Grass Cutting in Potton Strategy

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
    - 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

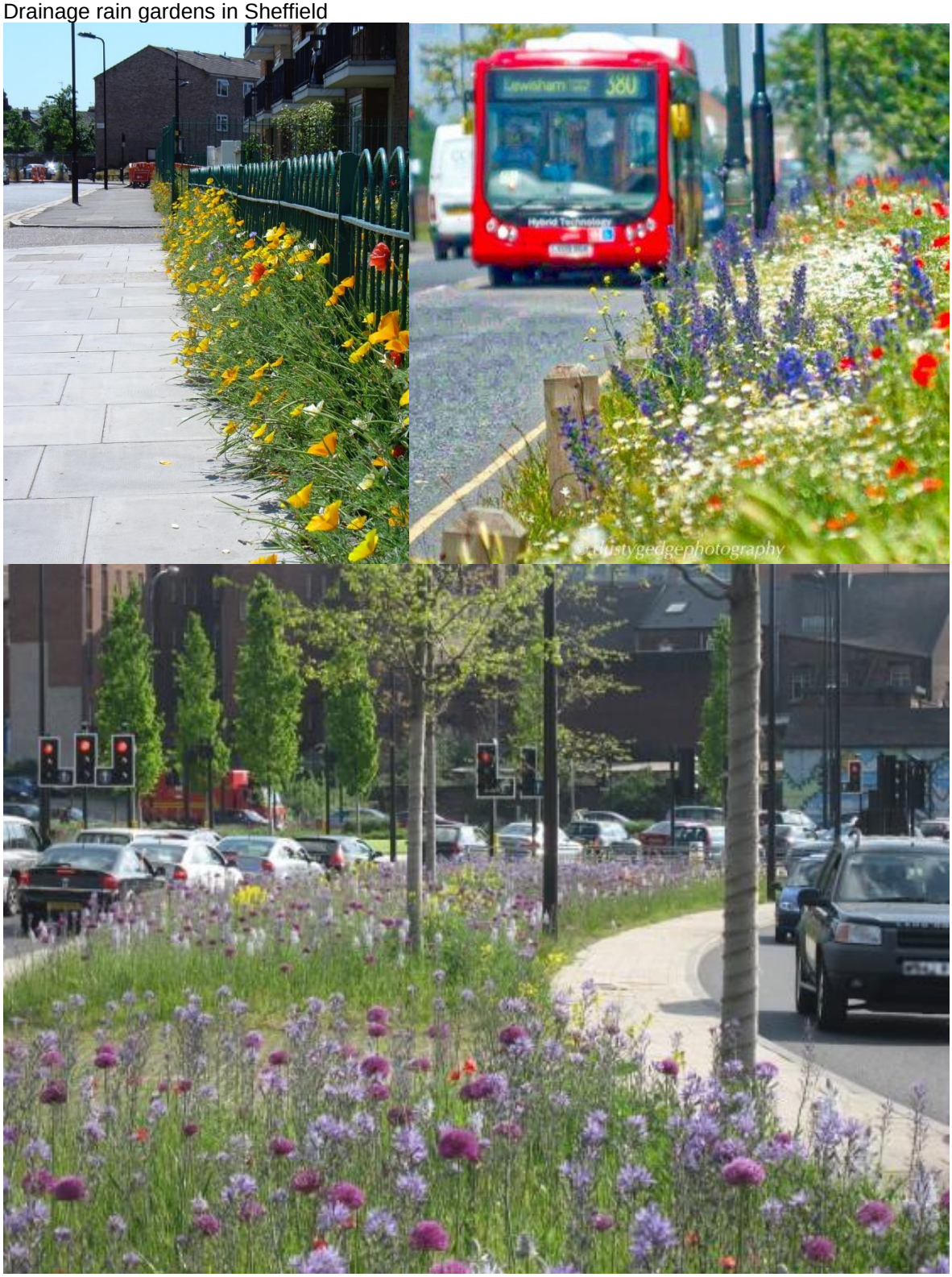
There is common misconception when we refer to 'pollinators' we mean honeybees. However, the term really applies to wild pollinators such as bumblebees, solitary bees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths.

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 Section 2: Policies.

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 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 practice, 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.

For '**Sport amenity**' grass will be cut to no less than 25mm from a maximum height of 40mm. This applies to all the playing areas at Mill Lane sports pitches and all of the central play areas of Henry Smith. See Tables 1 & 2 for detail.

For '**Short grass**' a slight change to minimum height post cutting 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. This applies across the whole town. See Tables 1 & 2 for detail.

The areas beneath trees in Henry Smith Park should be an '**Intermediate**' length of between 100 and 200mm. Avoid cutting during spring flowering period. See Tables 1 & 2 for detail.

The areas of '**Long grass**' should follow the separate specification of the water vole management plan devised by Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, See Tables 1 & 2 for detail.

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**	40	25	• Grass clippings need to be spread evenly across the grass area and not left in mounds. • Clipping must be swept from paths, roads, service covers and street furniture
2	**Short**	100	50	
3	**Intermediate**	200	100	• Collect and remove all arisings from site • 1m to 1.5 wide short grass mowing strip adjacent to footpaths • Short grass sight-line to maintain safety at road junctions • Beneath trees, extend 2m beyond the overhead canopy, unless otherwise instructed • Against hedges, extend to 1m beyond unless otherwise instructed. • Where instructed, cut short grass path/s through grass • Do not cut beneath trees or against hedges from mid - September to mid-April • **For long grass**, cut in early spring from mid-April to late-May as required • Commence again as notified usually from mid-August to mid-September, continuing until the end of the season.
4	**Long**	300	100	

Table 2: Principle areas of implementation

Nos	Location
1	All of Mill Lane Recreation Ground and most of Henry Smith Playing Field, except 2, 3 and 4 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, Allotments, Festival Road, parts of Henry Smith* (except see number 3 below), Kings Street/Gamlingay Road junction In time, some areas *may* be considered for change to a longer grass cutting specification.
3	Beneath tree canopies, eg: Henry Smith Playing Field. Also, in time, at selected locations listed under number 2 above, eg: Festival Road.
4	The 'Carrot wash' as per water vole management plan for Henry Smith Park. *As per attached Potton Water Vole Habitat management plan.

Map 1: Henry Smith Playing Field