

Wildflower areas – a briefing for Councillors

Claire Matthes and David Dullaway
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Introduction and summary

We are asking the Town Council to consider changing the way that some areas of grass are maintained to promote the growth of wildflowers. We hope that doing so will make Haslemere and the surrounding area more resilient and so preserve its diverse and attractive wildlife. We also believe that the wildflower planting can be attractive in its own right, as long as it is implemented carefully.

This is not the first time that wildflower planting has been tried in Haslemere. Waverley Borough Council implemented it a few years ago, with mixed results. The idea was initially widely supported, and the first year's results were positive, but sadly the areas planted then became overgrown with rank grass, which was neither ecologically helpful nor attractive. Indeed, as a result Haslemere Town Council adopted a resolution not to undertake any wildflower meadow planting or maintenance in the future without a properly designed and costed management plan (Amenities Committee meeting, 14th June 2018).

This paper focuses on why this poor outcome happened, how we can avoid it happening again, and what a proper management plan might look like.

Governance

Usually, a proposal of this sort would be within the remit of the Amenities Committee, and indeed an earlier version of this paper was discussed at the Amenities Committee meeting on 10th June 2021. However, due to Covid restrictions this was an informal meeting, and while the committee supported the proposal it could not formally approve it. In addition, given the resolution above it seems right to give all Council members the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, even if technically the Amenities Committee has the power to change it. The Amenities Committee therefore agreed to put this proposal before and recommend it to the Full Council.

The Amenities Committee discussed this proposal in some depth and as part of this discussion several specific questions or concerns arose. We believe these have now been addressed and this paper has been updated to include answers to them at the appropriate points.

What do we want to do and why?

In brief, we would like to change the maintenance approach for three selected areas of land to encourage the growth of wildflowers. In these areas we suggest moving from closely cropped grass to a mix of taller grass and wildflowers.

The main rationale for this is that wildflowers help support the wildlife – bees, butterflies, etc – that act as pollinators and so make the green areas of Haslemere a bit more resilient to the impact of climate change, change of land use, drought, and so on. Beyond this, if done sensitively, we hope that this will also make Haslemere look more attractive at the same time.

We think this is a sensible way for the council to meet its green commitments in a way that has a direct benefit for residents, and so can gain more widespread support.

Which areas are we suggesting?

We are suggesting making these changes to three areas of Lion Green, as shown on the attached map. These are in the proposed orchard area (area A), along the eastern edge of the green by the stream (area B), and the small square adjacent to the triangle now used by the Lion's Den (area C). The Amenities Committee raised several questions about the practicality of area C, which are discussed below, and a decision is required as to whether this area should be included.

In area A we are suggesting allowing wildflowers to grow throughout the orchard area but mowing strips along existing paths and walkways. This will ensure that the public can still use them, make the area look well maintained, and ensure the wildflowers do not encroach on the houses abutting the area.

In area B the wildflowers will form a strip or verge along the edge of the stream, so that they blend into a wilder area and therefore look more natural and not out of place. The Amenities Committee raised the question as to whether this would impinge upon the picnic tables or football pitches already on the Green – we have measured the area and can confirm that it will not.

Area C is different in nature to areas A and B. It is not contiguous with them and is in an area that is more heavily used. There is the possibility that if it looks untidy it could attract complaints and that it may be flattened by revelry after the Apple Tree pub has closed. Against this, it already contains a number of quite rare wildflowers and could form a visually attractive backdrop if well managed. We suggest that we include the area but with the careful mowing of a strip around it to make it look clearly cared for, and that we should be willing to review this if it becomes unsightly. It is worth noting that the 'cut and collect' approach discussed later in this paper has already started in all of the areas, and that this has not attracted any negative comments so far.

It is possible that there are other areas that would benefit from similar treatment, but we think these three areas would form a good test case initially, perhaps to be reviewed in a year's time.

How would we make it work this time?

Wildflower planting has a chequered history in Haslemere. A previous attempt was widely supported but after a year became quite ugly and, not unreasonably, the support

disappeared. However, a number of local and other councils have adopted wildflower planting since then and some important lessons have been learnt.

The key lesson is that in encouraging wildflowers to grow we are essentially trying to replicate the grazing environment where they grow naturally. When grass is grazed the nutrients in the grass are removed by the grazing animals, giving the wildflowers a chance to grow. Without this removal, if left untouched they will be overwhelmed by grass. This is exacerbated in urban settings where very vigorous rye grass is often planted. To replicate this the effect of grazing in Haslemere requires moving to a 'cut and collect' approach for the wildflower areas, where the cut grass is removed to reduce the nutrients available to the grass and give the flowers a chance to grow.

In outline the management approach that we would suggest is therefore as follows.

- For the first summer, a cut and collect approach is adopted in these areas as opposed to the current 'cut and leave' approach. This will reduce the growth of the existing grass and give wildflowers a chance to establish. This cut and collect should happen on a monthly basis through summer and is crucial to the scheme's success, as it prepares the area for wildflower growth.
- Next spring, we should inspect the areas we want wildflowers to grow in and see if they have naturally established themselves. If not, we can choose to seed or plant plugs in the area for the first year, using native species chosen for their ability to establish themselves. The idea is that the plants that grow naturally or that we plant will be the species that flower year after year.
- After the first year, these areas should be cut and cleared twice a year to give space for wildflowers to grow and to discourage the grasses taking over.

While we were not involved in the original wildflower planting in Haslemere, there are two common issues that arose in areas where wildflower planting was first tried. The first was simply to leave the areas unmanaged, which allowed grasses to grow and crowd out any wildflowers, as the ground became too nutrient rich. The other was to seed the areas with annual plants which looked good for a year but then failed to grow again the following year.

The truth is that encouraging wildflowers requires a different form of maintenance, but it still requires maintenance. The grass must be cut and cleared each year to control it and allow the wildflowers to grow. Leaving it untouched will lead to overgrown rank grasses and will be an eyesore.

The first of the steps set out above is a fully reversible and zero to low cost change. Given the Amenities Committee's support at the last meeting the Clerk has made this change under her delegated authority, as an early start means the whole approach more likely to work.

We recognise, and the Amenities Committee reinforced this point, that it is important that the wildflower areas are seen as attractive as well as bringing environmental benefits. This

may give more weight to seeding or plug planting initially to ensure that the areas are quickly established. Initial wildflower surveys of the areas suggest that area B is more likely to require this than area A. We have not yet been able to complete a survey of area C.

Costs and practicalities

The overall impact on costs has been confirmed to be small, perhaps a little higher in the first year and a touch lower in the subsequent years.

The only clear potential cost is the move from a cut and leave to a cut and collect approach for these areas – essentially just a different way of mowing. This is more labour intensive but after the first year it would need doing much less frequently, twice a year as against the current twenty-eight times per year. The Grounds contractors have confirmed that they expect that this would have no or at very worst a minimal cost.

The other possible cost is if we decide to seed/plant plugs in the areas. This is not a requirement but is an option if wildflowers have not become established after a year and we wish to speed up or enhance the process. Whether or not this is required and where will become clear during the spring survey.

During 2022 the grounds management contract will come up for tender and any ongoing costs and changes to the ongoing Maintenance Specification can be confirmed as part of this process.

An important point raised by the Amenities Committee was litter and other debris such as broken glass or even needles collecting within the wildflower areas, particularly in areas B and C, and becoming an eyesore or hazard. The litter-picking contractor already does four litter picks a week and has confirmed that they do not foresee any additional issues or costs should the proposed scheme go ahead. It is also to be hoped that wildflowers in area B will act as a barrier to litter ending up in the stream.

Public engagement and support

There is definitely strong support for this proposal from some parts of the community, and from various civic organisations such as Haslemere Vision, Transition Haslemere, and the Haslemere Society. More broadly, we believe that most residents would support a greener approach to maintenance as long as it is still attractive, even if it is attractive in a different way. The Town Council has posted about the proposal on Facebook (14th June post) which attracted a broadly positive response, especially when the Town Clerk shared it to the Haslemere Community Board.

We have outlined above how the areas could be managed to avoid the problems of the past, but some communication would be useful to let residents know what is happening. This point was also made by the Amenities Committee more generally. We suggest that this could be done through the Town Council website and Social Media, and via a small number of plaques or notice boards at the edge of the wildflower areas. A small article has already

made The Haslemere Herald and follow-up articles could be published at intervals to inform readers of progress.

Recommendation

1. That the Council agrees that wildflower planting as set out in this proposal should go ahead, with the results to be reviewed at the November 2022 Full Council meeting.
2. That the Council decides whether the planting should include area C or be limited to areas A and B.