

A Policy on Wildflower Grass Management

This note sets out the policy position for biodiversity grass verge and open space management in Rhondda Cynon Taf. For a variety of fortunate reasons, highway grass verges, open spaces, parks and school grounds in Rhondda Cynon Taf are often rich in native wildflowers and support 'priority' grassland habitat. In recent years, the loss of wildflower grassland habitats and the pollinating insects they support has become an issue of significant public concern. Strategies to restore grassland biodiversity have been developed and publically owned grasslands and grass verges are increasingly seen as important reservoirs of wildflower rich habitat. A resource which if managed sympathetically, can help to reconnect and restore grassland biodiversity. As areas in the public view, these areas also offer excellent opportunities for awareness raising and local community support and action. Wildflower grassland and grass verge management also involves integrated cross department working in support of Action for Nature: the Local Biodiversity action plan for RCT and the Council's new Biodiversity Duty.

It is important to recognise that wildflower management is not abandonment of land. Wildflowers need management to thrive and wildflower grasslands are traditionally maintained either by cutting or grazing. In very simple terms, biodiversity management requires grass to be left uncut in the spring and summer in order for flowers to 'flower and seed' , and only then are cut, with all 'arisings' collected. The collection of the cut grass is essential, because in doing so it removes nutrients from the soil which has the dual impact of reducing grass growth and increasing wildflower diversity and abundance. Collection also ensures that dead grass isn't allowed to form a mulch which can smother the wildflowers beneath. On grasslands where cut material is not collected, wildflowers will not flourish. Indeed changes of management which see grasslands cut once or twice a year but with the cuttings left is proving worse for wildflower diversity than traditional regular grass cutting. Again, it is important to re-iterate that wildflower grassland management is not abandonment.

Once collected the cut material can often be composted on site in specially set aside 'eco-piles' (which act as hibernation areas/refuges for reptiles) or removed for composting elsewhere. The removal of cut material is therefore essential. It is also the most difficult element of wildflower management and it is one of the first questions that need to be considered when changing management to a wildflower regime. In most cases cut and collection will be by machine, however on small sites community raking up of cut grass through the 'grab a rake' initiative with the green bagging of cut grass for waste collection is a viable option. On larger sites, where opportunities arise conservation grazing is a very effective wildflower management tool (RCT Council runs a number of conservation grazing sites).

On steep banks collection of cut grass by machine is impossible, but here gravity assists, as cut grass 'works down' to the bottom of banks, leaving at least the upper parts wildflower rich. In such circumstances, where community volunteer help is available, hand raking can help the bottom of the bank.

The RCT grass and grass-verge biodiversity management policy is **'to increase the area and extent of wildflower rich grassland habitat in the County Borough in support of the Council's Biodiversity Duty and Local Biodiversity Action Plan'**.

Key principles in support of the policy include;

1. To identify sites where there are no over-riding health and safety constraints to changed grassland management.
2. To ensure changes in grass and grass-verge management are broadly supported by local people.
3. To pick sites with the highest potential for biodiversity improvement. The measure of potential includes consideration of;
 - a) Existing wildflower composition
 - b) Larger sites being better than small ones
 - c) Sites which help to create habitat connectivity within the local landscape.
 - d) Sites which help 'fill in' gaps in the network of sites across the County Borough
4. To pick sites where appropriate vehicle access is available.
5. To ensure sites have necessary 'eco-pile' composting capacity.
6. Where appropriate to establish conservation grazing sites on large sites.
7. Integrate management with Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam and other invasive plant control.
8. Develop site interpretation at a scale and form appropriate to the site and location, and co-ordinate via the Council web site using the 'brimstone butterfly' emblem as the project logo.
9. Where appropriate link local communities/interest groups with site management for awareness training, the recording of wildflowers/insects and to promote 'grab a rake' community raking.
10. In some cases not all the wildflower grass needs to be cut and collected each year. Staggered biennial cutting can ensure even better pollinating insect habitat and that some wildflower seeds are available to seed eating birds as winter food.
11. Even grassland which initially have few wildflowers can quickly diversify with biodiversity management, however in these cases the floristic improvements can be accelerated by planting spring bulb. These will provide an instant reaction to new management and the 'hay meadow' management will ensure the plants can photosynthesize after flowering and develop strong bulbs for flowering the next spring.
12. Map, record and report progress through the Biodiversity Duty and Local Biodiversity Action Plan.