



To: Chair and Members of the
Communities Scrutiny Committee

Date: 19 October 2012

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Dear Councillor

I refer to this agenda for the meeting of the **COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** to be held at **9.30 am** on **THURSDAY, 25 OCTOBER 2012** in **CONFERENCE ROOM 1A, COUNTY HALL, RUTHIN** and enclose the following report(s).

**Agenda Item
No**

5 REVIEW OF HIGHWAY VERGE GRASS CUTTING 2012 (Pages 3 - 10)

To consider a report by the Joint Head of Highways and infrastructure (copy enclosed) which reviewed the grass cutting programme for 2012, and assessed the effectiveness of the recommendations put forward by the Committee for 2012 season.

9.35 a.m.

Yours sincerely

G Williams
Head of Legal and Democratic Services

MEMBERSHIP

Councillors

James Davies
Peter Evans

Bob Murray
Joe Welch

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Huw Hilditch-Roberts
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life on the edge

Agenda Item 5



Roadside Verges Project
Protecting Denbighshire's Wildflowers

Why are roadside verges important for wildlife?

Roadside verges have become increasingly important as havens for wildlife because, unlike many farmed habitats, they have been left untouched by fertilisers or pesticides that can destroy wild species. This means that they can support many of our most beautiful and scarce wildflowers even though these may have disappeared from the surrounding countryside. This allows an extraordinary range of wildlife to survive on roadside verges such as bumblebees, butterflies and other invertebrates, as well as lizards, amphibians, small mammals and a variety of birds. In many cases verges are all that remain of once widespread herb-rich hay meadows and pasture.

Together with hedgerows and adjoining stone walls, roadside verges form a network of natural routes spreading across the countryside, often in a sea of intensive agriculture. These can act as corridors along which wildlife can move, and may help species adapt to climate change.



Meadow Crane's-bill

Common Spotted Orchid

What is special about roadside verges in Denbighshire?

Denbighshire verges are noted for their species diversity which is largely determined by the prevailing geology and soils. These have created a variety of grassland habitats across the county. Amongst the most impressive are the calcareous grasslands in the north and east where limestone-loving plants such as Orchids, Meadow Crane's-bill, Field Scabious, Cowslip, Lady's Bedstraw, St John's-wort, Yellow Rattle and numerous other wildflowers occur in great abundance. Elsewhere, verges more typical of unimproved acid grassland of the upland areas and neutral grassland in the lowlands support Greater Stitchwort, Giant Bellflower, Shiny Crane's-bill, Sneezewort, Harebell or Foxglove. Plants more associated with woodland habitats including Bluebell, Primrose and Red Campion are also to be found growing in some verges.



Red Campion and Meadowsweet Verge

There are over 1110 kms (690 miles) of roadside verges in rural Denbighshire, with the most important being found on the minor roads which often follow ancient routes and pathways. Wildflowers in verges are also an attractive feature of the landscape.



Bluebell Verge

How do roadside verges contribute to UK and local biodiversity?

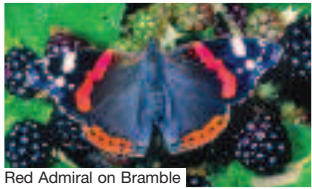


Because traditional meadows have declined to such an extent over the last 70-80 years, they are listed in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan as a priority habitat for conservation action. As verges are now an increasingly important place for the survival of this habitat type, the more important flower-rich verges are also highlighted in both national and county Biodiversity Action Plans, with targets to protect and enhance their value for wildlife. If managed to take

account of wildlife, roadside verges can make a significant contribution to the conservation of biodiversity in the county.

What is being done to protect the biodiversity value of roadside verges?

Many people know of roadside verges in their local area where wildflowers appear in the spring or summer, only to get cut down just when they are at their most spectacular. As well as making our surroundings less attractive, cutting roadside verges when they are full of plants in flower also harms the wildlife that feeds, shelters and nests there. Although most verges do benefit from a cut at some point in the year, ideally the plants they support should be allowed to flower and set seed first, otherwise we will eventually lose the wildflowers and much of the wildlife associated with them.



Red Admiral on Bramble

Today not all verges are flower-rich and full of insects. Modern methods of verge cutting with a flail cutter machine combined with frequent cutting throughout spring and summer have caused a decline in the value of the verges for wildlife. Increased soil fertility from grass cuttings and scalping of soils also encourages the coarser grasses and vigorous species to dominate. However, if left unmanaged the verge will also

become colonised by scrub and woody species.

The Highways Authority along with Denbighshire Countryside Service and the North Wales Wildlife Trust are working together to develop improved management regimes for the verges of Denbighshire, especially in rural areas, to maintain and improve their value for biodiversity but without compromising road safety. This is especially important as public bodies including Local Authorities and Community Councils now have a specific duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 to further the conservation of biodiversity.

An ongoing programme to cut rural roadside verges in a more wildlife-friendly way has started. Apart from where road safety is an issue, verge cuts on minor roads will be carefully timed so that wild plants can flower and set seed. This will ensure that they continue to look spectacular and help to protect our wildlife for the future. This should also lessen disturbance to birds nesting in hedges.

A low intensity management regime is being trialled to determine the optimum cutting times for different types of grassland and, in so doing, ensure the conservation and protection of the greatest numbers of wildflowers and other associated biodiversity.



Common Blue on St John's-wort



Cowslip



Bumblebee on Scabious



Orange Tip on Lady's Smock



Meadow Brown on Knapweed

Roadside Nature Reserves

In addition to the general verge management policies mentioned above, the North Wales Wildlife Trust has also identified a number of verges of special conservation interest either for their rare plants or which are remnants of now scarce grassland habitats. These have been designated as Roadside Nature Reserves and are being managed by the Highways Authority according to specific management prescriptions. However, these special verges only form a tiny proportion of the total highway verge network.

Aims of the Roadside Verge Project

- ❁ Reduce intensity of overall cutting regime, delaying timing of cut to late summer/early autumn to avoid main flowering and seeding, unless for safety reasons.
- ❁ Avoid cutting too low to minimise damage to soils.
- ❁ Cut verges with limestone and acid grasslands with slower-growing vegetation once only in August/September.
- ❁ Consider occasional cutting in early May on more productive verges to control growth of coarser grasses and dominant species.



Yellowhammer



Bank Vole




Common Lizard

If you would like to know more about the Roadside Verges Project in Denbighshire, or would like to send in information on any verges of particular interest, please contact one of the following:

North Wales Wildlife Trust

 01352 810469

Denbighshire County Council, Countryside Service

 01824 708263/708234

Transport and Infrastructure

 01824 706101

Or email – biodiversity@denbighshire.gov.uk

Harebells



The project is supported by the Denbighshire Local Biodiversity Partnership. This leaflet is produced by Denbighshire Countryside Service with funding from Countryside Council for Wales.



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