

Parish Briefing

30 April 2024



Grassland Management and Conservation

Overview

Next month (May 2024) Somerset Council will begin summer grassland management routines across its highways, open spaces, country parks and council property grounds.

Since the creation of Somerset Council last April, work has been underway to align the approaches of the five former authorities and their relevant services into one consistent, cross-county approach to all aspects of grassland management.

Where appropriate and safe, grassland areas will be allowed to rewild, set seed and improve conditions for nature to flourish. The aim is to allow a broader range of species to thrive, while retaining the Council's commitment to ensuring safety.

Providing larger, higher quality and better-connected grasslands across the county is pivotal to ensuring habitats are of high quality and support a diverse abundance of species.

Defra has appointed Somerset Council as the lead for the [Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Somerset](#), and grassland networks that deliver well-connected pollinator-friendly spaces will form part of this. This also includes green spaces and parks that transition to the capable hands of our city, town, and parish councils, and as they take the reins, we will also encourage them to embrace the "leave it longer" spirit and leave space for nature to thrive.

Please note:

- we have chosen not to register for Plant Life's No Mow May campaign this year. While we note the excellent work it has done, we are keen to emphasise the merits of a year-round approach to grassland management which allow the full lifecycle of grassland and wildflowers to be realised.
- as some greenspaces and parks devolve to our city, town and parish councils, we will no longer have control of the way in which grassland management is carried out in these areas.

Our approach to Grassland Management

Highways

Grass cutting is vital to safety on the highway. In line with the [Somerset Pollinator Action Plan](#), cutting has been adjusted where possible to allow grassland species to flourish through the growing season.

For safety and visibility, on wider verges only a 1 metre swathe is cut, and the remainder of the verge is left. The service maintains a list of identified biodiverse verge sites where cutting programmes are further altered (avoiding flowering and seed maturation periods) to ensure species like orchids can flourish. The team is introducing improved monitoring at these sites to ensure these populations can thrive and expand.

Coming soon: The roadside grass-cutting team is currently pulling together the annual verge grass cutting schedule for this year, this will be uploaded to the [roadside grass cutting web page](#) as soon as it's available.

Local verges

Some verges in towns and villages are managed by our local Streetscene and grounds teams. Where safety is not compromised, these verges are increasingly being left to grow throughout the spring and summer seasons.

On larger verges a 1m edge strip will be cut, in line with our approach for Highway verges. Leaving the verge to grow allows plants to set seed and grow, while also providing longer periods of forage for pollinators. In areas where we are trialling this approach on new verges we will, where possible, put up explanatory signage.

Somerset Council does not own and manage all urban verges, some belong to private estates or landlords, although we are pleased to see a gradual shift towards less intensive grass maintenance on verges across the whole county.

Countryside Services

Will continue to manage grasslands to provide high quality habitats and public access. All sites have management plans that identify priority habitats and management practices required to conserve grasslands – a combination of grazing, scrub and invasive species control and hay cuts are deployed in appropriate circumstances.

Targeted conservation projects include those for the shrill carder bee and skylarks at Ham Hill and harvest mice at Riverside Park in Yeovil.

Open Spaces

Developing work from 2023 and previous years, parks and grounds maintenance teams will continue to introduce new areas for biodiversity including cut and collected meadow spaces and over wintering habitats in longer, dense clumps of thick grass known as tussocks.

Improvements in grassland diversity from last year will be monitored, and taking into account public comment, management will be altered to create more new spaces for nature in our parks. The grounds teams have completed training in managing biodiverse grasslands, and work to the agreed [Habitat and wildlife benefits of long grass \(somerset.gov.uk\)](https://www.somerset.gov.uk/~/media/2023/06/23/230623-habitat-and-wildlife-benefits-of-long-grass.pdf) approach.

Grounds and Property

Will develop management approaches from trials in 2023 at Brympton Way in Yeovil and the Taunton County Hall site. Various grassland spaces will be left, or infrequently mown to support pollinators and to encourage increased abundance of a variety of species. Where appropriate wildflower seed mixes or plug planting will be introduced to fast-track a diverse grassland flora.

Where we are implementing a management change, or in particularly high-profile spaces like County Hall, we will make use of appropriate signage to explain the changes and anticipated benefits to nature.

National Landscapes

Our amazing National Landscapes, including the [Quantock Hills](#) and [Mendip Hills](#) partners will continue their work at scale to deliver and influence conservation grassland management and restoration, through their nature recovery plans and new management plans that are being drafted and consulted upon this year.

Examples of good practice can be seen at Cothelstone Hill with 39Ha of grassland being managed through conservation grazing of Exmoor Ponies allowing acidic and natural grassland species to thrive, supporting many grassland bird species such as skylark, meadow pipit and stonechat. Late cuts allow seed banks to develop and extended rotations allow for a diverse sward improving the habitat for a wide variety of invertebrates.

On the Mendip Hills partners are managing a significant number of species-rich wildflower meadows and calcareous grasslands at a landscape scale allowing iconic species such as the pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly and black oil beetle to thrive.

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