# DfI’s wildflower verge cut sparks outcry in Belfast amid road safety debate



Residents in Belfast were left dismayed last week after a flourishing wildflower meadow on the Saintfield Road was cut down by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), citing road safety concerns as the primary reason for their actions. This vibrant patch, which had been a cherished feature of the local landscape for the past two years, was unexpectedly reduced to just a few centimetres, sparking outrage among wildlife supporters and local inhabitants alike.

Ryan Bradley, a local resident who had taken it upon himself to cultivate this area, described his shock upon discovering the meadow had been decimated. He had hoped to enhance biodiversity by planting native wildflowers, following a burgeoning movement among enthusiasts in conservation. “While I haven’t had any official permission to do this,” Bradley said, “I didn’t think there had been any problems, as wildflowers had been left alone.” Officially adopting the verge in 2023, he had carefully attended to the site, hoping it would flourish over the years.

A spokesman for the DfI explained that the area in question was part of a designated sightline, integral for maintaining visibility for drivers. The department, responsible for managing around 45,000 kilometres of grass verges annually, claimed that road safety must always take precedence, even amid growing commitments to biodiversity. In 2022, they updated their grass cutting policy to reflect an intent to support wildlife, but they maintain that this has to be balanced with the necessity for safe road use.

Bradley disputed the necessity of the decision, pointing out that the wildflowers had been positioned far enough back from the road to not pose an issue for motorists. He expressed frustration that this action occurred during “No Mow May,” a campaign aimed at protecting pollinators by encouraging residents to leave their grass uncut. “Anyone working in this sector would know that you don’t cut this early in the year,” he chastised, emphasising that early spring is crucial for the establishment of these ecosystems.

Others in the local community echoed Bradley's sentiments, lamenting the loss of a space that not only provided aesthetic joy but also played a role in supporting local biodiversity. Advocates for wildlife highlight the broader implications of government actions like these, pointing to the ongoing tension between road safety and environmental conservation. Experts argue, as discussed in various publications, that while safety cannot be overlooked, there is a significant need for regulations to protect natural habitats, particularly during critical growing seasons.

Local conservationists have pointed out that cutting back vegetation too frequently or too early exacerbates challenges in preserving biodiversity, while recent discussions surrounding roads and wildlife stress the need to handle such decisions with a finer balance. Legislative frameworks, like the Wildlife and Heritage Act, provide protection for specific species and habitats, indicating that a nuanced approach is necessary in urban planning and maintenance.

Despite his disappointment, Bradley remains committed to his goal of fostering a vibrant wildflower habitat. He expressed hope that this setback would not deter him from continuing his work to bolster local biodiversity. Acknowledging that communication with the authorities is crucial, he suggested that an apology would be appreciated and could pave the way for more collaborative efforts in the future.

As discussions continue around the role of public infrastructure management in protecting natural habitats while ensuring safety, the case of the wildflower meadow raises important questions about how urban policies can evolve to support both biodiversity and road safety more effectively.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/popular-wildflower-meadow-on-verge-of-belfast-road-cut-down-due-to-road-safety-concerns/a300945896.html), [[2]](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/roadside-grass-cutting-weeds-and-overgrown-hedges-or-trees)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/popular-wildflower-meadow-on-verge-of-belfast-road-cut-down-due-to-road-safety-concerns/a300945896.html), [[3]](https://www.northernirelandworld.com/news/politics/council/we-need-to-keep-our-borough-neat-and-tidy-3912713)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-63108973), [[6]](https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/2024/07/22/when-to-cut-hedgerows-road-safety-concerns-pitted-against-nature/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://belfastmedia.com/dfi-defends-cutting-grass-at-balls-on-the-falls-during-bird-nesting-season), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-63108973)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/popular-wildflower-meadow-on-verge-of-belfast-road-cut-down-due-to-road-safety-concerns/a300945896.html), [[6]](https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/2024/07/22/when-to-cut-hedgerows-road-safety-concerns-pitted-against-nature/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/popular-wildflower-meadow-on-verge-of-belfast-road-cut-down-due-to-road-safety-concerns/a300945896.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/roadside-grass-cutting-weeds-and-overgrown-hedges-or-trees> - The Northern Ireland Executive's official website outlines the Department for Infrastructure's (DfI) policy on roadside grass cutting, weeds, and overgrown hedges or trees. It states that grass cutting on road verges is performed solely for road safety reasons, aiming to balance safety with environmental protection and biodiversity. The DfI is responsible for maintaining the public road network, cutting approximately 45,000 km of grass verges annually to ensure visibility for all road users. The policy was amended in 2022 to reflect a commitment to protecting wildlife and promoting biodiversity, while prioritising road safety.
3. <https://www.northernirelandworld.com/news/politics/council/we-need-to-keep-our-borough-neat-and-tidy-3912713> - An article from Northern Ireland World discusses the Department for Infrastructure's (DfI) approach to grass cutting in urban areas. The DfI acknowledges that additional cuts at specific locations may be required to maintain sight lines for road safety purposes. Routine cutting is typically carried out up to five times a year in urban areas. The department's grass-cutting policy has evolved to focus on protecting wildlife and promoting biodiversity while managing roadside verges, aiming to balance environmental concerns with road safety.
4. <https://belfastmedia.com/dfi-defends-cutting-grass-at-balls-on-the-falls-during-bird-nesting-season> - Belfast Media reports on the Department for Infrastructure's (DfI) decision to cut grass and wildflowers around the Rise sculpture at Broadway for road safety purposes. The DfI stated that grass cutting operations are carried out specifically for road safety reasons and not for cosmetic or amenity purposes. Areas needed for road safety, such as sight lines at junctions, are cut at least twice each year to enable road users to see on-coming traffic when exiting a junction. The public can report issues with roadside grass, weeds, hedges, or trees through the DfI's online service.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-63108973> - BBC News reports on the Department for Infrastructure's (DfI) reduced schedule of cutting roadside verges in Northern Ireland. In the absence of an agreed budget, a single swathe will be cut along verges on the strategic road network twice a year. To maintain sightlines at junctions and prevent the obstruction of road signs, cutting in those areas will happen at least twice a year. The DfI's approach aims to support actions to comply with the Climate Change bill, passed by the assembly in March 2022, and to help protect wildlife and promote biodiversity.
6. <https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/2024/07/22/when-to-cut-hedgerows-road-safety-concerns-pitted-against-nature/> - The Irish Times discusses the balance between road safety and biodiversity in the context of cutting hedgerows and verges. The Road Safety Authority (RSA) argues that it should be left to council officials to decide if and when it is necessary to cut back hedges and verges. However, conservation groups like BirdWatch Ireland argue that cutting hedgerows too early and often exacerbates biodiversity loss. The Wildlife and Heritage Act bans the cutting of hedgerows during the late spring and summer months, unless deemed necessary for road safety.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-34602129> - BBC News reports that uprooting wildflowers, such as bluebells and primroses, without permission in Northern Ireland is a crime, and individuals could be prosecuted. The warning comes as organisations set up to prevent wildlife crime begin a new awareness campaign. Organisers say many native NI species, such as deer, salmon, and birds of prey, are subject to poaching and cruelty. Uprooting even common wildflowers without the landowner's permission is an offence, with a list of 70 protected wildflowers subject to this regulation.