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# Grassland Management and Maintenance

*'To cut or not to cut, that is the question'*

*Matt Ellis, APSE Principal Advisor*



## Grasslands –a brief history

- 12,000 years ago, major changes in the climate of the world led to relatively warm conditions favouring the development of grasslands.
- This in turn led to an increase in the number of deer, antelope, goat, sheep and cattle, and other animals that survived on grass.
- Many of these large herbivores (grass eaters) were hunted to extinction and as a result woodlands began to increase, and grasslands decline.
- However, with the advent of agriculture and the need for land to grow crops and graze animals, much of the woodland was cleared and once again grasslands began to spread into lowland and upland areas.
- Lowland grasslands were largely given over to growing crops and grazing whilst upland grasslands have been used mainly for grazing.







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## Why the sudden interest in the management and maintenance of local authority grasslands?

- Response to network queries to provide examples of more relaxed styles of grassland management.
- Grassland management has been included in Network discussion groups.
- A more specialist event was needed to allow a truly reflective understanding of the approaches being taken in this area.
- Therefore, this online seminar has been developed to look at how important planning, communication, and adopting the correct operational practices are.



## Grasslands: Current situation

- Most of today's grassland is farmland or rough upland grazing, with only a tiny proportion of 'unimproved' grassland remaining.
- Unimproved grassland is grassland that hasn't been reseeded, fertilised or drained and tends to be full of flowers and wildlife.
- In England, there are around 4.5 million hectares of grassland, of which just 100,000ha are unimproved.
- During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, 90% of lowland grasslands were lost due to chemical fertilisers, herbicides and new grass varieties being introduced to increase yields. Government incentives to plough grasslands also added to these losses.





## Amenity Grasslands and local authorities

- Up to a third of the area of a town or city may be grassland. Of this, about two-thirds is closely mown amenity grassland used primarily for recreation.
- Amenity grasslands are mainly open grassy areas, such as parks, playing fields and informal green spaces used by the public.
- Such amenity grasslands generally consist of few species, compounded by quality fertile or fertilised soil and management regimes that can discourage either structural or species diversity.
- The maintenance costs of maintaining such spaces can be extremely costly and heavily reliant on fertilisers and herbicides.
- However, amenity grasslands can offer a very versatile and practical means of expanding the social and economic benefits offered by greenspace.(recreation, leisure, sports, events, community gatherings, informal play spaces etc.)



## A change in management styles

- More recently, amenity grasslands are beginning to be managed to increase biodiversity levels through more relaxed management regimes and wildflower planting.
- By changing the traditional management of such grassland areas in urban settings, through the provision of native or naturalised grasses and flowering plants, this is helping attract insects (including butterflies and bees), arthropods (from spiders to millipedes), birds and mammals
- The reduced-intensity management needed for rough grasslands and urban commons also makes them a cost-effective alternative to closely mown amenity grassland.





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## Aim of the Seminar

- Outline why grassland management practices are changing.
- Provide examples of the thought process, plans and benefits such changes can bring.
- Hear how local authorities have brought about such changes and the variety of greenspaces they have introduced these changes to.
- Understand why communicating any such changes to as wide an audience of users of these spaces as possible, is important.
- Look at the approaches local authorities have used to gain public and stakeholder support.
- Appreciate the positive biodiversity and climate change impacts such changes can bring.

