

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** Conservation Advisory Group.  
Conservation, Sustainability &  
Community Planning Portfolio Holder  
**AUTHOR/S:** Conservation Manager

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8<sup>th</sup> December 2004

### Management of roadside verges for biodiversity enhancement.

#### Purpose

1. To consider and bring the issue of roadside verge (RSV) management to the attention of the Conservation Advisory Group (CAG) and to explore options for future biodiversity enhancement of these sites.

*Susanah O'Hanlon – CCC Biodiversity Officer & Rob Mungovan – SCDC Ecology Officer will be available to contribute to this debate.*

#### Effect on Corporate Objectives

2.	Quality, Accessible Services	Enhancement of the biodiversity of roadside verges will contribute to meeting service targets set by both the County's BAP and SCDC's Performance Plan (SP901)
	Village Life	Semi-natural grass verges are important features of South Cambridgeshire and provide a pleasant backdrop to the villages, establishing part of the "green infrastructure" of the settlements.
	Sustainability	Establishing the correct level of maintenance will ensure that resources are deployed effectively, and contribute towards environmental improvement by enhancing biodiversity.
	Partnership	There maybe an opportunity to work more closely with the County Council, parish councils and local natural heritage bodies.

#### Background

3. The roadside verges (RSVs) of South Cambs. represent a significant grassland resource. Some RSVs receive protection as *County Wildlife Sites* (CWS). However, successful levels of protection for such sites effectively relies upon joint-working by agencies and local partnerships, because of the non-statutory status of the CWS designation.
4. The standard maintenance operation applied to the RSVs usually necessitates cutting by a tractor-mounted flail with a frequency of 3-4 times per year. The cuttings are left in place. The left cuttings can act to suppress the more sensitive grassland species. There is a growing concern that the RSVs are being over-managed leading to a reduction in their associated biodiversity.

#### Considerations

5. There are 42 protected RSVs in South Cambs. and management prescriptions for these sites have been forwarded to the County Council from the Wildlife Trust. The general management regime applied to many of these sites involves cutting at the

optimum time of year (often requiring two cuts per year) followed by removal of the arisings.

6. Non-protected RSVs are subject to no special management treatment. However, the view amongst conservationists is that in many parts of the district RSVs could have a reduced management regime, possibly including not cutting some areas at all in some years. This would appear to be the approach adopted in parts of neighbouring Hertfordshire and Essex, where as a consequence biodiversity has been enhanced.
7. The management of RSVs is primarily undertaken to meet the safety requirements of the highways authority. Clearly, visibility of the road ahead must not be impaired by vegetation. Annual cutting is also a method of preventing scrub encroachment. However, it is generally accepted that most flails can manage woody vegetation of up to three years growth.
8. In April 2004 the Cambridgeshire Biodiversity Partnership wrote to the County Council's Assistant Director for Environment & Transport, to initiate discussion on the future management of the protected RSVs. This debate is still on-going and it is therefore considered appropriate for CAG members to contribute to the debate in the light of their local knowledge and contacts with local groups.

### **Options**

9. The Conservation Advisory Group are requested to :
  - (1) To consider the potential for enhancement of maintenance regimes for protected roadside verges with the Biodiversity Partnership, as a basis for the development of future revised management regimes with the Asst Director of Environment and Transport at CCC.
  - (2) To explore alternatives for the potential biodiversity enhancement and revised management procedures for non-protected RSVs with the Asst Director of Environment and Transport at CCC, where there is an opportunity via local partnerships to change the current management regime without compromising highway safety.
  - (3) To defer the matter of the management of roadside verges to the appropriate representative of the County Council responsible for the management of RSVs.

### **Financial Implications**

10. None specific.

### **Legal Implications**

11. None specific. Highway maintenance is the responsibility of the county council.

### **Staffing Implications**

12. Likely to require the time of the Ecology Officer, which will require prioritising against other projects.

### **Risk Management Implications**

13. None specific as the management of all RSVs will ultimately still lie with the County Council.

## **Consultations**

14. None specific. However, the District Council's Scrutiny Committee raised the issue of RSV management. Cllr Agnew is keen that the matter is explored further.

## **Conclusions/Summary**

15. There would appear to be a need to initiate further dialogue with the County Council on the issue of RSV management. The County Council has its own Biodiversity Officer. It is considered that the improved management of the protected RSVs to secure their biodiversity potential, needs to be identified as a matter of greater priority.
16. The management of non-protected RSVs is likely to be an area of much greater debate. Safety and the management of existing cutting contracts will have to be considered further if these sites (the majority) are to reveal their biodiversity potential in the future.
17. It is considered that opportunities for the adjustment of the standard maintenance operations within current contracts should be explored initially, with a possible new lead role from the parish-up level where local knowledge and enthusiasm of local people exists to assist the County Council.

## **Recommendations**

18. It is recommended that the Conservation Advisory Group requests that the Conservation, Sustainability & Community Planning Portfolio Holder initiates further action by officers to :
  - (1) Consider the potential enhancement of maintenance regimes for protected roadside verges with the Biodiversity Partnership, as a basis for the development of future revised management regimes with the Asst Director of Environment and Transport at CCC.
  - (2) Explore alternatives for the potential biodiversity enhancement and revised management procedures for non-protected RSVs with the Director of Environment and Transport at CCC, where there is an opportunity via local partnerships to change the current management regime without compromising highway safety.

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: None specific.

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