the British landscape. This will provide large areas of brand new habitat benefiting bees and butterflies— but also a host of other wildlife. This initiative is also supported in section 15.3.4 of the CBC Local Plan.

The Plantlife road verge project

Rural road verges are a vital refuge for wild flowers driven out of our farmland. In turn, wild flowers support our birds, bees and other wildlife. Some councils are looking after their road verges in a way that benefits nature, but they are in a minority. Plantlife want to see all road verges managed better while remaining safe for motorists. Not only can it be done - it could save money as well. Via a dedicated web page, Plantlife encourage the public to email an open letter to their local authority asking them to manage their verges more sympathetically for wildlife. Central Bedfordshire Council have already signed up as a result and are working with contractors to improve the floristic value of its roadside verges and to create more Roadside Nature Reserves.

What can Potton Town Council do?

It is possible for the Town Council and community of Potton to make a significant contribution to the Governments National Pollinator Strategy and the initiatives being run by Buglife and Plantlife which are supported by the Central Bedfordshire Council Local Plan. This can be achieved by making minor adjustments and enhancements to the grass cutting and management throughout the town. In turn, this will help boost the abundance of flowering plants and subsequently numbers of important pollinators and other invertebrate species, leading to associated benefits for other wildlife and people.

What will be different about the grass in Potton?

In short, not a lot. It is proposed to create four grass cutting specifications: '**sport amenity**', '**short**', '**intermediate**' and '**long**' as described in Table 1 on the following page. Their general locations are listed in Table 2.

NB: although referenced here and in Tables 1 & 2, '**sport amenity**' areas are broadly otherwise outside any interest or consideration of this scheme. It applies to those Coe playing areas of all Mill Lane sports pitches and all of the central play areas of Henry Smith

For '**Short grass**' a slight change to minimum height has been agreed at 50mm, but this does not affect the current frequency of cutting and which will apply to c>90% of the towns grass areas. '**Intermediate**' and '**Long grass**' will likely require notification by the Town Council to cut. Alternatively, it might be expected 'Intermediate' grass could be every 4 - 6 weeks depending on weather. The 'long grass' will generally require cutting on a similar frequency in early spring and autumn, but not from late April/early May through to late August/early September as this is where the flowers bloom and seed, see Table 1 for detail.

How soon will this happen?

It is important to note there will not be a dramatic overnight change. It is planned to deliver this slowly over several years during which time it is anticipated to add value by gradually seeding selective areas with wildflowers to increase its appeal.

Other grass mowing areas in Potton

The specifications detailed on the following page are consistent with current grass and verge management of St Mary's Church and the Roadside Nature Reserve beneath the church boundary wall on Hatley Road and the Potton Water Vole Habitat Management Plan for Henry Smith Playing Field.

These additional sites have their own specifications drawn up in conjunction with the Town Council and partners including the local Wildlife Trust, the Diocese of St Albans, Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity.

Table 1: Grass specifications

Nos	Grass type	Specification length		Specification detail
		Before cut (mm)	After cut (mm)	
1	Sport amenity	35	20	Grass clippings need to be spread evenly across the grass area and not left in mounds.
2	Short	100	50	Clipping must be swept from paths, roads, service covers and street furniture
3	Intermediate	200	100	<p>Collect and remove all arisings from site</p> <p>1m to 1.5 wide <u>short grass</u> mowing strip adjacent to footpaths</p> <p><u>Short grass</u> sight-line to maintain safety at road junctions</p> <p><u>Beneath trees</u>, extend 2m beyond the overhead canopy, unless otherwise instructed</p> <p><u>Against hedges</u>, extend to 1m beyond unless otherwise instructed.</p>
4	Long	300	100	<p>Where instructed, cut <u>short grass</u> path/s through grass</p> <p><u>Do not cut</u> beneath trees or against hedges from mid -September to mid-April</p> <p>For long grass, cut in early spring from mid-April to late-May as required</p> <p>Commence again as notified usually from mid-August to mid-September, continuing until the end of the season.</p>

Table 2: Principle areas of implementation (see also Tables 3 and 4)

Nos	Location
1	All of Mill Lane and most of Henry Smith Playing Field, except 2 & 3 below*
2	Road verges, junctions and greens throughout the town, eg: Everton Road, Mill Lane, Newtown, Sutton Mill Road, Sycamore Close, Bellevue Court, Sandy Road Cemetery, Festival Road, parts of Henry Smith* (except see number 3 below), Kings Street/Gamlingay Road junction In time, some areas <u>may</u> be considered for change to a longer grass cutting specification.
3	Beneath tree canopies, eg: Henry Smith Playing Field (commencing 2020 or 2021). Also, in time, at selected locations listed under number 2 above, eg: Festival Road.
4	Initially at King Street/Gamlingay Road junction (commencing 2020) Also, in time, at other selected locations, eg: junctions of Everton Rd/Myers Rd, Everton Rd/Mill Lane, Everton Rd/Horslow St and Manor Way.

Making the grass look better

Over the coming years, there will be opportunities to enhance selected grass areas with appropriate wildflowers mixes. For short grass, there are specific flower mixes tolerant of regular mowing. Therefore, there will be no change to the specified mowing of enhanced areas. The only difference will be an increase of flowers in the sward.

Establishment of wildflowers requires autumn sowing, followed by regular mowing in the first year to encourage development. Therefore, it is **important to understand nothing of note will be seen in the first 1-2 years following any sowing.**

Below is an illustrative impression of how verges might typically look following establishment of enhanced grass areas. **Figure 2: Illustrative examples of enhanced grassland**



Appendix 1: Increasing insect and seed abundance for wildlife

Between 2008 and 2012, the RSPB trialled management techniques in nineteen parks across London with eight partner green space managers. The aim of the research was to investigate how making subtle changes to park management could increase the abundance of insects and seeds to benefit birds – particularly house sparrow and other wildlife. The project was called ‘The London House Sparrow Parks Project’.

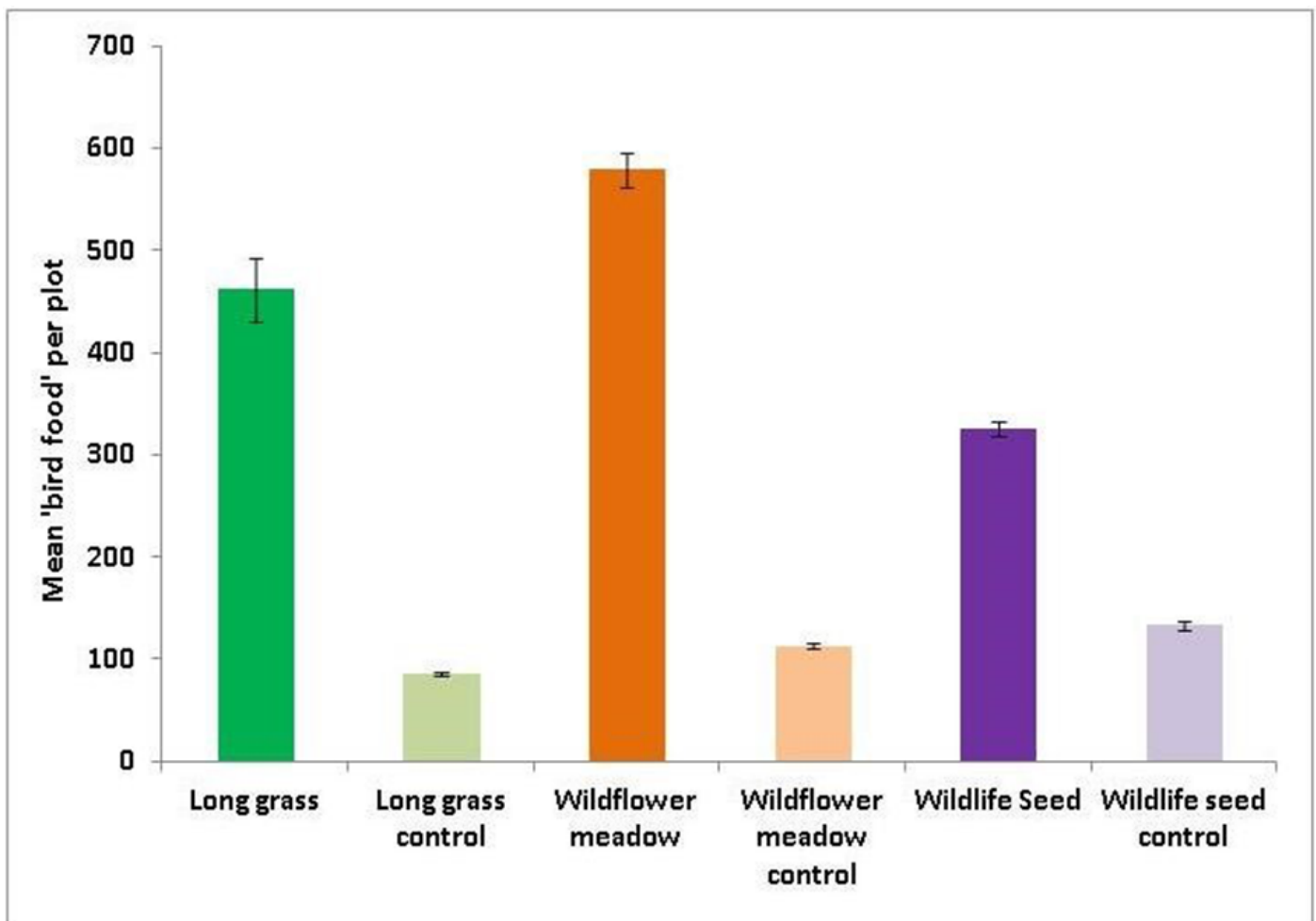
Eight trial plots of each of the following prescriptions were assessed across the various sites:

- taking grass out of the regular mowing regime to provide un-enhanced long grass
- creating new flower rich, long grass areas
- creating a ‘wildlife seed plot’ using a bespoke seed mix

Each plot had an adjacent control alongside where mowing was continued as normal.

Not surprisingly, the flower rich grassland recorded the greatest number of insects and seeds compared to the control grass areas. Even just taking grass out of a regular mowing regime significantly increases the number of invertebrates and seeds as opposed to mown short grass.

Invertebrate abundance



From: London House Sparrow Parks Project (2008-2012)

‘Bird food’ refers to invertebrates known to comprise the primary component in the diet of birds. It is derived from a sample of approximately 140,000 invertebrates collected via vortex sampler and sweep net.

Appendix 2: Public perception to changes in mowing practice

When embarking on its research to investigate increasing insect and seed abundance by making changes to mowing practices, see Appendix 1, the RSPB invested considerable time before and during the project to engage and inform park users of what was happening and why.

Some results from that exercise in risk management and the public perception of how they would like to see their green spaces managed are reviewed here.

Public perception

Long grass	Public reaction was less positive than to the other, more colourful habitat types. Due to park use pressures it can be difficult for park managers to justify instating new areas of long grass.
Wildflower meadow	In the first year of establishment, wildflower meadows contained much bare ground,* and received mixed public reaction. As the meadows became more established the amount of bare ground was reduced and public reaction was positive. Therefore, over the longer term the benefits of this habitat type will exceed those of long grass. Partners agreed that mowing paths through both wildflower meadows** and long grass areas may channel movements of people away from the wider plot area.
Friends of groups	Feedback from Friends groups was very encouraging, with unanimous agreement on the value of wildlife areas in parks. Comments from Friends groups highlighted the need for sensitivity to the needs of individual parks, and the need for keeping people informed.

*note: grass areas in Potton will not look like this. Wildflower seed will be sown over the existing grass. Each site seeded will look no different for the first 18 months during which time mowing will continue as normal. It will be once mowing is relaxed in the second year following sowing of flower mix that people will notice a change.

**See Table 1: Grass specifications