



Wildflower & Grass cutting

Progress Report 2021/22

Autumn 2022

East Cambridgeshire District Council
Authored by: Emma-Jane Danielsson



**EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Introduction

The aim of this progress report is to provide an overview of actions taken and actions planned for improving the biodiversity, abundance and connectivity of wildflower habitats upon the Council's managed land, for the benefit of both people and wildlife. **Action 5 in the councils top 20 actions from the 2021/2022 environment plan committed to 'Implement new grass cutting and wildflower management arrangements in suitable locations, to help support greater biodiversity.'**

The United Kingdom has one of the most depleted nature of all countries globally with nearly half of natural landscapes lost in the last 100 years alone. This puts the UK in the bottom 10% in the world and the worst of all G7 countries. Cambridgeshire aligns with these statistics having one of the lowest percentages of land dedicated to nature and having the 2nd lowest proportion of woodlands in the whole of the UK (Baker, M 2022)

There has never been a greater and more pressing moment to address the loss of biodiversity and to try salvage that which remains, protect it, improve it and create more of it.



Photo: West of Ely (Morley Drive)

Grass Cutting Schedule

There is a strong argument for reducing the frequency of grass cutting and letting grasses grow longer. Firstly, by allowing grasses to grow, other species, such as wildflowers are also able to grow. Wildflowers are a vital source of nectar for pollinators who have declined dramatically over the last fifty years, mostly due to habitat loss and increased use of fertilizers. Secondly, the cost of such intense cutting regimes is very high. By reducing the frequency of cuts, staff time and travel and fuel costs are reduced alongside.

Presently, the council is responsible for cutting approximately 70 hectares of grass. The majority of which, until recently, was cut as standard every 10 working days. Over the last two years the council has trialed reducing the frequency of cuts to every 15 days.

Wildflowers

It can take a good two to three years, sometimes longer to successfully create and establish areas of wildflower grassland. Once established there is no question of the beauty and the positive effect they have on wildlife and people. Areas that have been designated for wildflowers have a reduced cutting schedule of around three times a year or less. This means that for much of the year the grasses are very long, and as flowers only bloom for a short period of time, these areas can look somewhat unkempt. The council has been proactive in educating residents of the value of the wildflowers and the process that is required for them to be successful. There can at times be complaints but on the whole, they are becoming less and less frequent. As a result of leaving areas to grow there has been an increase in rare flowers including nationally protected species.

Orchids

For a number of years, the council have been working with a couple of local botanists who have surveyed a large area in the West of Ely to identify colonies of orchids. They have plotted the locations and have advised the open spaces team on the best times to cut and clear the area, this is crucial to allow the orchids to set seed, but not then be out grown by fast growing grasses.

The orchids do not flower every year and sometimes rest for several years, but we nonetheless need to know where they are. On the back of protecting the orchids, and the management of these areas for their benefit, many other species of interest have been able to establish themselves.

For the first time to our knowledge the first pyramidal orchids have flowered.

Photo: Pyramid orchid, west of Ely



Bee Orchids

Bee orchids have also started to flower over the last few years and are protected by the countryside and wildlife act. Recently students from University of the third age have been supporting the local botanists in surveying their locations, which can change yearly, so as to make sure that they are protected and left to flower.



Photo: Bee orchid, Ely

Parish collaboration

A number of parishes in the district are already taking the initiative to manage their land for the benefit of wildlife, and have been working with the council to alter grass cutting schedules to better support the establishment of wildflowers and wild spaces.

For example, in Ely Northwold, a group of residents work together with the council to identify safe areas where grass can be left to grow and then help to establish more wildflowers in the area.

As the council does not own any cut and collect equipment, when a community wants to reduce the cutting of grass areas then support is needed in removing the extra-long grass cuttings to reduce over

neutralizing the soil and enable wildflowers to grow; Ely Northwold residents take on this task by hand.

Until recently this has also been the case with Witchford. However, the parish council is now seeking an agreement with the council to take on all the cut and collect grass cutting in their area in order to establish and manage wildflower verges and wild spaces as a community.

Community engagement

There are a number of wildlife and nature groups active in East Cambridgeshire and they are keen to work with the council in managing spaces better for biodiversity.

Alongside Ely Wildspace the council has developed the Ely commons into rich wildflower grassland. Whilst the west side is cut monthly and frequently accessed by the community, the east commons has been protected with just a single cut a year. Due to this there has been remarkable increase in cowslips, flowering bee orchids and recently a very rare green winged orchid.



Photo: Ely Commons

Last year the council worked alongside ECO Ely to plant whips on public open space and trees at Gateway gardens with funding and labor support from AstraZeneca.

Churchyards are usually quite high in biodiversity due to the relatively little over working and management of them. Working with the churchwardens at Swaffham Bulbeck and Burwell, the open spaces team have amended cutting schedules to enable more wildflowers to grow. Swaffham Bulbeck recently won an award for their churchyard last year.



Photo: Swaffham Bulbeck churchyard

Open Spaces

The council owns and manages a number of greenspaces with the primary focus being for the benefit of residents. With the shift in local approval for wilder spaces that are better for pollinators and birds, the council have started to allocate parts of these spaces for nature more specifically. All new tree stock, once established now have areas around the base of the tree left uncut. The benefits of letting this area grow is to provide habitats for small insects and invertebrates as well as protect the tree bark from closer mowing.

Two hedge mazes were planted last year in the country park. As they grow and become more established they will become valuable habitats for many small insects, pollinators and nesting birds.

Award Ditches

The council is fortunate to be home to a number of award ditches, approximately 27 miles, that provide an array of opportunity for biodiversity and to create useful wildlife corridors. Where possible the council will alternate yearly which bank they cut, leaving one bank every year to grow longer as they provide valuable homes to breeding birds and invertebrates. Any vegetation removed from the desilting works is left on the bankside to allow wildlife to return to the water.

Verges

Changing the ways in which the council manages road side verges will have a significant impact on biodiversity, help reduce carbon emissions as well as potentially lower costs for council. However, there are a few obstacles to managing these specific places.

Firstly, there can be safety issues, as reducing the cutting of verges and allowing the grasses to grow taller could potential reduce visibility for drivers and cyclists. Secondly, when the longer grasses are cut they need to be collected as leaving the arisings on the verges will inhibit the growth of the wildflower species that we are trying to establish.

East Cambs district council unfortunately does not own any cut and collect machinery and due to the size of the verges' specialist equipment is essential if grass cutting is going to be reduced significantly. In the meantime, the grass cutting would need to be collected by hand which isn't time efficient for council staff or practical.

Another issue with managing verges is that that many of them do not actually belong to ECDC and are in fact County verges.

Urban spaces

Within urban areas there are plenty of opportunities to create smaller, although equally valuable spaces for wildlife. Newnham street carpark in Ely is one such space that has been reimagined to include a wildflower and woodland species space with a bench added for visitors to enjoy.



Photo: Newnham street carpark

In Jubilee gardens a small wildflower area was created and was found to be popular with visitors. This year a second area will be created.

A further wildflower habitat will also be created at the Dock car park_next year.

Limitations

There are limitations to how much the council can change regarding schedules and manage effectively and these are outlined below.

- Equipment. Not having cut and collect equipment means the council have to rely on community support to collect longer grass cuttings twice a year and this is generally localized to parishes rather than larger council owned verges and green spaces.
- The complication of ownership of spaces between county council, East Cambridgeshire and parish council's as well as variations in management. For example, many parishes have taken ownership of county council green space, some manage themselves and others are managed by ECDC.
- Climate change is making it increasingly difficult to manage the green spaces as global warming is extending the grass cutting season and reducing the time the council has to manage other elements such as tree planting, tree management and hedge cutting.

Next steps

The following are options for what the council can do, going forward, to continue to increase and protect its green spaces.

- Continue to work with parish councils and local environment groups to identify areas to develop into wild spaces and share management of those spaces.
- Potentially invest in at least one piece of cut and collect equipment that can be used on council verges and green spaces. This equipment could also be loaned out to parish councils. However, the fuel and time cost will increase with any additional machinery from both transport of the machine itself as well as additional journeys to remove the arisings.
- Create a grassland management document to easily categorize all council owned green spaces by accessibility and use, and implement bespoke cutting schedules around this. An example from Somerset West and Taunton council is available via:
<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/media/3219/grassland-management-decision-tree.pdf>
- Establish a community verges program in collaboration with parish councils and local community groups. Residents can identify verges that they wish the council to protect and manage for wildlife and these can be documented and managed through a verges committee such as the one running in Cambridge city, which can be viewed via
<https://www.onthevergecambridge.org.uk/> .

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- Along with the new biodiversity strategy, also prepared by the council this Autumn, the council could create a supplementary pollinator strategy to outline specifically actions related to species decline and the creation of pollinator habitats.
 - Continue to educate residents on the life cycles of wildflowers and the time and patience required to really reap the benefits of them. Support the paradigm shift from monoculture lawns and neat, short hedges to wilder spaces that support biodiversity although may not look pretty all year around.