

Hillbrow Grassland Management Plan



Introduction

Hillbrow Grassland is situated to the west of Letchworth Garden City. It is bounded by a train line to the north and allotments, garages and a recreation ground to the east, with access by a footpath leading from Hillbrow. While there is grassland in adjacent fields to the south and west, it lies in an area of predominantly arable farmland and urban development.

The site lies within National Character Areas 87 – East Anglian Chalk, and close to the boundary of the Chilterns, with an expansive view to the west. The underlying geology is Cretaceous chalk, covered in ice and river deposits.

The main area is grassland with scrub that has been allowed to establish. There is a deliberate area of scrubland to the south, the remaining scrub has established due to infrequent maintenance. Toward the north the grassland has been planted, on two occasions, with orchard trees, the last planting was in 2024 as part of the Arbor Day Celebration with a local primary school.

The site is bounded by un-laid predominantly hawthorn hedge to the east, a metal fence along the trainline to north with an establishing hawthorn hedge, and bramble and hedge species to the south. There is a narrow strip of woodland running along a ditch to the west.

The Greenway multiuser permissive footpath runs diagonally through the southern part of the site. There is also an unofficial footpath along the eastern and northern boundaries which is kept mown short along with the Greenway maintenance. A desire line runs along the western boundary in front of the trees. Clearly the site is well used by walkers, dog walkers and runners. Gaps at the northern boundary, and the Greenway to the south, allows access to the adjacent field. Within the field lies Icknield Tumulus, a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) ref: 1017406. This consists of two bowl barrows dating back to the Bronze Age (2000-700 BCE).

The area has been in Higher Level Countryside Stewardship from 2018-2023 with a prescription to manage the grassland for target features. This has not been renewed as part of our 5 in 10-year agreement.

Known special features

A full grassland species list is not available, although the list below indicates species recorded during spring-summer 2025.

- Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*)
- Common Birds Foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*)
- Knapweed – need to check if common or greater
- Field scabious (*Knautia arvensis*)
- Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*)
- Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*)
- Ox-eye Daisy (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*)
- Cowslips (*Primula veris*)
- Ladies Bedstraw (*Galium verum*)
- Common Centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*)

The indicates calcareous/neutral grassland in reasonable condition

Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) grows over much of the site. This supports a small population of small blue butterfly (*Cupido minimus*), a priority species in Hertfordshire.

Approach to management

There is potential to enhance the quality of the main grassland area to improve botanical diversity. Although the soil feels quite sticky, the presence of chalk indicates potential for calcareous grassland restoration. The main grassland areas are bounded by orchard, scrub hedges and trees which can provide a range of habitats to support pollinators, invertebrates and possibly reptiles.

Infrequent cuts means that scrub is starting to encroach. There is an establishing area of scrub towards the southwest which we will leave intact. We will also leave one small area of scrub to the north of the orchard planting. During 2025, we maintained 4 discrete patches of dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*), these should be removed over winter (2025-26) to remove the risk of further encroachments into the grassland areas. This is on the advice of the Hertfordshire Butterfly Recorder. A number of solo non-orchard shrubs are establishing. We will choose a small number of these to preserve. There is potential to plant additional hedge species to the north and to improve the hedge to the south. The eastern hedge is suitable for laying.

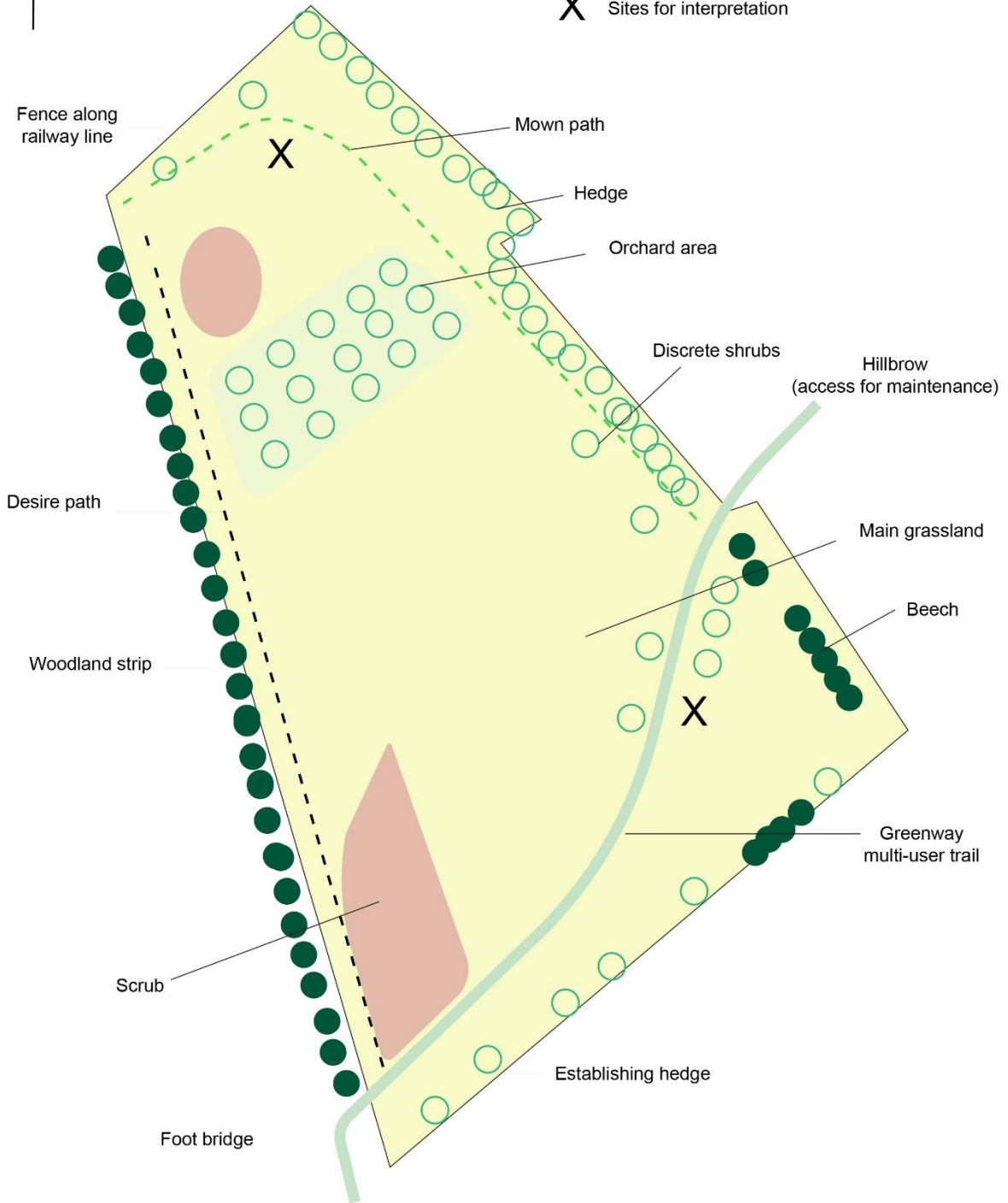
Location and access

The easiest way to access the site is to walk a short distance along the Greenway from Hillbrow in Letchworth, the track leads between houses 55 and 57. Alternatively you can approach along the greenway from the A505, Hitchen Road. Grid Reference: TL206319. What3Words: <https://w3w.co/else.fish.table>

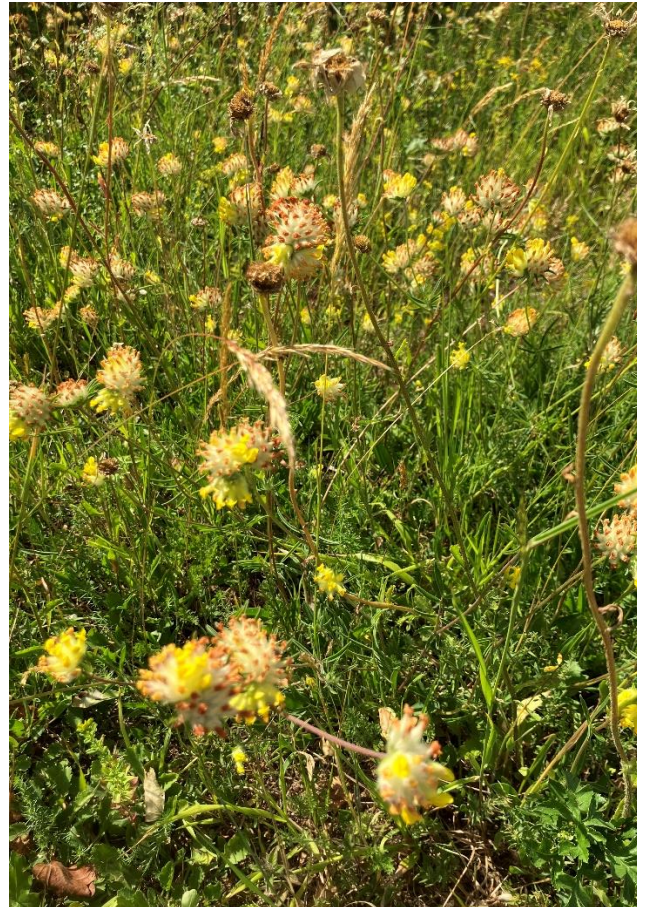


Hillbrow Grassland *(Not to scale)*

X Sites for interpretation







5 year works plan - 2025-2030

| Area and aim | Details | Main actions |
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| <p><u>Main Grassland</u> This is to be managed as calcareous grassland to support the growth of Kidney vetch and populations of Small blue butterfly. This will provide habitat for additional botanical and invertebrate species such as the Common blue butterfly and the Six-spot burnet moth.</p> | <p>Main grassland area to be cut late August:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Area should be cut ideally prior to a period of dry weather, leaving a short sward height. Arisings should be collected after 5-10 days and either stored along the northern boundary or removed from the site ○ On a rotational basis, prior to each cut an area/areas of long grass free from scrub should be selected and left to provide butterfly roosting sites (5-10% of grassland area). ○ Scrub areas identified on map and discrete shrubs to be maintained and not allowed to expand. ○ Following monitoring of botanical species, small scrapes or areas of disturbance may be required to assist germination. <p>Years 1-3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ideally scrub developing throughout the grassland areas should be removed by hand. ○ Where scrub persists a second cut and lift can be made at the end of October. | <p>Cut and lift late August</p> <p>Years 1-3, cut and lift late October if needed.</p> <p>Annual monitoring and adjustment of plan is essential to ensure management is correct for target species.</p> |
| <p><u>Orchard</u> Managed to retain orchard landscape and allow access to trees.</p> | <p>Sward around trees to be kept short by cutting throughout the year, at the same time as mowing paths.</p> <p>Year 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Trees to be catalogued ○ Tree guard from original planting to be removed. <p>Trees to be inspected late summer and any required pruning undertaken during autumn or winter. This will initially be minimal and focused on healthy tree establishment and an optimal level of fruit production.</p> <p>Fallen fruit to be removed from site during the late autumn.</p> | <p>Grass to be kept short throughout the year.</p> <p>Fallen fruit to be removed by end of November.</p> <p>Late summer inspection followed by maintenance.</p> |
| <p><u>Paths</u> To maintain easy access along the greenway and path running</p> | <p>Follow established cycle of greenway maintenance for main paths.</p> | <p>Frequent cuts throughout the growing season.</p> |

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| along the eastern and norther boundary. This may include an area around a bench. | No maintenance to desire line path to the west, other than to cut back understory encroaching from woodland every 2-3 years to stop path shifting into grassland. | Over winter, monitor and cut back understory to maintain desire line. |
| <u>Main hedge to east</u> This has potential for laying and could be a site for running a hedge laying course followed by volunteer involvement. | Maintain a sequence of cutting every 3 years, starting in autumn 2025. Obtain quotes for hedge laying and consider potential for hedge laying course and volunteering. | Autumn hedge maintenance cycle. |
| <u>Establishing hedge</u> | Support growth of developing plants and consider gapping, maintaining a diversity of at least 5 native species. Once established manage as hedge. | Autum planting and maintenance. |
| <u>Scrub</u> The aim is to diversify the range of on-site habitats and provide additional areas for birds and invertebrates to shelter and feed. | Following annual inspection, carry out work over autumn to maintain a maximum height of 5 m, with a variety of structure and form. Prevent from becoming uniform and overly dense | Autum inspection with works carried out by the end of December. |
| <u>Discrete patches of scrub and shrubs</u> | Maintain current footprint, as shown on map. Remove 4 patched of dogwood over winter 2025-26. Prevent the establishment of larger trees. | Maintained when grassland cut and over autumn if needed. |
| <u>Woodland boundary</u> | Regular surveys to maintain health and safety, and promote woodland health. Also see notes on removing understory to maintaining current location of desire line path. | Annual monitoring. |
| <u>Interpretation</u> | Year 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Install 1 x interpretation lectern and 1 x notice board in time for Nature Reserve recognition Inspect annually, and clean or maintain as needed. Ensure information remains relevant and website links work. The notice board is intended to be updated to that visitors understand and feel involved with the site. | Annual inspection. Seasonal check that notice board is up to date. |

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| <p><u>Monitoring</u></p> | <p>Year 1-baseline surveys</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ May-June, NVC survey to establish potential as calcareous grassland. ○ Over summer Monitoring of butterfly and moth populations. <p>Years 2-5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Spring and summer visits to monitor species against baseline levels. ○ Kidney vetch, Greater knapweed and Birds-foot trefoil should be maintained throughout the sward. ○ Consider extending survey work as site develops and information is uncovered. | <p>Spring – summer monitoring of identifies species and overall level of biodiversity.</p> |
| <p><u>Litter and ASB</u></p> | <p>There is a bin at the entrance for the site for dog waste. Interpretation panel and notice board will carry sign to promote responsible site use. Check the site regularly for dog mess, litter and other signs of ASB, clear any fly tipping quickly.</p> | <p>Regular monitoring and action as needed.</p> |