apse association for public service excellence

Grassland management

A guide for local councils

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Grassland management: A guide for local councils

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About APSE

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK.

Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority frontline services and operates one of the UK's largest research programmes in local government policy and frontline service delivery matters.

Foreword

Grasslands are one of the UK's most valuable and ecologically significant landscapes. They not only provide vital habitats for biodiversity but also play a crucial role in carbon sequestration, flood management, and maintaining the health of our natural environment.

For local government, managing these landscapes effectively is essential to preserving our natural heritage and promoting sustainable development. The process of securing resident buy-in to grassland management changes can, however, be tricky.

This guide has been developed specifically for those involved in local government decision-making, management, and conservation efforts. It provides a comprehensive framework for the effective stewardship of grasslands, offering practical advice, strategies, and best practice that are both locally relevant and environmentally sound. Whether you are responsible for public parks or roadside verges, this guide will help you balance ecological needs with the demands of development, recreation, and community wellbeing. It can even be used to help educate residents to garden more sustainably.

Local government professionals are uniquely positioned to influence the long-term health of grasslands in the UK. By applying the principles in this guide, you can help ensure that grasslands continue to thrive, benefiting both wildlife and local communities.

The importance of grassland management is more urgent than ever. With the effects of climate change becoming more pronounced and pressure on land use intensifying, it is essential that we act now to protect and restore these ecosystems. This guide is here to support you on that journey, with evidence-based recommendations and a clear vision for the future of our grasslands.

Together, we can make a difference. Let's work toward a future where our grasslands remain resilient, vibrant, and valuable assets for generations to come.

Cllr Archie Dryburgh MBE

National Chair 2024/25
APSE

1 Executive summary

APSE member councils have been concerned for some time about the need to effectively manage their grassland areas to meet the needs of both climate change and biodiversity. This guide has been produced following increasing discussions amongst APSE member councils about how to approach this issue sensibly and with sensitivity to the views of residents and communities.

2 Introduction

Local authorities are facing a multitude of issues, none more so than trying to reduce the impacts of climate change and increase levels of biodiversity. Many have turned to the planting of large numbers of trees to help absorb carbon, reduce the impact of flooding and provide valuable habitats for wildlife. But trees take many years to establish and whilst critically important there may be other shorter-term actions which can bring similar benefits – grasslands.

Grasslands have a huge potential for locking up carbon, not only due to the plants we can see on the surface, but also through their roots and the relationships these have with fungi, bacteria and many other species which help enrich the soil with carbon. However, how we manage these grasslands, ranging from large open spaces to our roadside verges and even our lawns and gardens, is important.

APSE hopes to show how its members can manage their grassland areas in a more environmentally sustainable manner and in doing so reduce the impacts of climate change and at the same time increase the opportunities for biodiversity. As well as looking at case studies from local authorities who are beginning to change their grassland management practices this guide also looks at how to gain elected member, staff, and public support for the necessary changes to traditional grassland management.

In the fight against climate change and the drive to increase levels of biodiversity, this guide hopes to provide valuable information and practical examples of how to manage grasslands, not only at the operational level but also highlight how such actions can help play a contributory role towards helping achieve national and corporate environmental targets and objectives.

3 The Evolution of Grasslands

Pollen analysis suggests that there may have been some form of simple grasses around the time of the dinosaur extinction c.65 million years ago. However, from fossil evidence found in Chile and North America it appears that it was around 20-30 million years ago during a period of global climate change that full blown grass communities began to develop because of deforestation caused by cooler and drier weather. This opening up of the landscape through the reduced number of trees, allowed grasses to spread rapidly.

Natural grasslands tended to occupy the area between forests and deserts. Forests tend to occupy the most favourable environments, where moisture is adequate for growth and survival of a tall,

dense vegetation dominated by trees, whereas deserts are found where moisture is so lacking that a continuous, permanent vegetation cover cannot be maintained. Grasslands lay between these two extremes.

Constant climate change meant grasslands continued to thrive across the globe. In the case of the UK, its grasslands began to become established after the end of the last ice age around 12,000 years ago as the ice sheets retreated. However, grasses did not have it all their own way, for as temperatures increased, trees and woodlands became established, and grasslands were pushed back to marginal areas where trees found it difficult to grow. This all changed about 6,000 years ago, when humans began to farm the land cutting down the woodlands to grow crops and graze animals once again opening up spaces for grasslands to once again develop and spread.

4 Types of UK grasslands

Grassland is generally divided into upland, which is above 300m, and lowland. This is because the cooler, wetter climate of upland areas favours different species to the warmer, drier and less exposed lowlands. Further classifications include meadows which are enclosed grasslands where a hay or silage crop is taken in the summer, and pasture, generally used for grazing.

Upland Grasslands, West Scotland

It is estimated that around 40% of the UK is covered by different types of grassland, which in turn contributes to the fact that around a fifth of the world land area is now covered by over 12,000 different species of grasses.[1]

[1] [1] See the Wildlife Trust at https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/grassland

5 Grasslands under threat

One would assume at nearly 40% land coverage, the UK's grasslands would be in a good state. Unfortunately most of the UK's grasslands have been highly modified, through agricultural practices and the widespread use of chemicals and fertilisers, resulting in reduced species diversity and ultimately supporting lower levels of biodiversity. In England there are around 4.5 million hectares of grassland, with only around 100,000ha unimproved These unimproved grasslands, or semi-natural grassland (grassland which hasn't been fertilised, drained or reseeded) tend to support high levels of native wildflowers with a wide diversity of insects, pollinators and small mammals. These types of grassland areas often only exist close to woodland clearings, in open areas within woodlands or in those areas where trees and farming has not taken hold or been practiced such as uplands. These areas are becoming scarcer, for as well as man-made alterations, other threats to both lowland and upland grasslands include climate change, invasive species and a lack of proper management.

The deterioration of grasslands began after the Second World War with the widespread use of fertilisers, particularly chemical fertilisers. The additional use of herbicides, and new grass varieties to increase agricultural production was supported still further by government incentives encouraging the ploughing up of grasslands to create more room for arable farming. Together these factors have caused a 90% reduction in the biodiversity rich lowland grasslands, a trend which is continuing. In the upland areas of the UK, the decline in grassland was just as stark, where overgrazing has led to moorland and blanket bog declining and being replaced by less wildlife-rich upland acid grassland and rush pasture. The situation for meadows is even more concerning with a 97% loss since the 1930's again due to intensive farming methods and ploughing. This loss has had a significant impact on those species of flora and fauna which are reliant on these types of habitats. In the UK, meadows are home to more vulnerable species than any other habitat.

Attempts are being made to protect and conserve those grasslands which are species rich by offering farmers financial incentives to manage such areas rather than ploughing them. However, there is still a long way to go in looking at the wider picture of not only conserving high quality grassland but also providing support and advice in restoring those grasslands which, although may have been 'improved' in the past, still have the potential to be revived. Equally the responsibility for conserving and protecting grasslands must be more than just the sole responsibility of farmers, we all have a role to play and none more so than local authorities, which this guide hopes to expand upon.

Flower meadows, Cornwall

6 Why are grasslands so important

Grasslands not only provide important habitats for flora and fauna, they also provide substantial ecosystem services such as reducing soil erosion, storing water, and reducing flooding. Also, by filtering out pollutants they improve air quality.

As we face increasing environmental impacts caused by climate change, grasslands are now being recognised as having a huge potential for locking up carbon, not only due to the plants visible on the surface, but as stated previously, through their roots and to the relationships between the plants, fungi, bacteria and many other species which help enrich the soil with carbon.

Globally, grasslands hold approximately one-third of global terrestrial carbon stocks. In the UK, grasslands store two billion tonnes of carbon in their soils, but this is vulnerable to disturbance. Between 1990-2006, conversion from grassland to arable production (such as ploughing to grow crops) released 14 million tonnes of CO2. Therefore, notwithstanding the competing pressures of growing more produce locally to meet food production needs and reduce the carbon footprint of some imported foods, we nevertheless need to protect, conserve and where possible restore these species-rich grasslands due to their huge carbon storage capacity, for when managed carefully, they can lock in large amounts of carbon and boost biodiversity.

7 Trees or grasslands: Which is the better choice for carbon sequestration?

Carbon sequestration is the process of capturing and storing atmospheric carbon dioxide. It is one method of reducing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere with the goal of helping

reduce the impacts of global climate change. One of the most widely known approaches for increasing carbon sequestration is the planting of trees, this is known as biological carbon sequestration where vegetation such as trees, grasslands and forest take up carbon and store it. Tree planting is an approach many organisations and local authorities across the UK have adopted to help combat the negative effects of climate change.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the above ground woody biomass of trees is able to store more carbon than grasses, the impacts of climate change such as wildfires and the increasing range of tree-related pests and diseases, could mean that grasslands could be a more reliable carbon store because approximately 90% of their carbon is stored below ground, this means that when grasses burn most of the carbon stored is relatively untouched, as opposed to when a tree burns, its carbon is above ground and released as it burns. However, at this point it is important to make clear that it is not being suggested that grasslands should replace trees, but rather they should be seen as an important part of the biological responses to climate change.

A key point in the carbon sequestration of trees versus grasslands debate, is that it has been estimated that globally forests hold around 39% of the carbon in land-based ecosystems, this being very much the reason so many groups are planting trees, but it needs to be remembered that it can take years to decades for trees to reach maturity at which point carbon sequestration is maximized. However, grasslands hold about 34% of the world's carbon and often grasses establish in 1-3 years so maximum carbon sequestration is realized much sooner than with trees. Also, the production of biomass i.e. the tree growing, tends to take up and emit carbon from the soil, whereas with grasses although following a similar process, their take up of carbon from the soil is proportionately much less, and therefore carbon stored under grasslands tends to stay in the soil much longer, assuming the soil is not disturbed.

In fact, the amount of carbon stored in the world's soils exceeds the carbon in all the plant biomass in the world, and as previously stated, grasslands, with less biomass than forests, makes a very effective carbon sink. Indeed, one of the worst mistakes we can make in controlling carbon, is to plant forests into existing grasslands. Therefore, restoring grasslands is as important for sequestering carbon as restoring forests.

However, when considering the carbon sequestration of grasses, is should be remembered that not all grassland types store carbon at the same rates, and in fact the way we manage our grasslands can turn them into carbon emitters rather than carbon sinks. One example of this is the management of Turfgrass – lawns, parkland, golf courses – these can become potent carbon sources through the use of lawnmowers, aerators, and other lawn maintenance equipment emitting greenhouse gases. Also, manufacturers of petroleum-based fertilisers and pesticides used on these spaces emit significant amounts of greenhouse gases as part of the production process. As a result of this, many land managers are now looking at electrical machinery and more environmentally friendly fertilisers and pesticides to manage such spaces.

8 Which grasses?

Grasses can undoubtedly play a major part in carbon sequestration. There is evidence that increased species-richness in grasslands – particularly in communities of deep-rooting plant species and legumes – increases carbon sequestration substantially.

Species-rich grassland habitats are also extremely high in biodiversity, providing a home for more than 20% of UK plant species with up to 40 species per square metre. Unfortunately, many such grasslands, particularly natural meadows cover less than 1% of the UK's land area. Plantlife, a leading UK environmental charity, has produced a useful guidance note on carbon sequestration in soil which is a useful reference for those wishing to look more closely at this issue[2].

9 The role of local authorities

Local authorities are constantly facing many challenges, but two of the most urgent are mitigating the effects of climate change and halting the decline in biodiversity. In response to these challenges, most local authorities have developed and produced climate change plans and ecological emergency plans. Within these plans are a series of targets and actions which need to be addressed. Often common to both plans is the way we use and manage our urban and rural greenspaces. Featuring prominently in many of the proposed actions is the way we manage areas containing grasses such as road verges and amenity grasslands (parks and other open green spaces) to make them more wildlife friendly. It is now widely recognised that past practices involving the regular mowing of such spaces to create closely mown grass may look aesthetically pleasing but creates nothing more than 'green deserts' for local fauna and flora. Letting grass grow and having more meadow-like areas with wildflowers is far more beneficial when trying to achieve the aim of improving biodiversity levels. Also, mowing less often helps stop soil becoming too compacted and therefore looser soils allow plant roots to develop better. This helps soil absorb water and reduces the impacts of flooding and drought.

Therefore, simply by changing the ways we cut grass can create more native wildflower meadows and species rich grasslands and this will by association help provide new habitats for wildlife, particularly pollinators. Although large scale schemes are most beneficial, even the smallest areas can help, as together these areas will create networks of interlinking green spaces across which wildlife can move to sustain their populations.

Often as much as a third of the area of a town or city can be made up of greenspace, primarily grassland. This may seem high but, surprisingly, 47% of Greater London is made up of greenspaces.

Most greenspaces in towns and cities are managed as closely mown amenity grass used mainly for recreation and comprise of very few grass species. These have, in turn, regularly fertilised and chemically sprayed thus further keeping species diversity low. However, when one considers the

[2] https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Grasslands-as-a-Carbon-Store.pdf

variety of habitats that can be found in urban spaces then the opportunities to reconfigure the management of parts of these amenity spaces – to create species rich grasslands as a way to support these habitats and attract greater levels of biodiversity – is substantial. As are the additional benefits to public health and wellbeing as was shown during the COVID pandemic.

The idea of changing how we manage such sites to improve biodiversity levels, may also be economically attractive given the high costs associated with the more traditional approaches taken by local authorities in intensively managing amenity grasslands. As such the idea of reduced mowing, less fertilising and chemical spraying may well be sensible from a financial viewpoint as well as from a biodiversity perspective. Allowing some grassland areas to 'naturalise' can also have other benefits, such as allowing schools and communities to become involved in the sowing of seeds and maintenance of these sites including identifying the different species as they appear. With the appearance of wildflowers and associated insects and pollinators, residents will see nature coming into their area which has been proved medically beneficial to health and well-being.

Photograph courtesy of Avon Wildlife Trust

However, such changes need to be communicated both with local residents, staff and elected members if they are to be successful. In some cases, long grasses and wildflowers may not be welcomed initially, being seen as cost-cutting exercises, fire risks, dog toilets and magnets for litter and fly-tipping.

Mitigating such criticisms is possible. Through early communications with residents and other stakeholders, proposals can be explained and adjusted with community input explaining how

sterile areas of flat and monotonous grassland can accommodate grasses and wildflowers and could involve residents helping to choose the flowers, plant seeds and help maintain such sites. Additionally, councils can mow edges and pathways throughout the area to show maintenance is still taking place. It would also be worth setting up social media links to publicise photographs or videos of the sites and any plants, insects or mammals which appear because of the changes. In this way the community can develop a sense of ownership.

Annual cornfield of wildflowers Kirby, Liverpool.

10 Great ideas but are they practical?

As with many alternative approaches: the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

APSE therefore explored some case studies and best practice issues which consider how local authorities are addressing the issues of grassland management in their local authorities. Case studies provided ranged from developing grassland management strategies to delivering the naturalisation of grasslands with associated communication programmes and everything in-between.

11 Grassland Strategies

One of the first areas of focus is centred around the need to plan how the authority should deal with its grasslands from a practical operational perspective, whilst also taking into consideration the climate change and biodiversity aspects of grassland management.

Summarising several current council grassland strategies, APSE noted that the following approaches could be adopted and divided into two distinct parts: -

Part 1: Main strategy

Dealing with background information, main aims, plan, timelines and a policy document which outlines the 6 different types of grasslands and how they should be managed. The grassland types commonly identified are:

- Designated pathways and informal sports amenity.
- Designated pathways and additional amenities.
- Meadow edges and verges.
- Amenity prestige.
- Low activity and tree canopy amenity.
- Wildflower meadows.

Part 2: Making it happen

- Clear timelines.
- Staff training programmes.
- Consultation with local wildlife trusts.
- Identifiable contributions to Net Zero, via carbon sequestration.
- The council's intentions to increase biodiversity and support nature recovery networks.
- How grasslands will be managed now and into the future.

By creating such a clear strategy with practical examples of works proposed, then much greater weight could be given to changes in grassland management. It is also important that much of the work across the borough is phased, so that any issues or problems are capable of being resolved before the next phase is entered into.

Strategies are important for as previously stated, they can clearly set out why there is a need for different grassland management approaches in an area, and how these different approaches are meeting the needs of biodiversity, climate change (carbon sequestration), and public user needs. In this way people can see that when grass is left to grow it is not simply a cost cutting exercise but has wider benefits. They also allow residents to be forewarned about periods of apparent 'untidiness' particularly in relation to wildflower meadows both pre and post bloom. By gaining a greater understanding and hopefully public support, then sustainable management practices can

be established. It is vitally important to involve as many different groups and communities when drawing up such strategies as well as providing case examples of where should schemes have been successfully introduced elsewhere to show that such proposals can work.

It is critical that the strategy is also used to increase awareness and improve knowledge and understanding of climate emergencies and the importance of biodiversity and how the introduction of wildflower in grasslands help not only pollinators but a wide range of other flora and fauna. By identifying these benefits, this will help to gain support from interested parties and the community at large.

A further benefit of having a defined strategy is although they are primarily the blueprint as to how councils are managing their own sites, they can equally be used to influence other landowners to follow similar practices. As previously mentioned in areas which have a significant agricultural presence, then these strategies can help link local authority managed grasslands to larger grassland areas which may be being managed by farmers who have accepted government subsidies to protect and manage priority grassland areas. However, scale is not the only key issue, these strategies can also include advice as to how private gardens can also be adapted and managed to promote the twin aims of reducing climate change impacts and planting to promote opportunities for greater biodiversity, By being inclusive, these strategies can promote their aims across all areas within their towns and cities thereby increasing the amount of grassland being managed with climate change and biodiversity in mind.

Crucially, strategies should not simply be desktop documents. They need to be regularly reviewed and updated.

A good example of this is written within Leicester City Council's Grassland Management Strategy[3] which states that they will:

- Continually review and update grass cutting regimes, mapping and data
- Prioritise areas for grassland restoration and enhancement, improving grassland management and increasing the connectivity for biodiversity across the city
- Provide educational information, which, along with the strategy can be used to increase public awareness of the revised grassland management regimes and rationale for change.

When monitoring sites, Leicester City Council also consider botanical diversity, and the variety of pollinators present to ensure improvements are being made and sustained. Through regular reviews of their grasslands, they are able to see if the current management practices are still appropriate and if they have to change them. Monitoring also helps to understand the effects of their grassland management approaches against targets set in plans such as the Climate Emergency Strategy and Leicester Biodiversity Action Plan. It allows them to make any changes needed to enhance biodiversity, store carbon, and maximise benefits associated with grasslands.

[3] https://www.leicester.gov.uk/content/grassland-strategy-2023-2033/introduction/

12 Managing grasslands to benefit biodiversity

As part of this guide APSE explored a number of case studies and reviewed existing material on grassland management. In several areas we found a focus on how councils had made changes to their working practices which aimed to improve and enhance biodiversity. The most notable change to mowing working practices was the decision by one council to move away from cut and drop to cut and collect grass arisings. This work related to road verge maintenance where it was felt wildflowers could be introduced and thereby provide added opportunities for pollinators. Under the old system of cut and drop, the arisings left rotted down and added nutrients to the soils which resulted in coarse grasses growing quickly and swamping out any opportunities for wildflowers. Also because of the rapid growth rate these areas needed cutting at least six times each year. The decision to cut and collect was introduced to allow the grass cuttings to be removed off site and consequently the soils received less nutrients and therefore grass growth was much reduced giving opportunities for wildflowers and a wider range of fine grasses to grow in the nutrient poor soils. Also, as the rate of growth was less vigorous this has resulted in fewer cuts being required.

Obviously if grass is being removed off site this presents the issue of disposal. This was resolved by allowing farmers to take arisings for hay, but also if discreet areas could be found, then arisings could be composted out of view. An unexpected benefit of this has been that these compost mounds have provided a nesting site for adders to lay their eggs.

Courtesy of Dorset Council

These operational changes were not just a reaction to improving opportunities to improve biodiversity, but also helped with meeting budget cuts through reducing mowing frequencies, so a real win-win situation.

Importantly, residents were informed of the changes and successes, and as such the verge naturalisation schemes have been developed across the county resulting in significant benefits for biodiversity.

A second council case study considered the process of setting land aside for 'rewilding' By adopting this approach, land is left to naturalise, but still has signs of ongoing maintenance such as the mowing of edges and desire lines to allow people to walk between wildflowers and enjoy their colours without unnecessarily trampling upon them. An interesting element to this has been making sure any work tends to have a significant impact such as planting highly colourful annual wildflowers which help capture public interest and more importantly provide support for further schemes. So successful has this approach been, with both elected members and the public, that the amount of set aside land has increased four-fold in the last two years. Importantly, any benefits to flora and fauna are reported upon and any successes promoted.

To make improvements to the quality of the environment still further, the council is now looking at introducing electrical mowing machinery to help cut their carbon footprint. This latter point is important, as what it does show is how councils can demonstrate how they are helping deliver targets in Climate Change Plans, Ecological Emergency Plans, Biodiversity Action Plans as well as improving the areas green infrastructure. All these actions also play a major part in showing how councils can work towards meeting their legal duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

13 Dealing with the doubters

Perhaps the biggest problem in introducing different grassland management approaches and working practices, is not the technicalities, but gaining public acceptance. So often we hear press stories of council's not meeting their responsibilities of mowing grass due to 'cost cutting exercises' and examples

of residents taking matters into their own hands by mowing grass which has been left with a view to increasing biodiversity. The problem is nature isn't tidy. Wildflower areas are often 'scruffy' both pre flowering and post flowering, but they need to be left to allow seedheads to drop seed. It is often this non-flowering stage which residents find hard to deal with.

The issue of public acceptance being a problem is a topic often discussed at APSE parks and greenspaces networking events. One council reported to APSE that when the proposal to introduce wildflowers to certain grassed areas in the district was discussed it was met with a host of reasons why it wouldn't work or shouldn't happen.

These include complaints the area will:

- Look neglected
- Attract dog mess
- Be a fire risk,
- Attract vermin such as rats,
- Affect house values

Finally, there is resentment that this is a policy being 'imposed upon us'. There were also concerns that staff may not be supportive, having delivered grass cutting in the same way for years. Clearly there was a need to communicate why changes were being made to a wide sector of stakeholders and staff.

In addition, there was also a need to consider the sites proposed and their suitability for wildflowers, not only soil suitability but also how local residents may be using these areas. Therefore, consultations with staff were entered into which was of particular importance as many had local knowledge of the sites proposed and could provide relevant information about the suitability of the site. Staff could help explain proposals to local residents and gain valuable feedback. What became clear was that compromise and adaptability would need to be key approaches to gaining public acceptance. Maps were devised showing all the sites deemed suitable and were made available both to staff and the communities affected. Where wildflowers were introduced, regular meetings were held, and planted wildflower areas were framed with mowing strips to show these sites were still being maintained.

Desire Lines cut within an area of wildflowers showing maintenance is still taking place

Also, many sites had signs erected with QR codes on them which people could use to access a website which explained both the reasons for the scheme but also the benefits. Social media posts were also heavily used to promote the schemes and these also allowed positive comments from residents to be aired, of which there have been a growing number. Since the inception of the scheme public support has been growing and requests for wildflowers have started to materialise.

It is clear that when trying to gain public support, particularly from those closest to the proposals, then early consultation is important as is gaining staff buy-in. There is also a need to understand how the proposed areas are seen and used by local communities and accept that some sites may simply not be suitable. But where schemes can be introduced, then publicising the benefits and successes is vital.

Complaints may always be received but when measured against the people who do not complain, together with the benefits to biodiversity and climate change amelioration, then these can be acceptable, indeed from those complaints received often they are not about the grassland and wildflower changes but often mask more general complaints about the council.

The above case studies[4] and reviews were presented at a recent APSE online grassland management seminar and further details can be found using the link in the footnote below.

14 Grasslands: Undervalued and overlooked

Grasslands are one of the most common vegetation types found across the globe and include savanna, prairies and steppes as well as lowland and upland grasslands as found in the UK.

Most grasslands have been significantly altered by human manipulation to allow grazing of animals and growing of cereal crops to the point that very few natural grasslands now remain. What makes grasses so special is that they can survive and keep regrowing no matter how much they are grazed by animals. This fact means they can provide relatively safe and dependable habitats, attracting and supporting all kinds of wildlife.

However, as we have seen throughout this guide, UK grasslands are under threat from human activity, overgrazing, housing and infrastructure building. Compounding this problem, the effects of climate change are also adding to the precarious state of many of our grasslands.

It may appear that due to the areas covered by grasslands in the UK that it would be down to national agencies and industries such as agriculture to lead the charge in protecting and conserving these increasingly fragile environments. However, this is not the case. Local authorities hold and manage significant areas of grassland and are beginning to recognise the need to manage their own areas in an environmentally sustainable and biodiversity friendly manner. As well as getting their own house in order, local authorities can also influence private landowners in their areas to follow suit. We must also not forget the millions of private gardens which can also be included in their sphere of influence.

Some local authorities have already taken up the mantle with regards to improving the quality of their grasslands to address biodiversity decline and reduce the amount of carbon being emitted by storing it in the soil under their grasslands. The motivation to do this lies in not only meeting environmental responsibilities, but also as a way to address budgetary pressures which are increasing year on year. These moves are often despite initial public opposition to their proposals. However, as we have seen throughout this guide, there is an increasing groundswell from government, agriculture, private landowners and increasingly growing number of the public themselves to improve the way we manage, protect and conserve our grasslands.

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[4] https://www.apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/events/previous-seminars/2024-seminars/best-in-grass-grassland-management-online-seminar/

It appears the days of closely cropped and frequently cut grassed areas may be numbered. Even areas used for specific leisure or sporting activities are looking at ways to adopt more environmentally friendly management practices.

It is hoped that the content of this APSE guide will help those who have already embarked on the journey to a more sustainable and biodiversity friendly grassland management approach and equally inspire those who may not yet have started the journey to seriously considering doing so.

Our grasslands should be taken as seriously as our woodland and forest areas with regards to the benefits they can bring, often they have not. For, as was highlighted in the report: Valuing Grasslands Critical Ecosystems for Nature, Climate and People Discussion Paper': (December 2023)

'Grasslands stretch across the planet, their apparent simplicity masking their ecological, climatic and social importance and complexity. These undervalued and overlooked landscapes are fundamental to planetary and human health. Protecting them is not merely an urgent mandate; it is central to numerous global challenges'.[5]

Grasslands have been in existence long before the appearance of humans and have provided habitats, food and shelter for all forms of life in that time. We have failed to understand the many benefits they can bestow and have simply manipulated them for our own means. Now, with greater understanding, we may be able to more sustainably manage them, or even allow them to naturalise, thereby offering greater biodiversity opportunities for which they were initially intended.

Again, we must overcome this belief that nature is there merely to provide a service to humankind. Perhaps in relation to grasslands it would be useful to remember that they were some of the first types of vegetation to colonise the land, and unless we accept our place in the natural world rather than constantly trying to control and tame it, grasses may well be some of the last forms of life to stand.

[5] https://search.issuelab.org/resource/valuing-grasslands-critical-ecosystems-for-nature-climate-and-people.html

Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular advisory groups, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The advisory groups are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Advisory groups are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and are an excellent way to network with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area, please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national advisory groups include:

- Building Cleaning and Facilities Management
- Education Catering
- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Climate Change and Renewables Network
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Commercialisation, Income and Trading Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Fleet, Transport and Vehicle Maintenance
- Waste Management, Refuse Collection and Street Cleansing

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