

Subject: **Grass cutting in Charlbury 2022**

From: **Land and Nature Group**

Date: 23 January 2022

Summary of decisions or actions requested (including timing):

Full information is provided in the attached report dated 23 January 2022 from the Land and Nature Group.

1. Agree modified management of areas of grass paid for by Charlbury Town Council in order to enhance amenity for local people, reduce direct carbon emissions, increase carbon sequestration and increase biodiversity within the town. Make changes to the management of Mill Field from 2022 onwards to increase the biodiversity: including the restoration of meadow flora, allowing wild flowers to flourish, and leaving vegetation overwinter to help small mammals and invertebrates. Make minor changes to cutting of grass at the Cemetery, Watery Lane Triangle, Marlborough Place, and by the Burford Road bench.
2. Request Land & Nature Group to meet with contractors and the Town Clerk during February to discuss changes on site and how it will affect their charges.
3. Contact WODC (Ubico) during February to modify cutting of grass at Ticknell Piece from March onwards.
4. Contact OCC during February to modify grass cutting within the town to avoid cutting down plants in flower.
5. Request Land & Nature Group to draw up guidelines for agreement at the February CTC meeting for local residents when voluntarily cutting verges within the town otherwise cut by OCC annually.

Financial implications:

There will be changes to the charges made by the contractors but they are likely to reduce the total costs. Costs for restoring the flora on the Mill Field are likely to be covered by those savings.

MANAGEMENT OF GRASS AREAS WITHIN CHARLBURY

In the context of the climate and biodiversity emergency declared by Charlbury Town Council, a change in the management of grassy areas within the town is arguably the simplest opportunity to directly reduce carbon emissions, sequester carbon and improve biodiversity.

Charlbury Town Council is responsible for some areas of grass, so is Oxfordshire County Council, West Oxfordshire District Council and various property landowners such as Cottsway, Anchor Hanover, Charlbury Medical Centre, Paul Chaston Commercial Property (Spendlove offices), Gifford Trust (Playing Close), the various church bodies, and small groups of residents for particular housing areas such as Sandford Park. Even though OCC as highways authority is officially responsible for the majority of the roadside verges within the town, they make a single cut each summer and very many of the verges are unofficially adopted and maintained by adjacent householders according to their own personal management ideas.

In 2021 an informal photographic survey carried out of many verges within the town revealed areas of grass that still contain a good natural flora even though they have had decades of being cut short, and some of which are now being allowed to flower.

In adopting a more enlightened grass management policy for the areas it is responsible for, Charlbury Town Council can provide a model of good practice for other agencies within the town and wider communities.

A study of invoices shows that the Town Council pays three different contractors for cutting grass at several sites in the town: Nine Acres recreation ground, Mill Field, Cemetery, Ticknell Piece play area, Marlborough Place grass rectangle at the end of Narrow Lane, Watery Lane triangle at the bottom of Pound Hill, and around various seats and bus stops. Nine Acres, Mill Field, Marlborough Place grass, Watery Lane Triangle have all been designated Local Green Spaces in the recently adopted Neighbourhood Plan.

Apart from the Cemetery and Nine Acres where management policies provide a mosaic of wildlife habitats, the current instruction to contractors is “to maintain the grass in a tidy condition”. This results in grass being cut regularly at least monthly from March through to October with the resulting sward effectively being a green desert for wildlife.

Apart from these invoices, there is also the field adjacent to Centenary Woodland used for dog walking and recreation, which is cut annually for hay in July by local contractor Gavin Benfield (in return for the hay?) and arranged by the Town Council.

Aims

To ensure that the management of the land under control of Charlbury Town Council is sensitive to wildlife as well as people. In the longer-term management should reduce any adverse impact on the environment and enhance the rural experience for the people of Charlbury.

Objectives

1. Provide appropriate amenity to the public – short grass for games, paths for dog walkers, wildflowers and invertebrates to enhance people’s connection to the natural world.
2. Reduce direct carbon emissions – reduce the number of mechanised cuts, reduce the use of strimmers (damaging to slow-worms, hedgehogs, invertebrates), avoid use of leaf blowers (damaging to invertebrates).
3. Increase carbon sequestration into the soil – allowing vegetation to grow longer and increasing the range of plants increases the depth of plant roots and increases the carbon dioxide uptake. There is a dilemma about the cuttings – if left on the surface they rot down into soil organic matter and fertilise the soil, which in turn encourages the grass to the detriment of the wildflowers which always grow best in impoverished soils. However, the increase in soil organic matter does increase the carbon sequestered in the soil.

4. Provide wildflowers for pollinators – local native flora is good for bees, hoverflies etc. Allow flora in historic grass swards to flower to see what is already there and allow the flowers to spread. If necessary, introduce seeds from other local sites to maintain local genetic stock and yellow rattle to reduce vigour of the grasses. Note that perennial seeds take a while to establish until the plants are big enough to produce flowers within a grass sward.
5. Provide year-round security of habitats for invertebrates – many butterflies and other invertebrates complete their life cycle and overwinter in amongst grassy vegetation so some areas need to be left uncut until the spring, otherwise invertebrates will be destroyed. Not sure if existing contractors use weedkillers but need to discuss this with them with a view to restricting their use (see <https://www.pan-uk.org/pesticide-free-towns-success-stories/> for information on the 40 other towns in the UK who have imposed restrictions and also see the experience in France where non-agricultural use of pesticides was banned in 2020).

Public Opinion

There is considerable public interest in wildflower meadows and wildlife gardening. Nationally there are regular questions on Radio 4's Gardeners' Question Time and programmes on television like the Wildlife Gardener and Garden Rescue. The Climate Emergency visioning meeting called by the Town Council shortly before lockdown in 2020 found that people wanted more wildflowers for wildlife in Charlbury. This month, Charlbury Garden Society arranged a zoom talk on wildlife gardening. In the 25 years since the Charlbury Town Appraisal found that that over a half of Charlbury people wanted environmental improvements in the town, we have sadly witnessed further declines in bird, butterfly and insect life. At that time about 25% respondents specifically wanted verges to be cut less often and hedges to be allowed to grow more naturally. We are now seeing far more road verges being unofficially adopted by adjacent residents and being left to flower during the summer, and also more lawns being managed for wildflowers. Such interest is widespread - in Eynsham a recent survey about nature recovery found a resounding 98% of respondents wanting to increase wildflowers in the town.

GRASS AREAS MANAGED BY CHARLBURY TOWN COUNCIL

Summary of grass cutting payments 2021

Area	Cut by	Price per cut ex VAT £	VAT £	No cuts	Mar	Apr	Ma y	Jun	Jul	Au g	Sep	Oct	Total Net £	Total incl VAT £
1. Nine Acres	AP	118	23.60	13		2	2	3	2	2	1	1	1,534	1,840
2. Nine Acres headlands/edges	NA		-										1,000	1,000
3. Mill Field (excl picnic area)	RJ	130	-	6		1	1	1	1	1	1		780	936
4. Mill Field picnic area + lane	CL	195	39	9	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1,755	2,106
5. Cemetery	CL	350	70	9	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3,150	3,780
6. Ticknell Piece play area	CL	170	34	9	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1,530	1,836
7. Marlborough Place grass + path	CL	90	18	9	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	810	972
8. Watery Lane triangle	CL	45	9	9	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	405	486
9. Seats/bus stops	CL	175	35	9	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	675	810
Total													11,639	13,766

AP = Ady Podbery - invoices monthly April - October

NA = Nine Acres - precept grant

RJ = Rob Jackson (exempt from VAT) - invoices monthly April - September

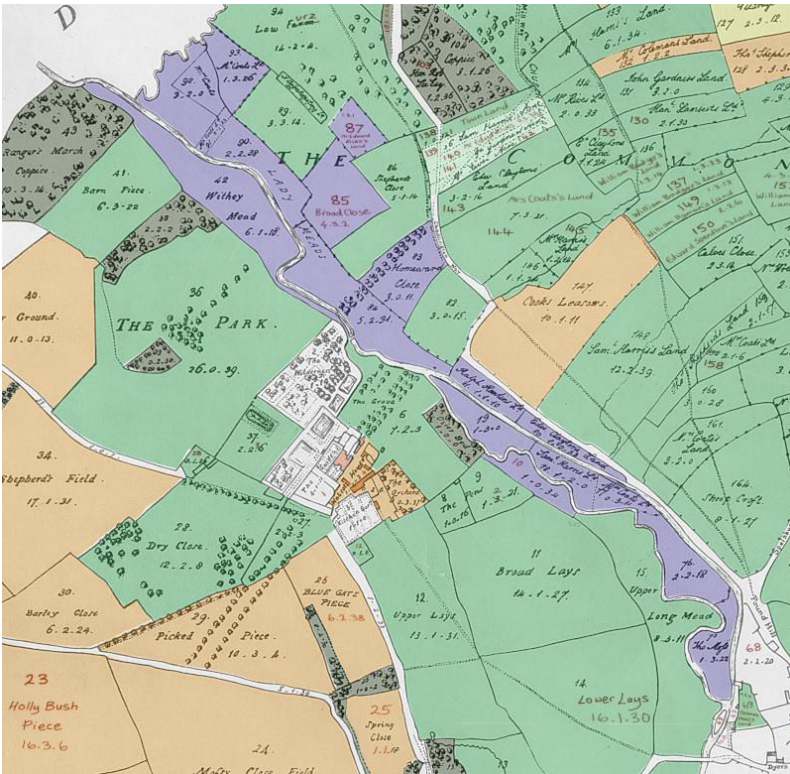
CL = Cotswold Landscaping (Ian Clemson & Tom Jenkins) - invoices April, July, Sept, Oct

NINE ACRES RECREATION GROUND

1. **Nine Acres – Ady Podbery.** Football pitches and play areas are cut fortnightly, *no change necessary.*
2. **Nine Acres Headlands/Edges – Nine Acres Grant as precept** but *surprised the allowance is as much as £1,000.* While the pitches are cut fortnightly, the policy has been to manage the edges of Nine Acres to enhance the biodiversity of the site – *this policy should continue.* In the past the edges alongside the stone walls, the banks, the lower dell walkway along Nine Acres Lane have been cut once a year after the cow parsley finished flowering and before the Charlbury Youth Football tournament in late June, otherwise difficulty in retrieving footballs amongst the long growth including stinging nettles. Removing the cuttings, however, is labour intensive and this could contribute to the high costs. The dell is developing well as tussocky grassland providing overwintering sites for invertebrates and small mammals, however, *the path through the dell does need to be cut wide enough so the long grass doesn't flop over onto the pathway after heavy rain.* The bank below the hard surface area towards the Nine Acres kissing gate is made up of spoil from the original hard surface tarmac which had to be replaced several years ago, so the soil is very shallow and was sown with local wildflower seeds some of which are still apparent. Some of the other banks also have wildflowers, e.g. the bank alongside the dell has toadflax in late summer, and the small bank opposite the corner 10 Enstone Road has hedgerow cranesbill. In some years, the sunny nettles on the banks into the dell by the kissing gate corner have been chosen by small tortoiseshell butterflies to lay eggs from April for caterpillars to eat until June, such colonies are very conspicuous and it is *important not to cut those nettles back until the adults from this brood have emerged in July.* In general, the boundaries have been planted up with native shrubs to fulfil the planting requirement for planning permission for the hard surface courts and also to both suppress the nettles and provide varied habitat. *The dogwood and shrubs near the kissing gate need cutting back annually to maintain the path through them.* For several years Birmingham University students came to survey the snails found in the stone walls around Nine Acres, this highlights the importance of stone walls for sheltering wildlife.

MILL FIELD

The entire Mill Field is an island created when the mill cut was created for the water-powered corn mill over a thousand years ago. The fields on the island were part of the continuous line of low-lying riverside meadows through the parish. After the hay cut the island would have been grazed (access would have been across the ford over the mill cut which is shown on the 1880 OS map just upstream from the mill pond at the bottom of Pound Hill) but nowadays with complete access for dog walking the Mill Field wouldn't be suitable for grazing. There would have been a rich meadow flora until the grassland was "improved" 70 years ago by reseeding with rye grass.



1761 Thomas Pride map coloured to show land use:

meadows are **mauve**

enclosed pasture is **green**

unenclosed pasture **light green**

enclosed arable is **yellow**

unenclosed arable is **light yellow**

woodland is **dark green** including the osier beds on the banks of river at Walcot

Base map with kind permission of
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 Christine Elliott

the river. **Mid Field** - the management plan recommends mowing until the Riverside festival in July and leaving uncut until late September and continuing a 2-metre mown pathway through the field. **Waterside boundaries** - the management plan recommends vegetation alongside the river and the mill cut to be left uncut for a width of 3 metres apart from existing access points, this is essential both for wildlife and to avoid having to have security barriers at Riverside Festival.

3. **Mill Field (excluding Picnic Area) – Rob Jackson.** Both Mid and Upper Fields are cut monthly using a tractor mower and the cuttings are left to rot down in situ - while this is good for carbon sequestration it does fertilise the soil and the grasses to the detriment of any wildflowers. However, fewer cuts would also mean much more of a problem with what to do with the arisings (cut vegetation) which would need to be removed to avoid swamping the new vegetation coming through. Traditionally this vegetation would be removed for hay but since the area is a major area for exercising dogs there could be a lot of dog waste in amongst the grass. However, there is the same issue with the grassland by Centenary Woodland which is also heavily used by dog walkers and where a hay crop is taken each July by the local contractor, Gareth Benfield – so maybe both sites could be managed in the same way?

Suggestions:

- a. Maintain the waterside boundaries as now by leaving 3m wide strips of vegetation uncut all year round to provide safe habitat for wildlife.
- b. Take an annual hay cut from Mid Field prior to the Riverside Festival in July and then leave it uncut, just like the field by Centenary Woodland.
- c. Mow a wide path through both fields the width of two tractor cuts to provide easy routes for people to pass each other and to avoid specific paths being worn.
- d. Restore the traditional meadow flora in Mid Field by spreading chopped up green hay collected from local meadows together with fresh yellow rattle seed, this would need to happen in July prior to the Riverside festival and the crowds of people would help trample the seeds into the soil (like the traditional herd of cows). This would considerably increase the biodiversity and wildlife interest making the site much more interesting to both people and wildlife.
- e. Increase the biodiversity of Upper Field by leaving the grass in the bend of the river to grow uncut, allowing a tussocky grassland to develop, the meadowsweet to flower, and seedling shrubs to grow – this would provide a much more varied habitat for small mammals and also invertebrates to overwinter and complete their life cycles. To prevent encroachment of waterside vegetation into this grassland a perimeter path the width of one tractor cut could be mown around the longer vegetation which would provide an interesting walk nearer the river as an alternative to the path going straight through the field.

4. **Mill Field Picnic Area and Lane – Cotswold Landscaping.** As well as Lower Field, the contract includes the small patch of grass at the end of Mill Lane by the bridge next to the old millstone set in the wall. Lower Field is quite a large area, suggest dividing it into two - the lower third nearest the picnic benches and bridge continuing to be closely mown using the small sit-upon mower and the remaining two-thirds to be included in the management as for Mid Field by a different contractor. The flora in the larger area could then be restored as per Mid Field with a tractor mown path around it to prevent encroachment of waterside vegetation into the grassland; this perimeter path around the longer vegetation would provide a short circular walk around this part of the field making it much more varied and interesting than it is now.

CEMETERY

5. **Cemetery – Cotswold Landscaping.** For the past 25 years the cemetery has been sensitively managed under the informal guidance of local resident and flower expert Louise Spicer. In the 1990s, the site received a joint award from the Oxford Diocese and BBOWT, our local wildlife trust. The grass along the boundaries is cut at times to allow the natural flora to flower and also flowers are allowed to flourish within the kerbed graves, but paths between the graves are cut regularly for easy access. The uncommon meadow saxifrage found growing near the entrance did very well until the majority of the patch was inadvertently removed during the construction of a rose bed. Suggest leaving more of the wide grassy area to the right of the entrance uncut

between May and October. Hedges are cut as an additional item by Cotswold Landscaping but the health of the hedges need to be assessed and management recommended accordingly.

TICKNELL PIECE PLAY AREA

6. **Ticknell Piece Play Area – Cotswold Landscaping.** *Carry on unchanged.* Contract probably also includes the small football area between the fenced play area and the skateboard park.

OTHER SMALL AREAS



7. **Marlborough Place and path – Cotswold Landscaping.** (Designated as a Green Open Space in the Neighbourhood Plan.) Large patch of grass alongside Narrow Lane pathway between Hixet Wood and Dancer's Hill and the narrow grass path towards Dancer's Hill. The patch of grass slopes down to the Narrow Lane path but people obviously walk diagonally across it as well as the surfaced path that goes around it. Leaves of flowering plants can be seen amongst the grass particularly on the slopes, so *suggest allowing these to flower from May through to October to see what they are. Important to mow the edges so the vegetation doesn't flop over the pathways, also to mow a diagonal path across the area following the current desire line, and mow the corner nearest Marlborough Place which seems to be lush grass. Scope for planting a couple of native trees, such as hawthorn and field maple to provide more of a varied habitat and sites for birds.*
8. **Watery Lane Triangle - Cotswold Landscaping.** (Designated as a Green Open Space in the Neighbourhood Plan.) Triangular grass area at the bottom of Pound Hill with a litter bin and a bench in the middle facing the mill cut and two whitebeam trees alongside the roadway, the one nearest Pound Hill has died. Contract might also include the patch of grass by the bench near the mill cut where the temporary bridge is constructed for the Riverside Festival. *Suggest mowing only part of the triangular area – just the area immediately around the litter bin and bench and leaving the rest from May to October. Doesn't look like there are existing flowers but it could easily be seeded with local seed collected from Wigwell just across the road. Recommend planting a hawthorn tree on the corner towards Spelsbury and a field maple to replace the dead whitebeam.*
9. **Seats and bus stops - Cotswold Landscaping.** Includes cutting around various benches located on verges which would otherwise be cut by OCC just once a year and rendering the benches unusable. It does include a large mown area around the bench on the RHS of the hill out towards Burford and *suggest this could be adapted to try to increase the flowers by cutting the whole area as now until May whereupon just the area immediately around the bench could be cut – this would give the surrounding wild flowers a better chance of coming through and not getting swamped by the long grass – it would be interesting to see if this method worked.*

GRASS AREAS MANAGED BY OTHER AGENCIES

Within the **Ticknell Piece** housing area, there are three grass areas regularly cut by West Oxfordshire District Council, cuts are managed by Ubico, contact laurence.sutton@ubico.co.uk. The flora in the large area of grass under the walnut trees at the entrance is interesting but the grass is usually cut just when the flowers have started flowering. Also, there is an extensive patch of lady's smock between the two big walnut trees but this is never allowed to flower. A change in the cutting regime would allow for the lady's smock to flower in April and for the flora to flower in the more open part of the site towards the roadside. A partial cut each time would allow both areas

of natural flowers to flourish in the same way that the mowers leave alone the crocus leaves that have been planted under the trees. Conversations with residents overlooking this area reveal that they would much prefer to see the flowers within the grass. The other two areas cut by WODC further into the site need to be looked at more closely but leaves of flowering plants are visible within the grass sward, particularly on the slopes of the landscaped mounds. *Suggest contacting Ubico this year with a revised mowing plan to allow the flowers to bloom and be surveyed – they have responded well to requests from other communities.*

The most interesting limestone flora in the town has been revealed in **Sandford Rise**. This was an old orchard until the private bungalows and Anchor Hanover flats and bungalows were built in the 1960s. A few years ago, one of the residents of the flats persuaded the management to leave the areas she overlooks uncut. The rich flora includes bird's foot trefoil, pyramid and bee orchids, ox-eye daisies, and hawkbits. Surveying the grass sward on the rest of the slope shows that the whole area has a rich flora and could be managed the same way. The householder of the first house on the left also leaves some of his slope uncut which has revealed a spectacular flora.

Some residents along **Woodstock Road** have allowed the verge in front of their house to flower and this has revealed a very rich flora similar to the flowers found in Wigwell. Some verges are cut very regularly, notably the large verge overlooking the Five Ways junction – this bank is likely to have interesting flowers some of which were seen briefly last August before being cut. All these verges are the responsibility of OCC, the highways authority, but they don't really have much left to cut because the householders have already cut them.

The wide verge alongside **Ditchley Road** is again the responsibility of OCC but is cut regularly by householders – the sward has not yet been surveyed but its location and history means that it is likely to have an interesting flora.

The wide verges alongside **Nine Acres Lane** in front of Jeff's Terrace and Evenlode Close will be cut by Cottsway, the sward has not yet been surveyed but the location and history means that they might both have an interesting flora. The verge on the bend further up the road by the access into Nine Acres recreation ground always shows interesting flora whenever the ground is disturbed for utilities e.g. gas and Gigaclear, this is managed by OCC and the flowers are cut down.

When OCC do make their annual cut, they sometimes cut down plants that neighbouring residents have been looking after and enjoying, for example along the old stone wall along the original historic line of The Slade prior to realignment of the road in the 1960s. *Suggest asking OCC to avoid cutting back flowers in specific locations around the town.*

An informal photographic survey was made of the wildflowers growing within Charlbury during the summer of 2021 and this was displayed at Street Fair, but a more complete survey needs to be made and a better understanding of the voluntary cuts that are made by local residents. Sometimes people cut their verge because they think they ought to, so *suggest town council could publish some broad guidelines outlining the best approach to maximise the flora in our verges.* However, timing of cuts depends on the plants in the sward and the growth of the grass which depends on the species of grass as well as rainfall and temperature which of course vary each year. Generally, it is advisable to cut back and remove lush grass in March and April to then allow the flowers to bloom in May throughout the summer. It is also advisable to leave some areas uncut over winter to allow the invertebrates to complete their life cycles before emerging in the spring.