

Open Report on behalf of Andy Gutherson, Executive Director - Place

Report to:	Highways and Transport Scrutiny Committee
Date:	09 December 2019
Subject:	Roadside Nature Reserves and Wildflower Planting

Summary:

A report on current practices and partnership arrangement and considerations as to future policy on community led planting schemes and schemes associated to new infrastructure works.

Actions Required:

The Highways and Transport Scrutiny Committee are invited to consider the report and highlight a recommendation for consideration by the Executive Member for Highways, Transport and IT on the potential policy direction for future planting schemes based on new road construction or for community led verge projects.

1. Background

Roadside Nature Reserves

Lincolnshire County Council, as Highway Authority, is responsible for the maintenance and management of the highway including any associated roadside verge. In doing so the authority is expected to exercise this function (as with all functions) with regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity (Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 s.40(1))

Since 1960 a number of specific verges have been managed on behalf of the authority by Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, initially under the banner of Protected Roadside Verges and latterly as Roadside Nature Reserves (RNRs).

Currently there are 65 verges comprising about 80 kilometres within the scheme with some also designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Alongside these there are also a number that have been designated as Local Wildlife Sites and have been identified as having special floristic interest. The Trust and the Council work together alongside voluntary Wayside Wardens to preserve these special characteristics. The Roadside Nature Reserves team meets twice a year and consists of officers from LWT, LCC and Natural England.

Landowners are often involved too with some taking hay for their own use and some out of goodwill.

2. Life on the Verge project

<https://www.lincstrust.org.uk/what-we-do/wildlife-conservation/projects/life-on-the-verge>

Road verges hold the potential to act as wildlife corridors and a sequence of surveys were undertaken between 2009 and 2016 across Lincolnshire. The surveys helped gain more data on how these corridors are linked, together with nature reserves and Roadside Nature Reserves, in order to support pollination for the county's crops.

The surveys began in the summer of 2009 and were focused on the limestone area of Lincolnshire and Rutland and in 2011 the surveys were extended to the Lincolnshire Wolds, and in 2014 work began to cover the North Lincolnshire Edge between Lincoln and the Humber. After 8 summers, the surveys were finally completed in 2016.

Over 250 volunteers were recruited, who helped survey important wildflowers along a total road length of over 3,900km (2,400 miles). This effort has led to the designation of 159 new Local Wildlife Sites on verges along more than 250km of road which constitute to nearly 100ha of wildflower-rich habitat.

Maps of these results are now helping the Wildlife Trust and its partner organisations, including Lincolnshire County Council to target conservation management more effectively and efficiently on the ground.

3. Legislation

Verge planting and maintenance is governed by provisions in the Highways Act 1980.

- Section 96(1) and (2) gives powers to highway authorities to plant and maintain, or remove, trees and shrubs in roadside verges providing they do not hinder usage of the highway or become a nuisance or injurious to the owner or occupier of premises adjacent to the highway.
- Section 96(5) allows parish councils to undertake the same powers with the consent of the highway authority
- Section 142 allows the highway authority to grant a permit to an adjacent owner or occupier to plant and maintain trees, shrubs and plants in the verge subject to a number of caveats.

The full legislation is shown in Appendix A

4. Further considerations concerning planting schemes

Planting schemes are clearly good for communities, and are enjoyed by residents, commuters and visitors alike. Schemes in Sheffield and Rotherham have been recently featured in the press with positive reaction. It is recognised that these schemes have the potential to save money by reducing the number of necessary cuts to one or two per annum however it should be acknowledged that whilst potentially providing a resource for pollinators through the year, these highly colourful installations are made up of artificially selected mixtures of non-native annuals and are not "wild" flowers and are not part of the UK's natural heritage. Many of the commercially available seed mixes are from North America or southern Europe and are combined in ways that benefit the aesthetics of an area but do not benefit species biodiversity.

These flowers are annuals and will need to be rotated annually or at least every two years in order to sustain the display year on year. Also, as non-native flowers, they cannot be relied on to sustain themselves through self-seeding for much longer than two years as the variety of colours will diminish as some plants out-compete others due to varying seed amounts and dispersal. The seed mixes will need to be re-sown every few years to enable fresh displays. Native perennials require little maintenance other than two collector cuts per year.

Due to the mixes of non-native species the biodiversity for invertebrates (the largest area of biodiversity) is diminished as their life-cycles depend on the right leaves, stems and roots for the larvae/grubs and the flower is not the dominating factor. The artificial selection of plants has an effect as it alters the scents, palatability, UV markings on petals, physical accessibility and genetic diversity (and therefore adaptability and disease resistance). The more ornamental a plant is the less ecologically functional it becomes.

5. Future Policy

Whilst verges in central urban areas would look highly attractive with a colourful extended season annual display, even including non-native species, and would have public support, it is considered that rural areas would benefit more from native wildflower based schemes and certainly would be the only acceptable option in areas adjacent to existing local wildlife sites or RNRs.

Any future policy concerning LCC led planting schemes based on new road construction or for community led verge projects ought to be created in partnership with the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust which has a wealth of knowledge and experience on the subject. The Trust has already begun working with University of Lincoln at Riseholme to propagate Lincolnshire's wildflowers and have been banking the seeds for community green space restoration schemes. Current stocks are allocated but they hope to scale up production to be able to supply community schemes from October 2020.

For further information on suggestions from the Wildlife trust as to how to restore natural verges please see Appendix B

Finance

Work on RNRs is only possible through funding by the County Council. For the financial year 2018/2019 and 2019/20 this was £26,610 which was supplemented by a Conservation and Enhancement Scheme grant of £4,194 from Natural England.

Any increase in contractor costs or in the amount of designated RNRs will see the need for increases in funding to enable the scheme to properly operate.

6. Consultation

a) Have Risks and Impact Analysis been carried out?

No

b) Risks and Impact Analysis

As yet no decision has been made on any policies and as a consequence there is no current risk or impacts to assess. Any follow up work to formulate such a policy will be fully assessed.

7. Appendices

These are listed below and attached at the back of the report	
Appendix A	Legislation concerning highway verge planting
Appendix B	Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust - Biodiversity enhancement schemes

8. Background Papers

This report was written by Chris Miller, who can be contacted on 01522 782070 or countryside_access@lincolnshire.gov.uk.