



Ampthill
Climate Change
Group

Every Action Counts.

Turning mown verges into wildflower havens across Ampthill



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What is the objective?

One of the main aims of the Ampthill Climate Change Group (ACCG) is to restore nature within Ampthill. This includes increasing biodiversity and providing habitats and food sources for pollinators across the town.

The aim of this project is to turn Ampthill into a town known for its wildflowers, where native wildflowers bloom on every road and around every corner, alive with bees, butterflies and other precious pollinators.

Why is this important?

Since the 1930s, the UK has lost over 97% of its wildflower meadows. This has caused a steep decline in the populations of pollinating insects, with substantial knock-on effects to birds and other species that feed on them. It is becoming increasingly critical to reverse the decline in insects, which are vital to our ecosystems and the food supply of not only other animals but also ourselves.

How can this be achieved?

Road verges and similar patches of grass offer huge potential to reverse these trends and to support biodiversity by changing them from mown grass to long grass and wildflowers.

Once established, areas where wildflowers are allowed to bloom provide waves of colour for large periods of the year. These areas provide food for insects and sanctuary for invertebrates and small mammals.

To achieve this, we would follow the principles as set out in the '[Plantlife: Managing grassland road verges](#)' document, changing how verges and patches of public land are managed.

Rather than mow six times a year, the areas in scope will be mown **just twice** and operate a **cut-and-collect system**. Many areas will be left for flowers to appear naturally but some areas will be more actively managed at the outset through sowing or the introduction of plug plants, in order to accelerate the process.

[Dorset council](#) have made great strides in doing this within the 30mph network. 'Cut and collect' currently happens in North Dorset, Weymouth, Portland, Purbeck, Bridport and East Dorset.

Benefits

Increasing the amount of long grass and wildflowers in the town will:

- Support dwindling populations of native pollinators by increasing the food supply
- Provide habitat for insects, reptiles, amphibians and small mammals, many of which are also under threat
- Enable wildlife to more easily and safely travel across town by creating “green corridors”
- Save money through a reduction in mowing frequency
- Provide essential personal well-being for many people, bringing residents even closer to nature
- Visually enhance Ampthill, creating a feature of the town in which residents can have pride

Costs

According to the Plantlife charity:

“...adoption of cut-and-collect by Dorset Council on some of their urban verges has reduced cutting frequency by 30%, is providing five-year management savings of £36,000 and £11,000/yr staff savings, and is covering the cost of the new cut-and-collect machinery. Whereas conventional flail cutting produced no cost recovery, decreased wildlife value and resulted in ever-increasing amounts of grass to cut.”

Managing public perceptions

According to the Plantlife charity:

“...flower-rich verges are increasingly popular with local communities and are an effective way of encouraging wildlife into the heart of the built environment. However, they can be seen as untidy and neglected by some residents and road users. Cutting narrow strips around the verge, so framing the verges inside, is a simple but effective way to give the perception of tidiness and help offset potential negative feedback on a perceived lack of management. Raising awareness of the importance of road verges and engaging local communities in their active management will also help to mitigate this negative perception.”

In 2016 and 2017, a mowing trial was conducted on 17 urban roads in Sheffield. The trial which reduced the number of cuts by half was communicated to the public through press, signs on lamp posts and leaflets delivered to each house on the trial roads. Research on public perception found that *“although local residents did not always appreciate the appearance of the unmown grass, there was appreciation that it was better for wildlife.”*

Establishment and management process

General approach

Wildflower seeds are generally already present in the seedbank of grassed areas. Furthermore, seeds are spread by wind and birds. Typical management practices for grassy areas involve frequent mowing, which prevents wildflower plants from establishing themselves. Wildflowers also prefer poor-quality soil. Council management practices for grass verges typically involve leaving cuttings to rot back into the soil, which enriches the soil and subsequently inhibits wildflower growth.

Leaving an area for nature to take its course should see wildflowers naturally appear. This is the process which is most likely to lead to a self-sustaining wildflower area and is the easiest to manage.

Most council-managed areas of grass in Ampthill are mowed six times a year. For the areas in-scope of this project, merely reducing the frequency of mowing will see flowers start to appear.

Proposal for new mowing regime

Unless they fall under one of the exceptions (see below) all grassed areas to be mown only twice a year in **March and September**. This will need to be **changed to a cut-and-collect management system** to ensure that soil fertility remains low.

These areas will have a 500mm edge (approx.) mown every 4 weeks to neaten the areas and to aid the understanding of residents that these are intentionally left for wildlife.

Actively managed areas

In addition to allowing many verges to grow long and naturally regenerate with wildflowers, three locations in town will be actively managed by members of the ACCG. These will have different establishment processes applied and will be monitored to compare the speed and success of wildflower growth and to identify and address any problems and issues.

There will be two methods used for introducing wildflowers:

- To sow seeds
- To add small plants

As recommended by Plantlife, UK-native species, and ideally locally-sourced, wildflowers will be actively introduced. As wide a mix as possible will be selected in order to maximise flowering period for pollinators and impact for residents.

We will mainly be using perennial wildflowers which are plants that have a multi-year lifespan, returning season-after-season. Some annuals, whose lifecycle from seed to flower

to seed completes within a single season, may be included within an initial seed mix but we will not be using these ongoing.

Perennials take longer to establish and flower than annuals and will provide less colour in the first year or to than annuals, but in the long term are lower maintenance and more sustainable than annuals.

To sow a wildflower patch, the grass must be raked to expose bare patches of earth within the turf. Sowing a wildflower mix onto these patches in the early autumn will see plants begin to appear within a few weeks.

Small plants bought as plugs or in 9cm pots can be directly planted into a given area. This will speed up initial establishment, albeit potentially at the risk of having fewer varieties of wildflower. These can be planted out at a rate of 6-10 plugs/m² (according to species). Planting in autumn is much more successful as it avoids spring droughts that can desiccate the small plugs.

Most grassy areas have vigorous species of grass, which can easily out-compete wildflowers. To prevent the grass from returning to overwhelm the wildflowers, yellow rattle will be sown. It is a native annual flower, which leads a parasitic life, drawing nutrients from other plants, particularly grass.

The three areas that have been selected for active management are key points at the entrances to the town and will be highly visible to residents and visitors alike.

Junction of Holland Road and Flitwick Road

This area has two verges, either side of the entrance to Holland Road, and will be seeded with perennials.



Junction of Church Street and Church Avenue

This area also has two verges, either side of the entrance to Church Avenue, and will be planted with plugs and 9cm plants.



Entrance to Amphill Park West Car Park

This is a larger verge, around the entrance to the car park, and will be left alone for natural establishment.



Exceptions

Some areas will be less suitable for wildflowers than others:

- Junctions where visibility may be affected (there may be a strip of “controlled” mowing to combat this issue if wide enough)
- Narrow strips of grass outside of residents’ houses where it may look untidy or where footfall is high
- Recreational areas such as the grass between Tavistock Avenue and Wagstaff Way

For these, mowing will be undertaken once every 4 weeks.

Example exempted areas:



Opt-out process

If residents have any cause for concern regarding the verges allowed to grow longer around their homes, they can either mow the section themselves (except the three areas being actively managed) or they can send a request to the town council to amend the area to be mown 4-weekly.

Alternative options

1. To only cut-and-collect in the three areas mentioned above, with members of the ACCG collecting the trimmings, sowing or planting wildflowers and monitoring results.
2. To designate a larger number of areas but with contractors collecting cuttings (it is unknown whether the current contractors cut-and-collect or leave cuttings on the ground). These could be actively managed according to the number of volunteers available.