Maidstone's Biodiversity Strategy

A Local Biodiversity Action Plan

Phase 1: 2009 – 2014

HAP 3: Lowland Meadows

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

Table of Contents

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

Description

1.1 Lowland Meadows occur on neutral soils in river corridors and floodplains. Lowland meadows in this action plan refers to plant communities spanning three National Vegetation Classification (NVC) plant communities including;

- MG4: *Alopecurus pratensis - Sanguisorba officinalis* (meadow foxtail - great burnet) Floodplain meadow
- MG5: *Cynosurus cristatus - Centaurea nigra* (crested dogstail - common knapweed) Grassland
- MG6: *Cynosurus cristatus - Caltha palustris* (crested dogstail - marsh marigold) Flood pasture
- It also includes the inverse category (under the Integrated Habitat Classification System) 'other neutral grassland' where this was recorded in the Kent Habitat Survey 2003 as species-rich.

1.1 Lowland Meadows are extremely rich in flora and fauna and are important habitats for amphibians, small mammals and farmland birds.

1.2 Lowland Meadows in Kent are traditionally an intimate mosaic of small fields with hedgerows and associated ponds and in Maidstone are located within the Low Weald Natural Area.

National status

2.1 An estimated 97% loss of semi-natural lowland grassland has been lost between 1930 and 1984 in the British Isles, and losses have continued since then at 2-10% per year in some areas. *Cynosurus - Centaurea* grassland, the mainstream community of unimproved hay meadows and pastures over much of Britain, is now highly localised, fragmented and in small stands.

2.2 Recent estimates for cover in England and Wales indicate that there is 5000-10,000 ha of this community in total. Unimproved seasonally-flooded grasslands are less widely distributed. They have lower overall cover, but there are still a few quite large stands. *Alopecurus - Sanguisorba* flood-meadow has a total cover of <1500 ha in Britain and Wales. *Cynosurus - Caltha* flood-pasture is scarce and localised, with probably <1000 ha cover in England and Wales.

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

Local status

3.1 The Kent Habitat Survey 2003 recorded 71 ha of lowland hay meadow and a further 587 ha of species rich 'other neutral grassland' in Kent. However, this is thought to be a significant under-recording of actual extent of this habitat – based upon distribution of key indicator species within The Atlas of the Kent Flora (E.G. Philp Kent Field Club).

3.2 The Kent Habitat Survey 2003 recorded 45 ha of lowland meadows occurring in Maidstone Borough, of which only 6% is notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), with a further 3% in Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). This means that in total only 10% of this resource in borough is currently in a designated site.

3.3 All of the lowland meadows within SSSI in the borough is under management and is currently on target to be in a favourable condition by 2010 in accordance with the Public Service Agreement Targets.

3.4 The 1 ha of Lowland Meadow within a LWS is currently not under management or an environmental stewardship specifically for grasslands.

3.5 Currently 5 ha (11%) of lowland meadows identified within the Kent Habitat Survey 2003 is in a favourable condition.

Factors causing decline in biodiversity

4.1 Agricultural improvements are the main threat to Lowland Meadows. The detrimental practices on lowland meadows include; the heavy use of fertilizers/manure, shifts in silage production, conversion to arable use, and later summer hay cutting which is out of synchronization with other agricultural operations.

4.2 Decline in the perceived agricultural value of species-rich pasture and hay in farming regimes.

4.3 Abandonment leading to rank overgrowth, and scrub encroachment.

4.4 Lack of appropriate livestock, leading to floristic impoverishment, due to heavy grazing pressure and changes in stock species and breeds.

4.5 Atmospheric pollution and climate change, the influence of which is not fully assessed.

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

4.6 Loss to development including creation of hard standing and stationing of caravans and mobile homes

Current national action

5.1 Lowland Meadows is targeted habitat under agri-environmental schemes for maintenance, restoration, enhancement and creation.

5.2 Under its Public Service Agreement target, English Nature is targeting areas of Lowland Meadows within SSSIs to achieve at least 95% in favourable condition by 2010.

5.3 Weald Meadows Initiative providing advice and sources of local seed for re-creation/restoration

Funding resources

6.1 The Environmental Stewardship Scheme provides funding the maintenance, restoration and creation of species-rich grassland.

National plan objectives and actions

7.1 The UK-BAP Lowland Meadows Habitat action plan objectives and targets cover habitat conservation, restoration and expansion. The UK-BAP Lowland Meadows Habitat action plan objectives and targets cover habitat conservation, restoration and expansion. The plan aims to maintain the current extent, quality and distribution and in addition, achieve favourable condition of 6078 ha of Lowland Meadow habitat in England by 2015. The plan also targets the re-establishment of 737 ha of Lowland Meadow habitat of wildlife value at carefully targeted sites in England by 2015.

Local plan objectives and actions

8.1 The Kent LBAP Lowland Meadows Habitat action plan objectives and targets concentrate on the improvement of designated sites and creation of the habitat. Within SSSIs it seeks wherever feasible, favourable status for all lowland meadows by 2020. Within LWS the plan seeks favourable status for 75% lowland Meadows by 2020. The plan also targets the re-establishment of 250 ha by 2015. Specifically, the re-establishment of Lowland Meadows has specific targets within the Maidstone Borough, with the creation of 100ha in the Low and High Weald some of which should be close to Marden Meadows SSSI and 50 ha some of which should be within the Medway Valley, downstream of Maidstone.

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

Maidstone's objectives

9.1 Maidstone's objectives are;

1. **Maintain the current extent and quality of lowland meadow habitat.**
2. **Ensure positive management of lowland meadow habitat.**
3. **Re-establish lowland meadow habitat by restoring and expanding the current extent of the habitat.**
4. **Work with Kent Habitat Survey to record the true extent of this habitat as a priority.**

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

Objectives and targets

Objective 1: Maintain the current extent and quality of lowland meadows habitat

Target 1: Maintain 45 ha (as identified by the Kent Habitat Survey 2003) by 2026

LM	ACTION	TARGET START DATE	TARGET END DATE	KEY EXTERNAL PARTNERS	PROGRESS
1.	Ensure that Maidstone's Local Development Framework contain policy to protect Lowland Meadows.	2009	2010	ALL	
2.	Ensure that regional strategies and plans contain policy to protect Lowland Meadows.	2009	2010	KWT NE KCC	
3.	Ensure all lowland meadows of local importance are designated as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS).	2009	2026	KWT	
4.	Develop data recording on environmental stewardship for species-rich grassland to distinguish between the different priority habitats (Lowland Calcareous Grassland, Lowland Meadows and Lowland Dry Acid Grassland) that could be managed under this option.	2009	2014	ALL	Need for recording/monitoring system to be set up as determined by Steering Group. Opportunity for community engagement.
5.	Work with Kent Habitat Survey to determine the true extent of this habitat **with key areas of search including the Greensand Ridge and Low Weald.**	2010	2016	KCC	

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

Objective 2: Ensure positive management of lowland meadows habitat

Target 2: Ensure the positive management of 35 ha by 2014, 36 ha by 2020 and 37 ha by 2026

LM	ACTION	TARGET START DATE	TARGET END DATE	KEY EXTERNAL PARTNERS	PROGRESS
6.	Ensure that all Lowland Meadow identified in the Kent Habitat Survey 2003 is under an environmental stewardship.	2009	2026	NE KWT	

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

Objective 3: Re-establish lowland meadow habitat by restoring and expanding the current extent of the habitat

Target 3: Expand areas of lowland meadow habitat at sites adjacent to current species-rich grassland habitat in the Medway Valley, Greensand Ridge and Low Weald area, by at least 2 ha by 2014.
Restore areas of lowland meadow habitat at sites adjacent to current species-rich grassland habitat in the Medway Valley area, or near to Marden meadow SSSI, by 9 ha by 2014, 11 ha by 2019 and 12 ha by 2024 (Total Area: 12 ha by 2024).

LM	ACTION	TARGET START DATE	TARGET END DATE	KEY EXTERNAL PARTNERS	PROGRESS
7.	Annually monitor the borough's environmental stewardship data on species-rich grassland to assess current management and expansion of lowland meadows, and identify key areas where expansion would reduce current fragmentation of the habitat and be targeted within selected sites of the Medway Valley Greensand Ridge and the Low Weald especially nr. Marden Meadows.	2009	2026	NE	
8.	Target restoration/creation schemes for Lowland Meadow environmental stewardships to areas adjacent to area of Lowland Meadows that is currently in favourable condition.	2009	2026	NE	
9.	Look to improve the key species composition of the wild flower Meadow Area in the Whatman Park through surveying current diversity and enhancing by increasing with appropriate species using local seed or plugs. Produce interpretation board explaining the creation and management technique used on the site and the benefits to wildlife.	2009	2014	KWT MVCP Wealden Meadow Initiative	
10.	Find other MBC owned amenity sites that could potential used to create lowland Meadows.	2009	2014		
11.	Look to include areas for Lowland Meadow creation within new developments in the Medway Valley and Low Weald; as part of green and blue infrastructure, whereby these areas	2009	2026		

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

	could be flood risk areas and also enhance biodiversity.				

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

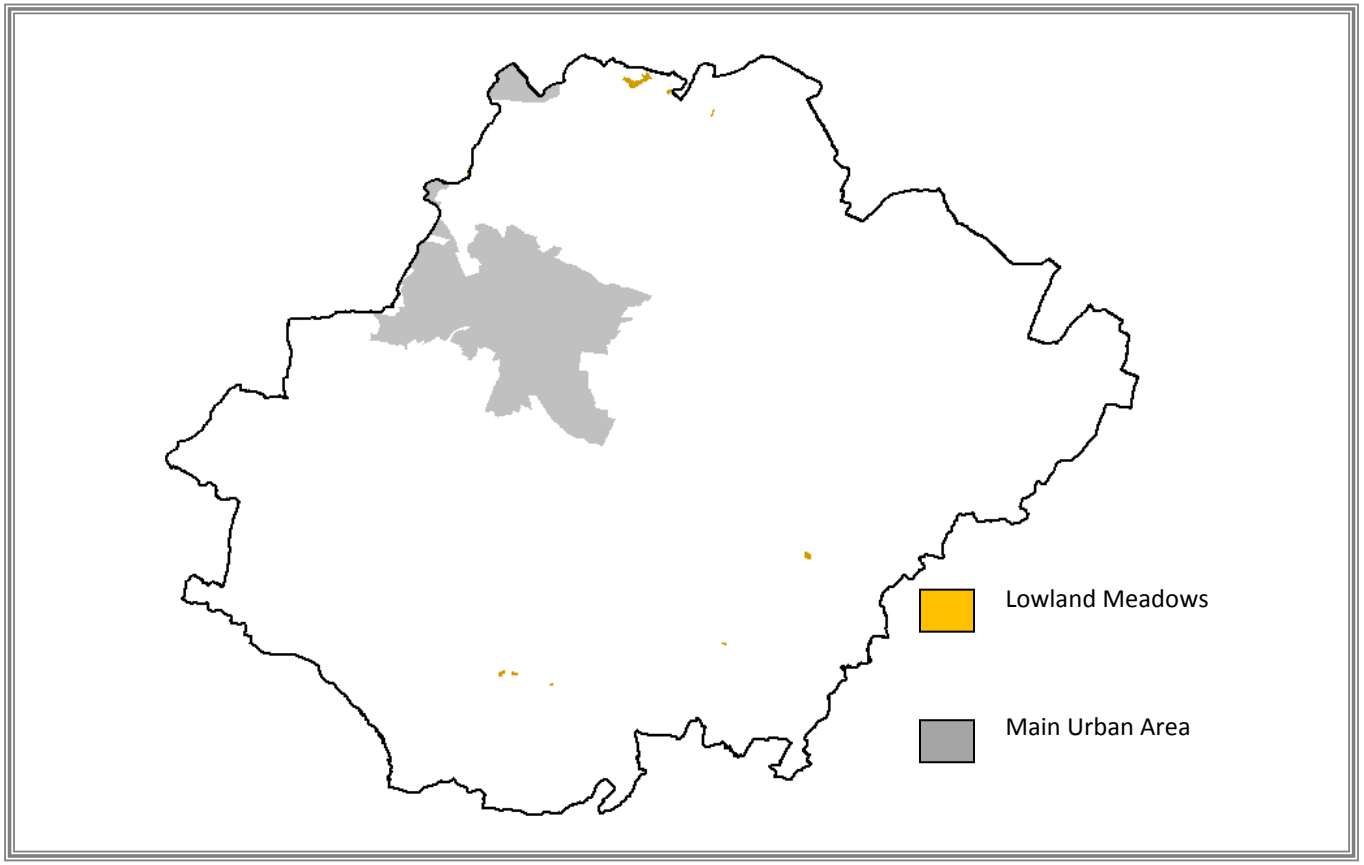
LM	ACTION	TARGET START DATE	TARGET END DATE	KEY EXTERNAL PARTNERS	PROGRESS
12.	Promote the establishment of a local native seed production 'nursery' to provide a bulk source of local provenance seed for restoration projects.	2009	2014	ALL, Landowners	

Lowland Meadows Action Plan

Lowland meadow distribution

10.1 The distribution of Lowland Meadows can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1 Distribution of Lowland Meadows in Maidstone Borough



Data Source: Kent Habitat Survey 2003