

# Newts & Shoots Grassland Enhancements – Hillfield Park and Lavender Hall Park

We have started the Newts & Shoots project, a 21 month scheme which includes woodland, wetland and grassland management works across Solihull. Newts and Shoots is part of the Wildlife Ways Small Habitats Grants Programme – part-funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This programme supports a wide range of habitat and nature improvements across the borough and beyond. Solihull Newts & Shoots project will ensure better conservation for over 3.8 hectares of woodland, grassland and wetland habitat – an area equivalent to six football pitches.

In July 2021 a programme of grassland enhancement works got underway at both Lavender Hall Park LNR and Hillfield Park LNR with the aim of helping to address the national reduction in species-rich grassland. Although once widespread in lowland Britain, the traditional hay meadow has been the grassland community most affected by modern farming practices. It is estimated that by 1984 semi-natural grassland had declined in the UK by 97% over the previous 50 years to less than 200,000ha, mainly through ploughing, re-seeding and fertilising of old grasslands.\* Losses have continued during the 1980s and 1990s, at a national rate of between 2–10% per annum.



*Pic: Grassland at Hillfield Park (left) and Lavender Hall Park (right) before enhancement.*

Both sites have large areas of grassland which have historically been managed as close mown amenity grass. In 2018 some selected areas were taken off this regular mowing regime and left to grow all season followed by a flail cut in early Autumn. These areas of species grassland will be enhanced through the project to create species rich wildflower meadows. In addition some areas which are currently managed as amenity grassland will also be included within the scheme.



*Pic: Grassland at Hillfield Park (left) and Lavender Hall Park (right) during enhancement.*

At both grassland sites native wildflower seed will be used to create new areas of species rich grassland on existing species-poor semi-improved and amenity grassland areas. Native grass and wildflower seeds will be sown directly into a prepared seed bed (which may need spraying and/or scarifying as initial preparation). The sward will then be cut regularly and the cuttings removed in the first year to reduce the growth of weeds. Some selective herbicide spot spraying to control non-desirable species may be required in the first two years of establishment. As the wildflowers become more established, less cutting and removing is required until it is only necessary once a year.

Upon completion, the newly created, restored or enhanced habitats will be incorporated into the long-term SMBC maintenance programme. For the grasslands this will be delivered through an annual hay meadow cut and collect to be carried out in late summer. Over time the annual harvesting of the hay will further deplete the nutrients in the soil which will favour a greater diversity of wildflowers.

The SMBC Ecology Team will use standardised methodologies to monitor the ecological improvements that result from the project work. Warwickshire Wildlife Trust has developed Grassland Condition Monitoring Assessments, which are designed to assess the ecological condition of a site by examining its species and

structural diversity. The methodologies have been specifically adapted for Warwickshire from Natural England's SSSI condition monitoring assessments. The condition monitoring assessments will be made pre and post interventions to establish measurable improvements in habitat condition.

\*Source: ( Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull Local Biodiversity Action Plan – Neutral Grassland (PDF))

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