



Managing grassland road verges: a best practice guide

Case study: Restoring and expanding species-rich road verges in the Fermanagh and Omagh Council area

A case study from: Ulster Wildlife Trust

Partners/Funders: Fermanagh and Omagh Council, Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Fermanagh and west Tyrone host the largest blocks of species rich grassland in Northern Ireland. Much of the area is designated as both Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for the component habitats. The species rich grassland in the area comprises mainly of lowland meadow and purple moor grass and rush pasture habitat types as well as some localised calcareous grassland complexes. These habitat types are found frequently along road verges in the area but were historically cut regularly.

Along with Transport NI and Roads Service, Fermanagh and Omagh Council were a key partner in the project and are responsible for cutting many of the rural road verges in the county. The council were aware of the importance of rural verges in the county and accordingly included Grassland and Roadside verges collectively as a habitat type into their 2016 - 2020 Local Biodiversity Action Plan. This gave both parties plenty of scope to work together on roadside verges and reach solutions that were satisfactory to both parties.

Verges were surveyed and shortlist of the most species rich verges was compiled. Rapid condition assessments were undertaken by staff and volunteers using the Flora of Co. Fermanagh alongside input from input from its authors. Survey data was presented to the relevant biodiversity and roadside management teams, and sites that weren't health and risks were identified.

There were no issues with litter, although the council did had concerns regarding the perceived "tidiness" of the verges. This was worked around by allowing narrow strips to be cut around the edge of the verge, framing the taller verge plants inside. This gave the perception of tidiness, offsetting any potential negative feedback on a lack of management around verges. Other than the framing the verges were untouched and were cut once a year from mid-August onwards. A management plan was created and agreed with the council to this effect.

These arrangements were supported by the provision of GPS coordinates which were fed into the councils mapping system. This illustrated the custom management arrangements in place ensuring that appropriate management was undertaken. In addition, signs were erected for the totality of the council cutting season to a) raise awareness of the concept and b) inform contractors and sub-contractors as a failsafe to maintain sympathetic management.

This project has protected roadside verges of real ASSI quality. Priority plant species such as fragrant and bee orchids have been protected as well as priority fauna such as the dingy skipper butterfly of which some strongholds occur along our roadside verges. The project has also been a great way of engaging the local community. Members of the public have approached the project to get advice on converting gardens into wildflower meadows, to volunteer with seed harvesting and even to create a green roof on their house using native wildflower seed. The project itself also had a significant reach on social media with over 6 million impressions in tweets and retweets on twitter.

Next steps for the project include undertaking investigatory research to ascertain whether or not there are benefits to roadside verges that can be quantified, for example the reduction of flooding which is a problem in the area. Equally, discussions with FODC are ongoing as to issues such as what cutting machinery is best fit for purpose and as to whether grass cutting collection is feasible, at least on some key sites.

Project costs

Staff costs for 3 days development work, 3 days engagement work and 2 days liaising with the council.

Travel and Subsistence - £150

GPS - £150

Signs - £200



Clear signage on verges to raise awareness and inform contractors

