

I was invited by one of your members to email the committee with my concerns regarding the mowing schedule of the grass verges around Lowestoft. This was in response to a post I shared with the Gunton Residents' Association group on Facebook, expressing my dismay and frustration that the grass verges around the Gunton "painters' estate" had been mown at the height of the flowering season for native wildflowers (see attached photo of my original post).

Lowestoft Council is clearly aware that there is a climate emergency occurring yet there appears to be a lack of joined-up thinking regarding the protection of our town's native fauna and flora. I know that there are a number of sites around Lowestoft that are protected as no-mow locations throughout the summer but I believe that it would be a positive step towards preserving our native pollinators if all grass verges around the town were protected from mowing throughout the summer. When I shared my frustration on Facebook about the mowing of grass verges, I had several people argue over this issue with me but their only argument was that it looks "scruffy" for the verges to be left unmown. When faced with a climate emergency and a drastic decline in the populations of many species of pollinators, it is imperative that councils look at the bigger picture and are not swayed from making beneficial decisions for fear of upsetting the "neat freaks" among us.

Why am I so concerned about grass verges? According to a 2021 study, (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/26/end-mowing-of-road-verges-to-create-huge-wildlife-habitat-says-uk-study>) grass verges account for 1.2% of Great Britain's land. They are not used for any specific purpose, unlike cemeteries or play parks, and therefore do not need to be kept short for ease of access. Mowing verges to look like garden lawns is bad for wildlife. Considering that the UK has lost 97% of its wildflower meadows over the past century, allowing grass verges to take up this role would be both worthwhile and beneficial. Reducing mowing to just once or twice a year would allow more wildflowers to bloom and set seed, providing food not just for pollinators but for birds and small mammals.

Everybody is aware of the precarious state of bees worldwide but not many people are aware that other pollinators such as butterflies and moths are also in sharp decline. According to the Natural History Museum (<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2022/may/half-british-butterflies-placed-extinction-red-list.html>), half of Britain's remaining butterfly species are red listed as threatened or near-threatened. Although many households grow plants that are attractive to adult butterflies, the larvae depend predominantly on native wildflowers as their food source. I am not suggesting that grass verges should be full of nettles and thistles (even though this would be amazing for butterflies) but many butterfly and moth species rely on "weeds" as their larval food sources. Plants such as birdsfoot trefoil, self-heal, ragwort and flowering grasses are all important foodstuffs for pollinators. These are exactly the species of plants most likely to colonize unmown grass verges. To quote the NHM article, "As well as restoring breeding habitats and other sites, it is also important to ensure connectivity between them. As butterflies cannot travel great distances in one go, this involves providing flower rich field margins that can act as stepping stones between habitat patches." Sadly, the increasing popularity of AstroTurf and hard surfacing in domestic gardens means that gardens can no longer be relied on to act as wildlife corridors. This is where grass verges come into their own - they would make ideal corridors of habitat throughout suburban Lowestoft, linking Carlton Marshes with the various parks, allotments and cemeteries all around the town. To quote another report by the NHM (<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/why-road-verges-are-important-wildlife-habitats.html#:~:text=Managed%20well%2C%20road%20verges%20have,%2C%20birds%2C%20amp%20hibians%20and%20reptiles.>), "Without corridors, populations become isolated. This makes them weaker genetically and more vulnerable to any sudden changes in their environment, for example pollution incidents."

I believe that there is a fairly widespread "no-mow May" policy in Lowestoft. However, with the changeable nature of British weather, this is not as helpful as it could be. Depending on the weather conditions, many flowers do not bloom until June or July. If flowers are mown too early, before insects have had a chance to pollinate them or before seeds ripen, the plant won't be able to

reproduce. Plantlife, in collaboration with Butterfly Conservation and the Wildlife Trusts, recommend simple changes such as cutting verges less frequently and later in the year.

The wild plant conservation charity estimates that if all verges were managed for nature there would be over 400 billion more flowers. We have to remember that more flowers = more food for invertebrates = more food for birds, hedgehogs and amphibians. The simple act of choosing not to mow our town's grass verges between 1st May and 1st September would have a massive impact on all of the wildlife with whom we share this town. The Waveney Norse employees who currently mow the grass verges could be redeployed clearing wildflowers from pavements, where they pose a trip hazard (either with heat guns or by hand - clearly pesticide use should be avoided at all costs).

Lowestoft council was rightly proud of its status as the first Fair Trade council in England. It would be fabulous for our urban wildlife if the same forward-thinking attitude could be taken towards a town-wide no-mow policy.