



**OPEN REPORT
COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**

Community and Environment Committee – 7 December 2022

BIODIVERSITY REPORT UPDATE

Report of Director of Community & Environmental Services

Report Author and Contact Details

Ashley Watts, Director of Community & Environmental Services
01629 761367 or ashley.watts@derbyshiredales.gov.uk

Wards Affected

District-Wide

Report Summary

The report provides an update and informs Members on the progress of the biodiversity of road verges and public open spaces project and seeks approval for the next phase for 2023/24.

Recommendations

1. That the progress of the project in year 2 be noted.
2. That approval be given to the next steps for 2023/24 as outlined in the report.
3. That community groups and organisations be supported to improve the biodiversity in their area and to help them inform & educate their local community on the importance of the work

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 Photographs

Background Papers

Report to Community and Environment Committee – 8 October 2020

Consideration of report by Council or other committee

No

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from Press or Public

No

Biodiversity Report Update

1. Background

- 1.1 The report on the biodiversity of road verges and public open spaces went to Committee on 8th October 2020, where it was unanimously approved.
- 1.2 Members recognised the need to do something to redress the dramatic loss of wildflowers in the last hundred years.
- 1.3 The first year involved 15 pilot verges to understand the management of the verges, its impact on the Clean & Green team and the results from the changes in management.
- 1.4 In the second year the number of sites more than doubled and included open spaces as well as highway verges.

2. Key Issues

New Sites for 2022

- 2.1 In the first year there were 15 sites, in this second year there are 23 additional sites, making a total of 38 sites that are being managed for wildflowers. Most of these were put forward by Parish & Town, churches and community groups, including.

- Grindleford three verges
- Taddington two verges
- St Thomas Church, Biggin
- St Ann's Church, Baslow
- Hassop island roundabout
- Bakewell Recreation ground
- Northwood Recreation ground
- Darley Dale two verges on A6
- St Helen's Church, Darley Dale
- Arc Leisure Matlock
- Morledge estate three new sites
- Matlock A6 roundabout
- Hall Leys Park
- Artist Corner
- Steeple Arch cemetery
- Ashbourne cemetery
- Ashbourne Fishpond Meadow

This year we have extended beyond highway verges including a variety of sites: roundabouts, closed churchyards, active cemeteries, open spaces and parks.

Creation and management of wildflower areas

- 2.2 As standard practice, grass verges aren't seeded but by annually cutting and collecting the vegetation on the verge we slowly reduce the fertility of the soil. Over time this will allow the natural seed bank in the soil to germinate and grow. It should also be remembered that common species like dandelions and buttercups are wildflowers and a valuable source of food to pollinators. Some community groups and parish & town councils, volunteers have scarified their verges and sown wildflower seeds to give nature a helping hand.
- 2.3 The purchase of the Amazone, a cut and collect flail mower has allowed us to increase the number of sites and to manage larger wildflower areas. It has a capacity of 1800 litres and the interchangeable blades that allow cut and collect or drop and to scarify. Scarifying removes dead material in the turf and in doing so it opens up bare patches of soil which is then possible to sow wildflower if desired.
- 2.4 The Amazone was used this autumn at Bakewell Recreation ground, Fishpond Meadow and Mayfield Road cemetery to create wildflower areas. These areas were left uncut during the summer but, because they are within parks, we decided to sow with a mix that contains both annuals and perennials native seed mix. The annuals will provide a splash of colour in the first year while perennial wildflowers established themselves.
- 2.5 The meadows created along the Broadwalk in Hall Leys Park was completed in conjunction with the Environment Agency and their contractor Jacksons, as part of their reparations for the work on the river bank. Jacksons carried out the preparation work and we invited children from Castle View Primary School to sow wildflower seeds and plant bulbs. These will provide interest from March through to August for visitors as well benefiting local wildlife.
- 2.6 Most of the wildflower areas are cut once a year in September, to allow the plants to flower and set seed. However there are two areas where the management differed. This year the areas between the two car parks at the Arc were managed as part of the charity Plant life No Mow May. The campaign encouraged the public and landowners to leave areas of grass uncut for the month of May to allow the plants growing within the grass to flower for bees and other pollinators, the sward can then be cut as usual. This was the first time the District Council had taken part in this campaign but it was felt that it would work for Arc Leisure Matlock as families use the space to picnic in the summer. However due to some negative publicity when we did cut in June we have reviewed the situation and will be cutting it later on in the year.
- 2.7 The other area is adjacent to Steeple Arch Cemetery. The ground is damp and this makes it difficult to cut and collect later on in the year so we are managing it as a spring meadow. By cutting it in mid/late July it will encourage more spring and early summer flowering plants and the ground should be dry enough to get the Amazone on.

Urban and rural verges

- 2.8 It is important to understand there are significant differences between rural and urban verges. The urban verges are maintained in house, by the Clean & Green Team. They are often within villages or towns on roads with less than 40mph speed limits and currently receive at least 6 cuts per year.
- 2.9 Rural verges tend to start at the edge of residential areas and have speed limits of 40 mph and over. They are cut by a flail mowing contractor, once or twice a year. The Clean and Green Manager and Supervisors manage this contract on behalf of DCC and the specification is well established. With a maximum of two cuts, this specification already enhances biodiversity; whilst balancing highway safety. Even though the Biodiversity Team has received recommendations for several rural verges; following an assessment; highway safety would be compromised. In addition, the speed of the traffic on the rural roads make it unsafe for the workforces to collect the cuttings. However DCC are undertaking a county wide review on the maintenance of the verges so this may change.

Derbyshire County Council

- 2.10 Talks with DCC Highways are ongoing and regular meetings have been held over the last year. DCC recently appointed Road Verge Project Officer for two years to look specifically how Derbyshire in its entirety manages verges and what can be done to improve biodiversity. The Officer has met with the Biodiversity Team and is learning from our experiences and has me staff to see it first-hand. South Derbyshire Council has joined the discussions as another authority within Derbyshire to be enhancing diversity.
- 2.11 In November 2021 DCC held a Highways Verge Conference for local authorities in Derbyshire. The aim of the conference was to look at the way the verges are currently managed and start to explore ways to improve their biodiversity. The speakers included DCC Highways officers, DWT & other conservation organisations and officers from DDDC and South Derbyshire District Council who gave a presentation about their road verge projects.

Parish and Town Councils

- 2.12 In autumn 2021 the parish and town councils were asked for suggestions of suitable road verges in their ward that they would like to see managed for wildflowers. There were 14 responses and each of suggestions were assessed by C&G. Most were added to list for 2022 and the few that weren't was because they weren't suitable, either in terms of traffic visibility or they are rural verges and where we don't yet have permission to make change to their management.

Publicity

- 2.13 Our Bee Kind signs were erected at each of the new verges to inform the public that they have been left uncut for wildlife. Information has been posted on social media, an article in Dales Matters and in the local press. The community groups have also been publicising the project through village news publications, events and social media.

- 2.14 The public feedback has generally been very positive. However the Council received some negative publicity from mowing at Arc Leisure Matlock after the “No Mow May” campaign. This confirmed our initial concerns and, since reviewing the campaign, we have decided to manage the area at the Arc as a spring meadow and leave it uncut until the end of July.
- 2.15 At the Green Event in Hall Leys Park in July, the Council promoted the biodiversity project. There was a lot of interest from the public on the work we are doing and seeking advice on growing meadows and wildflowers in their own gardens. From this event we are working with Derbyshire Dales Climate Hub about how they might as individuals and community groups make more space for nature within the Dales. The display and information from the Green Event also featured in Darley Dales’ Making Space for Nature the following weekend.
- 2.16 This autumn’s edition of Dale Matters contains an article about wildflower areas which is hoped to provide a bit more information about the verges and explain why not all the verges will be full of colourful wildflowers straight away but that they still are beneficial to pollinators and other wildlife while they develop.
- 2.17 The Council was approached last year by an author Roger Morgan-Grenville who planned to walk the length of UK visiting 20 biodiversity restoration projects. He was keen to include our wildflower road verges and visited Hartington’s wildflower project in March. The work of the volunteers in Hartington with DDDC support will feature in the book “Across a waking Land” due to be published in April 2023.

Community Involvement

- 2.18 In the first year of the project the Council worked closely with four community groups, this year the number has increased to include another five. The original four groups approached their projects in slightly different ways and it was felt that the new groups and parish councils could benefit from their experience. An online wildflower verge forum was held in February to inspire and pass on what these pioneer groups have learnt from their first year. Subsequently some of these the groups have continued to correspond and have visited each other sites.
- 2.19 The feedback from this year has generally been very positive. Many of the original groups felt there had been an increase in the number of species or population of wildflowers. Some are also planning to do further seeding or planting this autumn and spring. A number of the newer projects had mixed results but are keen to go on. We have provided them with advice and they plan to reseed their verges.
- 2.20 The groups express their thanks to Clean & Green team and Community Development for their support and their response to requests to changing mowing regime. When asked if there was any other support that DDDC could offer, some wanted help with educating local residents and the other would like to see us hold another forum.

Costings

- 2.21 The changes to managing the verges have come at a cost. It has taken 503 hours of Clean & Green Team time in 2022 and £3,640 has been spent on seeds and tool hire. The purchase of the Amazone is unknown as DCC Highways will be making a significant contribution to the cost.

3. Options Considered and Recommended Proposal

- 3.1 2023/24 is the final year of the three year project aimed at increasing biodiversity on land owned by the Council or that we have responsibility for. It is recommended that that the four recommendations made earlier in the report are excepted

4. Consultation

- 4.1 Next steps for 2023
We are currently considering another 10 sites for 2023. However there is the capacity to take on even more sites particularly where we can use the Amazone. As the machine is attached to a tractor it requires larger sites that are flat or with a gentle gradient. We would welcome suggestions from members and from parish & town councils and the public.

5. Timetable for Implementation

- 5.1 New sites for consideration in 2023 need to be submitted by the end of February to give time to visit and make our assessment on their suitability.

6. Policy Implications

- 6.1 This report supports the Corporate Plan priority of “Keeping the Derbyshire Dales Clean, Green and Safe”.

7. Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 It is expected that costs can be contained within existing budgets so the financial risk is assessed as low.

8. Legal Advice and Implications

- 8.1 This report is to update and inform Members on the progress of the biodiversity of road verges and public open spaces project and outline the next phase for 2023/24 as such the legal risk associated with the decisions recommended within this report has been assessed as low.

9. Equalities Implications

- 9.1 There are no equalities implications associated with this report.

10. Climate Change Implications

- 10.1 The recommendations of the report do not require a full climate change impact assessment

- 10.2 The environmental changes being driven by climate change are disturbing ecosystems in ways that are still only becoming clear. There are signs that rising temperatures are affecting biodiversity, while changing rainfall patterns and extreme weather events are putting pressure on species already threatened by other human activities. The threat posed by climate change to biodiversity is expected to increase.
- 10.3 The loss of wildflower meadows has an effect on many insect species, including vital pollinators like bees and herbivores like aphids, grasshoppers and caterpillars. It also impacts populations of natural pest controllers like spiders, ladybirds and lacewings. Providing more opportunities for native plants and wildflowers to thrive will help our local ecosystems adapt to a changing climate.
- 10.4 Importantly this project is acting as an exemplar in communities and educating/influencing others to make changes in the way in which they manage their own land even on a small scale.

Report Authorisation

Approvals obtained from:-

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Paul Wilson	29/11/2022
Director of Resources/ S.151 Officer (or Financial Services Manager)	Karen Henriksen	28/11/2022
Monitoring Officer (or Legal Services Manager)	James McLaughlin	29/11/2022