

MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

18 NOVEMBER 2016

A PILOT APPROACH TO THE MANAGEMENT OF GRASS VERGES

Background

1. The following AONB Management Plan policies are relevant to this work:
 - a) BP2 – Restore the condition of degraded habitats in line with local and national biodiversity priorities.
 - b) BP3 - Enhance the wildlife value of the countryside and achieve greater buffering and connectivity between key habitats within the AONB and between the AONB and the countryside beyond.
 - c) BP6 - Improve knowledge and understanding of the AONB's biodiversity, to enable evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and actions.

2. Declining numbers of all types of pollinators have been seen throughout the United Kingdom (UK). In the UK around 70 fruit, vegetable and cereal crops are purely insect pollinated. The economic value of honey bees and bumble bees alone as pollinators of commercially grown crops in the UK has been estimated at over £200 million per year. Pollinators are vital to our food supply and are particularly important in counties such as Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire with a large agricultural/horticultural industry.

3. In October 2015 Worcestershire County Council designated Worcestershire a 'pollinator friendly county' to promote the protection of pollinating insects and their habitats. With this commitment the County Council seeks to make a direct difference through the management of County Council owned land and by spreading information on biodiversity to help residents and businesses play their part in increasing local habitats, promoting bee keeping and planting pollinator friendly plants.

4. Much land in the AONB to the east of the Malvern Hills is intensively managed, either for agriculture or for other uses, for example, the Three Counties Showground. Data suggests that very little of this land is covered by agri-environment support schemes and that biodiversity is in short-supply. However, the area is bordered to the west and south by land which is of national importance for biodiversity, much of which is owned and managed by the Malvern Hills Conservators. In addition, the area contains a small number of sites which have a high nature conservation interest, such as St Wulstan's Local Nature Reserve and Hollybed Farm Nature Reserve.

5. This area (see map in Appendix 1) has been identified by the AONB Unit as one which might benefit from a 'landscape scale approach' to nature conservation. This approach involves considering the whole landscape, managing it appropriately to make it more ecologically coherent and integrating a range of different land uses in a

way that is sympathetic to the environment, in order to benefit both wildlife and people. The approach is very widely endorsed and supported, including by government through the Natural Environment White Paper. In 2013 the AONB Unit articulated the following aim for the project area in Appendix 1: 'To improve, in a selective and targeted manner, the connectivity, buffering and management of a mosaic of habitats...in order to benefit a range of locally characteristic and significant species.'

Roadside verges

6. In a landscape dominated by intensive management, highway verges provide a potentially valuable space in which wildlife, including pollinating insects, can live and even thrive. In some places verges may be the last remaining stretches of natural habitat available (NB over 97% of England's meadows have been destroyed since the 1930s). Verges also have a strategic function, acting as corridors which connect areas of high nature conservation interest and which allow wildlife to move from one site to another. The national charity Plantlife reports that 21 of the 25 nation's favourite wildflowers grow on road verges. With 30 million drivers in the UK they are probably also the most frequently viewed habitat, providing many people with their only regular daily contact with nature.

7. Ensuring the safety of road users is obviously of paramount importance for those responsible for managing grass verges. However, traditionally many verges have been managed to keep them 'neat and tidy' and this philosophy may still prevail in some areas. The chief problem with such verge management is that it cuts many wildflowers down before they have had a chance to flower (thus denying nectar to insects) and to seed and complete their life cycle. The build-up of a thick layer or thatch of cut grass on the verge can also stifle the growth of more sensitive and often less common grasses and flowers. It can also lead to soil enrichment which further damages the potential survival of such species, favouring instead those which are stronger and more competitive.

8. In recent times many Highway Authorities have begun to look at altering verge management regimes, partly to reflect reducing budgets but also in recognition of the environmental function verges can perform. Heightened publicity and campaigns from the likes of Plantlife have bolstered such efforts. Many Highway Authorities also designate and manage Roadside Verge Nature Reserves (RVNRs). These are usually short sections of verge which are known to have very significant botanical interest and which require/would benefit from bespoke management.

9. Over a period of many months the Malvern Hills AONB Unit has been in discussion with the Worcestershire Highway Authority about the possibility of introducing a pilot scheme to manage verges differently in one part of the AONB (similar to the area shown in Appendix 1). This is not about varied, bespoke management but rather adopting a different regime which can be applied uniformly across a larger landscape area. It is recognised that simplicity is likely to be one of the key success factors. Key elements of the approach which have been discussed thus far are as follows:

- One annual cut at the end of the summer/early autumn,
- Removal of arisings,
- Tailored management to control undesirable species,

10. The possibility of a 3-5 year pilot based on the above approach and commencing in 2017 has, initially, received a positive response from the Highway Authority. The continuation of any management works needed to maintain sight lines and to maintain health and safety is taken as a given. There are still a number of issues that need to be discussed further and resolved, for example, determining the best way to cut and collect the grass and dispose of it. Clearly cost is a key issue. Whilst there should be some savings arising from a single cut there will be additional costs involved in collection and disposal operations. It is not expected that the Highway Authority should have to bear all such costs and interested partners, including the AONB Partnership, are also likely to play a role.

11. There is little point in undertaking a pilot without any evidence of whether it has been successful. To this end the AONB Partnership commissioned a survey of the botanical composition of road verges in the proposed project area. This was completed in the summer of 2016. The data yielded by the survey acts as a baseline against which future management work will be measured. The AONB Unit will be responsible for the necessary follow-up surveys.

Recommendation

12. The Committee is recommended to:

- 1. Note and comment on the report,**
- 2. Not to broadcast the information in paragraphs 9-11 until the AONB Unit and Highway Authority have had a chance to discuss proposals with relevant Parish Councils,**
- 3. Recognise that this is a pilot project, based in a nationally important landscape and operating in conjunction with the Malvern Hills AONB Partnership, that cannot be rolled out to other parts of the county at this time.**

Legal, Financial and HR Implications

Costs of this pilot scheme to Worcestershire County Council and the AONB Partnership have not yet been scoped.

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