

**BILLACOMBE MEADOW COUNTY WILDLIFE
DESIGNATION PROPOSAL: BRIEFING REPORT**



Executive Summary

Plymouth has a network work of 26 existing County Wildlife Sites (CWS), areas of land that are rich in wildlife such as a tract of heath, a meadow, a copse or a village pond. In general, at least five Devon notable plant species are required for the creation of a CWS but other criteria such as wintering bird interest may be used. This briefing report outlines the proposed CWS designation for the Billacombe Meadows site and includes supporting ecological evidence, a site management plan, budget implications and an options appraisal. The report recommends that Billacombe Meadows is proposed as a CWS as part of the County Wildlife Site Selection Panel, which meets for decision-making on new sites in January 2023; and to continue to engage the local community through an engagement campaign in 2023.

1. Background

1.1 Site Context

Plymouth City Council (PCC) owns eight fields of approximately 15ha at Billacombe Meadows (figure 1). Field 1 is Billacombe Meadow Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), designated because the site supports the nationally rare plant Field Eryngo, which is a protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The SSSI is considered by Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) one of the best grasslands habitats in Devon (if not one of the best of its type in the south west). The site's biodiversity is very high because it has been well managed for decades in-line with the SSSI management plan.



Figure 1 Billacombe Meadows aerial image showing all fields numbered 1-8

1.2 Green Minds

Plymouth City Council (PCC) are the lead partner for the city-wide [Green Minds](#) partnership programme. This is funded by the European Regional Development Fund's Urban Innovative Actions, which aims to put nature and wildlife at the heart of decisions made around Plymouth's green spaces, supporting sustainable land management for people and wildlife. Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) are a key Green Minds partner providing specialist wildlife and land management advice, as well as supporting a community empowerment and engagement programme (Take Action for Nature), which encourages citizen science, community action and builds local conservation skills/knowledge. In addition, DWT are supporting PCC's workforce training and development for nature-based land management such as wildlife meadow management.

Recognising the outstanding habitat at Billacombe Meadows, DWT have proposed The Billacombe Seed Hub Project, designed to establish conservation management across all eight fields. Seed from Billacombe SSSI and other Devon sites harvested by Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) will be oversown to fields 2-8 where required to enhance these fields to same high-quality habitat. The aim is to provide a local, varied and resilient seed source for meadows across the Plymouth area.

Following a joint site visit between PCC staff (Environment Planning and Street Scene, Cabinet Environment and Street Scene Portfolio Holder and DWT (23 August, 2022) DWT proposed submitting Billacombe Meadows to Natural England for consideration to become a designated County Wildlife Site. A County Wildlife Site (CWS) is a conservation designation in the United Kingdom, which despite conferring no statutory protection onto a site, does affirm a site's importance and value for wildlife in its county context.

This work is extremely important, as the UK has lost over 97% of natural wildflower meadows since the end of the second world war, therefore this project and designation helps combat our global biodiversity crisis. The seed generated at the site will be used in other grasslands managed for nature in Plymouth increasing the biodiversity at these sites, as well as, improving the visual appeal through an increase in wildflowers.

2. Site Management - Proposed Changes

A management plan has been proposed by DWT which focuses on the delivery of species-rich grassland habitat on the 8 fields of Billacombe Meadows. The aim of the management plan is to introduce seed from the adjoining SSSI species-rich grassland to restore the biodiversity of the surrounding fields. Cutting and baling in subsequent years will be timed so as to allow wildflower seeds to germinate, flower and then set seed successfully before cutting in order to achieve and maintain the habitat quality intended.

Current management is shown in figure 2:

- Four hectares of grassland is managed as amenity grassland and mown every 6 weeks (yellow polygons).
- Two and a half hectares of grassland is managed as wildflower meadow through cutting and baling once a year in September/ October.

The proposal is to double the amount of grass managed as wildflower meadow reducing the total grass regularly mown to 1.5ha from 4ha. This is shown in figure 3.



Figure 2. Current grass management at Billacombe Green. Yellow shows regularly gut grass, purple shows wildflower management.

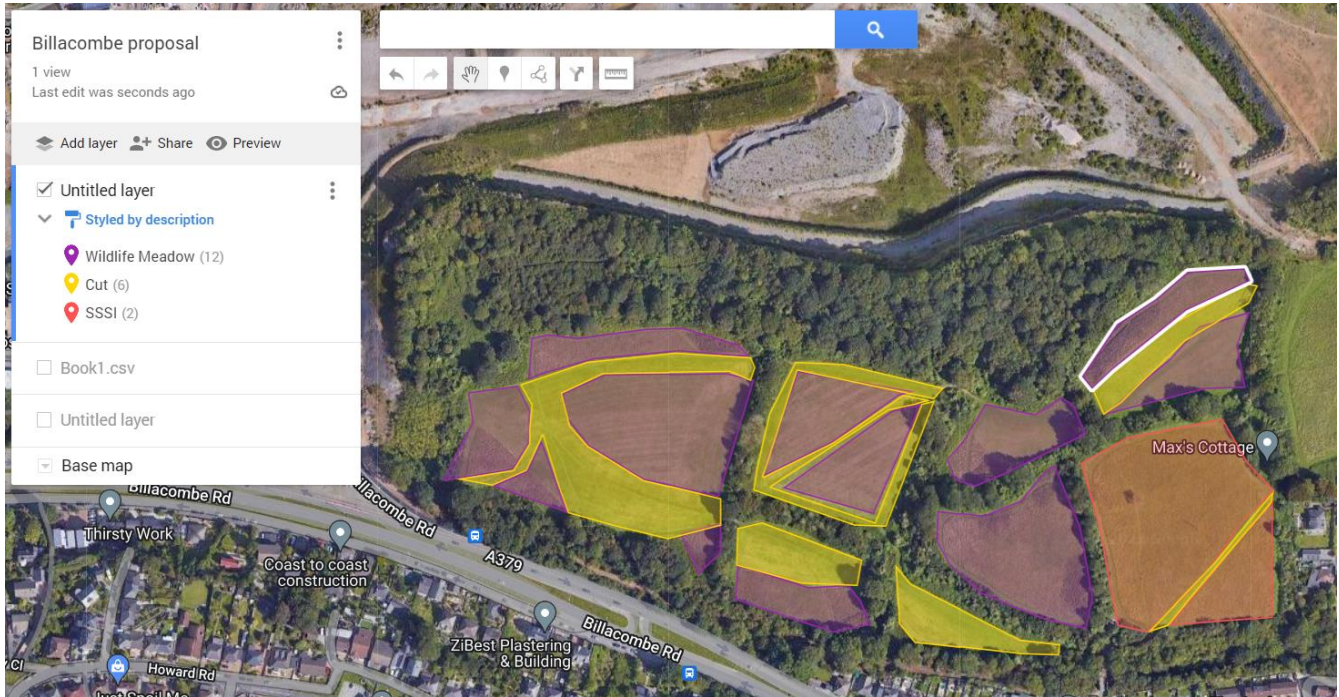


Figure 3: Proposed grassland management at Billacombe Meadows

In summary, the aim of this operation will be to:

- a) Increase the diversity of plant species across all the fields, eventually providing a local and varied seed source for new/existing meadows across the City of Plymouth
- b) Generate new income streams for management of the Council’s green estate
- c) Retaining suitable public access routes across the fields and providing a higher quality environment for local residents and visitors to use.
- d) Improve wider site biodiversity, for example, the many hedges provide a wonderful resource for wildlife to find food, shelter and to link with other green spaces and the city’s local nature recovery network.

The Billacombe Meadows Management Statement can be found at [Billacombe Green wildflower meadow | PLYMOUTH.GOV.UK](https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/billacombe-green-wildflower-meadow) and the updated Billacombe Management Plan is attached as Appendix 1.

Baseline and ongoing monitoring will be key to determine the success of development into species-rich grassland over a period of years. An initial baseline assessment was complete by DWT during July 2022.

3. Risks and Opportunities

Risk/ Opportunity	Level	Mitigation/ Action
Public opinion - Public perception of council cost cutting	Low	An engagement campaign will be used to manage public perception. As outlined above the engagement will be targeted at local residents to educate and raise awareness in the environmental value of the Billacombe Meadows. The campaign will include information signs at the entrance to the fields and environmental events run by DWT and Green Minds, such as the successful bat walk in Sept ‘22.
Public opinion - Friction with local dog walkers	Low	Wide paths will be mown through and around the fields to allow ample access for recreation (Figure 3). The site entrance and field 8, will be fully cut to allow dog owners to easily pick up dog mess and to have a mown space for ball throwing.

Improve site habitat quality – benefits for nature and people	Med	As outlined above in plan for site

4. Budget Implications

Current Management Action _ Revenue	Cost	Frequency	Total annual cost	Notes
4ha Grass Cutting – 6 hours, one tractor, tractor implement and driver (grade D)	£220	6 times a year (every 6 weeks in growing season)	£1320	
Cutting, baling and removal of meadow grass	£25 per bale	28 bales, once annually	£700	
Annual total			£2,020	
Proposed Management Action _ Revenue	Cost/ Value	Frequency	Total annual cost	Notes
1.5ha Grass Cutting –2 hours, one tractor, tractor implement and driver (grade D)	£100	6 times a year (every 6 weeks in growing season)	£600	
Cost of harvesting seed from site: 6 hours 2 operatives (1 C grade 1 D grade) Tractor and implement	£330	Once a year	£330	Cost off-set by income generated
Income – Biodiversity Units (Habitat Banking) or equivalent	£1000/ha/yr	Annual	£1000	
Income – Seed harvesting	£48 per kg	Once a year	£960	
Annual Total			£40	
Additional Costs _ Capital	Cost	Frequency	Total annual cost	Notes
Seed purchase for development	£48 per Kg	Once – Year 1	£2400	Amount of seed varies dependent on projects throughout the year
Site interpretation signs	£3500	Once – Year 1	£3500	

4.1 Capital Budget

The capital budget for the implementation for the proposed management plan and CWS designation application will be funded by Green Minds (externally funded by ERDF/Urban Innovative Actions)

4.2 Revenue Budget

Revenue budget implications are forecast to reduce core costs and generate additional income to meet existing income targets in SSW. Reducing the regular grass-cutting schedule for this site will off-set the costs required for an annual cutting and baling required by the proposed management plan. The seed generated on the site

and generation of Biodiversity Units through the expected increase in habitat will reduce PCC's ongoing costs for wildflower seed purchasing

5. Links to Strategic/Corporate Objectives



Implementing this new management plan and submitting the location to be considered as a CWS create a highly valued environmental, and recreational asset and resource for the people of the surrounding neighbourhoods, Plymouth and further afield. Designation of the sites will improve public access to site of high wildlife value. The further expansion of the CWS estate will support the growth of the City by increasing the quality of the Green Infrastructure network that crosses Plymouth and delivers the ecosystem services required by a growing City. As well as, the increased recreational opportunities provided by designating the sites will help enhance the health and wellbeing of local communities and their understanding of the local environment.

6. Options Appraisal

A. Implement the proposed management plan changes and submit application to Natural England for CWS designation across the entire Billacombe Meadows site. This will result in increased biodiversity, new revenue streams for the Council and improvements to community access providing enhanced opportunities to connect to nature and associated health and wellbeing benefits.

B. Do not implement the proposed management plan changes, continue with existing management. Wider Billacombe Meadows site will continue to degrade, costing the Council money and losing the biodiversity and wider environmental value of fields 2-8. And therefore, reducing Plymouth's biodiversity and public access to sites of high wildlife value during a time of climate and ecological emergencies.

7. Recommended decision

A. Implement the proposed management plan changes and submit application to Natural England for CWS designation across the entire Billacombe Meadows site and continue to engage the local community through an engagement campaign in 2023.