

SUMMARY DOCUMENT

Public Perceptions of Greenspace Management Amongst County Durham Residents: A Report of Empirical Evidence for Durham County Council.

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SUMMARY

In light of the length of the full report we have produced a summary document containing the key aspects of the report. This document is essentially a collation of the section summaries from the full report and is therefore not intended to be as comprehensive, detailed, or precise. Given the number of findings produced from our research the results section of this document is subdivided by research question. However, we hope that this document can provide the interested but busy members of council with an overview of the main points found through our work.

This summary is divided into five main sections, with subsections within the Results:

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Background

- The world is currently facing an ecological emergency with significant deterioration in nature and biodiversity.
- Reduced biodiversity has potentially catastrophic impacts to habitat survival, economic growth, resource production, and climate change.
- High levels of biodiversity are associated with climate change mitigation, habitat stability, and improved psychological wellbeing.
- Intensive mowing causes significant damage to biodiversity and ecology. Ecologically Conscious Land Management (ECLM) can have a powerful effect on reversing this damage.
- Durham County Council mows a large amount of land but is unsure if the residents of County Durham are supportive.

Methods

- Participants indicated how much they supported **mowing reductions** and **wilding increases**.
- Participants indicated how important mowing was for **specific types of land**.
- Participants indicated how they perceived mown spaces (relative to unmown spaces). These were grouped into 4 main **perceptions**: Participants were essentially asked whether they thought mown spaces were more attractive, more socially desirable, better buffers against antisocial behaviour, and more environmentally beneficial.
- Participants indicated how important a number of greenspace-relevant **concerns** were to them. These were grouped into 7 main concerns: Neatness, environmental impact, aesthetics, amount of litter, cost, accessibility, and safety.
- Participants reported how often they thought the council mowed (i.e., **mow frequency**).
- Participants indicated if they thought they cared about mowing more or less than other people in the county.
- **Demographic** questions related to age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, occupation, and education were also given to participants.

Demographic information

	Sample (n=709)	County Durham (2021)
Gender		
Female	64.7%	51.1%
Male	37.3%	48.9%
Age		
Mean age in years:	51.7	41.7 ^a
Ethnicity		
White	94.5%	96.8%
Any other ethnicity	5.5%	3.2%

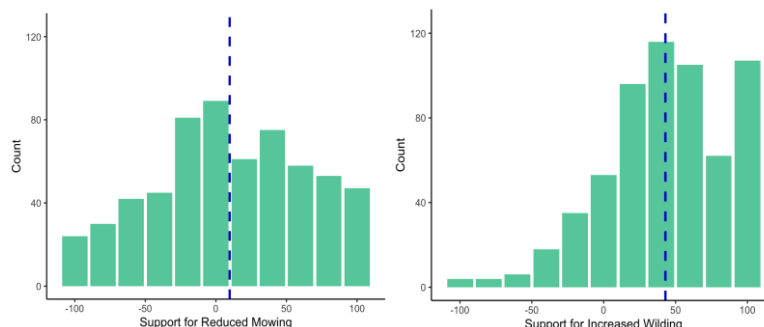
Note: ^acensus provides median age for people over 18 years old.

Results

Do People Support a Mowing Reduction and a Wilding Increase?

- There is a slight (but significant) desire to reduce the amount of mowing in the county.
- There is a large (and significant) desire to increase the amount of wild space in the county.

Histograms for support for reduced mowing and support for increased wilding



Note. Blue line represents mean of responses. Zero on the X axis indicates no preference one way or the other. 100 on the X axis represents support for mowing reductions/wilding increases, -100 represents opposition.

Does Preference Differ by Geographic Region or Demographics?

- Men neither support nor oppose reduced mowing, whereas women support significantly less mowing.
- Women are more supportive of increasing wild spaces than men, but both are still very supportive.
- The more educated respondents were, the more they supported ecologically conscious land management practices.
- There was no difference in support for ecologically conscious land management practices between different postcodes, ages, or occupations.

How Accurate are Perceptions About Mowing Frequency?

- On average people think the council mows less than the 2 times a month the council aims for. See full report for caveats about the use of 2 times a month as a benchmark.
- This underestimation is statistically significant but not necessarily a dramatic underestimation.

What are the Primary Concerns and Perceptions that Predict Mowing/Wilding Preferences?

Perceptions

- Perceptions of mowing’s environmental friendliness, visual appeal, and desirability were the perceptions most influential for ecologically conscious land management practices. People were less in favour of ecologically conscious land management practices if they saw mowing as environmentally friendly, visually appealing, and desirable.

- Perceptions of mowing’s cost-effectiveness was notably uninfluential. People who thought mowing was expensive and people who thought it was inexpensive showed no difference in their support for ecologically conscious land management practices.
- Perceptions of ecological impact and desirability are slightly more relevant for mowing reduction than for wilding.
- Overall, perceptions of mown spaces seem to predict support for mowing reductions and support for wilding increases quite similarly.

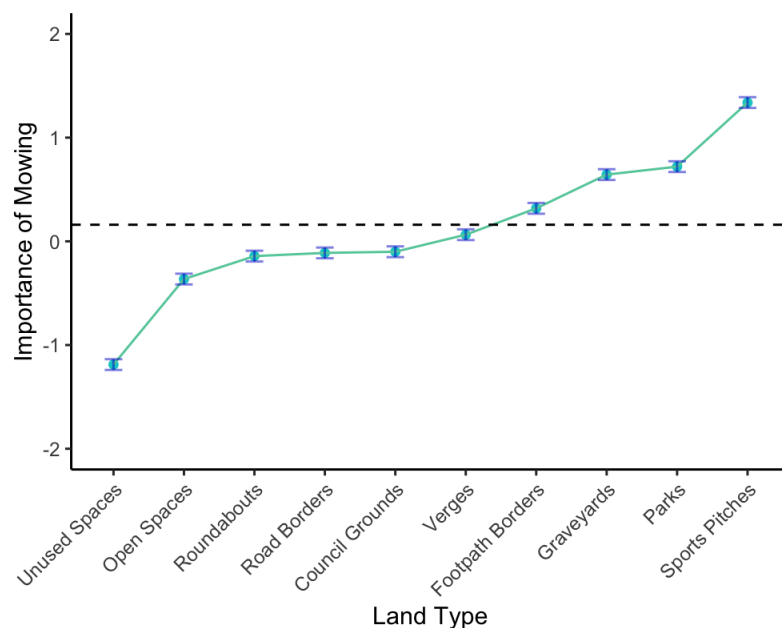
Concerns

- The two most influential concerns in peoples ecologically conscious land management preferences are concerns about neatness and ecological impact. The more people emphasize concerns about neatness and ecological impact, the less supportive they are of ecologically conscious land management practices.
- Neatness concerns specifically were found to be more important for people’s preferences for mowing than they were for their preference for wild spaces. However, they are still quite relevant to people’s preferences about wild spaces.
- Overall, practically speaking, the same set of concerns seem to predict mowing and wilding preferences.

Does The Type of Land Influence How Important People Feel Mowing Is?

- On average people have no strong opinions about the mowing of any green space, either for or against, even the average importance of mowing sports pitches was closer to just ‘important’ than it was to ‘very important’.
- In general, the only places where people clearly felt mowing was important (as opposed to neutral or unimportant) were pitches, parks, graveyards, and footpath borders.

Reported importance to mow different land types.



Note. The dashed line represents the point at which importance of mowing would have been significantly greater than neutral.

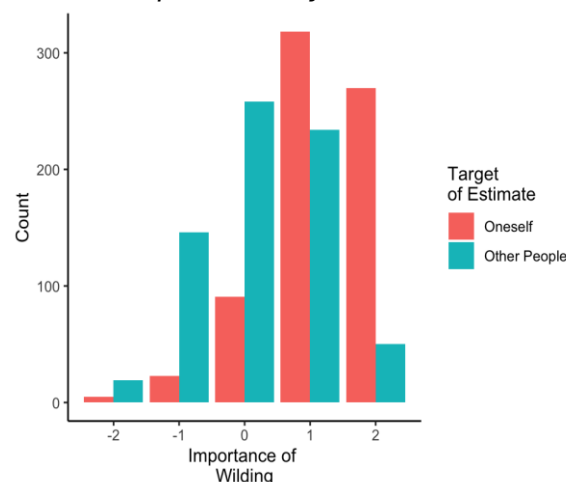
Does The Association Between Mowing Preference and Both Perceptions and Concerns Depend on Land Type?

- Consistent with earlier analyses, mowing (in general) was seen as more important amongst people who thought mowing was environmentally friendly, pretty, and socially desirable.
- Desirability, eco-friendliness, and prettiness seemed to matter for most land areas.
- If mown space was seen as ecologically harmful, people thought it was less important to mow, especially for unused spaces, council grounds, and roundabouts.
- If mown space was seen as pretty, people thought it was more important to mow, especially for footpath borders, roundabouts, parks, and open spaces.
- If mown space was seen as more desirable, people thought it was important to mow, especially graveyards, open spaces, parks, footpath borders, and council grounds.
- Consistent with earlier analyses, mowing importance (in general) was most influenced by concerns around neatness and ecological impact. As people became more concerned about neatness, they felt mowing was more important. In contrast, as people became more concerned about ecological impact, they felt mowing was less important.
- With only a small handful of exceptions, reported mowing importance for all types of lands was only predicted by concerns around neatness and eco-friendliness. Many other concerns did not actually impact how important people felt mowing was for most spaces.
- While the strength of associations for both concerns varied significantly depending on type of greenspace, the substantive association was largely the same for most spaces.
- Overall, this suggests that considering these two levers (neatness and eco-friendliness) as ways of framing any mowing reductions might prove to be useful for multiple land types.

Do People's Perceptions of Norms Match the Norm?

- People generally assume that they are more supportive of wild spaces than other people. Or in other words, people underestimate how much other people support wilding.

Distribution of responses related to how important people think wilding is personally and how important they think it is to others.



Practical Findings

- Based on the means for perceptions, people saw mown spaces as harmful to the environment, generally desirable, and neither attractive nor unattractive.
- The perceptions that mown spaces were less harmful to the environment, more desirable, and attractive grew stronger as level of education decreased.
- Based on the means for concerns, people were very worried about environmental impact and somewhat worried about neatness.
- While people indicated that they are more concerned about environmental impact than attractiveness, it was concerns about attractiveness that predicted preference for mowing reductions more closely (nearly 7 times stronger).
- Compared to women and those with higher levels of education, respectively, men and those with lower levels of education were more worried about neatness and less about environmental impact.

Conclusions

- On average, County Durham residents were slightly supportive of reduced mowing.
- County Durham residents underestimate how much the council currently mows.
- County Durham residents strongly want more wild spaces.
- Beauty, environmental impact, and social desirability were the important factors for people when thinking about mowing. These are the levers that seem likely to work, beauty/neatness, in particular.
- Mowing was only deemed expressly important for graveyards, parks, sports pitches, and footpath borders. Otherwise, mowing was seen as 'neither important or unimportant' or flatly unimportant.

Recommendations

- The council would likely be supported in at least partially reducing their mowing practices, especially for specific locations.
- In areas such as unused space, roundabouts, motorway and road borders, council grounds, and open green spaces, reductions in mowing may avoid significant opposition as, on average, mowing was not seen as decidedly important for these spaces.
- Visual appeal was reportedly important to perceptions of whether an area should be mown, much more so than environmental impact. Therefore, interventions may be more palatable if they highlight the improved beauty of a less mown area rather than highlighting the environmental impact. However, without behavioural research it cannot be said for certain which predictor will be most fruitful to target to change perceptions. Therefore, it would be advisable to highlight the positive impact on all three of the most important predictors of aesthetic, social desirability, and environmental impact until further research using randomised controlled trials can identify which produces the strongest results.