

Winster Grassland Enhancement Proposal

BACKGROUND

In 2019 Winster Parish Council began to discuss and develop a plan for the maintenance of Winster's green spaces. The ideas for the plan included amongst other things, converting parts of the common to a wildflower meadow and establishing a programme of tree planting on suitable sites. Towards the end of 2019, the parish council sought the views of Winster residents via a resident's survey. The aim of the survey was to collect information about problems, concerns or opportunities for the parish which would inform and assist the work of the parish council. A total of 37 responses, 20 via online submission and 17 paper copies, were received. Responses to a question regarding the green spaces plan indicated a lot of support amongst the respondents, for grassland enhancement and tree planting. Prior to the parish council elections in May 2021, the previous council suspended the mowing contract for the common and other areas at the top of the village, in order to allow the incoming council time to consider a new maintenance regime. The new council took the opportunity to arrange a cut and collect of the grassed areas, which took place in August 2021. The parish council have been working with various experts, in order to develop a maintenance regime for the grassed areas, aimed at enhancing the grassland and increasing floristic diversity. This document is provided to inform residents of the councils plans and the council wish to receive feedback from residents before seeking tenders for the mowing work and commencing the programme in Spring 2022.



WHY ESTABLISH A WILDFLOWER MEADOW?

Wildflower meadows offer a diverse, and typically exceptionally attractive, habitat for the pleasure of young and old alike. Due to changes in agricultural policy and modern farming practices, in particular, increased field drainage and increased herbicide use, and the growth of housing development expanding into the countryside, the twentieth century saw a sharp decrease in the variety of wildflowers in the UK countryside.

Recent years have seen an increased awareness of environmental issues and a renewed interest in wildflower habitats. Coupled with this has been increasing interest in the restoration of old, mismanaged wildflower meadows and the creation of new meadows. Wildflower meadows for the provision of native or naturalised grasses, wildflowers and flowering plants offers several advantages:

- Plant diversity attracts insects and other invertebrates (including butterflies, bees, spiders and millipedes), birds and mammals

- Flowering species add a changing palette of colour to the environment throughout the seasons
- Active involvement of the local community in managing the site encourages ownership values to be fostered – activities may range from mowing to the collection of seeds for use at a new location or for sale.
- Opportunities for education and recreation abound (ranging from nature studies, art lessons and other recreational pastimes).

Despite their floral and faunal diversity and the aesthetic benefits that wildflower meadows offer, they are occasionally shunned by local residents. This is often because of their untidy appearance in autumn and their physical height (in comparison with mown grassland), which may be seen to impede access for people and can lead to perceptions of wilderness or abandonment. This is especially the case in more formal greenspace settings. Where fears or negative perceptions are expressed, they can be managed at the local level through community engagement and education events. Wildflower meadows may pose a number of challenges compared to grassed open spaces that are maintained by mowing:

- The site needs to be appropriate for wildflowers in terms of the soil's depth, description and nutrient status.
- The management of a wildflower meadow is different from that of closely mown lawns or grasslands: long-term goals and commitment are required to see a wildflower meadow established and flourishing.
- Wildflower seed is considerably more expensive than grass seed and, while unlikely to be a negative factor, the cost may need to be considered in light of the management program and its associated commitment.

Most semi-natural grasslands on mainland and islands of the UK, including wildflower meadows, exist on nutrient-poor or seasonally waterlogged areas of land. On rich, fertile soils, wildflowers are rapidly smothered by stronger, faster-growing grasses and competing plants. It is necessary to undertake a survey of the soil resource before attempting to establish a wildflower meadow. An annual management program will also need to be adopted to encourage the wildflower meadow to establish and not be overrun by grasses, brambles, weeds (such as dock and thistle). Where the soil nutrient level is too high for the establishment of wildflowers, several options may be considered:

- Establishment of an alternative habitat
- Physical amelioration of the soil substrate (for example soil stripping or soil inversion)
- A carefully planned and executed program of mowing and removal of cuttings to reduce fertility slowly.

Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 places the following biodiversity duty on all public bodies:

“Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity”

The duty applies to all local authorities, including parish and town councils. Its purpose is to raise the profile of biodiversity and make it a natural and integral part of policy and decision making. Going above and beyond what is required by law can further enhance and protect biodiversity, and also save money and resources.

The United Nations have stated clearly that there is no pathway to net zero without protecting and restoring nature, and they are encouraging countries, businesses and organisations at any level, to include nature-based solutions in their climate plans and make ambitious commitments to build nature positive economies and societies.

The parish council strongly believe that we must play our part in enhancing our local habitats and must therefore consider all opportunities to do this on the land for which it is responsible. We also recognise that in doing so, we must consider the views and concerns of all residents and in particular, those who may be more directly impacted by such plans.



EXPERT ADVICE

The parish council recognise that to succeed in our efforts to enhance grassland areas in the village and to meet expectations from residents, it is imperative that we seek external expertise. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust (DWT) have experience in the establishment and management of wildflower meadows in the surrounding area. In October 2019, Kieron Huston, White Peak Regional Manager at DWT attended site and met with several councillors to discuss the proposals and subsequently produced a document outlining the first stages of the project. Due to changes on the parish council, plans were postponed. In the interim period, floral surveys were undertaken by a small group of residents. In February 2022, the parish council commissioned a more detailed report from DWT and the previous DWT report and residents survey data was used in its compilation. The report forms the basis of a proposed management plan, and it is envisaged that the council will continue to seek the advice and assistance of DWT as and when appropriate.

It is clear that this is not a project that can be rushed, nor one that will produce instant results and there will be a process to follow in order to achieve the ultimate goal of establishing successful wildflower meadows.

Summary of February 2022 DWT Report

The full report can be accessed in full via the council website, but the following is a summary of key points:

Existing situation:

‘The sites on their own are of relatively limited value, being predominately made up of low diversity modified grassland. The low floristic diversity means that whilst the sites may be able to support some pollinators, the carrying capacity is limited.’

‘Whilst the onsite habitats hold the ability to support small numbers of species groups in its current state, the overall nature value is low. The sites form part of a small corridor which connects habitats in the wider landscape. By enhancing these grasslands and improving floristic

diversity, the overall quality of the corridor will improve, increasing the carrying capacity and allowing a wider variety of species to exist and commute through the landscape.'

Wider benefits:

'Several priority and high quality habitats have been recorded within 1km of site (see Figure 5), these habitats consist of semi-natural broadleaved woodland, neutral grassland and calcareous grassland. By improving the overall quality of the onsite habitats, the mosaic of habitats within the area will be enhanced, thereby improving the overall quality of the existing priority habitats. In particular, by increasing the amount of high-quality grassland habitat, the existing corridor formed by the grassland is increased, providing a larger resource for invertebrates, small mammals and passerine birds that are reliant on this habitat type. In addition, the broadleaved woodland that borders the site will aid in the formation of a diverse habitat matrix, providing niches and resources for specialist and generalist species alike and allowing an improved habitat for edge species. Finally, the existing sites of high-quality grassland will act as seed sources and support the development of floristically diverse areas of land on the common through continued sympathetic management.'

Recommendations:

'As a result of this, the existing condition of the site and the surrounding landscape, the following is recommended:

- Enhance existing grassland features to improve floristic diversity and provide an important resource for pollinators;
- Establish hedgerows and lines of trees along the boundaries that already contain these features, this will take into consideration the recommendations from the NRN map and allow the creation of a woodland / scrub corridor whilst maintaining open habitat; and,
- Provide space and resources for additional species, such as maintaining small patches of bare ground for invertebrates and establishing hibernacula for reptiles and amphibians.

1. Test the soil.
2. Identify the most appropriate management method.
 - a. No seed sowing, or creation, following low intensity enhancement methods instead (not recommended);
 - b. Scarification of 50 – 75% and seed sowing; or,
 - c. Scarification of 50 – 75% and spreading of green hay (highly recommended);
3. If seeding, identify appropriate seed mix, if using green hay, identify a donor landowner from a high-quality grassland site through DWT.
4. Sow the seeds in August – October.
5. From year 2 onwards, cut the grassland in late Feb / early March and again in late summer, once the seeds have dropped, leaving small areas of long grassland over winter.'

Outcomes:

'Following the implementation of a sympathetic management regime, it is envisioned that within five years, the small sites will be bursting with native wildflowers, each providing an essential resource to pollinators, allowing the sites to be alive with butterflies, moths, bees and hoverflies. This invertebrate population combined with the tussocky grasses, woodland edge and tree lines will in turn support birds, reptiles, amphibians and small mammals alike with amphibians safely moving their way through site to the nearby ponds and birds displaying from the treetops. The site will be valued not just by wildlife but by the public and will allow a space for people to reconnect with nature and improve their own mental wellbeing.'



ENHANCEMENT AND MAINTENANCE PROPOSAL

General proposal

Taking into consideration the advice from DWT and other experts and the views expressed previously by residents, the parish council propose the following maintenance programme. It seeks to achieve a compromise between achieving our aim of grassland enhancement, whilst maintaining the safety of pedestrians and highway users, the positive appearance of the village to residents and visitors alike and the access to the areas included in the project. This project won't be achieved in one season, nor will it be achieved without some adjustment to people's expectations of grassland maintenance that have been developed over many years.

2022

- Mow mid/late march – No cut and collect initially, although this may become an option if contractors/organisations with the appropriate specialist equipment can be sought
- Maintain buffer strips on boundaries, visibility splays, playground and verges throughout the grass growing season, mowing these areas once a month.
- Scarify some bare patches and seed with yellow rattle and green hay or seed in August/September

Specific proposals for each area

The Common



A 1-2m verge will be maintained around the common grassed areas and a 5-6m buffer will be maintained on the boundary with adjacent properties.

The Griffin



A 1-2m verge will be maintained around the Griffin and a 5-6m buffer will be maintained on the boundary with adjacent properties which will also keep the footpath to Wyntor Rocks maintained. In addition, the playground area will be maintained, including the verges that lead up to it from the car park.

Bank Top



A 1-2m verge will be maintained around Bank Top (The council have plans in place to replace the wooden bollards)

Town Meir



A 1-2m verge will be maintained on the roadside boundary of Town Meir and also the pond

Other areas to be mown

Ore House and verge to Miners Standard



These areas will be maintained throughout the growing season

Woodhouse Lane



The highlighted areas will be mown as usual, towards the end of August. The Winster Pond and Community Orchard Group will continue to manage the orchard grassland, the area adjacent to the outdoor gym and the area adjacent to the playground.

The above plans are for illustrative purposes only and are not to scale nor should be relied upon to be wholly accurate.

Cllr Dave Robinson
Winster Parish Council