

# **Call for a Grassland Action Plan for England**

August 2023

**Plantlife Briefing**

# It's Time to Fill the Grassland Gap

England's land is under pressure to produce food, store carbon, host wildlife, give people space to breathe, stop flooding... we're giving our land a never-ending 'to-do' list.

Yet the ultimate multi-tasking solution is right here. From mountain pastures to floodplain meadows, from road verges to private gardens, grasslands are all around us.

Not just a green space... but a place for farming, for climate action and for nature and people to thrive.



Grasslands cover more than **40%<sup>i</sup> of England**. They are a huge natural asset, yet have untapped potential to do so much more.

Highly-fertilised monoculture fields and tightly-mown grassy areas now dominate our landscape, providing few benefits or 'public goods'.

Wildlife-rich grasslands are the ultimate multitaskers, providing many different benefits<sup>ii</sup>, but their value has been overlooked for too long and the vast majority have been destroyed.

The remaining fragments of semi-natural grasslands cover only 5% of England, in iconic places such as the ancient chalk of Salisbury Plain and the hay meadows of the Yorkshire Dales.

**It's time for real action to restore our grasslands, for nature, food, people and climate.**

Grasslands deserve the same level of strategic focus and investment given to peatland and woodland. In particular, the role of grasslands in tackling climate change has been systemically undervalued. An estimated 2 billion tons of carbon<sup>iii</sup> is already stored in their undisturbed soils across Great Britain – and they could absorb even more carbon if we change the way we manage them and bring back a diversity of plants and fungi<sup>iv</sup>.

**To unlock the benefits of grasslands, a new approach is needed. Plantlife and its partners are calling on the UK Government to prioritise grasslands as a nature-based solution to society's challenges and commit to developing a Grassland Action Plan for England.**

# The Grassland Gap

## Policies set out in existing UK Government Action Plans

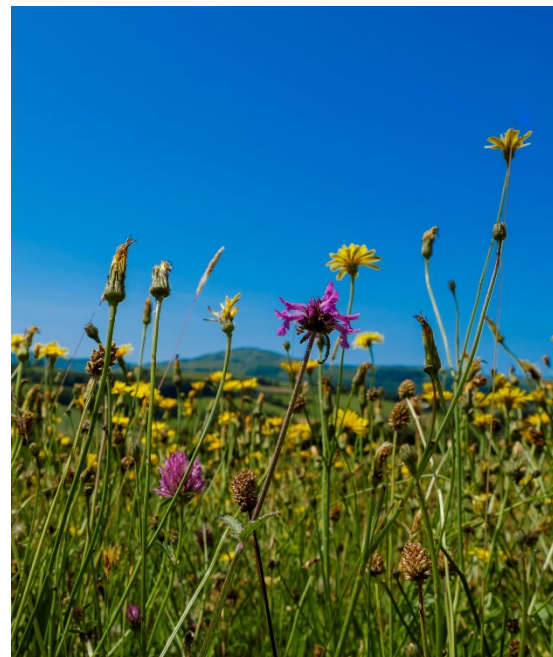
	Trees & Peat	Grasslands
Dedicated resource in Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), working on deliverables in the habitat Action Plan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Monitoring and mapping, with an up-to-date National Inventory, driving better spatial targeting of funding for restoration and habitat management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pilot scheme and/or Taskforce to test evidence, supporting the development of a natural capital approach to valuing habitats	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recognition as a Nature-based Solution to climate change, for example in the UK's National Adaptation Programme or funding in the Nature for Climate Fund	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Development of private biodiversity and carbon markets, for example through a Carbon Code	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELM) agri-environment funding actively incentivises the wide-scale uptake of options for habitat maintenance, restoration, and creation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Incentivising private investment for flooding mitigation schemes, such as Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDs)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Robust protections in the planning system, for example through 'Ancient Woodland and Trees' legal definition	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
International action and funding to restore biodiversity and lessen impact of climate change, via Biodiverse Landscapes Fund	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

As demonstrated by the England Trees Action Plan and the England Peat Action Plan, a joined-up approach to habitats can deliver large-scale change and benefits. Grasslands that are rich in wild plants and fungi are truly multifunctional, providing:

- **Food production within a sustainable farming system with healthy soils**, as grazing livestock on species-rich permanent pasture and meadows, provides nutritional benefits to livestock and producing high quality and healthier meat and dairy products<sup>v</sup>



- **Nature-based solutions to climate change**; greater plant diversity in grasslands increases carbon sequestration<sup>vi</sup> and resilience to floods, drought and other extreme weather events
- **Connected habitat for nature recovery**, providing food, shelter and corridors for pollinators and other wildlife across the landscape
- **Cleaner air and water** through reduced use of fertilisers and pesticides<sup>vii</sup>
- **Irreplaceable parts of our cultural heritage** and a key component of rural livelihoods
- **Mental and physical health benefits** through public access to species-rich green spaces and landscapes
- **Sustainable bioenergy resource for the circular economy**, providing economic benefits from grass cuttings in green space management



It's time to fill the grassland gap. Alongside our partners, we're calling on the UK Government to commit to developing a Grassland Action Plan, to make the most of grasslands for nature, food, people and climate.



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# Annex A

## Supporters of the call for a Grassland Action Plan

Plantlife and partners support this statement:

(As of August 2023)

“With competing pressures on England’s land, we need to make the most of our grasslands, which cover at least 40% of the country. Appropriately managed and connected grasslands (including semi-natural and species-rich areas) can be highly multifunctional, providing a wealth of benefits including food production, nature’s recovery, clean air and water, pollination services, accessible green space, soil health, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. From upland pastures, ancient and floodplain meadows, to gardens, parks and road verges, grasslands are a major national asset and require a strategic, cross-sectoral approach led by government. We therefore call on the UK Government to commit to developing a Grassland Action Plan for England.”



# Sources

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- <sup>ii</sup> SLR Consulting. (2023). *Valuing the Vital: assessing grassland ecosystems in the UK*. Available at: <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Plantlife-report-2-Ecosystem-Services-of-UK-Grasslands.pdf>
- <sup>iii</sup> Ward, S. E., Smart, S. M., Quirk, H., Tallowin, J. R. B., Mortimer, S. R., Shiel, R. S., ... Bardgett, R. D. (2016). Legacy effects of grassland management on soil carbon to depth. *Global Change Biology*, 22(8), 2929–2938. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/GCB.13246>
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- <sup>v</sup> Pasture for Life (2016) *Research benefits the human health benefits of Pasture for Life Meat*. Accessed at: <https://www.pastureforlife.org/research/research-demonstrates-the-human-health-benefits-of-pasture-for-life-meat/>
- <sup>vi</sup> Plantlife. (2023). *Grasslands as a Carbon Store*. Available at: <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Grasslands-as-a-Carbon-Store.pdf>
- <sup>vii</sup> Zhao, Yuanyuan & Liu, Zhifeng & Wu, Jianguo. (2020). *Grassland ecosystem services: a systematic review of research advances and future directions*. *Landscape Ecology*. 35. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10980-020-00980-3>



[plantlife.org.uk](https://plantlife.org.uk)

**Plantlife is the global charity working to enhance, protect, restore and celebrate the wild plants and fungi that are essential to all life on earth.** With two in five plant species at risk of extinction, biodiversity loss is now the fastest it's ever been – which means our work has never been more vital. We champion and accelerate conservation action, working at the heart of a global network of individuals and organisations, to influence and inspire landowners and land managers, public and private bodies, governments and local communities. As time begins to run out, we are using our position as the global voice for wild plants and fungi to bring lasting and positive change to our natural world – for everyone's sake.

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