



Registered Charity No. 1197155

## WFO 2022 – BIODIVERSITY RESTORATION AND WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

### About the Biodiversity Crisis

- The current crisis is accelerating. We have now **lost 47%** of our native insect population, with consequent major implications for birds and small mammals.
- The UK's nature depletion is one of the worst in the world. It ranks in the **bottom 10%** of the world's countries, and is bottom of the G7 countries. This shameful position is badly understood by many organisations, which underestimate the scale and severity of the loss in the UK.
- For example, the RSPB says Britain has lost 40 million birds in the last 50 years and 56% of wildlife species in the UK are in decline.
- The main factors continuing to drive this are habitat loss and use of pesticides/herbicides. It is now insufficient to simply prevent further loss of biodiversity, we must actively try to restore it. Biodiversity loss is closely allied to the Climate Crisis.
- Habitat fragmentation is a major culprit. This leads to a shrinking ecosystem which reaches a point at which it can no longer survive leading to collapse.
- A recent study by the Wildlife Trust suggests that 90% of lowland grassland has been lost in the 20th century, with fewer areas than ever supporting insects, wildlife and grassland species. These areas form an essential part of the UK's ecological infrastructure.

### Why is the loss important to us?

- Good Biodiversity is essentially linked with healthy ecosystems.
- It is essential for human existence, underpinning our food sources, our water and even the air we breathe.
- Flourishing ecosystems, and access to them, have now been proven to contribute to good mental health. This was particularly evident during the Covid lockdowns.
- Healthy biodiversity is a balance of several inter-dependent species, which interact to create a functioning ecosystem. Removal of any one of these eventually results in damage to the system and ultimate collapse.

### What solutions are available?

- Restoration of habitat is one of the most important, and the most successful.
- Creation of new habitat is more challenging, but is also highly effective. (This is not considered for our purposes here.)

### What has been done elsewhere?

- Many other UK councils have adopted relaxed mowing on significant areas of their verges and green spaces. This started in around 2014 with more rural areas, when Dorset famously saved over £100k in the first year just by reduced mowing. Its insect population quickly recovered as a result.
- Other councils followed, with neighbours such as Hull, Rotherham and Sheffield having major success in recovering biodiversity and saving costs and resources in much lower maintenance.

- Cambridge was one of the first areas to declare a “pesticide-free” county. This has had a huge positive effect on wildlife recovery.
- Skipton launched a wildflower verge project on 7 January 2022, following massive positive response to proposals for restoring verges. The town council called this, “the right thing to do.”

### What can be done in Otley?

- Otley is the UK’s **first Wildlife Friendly town**. WFO have had considerable success restoring habitat with businesses, churches, the hospital, schools and private residences. However, the town needs to build on this success by linking up wildlife corridors and restoring more areas of habitat.



*WGH grounds last year following relaxed mowing. A huge amount of positive feedback was received, with no complaints. Species such as wild orchids became apparent.*

- Most councils maintain mown grassy areas. Although these are essentially rendered sterile by the mowing, if allowed to grow, the species in the soil become apparent, even after years of close mowing. Many areas in Otley are actually species-rich if allowed to flourish. This is a massive boost for the insect and bird population which is evident, literally, within weeks. An excellent example of this is the hospital, which produced a huge range of ancient meadow plants in its grounds last year (including orchids, knapweed and many others) after only a couple of weeks.
- The lower maintenance associated with less intensive grass management is also cost saving according to case studies throughout the UK. This element has had surprisingly impressive results with some councils.
- The use of herbicides kills not only the grass but any native species within it. Its use could be discouraged in favour of voluntary clearing. The use of herbicides near water (such as that used alongside Tate Oil at the back of Sainsbury) is potentially extremely damaging to the waterway. There are effective ways of managing planting without the use of chemicals which should be considered here.
- The Economic benefits of wildflower verges and areas are worth considering here. Other Councils have reported an increase in tourist satisfaction where wildflowers are apparent. An increase in wild flora leads to an increase in birds and other fauna, which is attractive to many visitors. This would be in addition to costs saved by reducing mowing and chemical use.
- Pictorial Wildflower Planting, using non-native species can be spectacular, but is not as effective as relaxed mowing, and is more labour-intensive. Its advantage is that it helps to bring sceptical

members of the public on board more easily. Otley has a raft of volunteers who would be willing to assist with this if necessary.

## Public Support

- Public expectations have been effectively managed and residents kept informed of the strategy. Local support in these areas is now well-established, and the benefits are clearly demonstrable to residents.
- Support for relaxed mowing in Otley is considerable. 800 local residents recently signed a petition asking the council to consider this. WFO and O2030 are in direct and regular communication with residents of Otley, and can play a huge part in educating people and supporting habitat restoration. Case studies from other UK councils back this up.
- There is mounting evidence that the public are taking the Climate Crisis and Biodiversity Crisis more seriously than government and other large institutions. This is particularly true in Otley which has several thriving charitable organisations, including the Otley Nature Network, Otley 2030 and WFO, all of whom support habitat restoration.
- A YouGov poll in October 2021 found 81% of the public was in favour of rewilding. This is an overwhelming mandate to tackle the biodiversity crisis.



**Finally,** the biodiversity crisis must now be viewed in a very serious light. We have a duty to halt the downward spiral of our ecosystems and to meet our environmental obligations. That this can actually be done easily, and by saving money at the same time, is an opportunity we cannot afford to ignore.



# Otley Verges & Green Spaces suggested for relaxed mowing

## 1. Manor Garth Park

South side along the riverbank.  
Also a North side swathe within the mown boundaries.



*Potential appearances for riverside area; it is old land and likely to be species-rich.  
A rare species has already been identified here by WFO's botanist.*

*Picture left, Skipton riverbank.*

Also a north side swathe, within mown boundaries. A strip of relaxed mowing would complement the south side swathe, and provide an excellent corridor for insects. This area has traditionally been closely and regularly mown, but could be beautifully developed to provide an attractive walk, whilst still allowing dog-walking and picnicking.



*Manor Garth Park currently*



*What it could be*



## 2. Grove Hill Park

The site originally suggested is now, unfortunately, damaged by herbicide following the planting of rows of whips.

However, there is excellent potential for 3 or 4 lengthy swathes in other areas of the park.

The School uses this area and could become involved in the project.



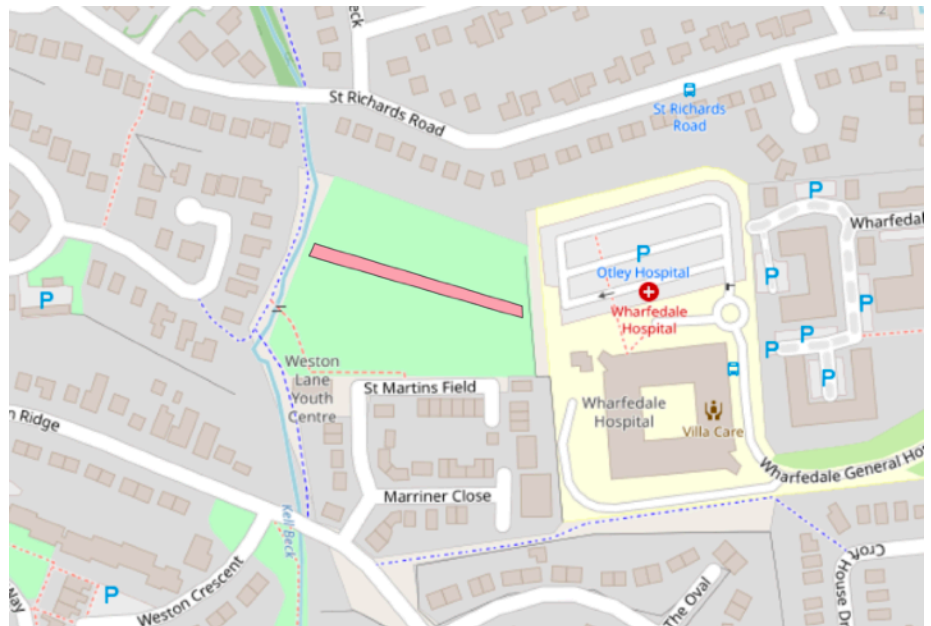
Such planting will enhance the appearance of the park whilst helping to support the wildlife corridor scheme. Using 2 mows per annum will allow the native species to rapidly develop.



### 3. St Martin's Field

Here there is a south-facing slope which is difficult to mow. The small area that has previously been left unmown, due to its steep nature, demonstrated a wealth of over 20 species of wildflower last year and looked beautiful. Unfortunately, it was tiny and isolated, so unable to support any meaningful insect population.

By simply allowing this area to grow, using 2 mows per annum, this would significantly add to the wildlife corridor as well as enhance the park without disturbing residents' ability to walk dogs etc.



*Potential wildflower swathe on south facing slope.*



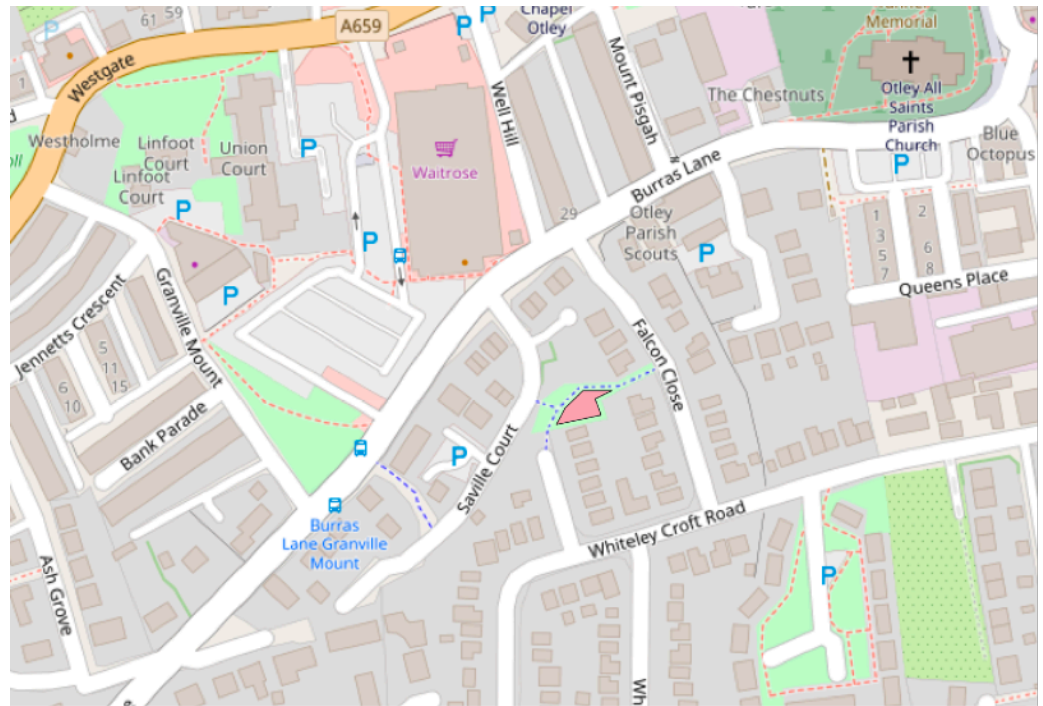
*St Martin's Field*



#### 4. Saville Court

This small area is sandwiched between houses, although not closely overlooked by them. It is an area for which WFO has received enquiries to improve.

Currently it is regularly mown.



A good option here might be to relax mowing in the centre, with a border of mown grass around the edges and a mown footpath through the centre. This would indicate the deliberate nature of the strategy (rather than 'neglect'). As it is near to residences, it would provide a valuable pilot study for acceptance by the residents.

We could consider pictorial wildflower planting here to enhance the appearance, with voluntary assistance.



## 5. Burras Lane West

This site was originally strongly suggested for relaxed mowing with a pathway through the centre, as it is particularly species-rich. The land beneath is predominantly rubble which is also especially good for wildflowers although of limited value for tree planting.

As the site has now been largely planted with whips and damaged by herbicide, we would like to preserve what is left, which is the north-facing slope going down to the pathway on Burras Lane.

P&C have previously – last year - left a small section of this unmown where bulbs had been planted. This yielded a large number of native wildflowers.

It is suggested that this be extended to cover the entire length of the area, making a narrow but effective swathe of wildflowers and supporting the wildlife corridor scheme.



*Burras Lane prior to whip planting; the mowing was regular and very close, destroying the grass and creating mud both on the site and on the footpath.*



*The Burras Lane slope in 2019*

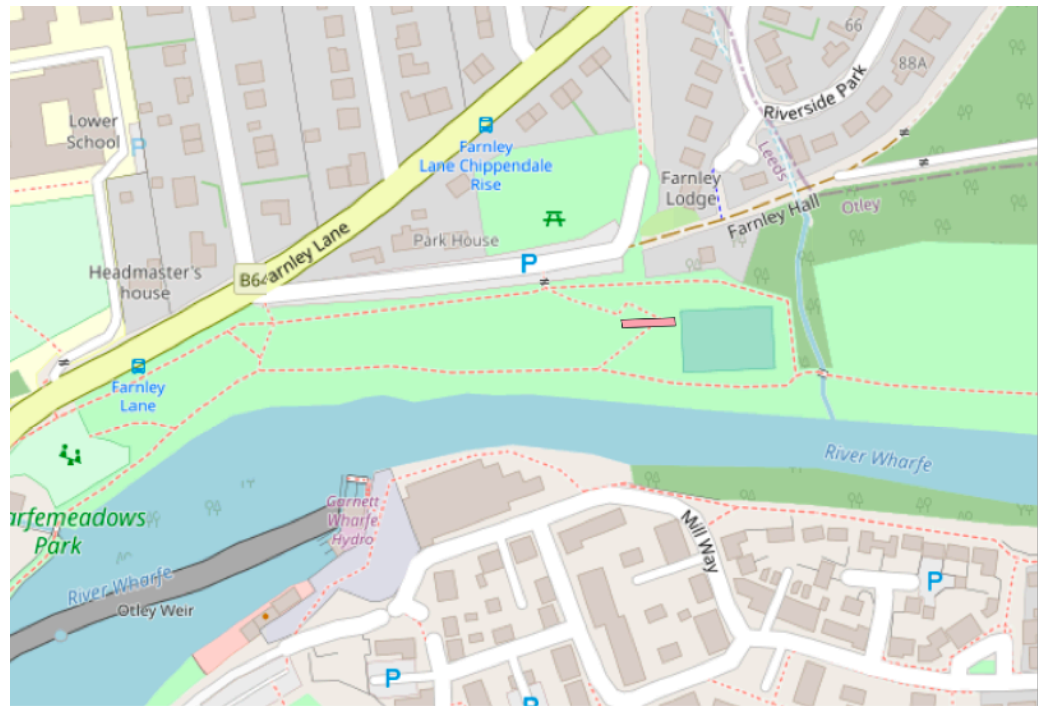


*The same slope in May 2021*

## 6. Wharfemeadows Park

There are a number of areas remaining in the park which would be suitable for relaxed mowing whilst still retaining the character and function of the park.

The south facing slope west of the skateboard park invites a swathe of wildflowers which would greatly enhance the park.



*WM Park has several slopes which would be amenable to relaxed mowing bringing out the native species. This would greatly enhance the Wildlife Corridor Scheme.*







*The potential for enhancing WM Park is enormous, attracting visitors and restoring biodiversity. This park could be an example for the north of England. Residents are already concerned about the reduction in insect-friendly planting in the park, and we could use this opportunity, and our considerable local resources and support, to think big and change for the better. Case studies for other northern councils who have attempted similar seem to be entirely successful and hugely popular.*





## 7. Pool Road

This site was firmly rejected by P&C despite several attempts to discuss it.

It is included here as we did not understand the argument for not restoring nature along this important route.

An identical situation exists along Farnley Road, below, which has relaxed mowing which is perfectly acceptable to the public and in no way affects their ability to use the pathway.

Furthermore, the pathway along Pool Road actually has relaxed mowing outwith the boundaries of the town with no adverse effects.

A key point here is that Pool Road is a major entry into the town, 'advertising' the town to visitors. The route can look frankly shabby at some times of the year, below, leaving a poor impression.

Allowed to flourish, it could look inviting, if not spectacular.

(Some Council verges have been planted with daffodils, and it is worth noting that the average buttercup is no higher than the average daffodil.)



*Farnley Lane footpath in Winter*



*Pool Rd footpath last summer. Mud from close mowing renders the footpath difficult to use.*



*The potential exists for a beautiful wild verge, which clearly advertises the Wildlife Friendly nature of our town and invites visitors to explore further. This in no way affects the public's ability to walk along the path.*





Further, varied sites to effect nature restoration and linked wildlife corridors are suggested below. Some are residential. Residents can be contacted to assess their response to limited relaxed mowing or pictorial wildflower planting, and managed accordingly. We suggest targeting a couple of pilot sites for the project.

| <i>North</i>           | <i>South East</i>      | <i>SW/ Central</i> |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Weston Drive           | Garnetts Field (OTC)   | Myerscroft         |
| Weston Drive Park      | Cross Green            | Leacroft           |
| Ashfield Verge         | Moor Dr                | Whitley Croft      |
| Weston Ridge           | Stephenscroft Pk       | Union Ct           |
| Bennetts Court         | Wellcroft Pk           | Ash Grove          |
| Crossways              | Wellcroft              | Piper La           |
| Newall Park (Private)  | King Close             | Bradford Rd        |
| Farnley Lane South end | Cambridge/Lisker Dr    | Bypass West        |
| West Weston Lane       | Leeds Rd               |                    |
|                        | Fairfax St             |                    |
|                        | Old Ilkley Rd, E and W |                    |

<https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/biodiversity/Biodiversity---evidence-for-action.pdf>

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/about-us/48398rspb-biodiversity-intactness-index-summary-report-v4.pdf>

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=162QktzkyI6Y53cjxHWRsXQFh5IzH3ZNJ&ll=53.50289139204335%2C-2.3655129738313185&z=6>