

Grassland Management



Setting the scene

‘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’.

APSE Report – Grassland Management A guide for local councils (February 2025)



Grassland Management – A guide for local Councils

- APSE member councils have been raising concerns for some time about the need to effectively manage their grassland areas in ways which meet the needs of both climate change and biodiversity.
- APSE has therefore produced a guide to help local authorities approach this issue, looking both at the practicalities regarding the naturalising of grasslands, and importantly, the considerations and communication necessary to gain the support of local-residents and the wider community.
- The guide will not only provide practical advice and case studies for APSE members but also be a useful tool which can be adapted to help explain the reasons why such actions need to be taken to ensure the health and wellbeing of both residents and flora and fauna alike.



What the guide hopes to achieve

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



Grasslands – a brief history

- Simple grasslands first appeared around 65 million years ago, but it wasn't until around 20 million years ago that grasses began to flourish providing food for a wide variety of animals
- Changes began to occur as human numbers increased and through hunting caused the extinction of many of the large herbivores (grass eaters) and as a result woodlands began to increase, and grasslands decline.
- Around 12,000 years ago major changes in the climate of the world led to relatively warm conditions favouring the development of grasslands in the UK as the ice sheets melted.
- Together with the advent of agriculture and the need for land to grow crops and graze animals, woodlands were cleared furthering the spread of grasslands into lowland and upland areas.
- Lowland grasslands were largely given over to growing crops and grazing whilst upland grasslands have been used predominantly for grazing.



Grasslands the 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 20th Century, 90% of unimproved 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.).



Some of the Benefits of longer, more species rich grasslands

- Letting grass grow and having more meadow-like areas with wildflowers and a diversity of grass species, is far more beneficial when trying to improve biodiversity levels.
- 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.
- Longer grass may also be more economically attractive given the high costs associated with the more traditional approaches taken by local authorities in intensively managing amenity grasslands.
- 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.
- 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.

However, things to consider before changing grassland management practices.

- In some areas where recreation and tidy appearance are priorities then long grasses may not be appropriate and more traditional, short, regularly mown grass may need to remain.
- Tall grasslands and wildflowers may not be welcome for other reasons:
 - *unsightly and unattractive both before and after flowering.*
 - *tall grasses may be viewed as a fire risk.*
 - *being used as a dog toilet.*
 - *attracting littering and fly-tipping.*
 - *Encourage vermin*
 - *Affect house values*
 - *People may not like these areas being imposed on them*



The importance of grassland strategies

- Develop a strategy which shows 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
- Key points include:
 - main aims, plan, timelines and a policy document which outlines the different types of grasslands and how they should be managed.
- Making it happen, which includes clear timelines and agreed areas proposed, staff training programmes, consultation with local wildlife trusts, wider consultation and communication programmes with residents and businesses.
- The benefits to be achieved, such as how the council will increase biodiversity and support nature recovery networks and identify how the changes will contribute to Net Zero, via carbon sequestration.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how grasslands will be managed now and into the future.

Gaining support

- For changes to be accepted there is a need to gain community and staff support as well as local elected member support.
- Communicate any proposals before any work is started.
- Monitor species present for 'good news' stories on social media and local press.



Is it worth the effort?

- Grasslands keep growing and are quick to regenerate
- They have recognised benefits for both biodiversity and carbon sequestration.
- They have multiple ecosystem service benefits – flood alleviation, air quality improvement, cooling in times of excessive heat.
- Leisure and recreation opportunities and by association health and well-being benefits.
- Local authorities are not only well placed to introduce more environmentally friendly grassland management policies, but they can also influence stakeholders, partners and private landowners.
- Budgetary pressures on grounds maintenance can be reduced by less frequent mowing and chemical applications.
- Growing recognition of the importance of grasslands in the wider natural ecosystem.

‘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’

