



**Ards and
North Down**
Borough Council

Grassland Management Strategy

2025 to 2032

Ards and North Down Borough Council

Strategy Title	Grassland Management Strategy 2025 to 2032
Version	V2
Summary	The overall vision for the Strategy is for the Council “to provide high quality, value for money grasslands, that provide aesthetic beauty and recreational use while maximising their value to people and the environment”. This strategy aims to deliver a sustainable grassland management policy, empowering Council to increase local biodiversity through the recovery of natural habitats, whilst reducing the impact on resources.
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November 2024	New Policy Created	V1
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1.0 Introduction, Background, and Context

1.1 Introduction

Ards and North Down Borough has a rich diversity of scenic countryside ranging from the Strangford Shores in the west to the Outer Ards Peninsula to the east, with a long history of settlement and land use which have formed the visually attractive landscapes that are part of our shared cultural heritage. The Borough covers almost 330 km² with nearly 350 km of coastline, which combines attractive coastline with many pleasant open spaces. Strangford Lough, which is of global environmental importance, forms the central geographical and landscape feature of the area.

Ards and North Down Borough Council (the Council) manages over 290 hectares of open spaces throughout the Borough. Various locations in Ards and North Down have achieved a Green Flag Award, an internationally recognised certification for environmental quality management which recognises parks and open spaces with excellent levels of maintenance, facilities and community involvement.

Council parks and open spaces provide a diverse range of grassland, woodland and wetland known to support important wildlife habitats including mature broadleaved, conifer and mixed woodland, parkland and lakes with fringing wetlands such as wet woodland and reed beds, as well as veteran or ancient trees. All of which provide a range of environmental, social, economic and wildlife benefits.

Suitably managed grasslands are vital for biodiversity, nature conservation and carbon storage, holding approximately one-third of global terrestrial carbon stocks. Grasslands provide crucial resilience in the face of climate change, including in Northern Ireland where disruption to business, services and people's daily lives will increase if adverse changes occur. UK Climate Projections (UKCP) present an increased risk of flooding and coastal erosion putting pressure on drainage, sewage, roads, water and habitats. Increased temperatures, more pollution and a reduction in air quality could bring discomfort to vulnerable people and further endanger species of animals and crops.

Grasslands use less water, reduce soil erosion and keep carbon stored in the ground. A diverse mixture of grass and wildflower species create an array of habitats that support a diversity of insects and pollinators, a multitude of bird species and other mammals. Healthy grasslands have been proven to improve water quality and increase water quantity and storage for communities, reducing downstream flooding events by regulating runoff, and ensuring high-quality water supplies for future generations.

Unfortunately given their clear importance, grasslands are some of the most threatened and least protected ecosystems in the world. Action is required to suitably manage Council grasslands for wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration and for the benefit of future generations in the face of the urgent climate and biodiversity crisis.

This Grassland Management Strategy recognises the importance of grasslands, the many benefits they afford us, the increasingly important role they can play in mitigating the effects of climate change and the essential habitat they provide. This strategy is

required to ensure the Council's limited budget is focused on delivering effective, efficient and environmentally focussed grassland management.

Council is committed to ensuring improved grassland management within the Borough, and to promote the importance of grasslands to ensure several Corporate and Community Plan objectives are met.

Council is committed to its Biodiversity Duty as outlined in The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the WANE Act). The act places a statutory duty on public bodies to conserve biodiversity.

This Strategy is required to ensure the Council's limited budget delivers effective, efficient and environmentally focussed grassland management. In addition, this Strategy sets out the responsibilities of Council's Parks Management to identify alternative grassland management approaches considering impact on Council budgets, resources, community usage and the environment.

The overall vision for the Strategy is for the Council:

"to provide high quality, value for money grasslands, that provide aesthetic beauty and recreational use while maximising their value to people and the environment"

This strategy aims to deliver a sustainable grassland management policy, empowering Council to increase local biodiversity through the recovery of natural habitats, whilst reducing the impact on resources. The following are the key aims of the strategy which will guide the Council's management of grasslands.

Aim 1	Aim 2
Improve Biodiversity	Move Towards Net Zero
to improve Biodiversity across the Borough in line with the Local Biodiversity Action Plan.	to contribute to Councils Net Zero targets on carbon emissions by reducing the amount of fuel we use and provide grasslands that are sequestering and storing more carbon.
Aim 3	Aim 4
Increase Efficiency	Community Education & Engagement
to ensure Council resources are used efficiently and effectively through alternative approaches to grassland management.	to actively engage and educate residents on the value of grasslands and the benefit of adaptations to their management.

Historically Council grasslands have been maintained with a 'one size fits all' approach with the majority mown regularly to ensure grass was kept short. While this approach still has a place, primarily within areas of prestige, of where organised sport occurs, alternative maintenance programmes have been introduced in several areas. In 2018

Council introduced a Re-wilding initiative to ensure best sustainable use of resources and promote biodiversity.

Rewilding requires converting closely mown grasslands to managed grassland habitats capable of supporting a much more diverse range of floral species, pollinators and insects and thus improving Biodiversity. At present 90,000m² of grassland is being managed for rewilding with Service Plan targets to increase this annually. This strategy will build on the success of the Re-wilding initiative by assessing all Council grasslands and implementing a suitable management for each location.

1.2 Background

In February 2019 Council declared a Climate Emergency and agreed to note the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report on the impacts of climate breakdown, agreeing that drastic and far-reaching measures must be taken across society to try and mitigate the risks.

Council is required to demonstrate compliance with the Duty for Sustainable Development, the Biodiversity Duty and environmental legislation such as The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

The Ards and North Down Local Biodiversity Plan

The provision of biodiversity is a statutory requirement under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The Act requires public bodies to take reasonable steps to further the conservation of priority habitats and species or to promote such actions by others. The production and delivery of the LBAP assists in demonstrating the Council's compliance with the statutory duty. Under the WANE Act, the Council is responsible for considering five key aspects of biodiversity. These are:

- Protection of Biodiversity
- Maintenance of Biodiversity
- Enhancing Biodiversity
- Restoring Biodiversity
- Promoting Biodiversity

The Borough's second Biodiversity Action Plan was approved and adopted in April 2023 and has helped to coordinate efforts to protect and enhance biodiversity across the Borough. The development of the plan is an important step in recognising the importance of our local biodiversity. It aims to ensure that international, national, regional and local biodiversity objectives are achieved through a range of partnerships.

A total of 84 actions were proposed across four themes in the LBAP, the actions are to help protect, conserve, and enhance those priority habitats and species within the Borough identified through the audit. Within these themes specific actions are attributed to Grassland Management, including the creation of this Strategy. Other actions linked to this Strategy include but are not limited to:

- Reduce the frequency of grassland cutting per year at selected Council areas.

- Continue to manage and monitor lowland meadows under the council rewilding initiative and increase the extent of species-rich wildflower meadow habitat by creating new meadows and expanding the area of existing meadows, in both urban and rural locations.
- Promote semi-natural grassland biodiversity through local events, and council publicity, hold lowland meadow identification and management training courses
- Inform the public where land is being managed for biodiversity
- Encourage the public to get involved in practical activities and habitat restoration projects to increase the numbers of our priority species

1.3 Corporate Context

The document will contribute towards Council wide plans and strategies, which include the following key documents:

- The Corporate Plan (2024 – 2028)
- The Big Plan (Community Plan) (2017 – 2032)
- Local Biodiversity Action Plan (2021 - 2031)
- Roadmap to Sustainability (2021 - 2028)
- Climate Adaptation Plan
- Local Development Plan Draft (2021 -2024)

Corporate Plan: The focus of the Corporate Plan is ‘Towards a Sustainable Borough’ in order to realise a vision for Ards and North Down that it is a borough where economic, environmental and social wellbeing are independent and decisions that are taken are balanced and equitable. The priorities are:

- Economic – Focus on attracting more businesses and more jobs to our borough.
- Environment – Reducing carbon emission as we transition to net zero
- Social – Increasing social inclusion and reduced inequalities

The Big Plan: The ‘Grassland Management Strategy’ will contribute towards all five outcomes of the Big Plan. The two outcomes of particular relevance are:

Outcome 2: All people in Ards and North Down enjoy good health and wellbeing.
Outcome 5: All people in Ards and North Down feel pride as they have access to a well-managed sustainable environment.

Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP): The LBAP provides an overview of priority sites including key habitats and species within the Council area which have been identified for conservation and enhancement through partnership working.

The Roadmap to Sustainability: has been developed to formalise the Council's commitments to becoming more sustainable into one document. It covers the period from 2021 to 2028 and is based on several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The Climate Adaptation Plan: has been developed to ensure the council is prepared for the effects of climate change and gives a commitment that the Council will carry out its activities and functions a manner which minimizes any potentially negative climate change impacts and states that the principles of sustainable development will be integrated throughout all Ards and North Down Borough Council activities..

Local Development Plan 2032 (LDP): The LDP has three key aims i.e. protecting and enhancing the environment; promoting economic activity; and ensuring cohesive and safe communities and supporting healthy lifestyles. In addition, the LDP has completed a Sustainability Appraisal with 14 key sustainable development objectives including improving 7 health and wellbeing, protect natural resources and enhance biodiversity etc. The LDP shall be produced in two stages and will comprise of two separate documents that will shape development within the Borough from final adoption to 2032.

This Grassland Management Strategy will aim to address the above corporate documents with a view to providing high quality, value for money grasslands across the Borough and also provide aesthetic beauty and recreational use while maximising their value to people and the environment.

2.0 Grassland Management Benefits and Challenges

Suitably managed grasslands are vital for biodiversity, nature conservation, carbon storage and provide crucial resilience in the face of climate change. Grasslands also provide aesthetic beauty and value that can make the Borough a healthier, attractive and more comfortable place to live and work. The wide range of benefits that grasslands provide are set out below.

2.1 Environmental Benefits

- Grasslands can capture larger amounts of water, they are good for flow regulation and decreasing the risk of flooding.
- Grasslands help to clean surface water.
- Land that is permanently covered by vegetation (in contrast to most arable fields) decreases erosion and loss of topsoil.
- Permanent grasslands store large amount of carbon in the soil. Much more than arable land and sometimes as much as forest soils
- Grasslands are valuable habitats for many plants, insects, birds and other organisms, both common and threatened species. Biodiversity is regarded as a prerequisite for many of the other ecosystem services, like pollination, biocontrol and recreation.
- Focussed use of resources can reduce the use of fossil fuels through mowing.

2.2 Social Benefits

- A well planned and implemented maintenance schedule improves the quality of the grass itself thus improving the experience of grassland users.

- Quality grasslands provide mental and physical benefits to the local population and visitors to the area, by providing areas that can be used for a social interaction.
- Grasslands facilitate organised and other recreational activities.
- Tall grasslands encourage natural play by stimulating the imagination of young children.
- Grasslands provide educational opportunities through knowledge of insects and wildlife associated with the habitat.

2.3 Economic Benefits

- Tourism and recreation. Grasslands are appreciated for walking, trekking and birdwatching, which makes them attractive areas for people to visit and engage in. They are also often popular for recreation, picnics and excursions.
- A well varied maintenance schedule ensures resources are used effectively and efficiently
- A reduction in mowing frequencies in suitable areas reduces machinery fuel and maintenance costs.
- Effective workload planning allows for resources to be directed to other areas within service provision.

2.4 Wildlife Benefits

- Grasslands provide improved habitat for pollinators, thus increasing populations of pollinators
- Grasslands are a valuable habitat for small mammals, insects, invertebrates and birds.
- Grasslands provide habitats for ladybirds, ground beetles and other insects that feed on pests, contributing to biological control without the need for additional chemical use.

3.0 Strategic Policy Aims

Aim 1	Aim 2
Improve Biodiversity	Move Towards Net Zero
to improve Biodiversity across the Borough in line with the Local Biodiversity Action Plan.	to contribute to Councils Net Zero targets on carbon emissions by reducing the amount of fuel we use and provide grasslands that are sequestering and storing more carbon.
Aim 3	Aim 4
Increase Efficiency	Community Education & Engagement
to ensure Council resources are used efficiently and effectively through alternative approaches to grassland management.	to actively engage and educate residents on the value of grasslands and the benefit of adaptations to their management.

3.1 Strategic Aim 1 – Improve Biodiversity

Research has proven that less intensively managed grasslands have on average 50% more plant species and better soil health than intensively managed grassland. Grasslands make up large proportions of the countryside and is vital to our environment. Often this land can be thought of as solely for food production or recreation, but evidence is growing on the important role it plays improving biodiversity and soil health.

Grasslands managed to improve biodiversity have greater plant species, including different types of grasses and herbaceous flowering plants. Additionally, grassland plants on these areas are often taller, a quality which is proven to be beneficial to many pollinators such as butterflies and bees as well as supporting many other insects among the foliage and soil. An abundance of life in our grasslands can also support small mammals and birds of prey.

3.2 Strategic Aim 2 – Move Towards Net Zero

Protecting, enhancing and restoring grasslands can play an important role in moving towards net zero carbon emissions. Grassland vegetation is the conduit for carbon sequestration and storage in the grasslands soil base. On this basis, grasslands managed to this aim are an example of nature-based solutions to climate change. Increasing both biodiversity and soil health in this way, increases the amount of carbon captured in the soil.

It is recognised globally that biodiversity is declining and with direct links to increasing levels of carbon in the atmosphere. This highlights the importance of developing and investing in nature-based solutions that aids both challenges simultaneously.

Plants, including those found in species rich grasslands form a fundamental relationship with the insects and animals that live in and use them. An approach to grassland management that fosters these relationships are essential to achieving ambitious net-zero targets.

3.3 Strategic Aim 3 – Increase Efficiency

A ‘one size fits all’ approach to grassland maintenance leaves the provision of council services untested and vulnerable to inefficiencies. Without fit and proper assessment of the mowing schedules and approaches, it is difficult to argue that resources are being applied effectively, both from a time, cost and resource provision perspective.

Grasslands managed in a way that maintains recreational use while increasing biodiversity, can lead to a reduction in time spent mowing areas unnecessarily. Pressures on resources are ever increasing and reducing time spent mowing these areas would allow staff to focus on tasks that are more beneficial to providing the high-levels of service rightly expected from residents and visitors to the Borough. A reduction in mowing also lowers fuel consumption and costs associated with machinery and equipment maintenance.

3.4 Strategic Aim 4 – Community Education and Engagement

Grasslands managed for biodiversity provide an environment where young and old can learn about a wide range of topics, including identification of insects, climatology, biodiversity, wildlife protection and habitat preservation.

The Primary Curriculum provides opportunity for children to learn about the world around them exploring the fundamentals of history, geography and science. Grasslands provide an environment for children to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in Place, Independence, Movement and Energy and Change. Time spent in grasslands encourages children’s natural curiosity, evoking a sense of belonging and providing a basis to their future learning, a basis for happy, healthy lives.

Citizen Science activities are popular for people seeking to volunteer within their communities. Volunteering provides people with learning opportunities, a way to build their employability, a place to interact socially with others, and mental and physical health benefits. Grasslands with an abundance of flowers, insects and other wildlife, provides opportunities to learn through monitoring and identification of species, while contributing to data collection, essential to future planning for climate mitigation and biodiversity improvement.

4.0 Grassland Management Practices

Cutting Season

This usually takes place between March and October, however out of season cuts will occur at specific sites based on usage requirement such as for Tier 1 Prestige sites.

Locations

Ards and North Down Borough Council cuts grass on sites that are maintained by the Council. These sites include parks, cemeteries, memorial sites and all other open spaces.

Timeframe

The frequency of cut will depend on the type of site, in this document these have been broken down into tiers. These range from weekly cuts at Tier 1 sites, which includes football pitches, to Tier 5 sites which will require a yearly cut to boost biodiversity.

Soil Fertility

In order to enhance the biodiversity of a grassland, it is widely understood that a low soil fertility is vital to encourage the growth of wildflowers. High fertility soils tend to produce more vigorous grass and competitive species of grass.

To reduce the fertility of the soil the arisings should be collected and removed from the site, as leaving the arisings allows the biomass and nutrients contained within to be absorbed by the soil. To provide the soil for wildflowers to grow, cut and lift equipment will be used in these locations.

4.1 Invasive Species Management

Adaptions in mowing regimes provide environments for an abundance of plants to thrive. Unfortunately, this includes a range of species that, while native to the UK and Ireland, out compete other species and are therefore classified as 'invasive.' These Invasive species require a proactive management approach if the biodiversity rich grassland are to be achieved.

Many of these invasive species are perennial and include broad leaved dock, ragwort and creeping thistle. Council is committed to its responsibilities to manage these species in a balanced approach that considers the impacts on wildlife.

Each of the council-maintained greenspaces will be evaluated based on their usage and the rate of cutting will be determined. This will be approached in a tier system, as below:

Tier 1 – Prestigious Areas

These are areas with high importance and high rate of usage, as well as community and social value. They include areas such as war memorials and other memorial gardens.

Rate of Cut	Arisings Management	Description
Weekly	Cut and Lift	Highly maintained grass lawns generally serviced using pedestrian mowing equipment with collection function

Tier 2 – Significant Areas

These are areas with high importance and high rate of usage including areas such as cemeteries.

Rate of Cut	Arisings Management	Description
Weekly	Cut and Drop	Grasslands of significant social value serviced through a mix of pedestrian, ride-on and tractor mounted equipment

Tier 3 – Public Space

These are areas of medium importance with a medium rate of usage. They include areas close to residential properties with reduced access to other green areas and recreational space within formal parks.

Rate of Cut	Arisings Management	Description
3-4 weeks	Cut and Drop	Grassland with a recreational value to the local community, serviced through a mix of pedestrian, ride-on and tractor mounted equipment.

Tier 4 – Wildflower Meadows

These are areas of medium importance with a low rate of usage.

Rate of Cut	Arisings Management	Description
Annually	Cut and Lift	Grasslands suitable for the creation of natural wildflower meadows while still providing space for public usage, generally serviced through tractor mounted equipment. Area will include informal paths to allow access to public where applicable.

Tier 5 – Long Meadows

Rate of Cut	Arisings Management	Description
No mowing	Cut and Lift	Grasslands with low amenity value managed to create sustainable natural areas for flora and fauna. Areas will be subject to invasive species management only.

4.2 Structure & Key Roles and Responsibilities

The ongoing responsibility for Grassland Management and Risk Management in Ards and North Down Borough Council is a corporate one. For practical reasons, however, the Parks and Cemeteries Section takes the lead and supplies a service to other landholding departments. Grass maintenance is currently scheduled and planned by various site managers, with a local knowledge on historical maintenance practices. Site managers are responsible for the provision of suitable equipment, protective wear and risk management. While these responsibilities will remain with the site managers, the Strategy will provide a consistent approach to grass maintenance across all areas of the Borough.

5.0 Action Plan

Strategic Aim	Actions	Delivered by	Timescale	Resources
Improve Biodiversity	We will baseline Wildflower and Long Meadows through Biodiversity audits	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service Partners: Volunteers Expert organisations	2024-2032	Officer Time
	We will monitor plants and animal species and provide data to CEDaR	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service Partners: Volunteers, Expert organisations	2024-2032	Officer Time
	We will develop a standard operating procedure for invasive species management	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2025	Officer Time

	We will improve habitat for local wildlife through installation of suitable animal homes and suitable plant species	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service Partners: Volunteers, Expert organisations	2024-2032	Officer Time
Move Towards Net Zero	We will reduce reliance on fossil fuel through the introduction of alternative grassland maintenance methods	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2032	Officer Time
	We will promote the benefits of alternative grassland management in climate mitigation and biodiversity improvement	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2032	Officer Time
	We will engage with Planning Department to ensure full consideration is given to the provision grasslands in new developments, within the Development Plan and associated policies.	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service Partners: Planning	2024-2032	Officer Time
Increase Efficiency	We will develop a maintenance plan for all council-maintained grasslands	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2026	Officer Time
	We will reduce the frequency of mowing on	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2032	Officer Time

	council-maintained grasslands			
	We will train staff in methods of alternative grassland management	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2032	Officer Time
Community Education & Engagement	We will promote the benefits of grasslands through community engagement activities	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2032	Officer Time
	We will provide information, expert advice and support for communities to become active in local meadows	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2032	Officer Time
	We will deliver educational events to promote identification and awareness skills, where gaps and training needs are identified in the local community	Lead: Parks and Cemeteries Service	2024-2032	Officer Time