

APPENDIX C – GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT

Harlow's main grassland areas are: -

Parndon Common

Parndon Lock Meadows

Hawkenbury Meadow

Stort Valley Meadows

Marshgate Springs

Parndon Moat Marsh

Wildflower meadows provide habitat for invertebrates in a range of ways. They offer a significant seasonal resource of pollen and nectar for a large number of species, including many of which are in global decline, can be abundant. They also offer habitat for more specialist flower-feeding insects that require particular flowering plants, either to complete their larval stages or as the main food plant for adults. Additionally, ground beetles, spiders and other invertebrates living on plant stems, leaves and roots add to the diversity. The habitat supports species which also provide ecosystem services to humans.

Wildflower meadows also provide a rich habitat for a range of birds throughout the year, from swifts and swallows feeding on the invertebrate populations, supporting ground nesting birds such as meadow pipits and skylarks and with kestrels and barn owls feeding off the small mammal populations that meadows support.

Wildflower meadows represent an important element of our rural history, a small reminder of a traditional, rural landscape and have a critical role to play in the conservation of our natural heritage. Many meadows have typically been managed, often by several generations of the same family, for hundreds of years. They form part of the quintessentially British landscape and are among our most culturally important and best loved habitats, full of vibrant wildflowers and abuzz with insects, they burst into life in late spring and illuminate our summer days. They are great for personal enjoyment, rest, relaxation and mental well-being.

Many of our grassland sites in Harlow have undergone substantial changes in management since becoming a new town over 70 years ago. Some sites still have retained some their characteristics of the original habitat and have been designated as Local Nature Reserves and/or Local Wildlife Sites and historically managed accordingly. Numerous grassland sites across the town have seen substantial changes in management. For example, Hawkenbury Meadow Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and Local Wildlife Site (LoWS) is a Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Lowland Meadow and is notably one of the most species rich pieces of grassland in the district. It is of great value for its invertebrate populations with particular interest for

its good population of the locally scarce Brown Argus butterfly. Previously cut for hay, since 2011 the area has been flailed annually. This has led to a decline in the quality of the grassland through nutrient enrichment, as a uniform assemblage of rank competitive grasses and tall ruderal vegetation replaces a diversity of finer grasses and flowering herbs with their associated invertebrates.

Currently the Council does not manage grassland areas in a traditional manner, which would have the most significant positive impact on bio-diversity, largely because of the cost implications of this. There is a need for a broader debate about what is desirable, both aesthetically and in terms of improving bio-diversity before future decisions are taken on this issue. In the short term the Council will continue to take a low-intervention approach and increase the level of wildflower planting where it can.