

## Response to points raised in the Hillbrow Grassland consultation, April-May 2025

In April we conducted a public consultation on the new management plan for Hillbrow Grassland and our proposal to recognise it as a nature reserve.

We were really pleased to receive 30 responses; these have helped us shape the development of this site and the nature-based story we would like to share. The guidance of an up-to-date management plan provides a clear aim and focus and should ensure important activities are not missed.

You will notice a change in the name from Hillbrow Orchard to Hillbrow Grassland. Having spoken to ecology experts, it was felt that this would reflect the primary importance of this site as a species-rich grassland, rather than focusing on the orchard trees which were more recently planted there.

Some responses mentioned anti-social behaviour, issues with increased use, and accessibility of the Greenway path. These have all been passed to our Estates Team for consideration. Anti-social behaviour can be a constant problem, although we are lucky that it is minimal at this site. We do know that spaces that are well managed and cared for tend to suffer less.

A number of responses mentioned the need to protect nature across Letchworth, and to increase habitats for insects and birds. This is in line with our thinking, and the biodiversity aims set out in our [Sustainability Strategy](#). In line with the Hertfordshire Nature Restoration Strategy ([soon to be published](#)), the primary importance of this site is as grassland, although the patches of scrub with fruiting trees, and surrounding hedge and trees make a complex range of habitats which provide shelter and a tasty food source for birds, invertebrates and even reptiles.

We have not carried out detailed surveys, but it is hoped that with consistent management the grassland and neighbouring areas will contribute to a significant increase in biodiversity. We are lucky that our starting point here is good. Over the summer we recorded over 10 frequent botanical species throughout the grassland including a beautiful display of Cowslips in spring and the striking Pyramidal Orchids which several people commented on.

In July the Hertfordshire Butterfly Group visited the site and surrounding areas and reported that the locally important Small Blue Butterfly was thriving; certainly, the Kidney Vetch which its caterpillars rely on was abundant through much of the site. In two hours, they counted 9 species of butterfly and 7 species of moth.

Some people have asked questions about how we manage grassland for nature. Hopefully the following explanation will help.

Land in the Letchworth area has been managed by humans for many hundreds of years, evidence of human settlement is all around us including the adjacent Bronze Age Icknield Tumulus (burial barrows). Without management, areas like this tend to become covered in scrub and eventually become woodland. If we go back to the time when the Garden City was established (122 years ago) the agricultural system was much more in-tune with nature, which would have been far richer and more diverse. Areas like Hillbrow Grassland would have been used for hay production and grazing. Grasses and nutritious flowering plants would have been allowed to grow in the spring and then cut during the summer for hay, an important winter feed. Animals may then have grazed the cut meadows until the grass stopped growing in autumn. This is the management cycle we are attempting to reproduce, although last year the summer and autumn cuts were missed and we instead decided to do a spring cut to knock back some of the developing scrub.

When we cut, we try to remove the plant material from the site, replicating the process of removing hay for feed. This gradually, over time, reduces nutrients in the soil and provides a better environment for

native wildflowers with less competition from other species. It is these wild, native species that many insects and other invertebrates recognise and depend upon for their survival.

The decision to keep the grass a little shorter under the fruit trees is to promote healthy tree growth and provide a more traditional orchard feel, plus the shorter grass provides conditions for species that don't thrive in the longer grass. When cutting, we still hope to remain sensitive to the flowers that are present and wait until species such as the orchids have flowered.

There was a question about having bee hives on the site. There are local keepers with honeybees nearby and while we support this as part of a rich agricultural landscape, honeybees compete with wild bees. We aim to maintain a balance by providing habitat for wild bees on our nature rich sites. For more information, the [Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew](#), have written a helpful article.

We had another question about planting fruit trees. While the existing trees will remain, as explained our primary focus is now to enhance the grassland. We will therefore not be supporting the planting of any more fruit trees at this site. Keep an eye on our [monthly newsletter](#) and [Living Well with Nature Platform](#) on [Discover Letchworth](#) for information on other orchards and local tree planting initiatives.

When we published the consultation, we were considering recognising Hillbrow Grassland as a Nature Reserve and are pleased to see there is strong support for this. For now, we have decided to wait while we consider some of the neighbouring land that is no longer used for crop production, this could lead to a much larger area set aside for nature and enjoyment. We also asked about interest in a 'Friends of' Group and while we do not currently have the resource to take this forwards ourselves, we would be willing to work with any voluntary group that did establish.