

Project & Amenities Committee 29th March 2022

Urban Verge Wildlife project

Welcome to new parishes who have joined the scheme this year, and hello to our existing partner parishes for another great year! 😊

I just wanted to send a quick update in relation to the **LCC Urban Verge Wildlife project** that you are currently signed up too.

As it stands as of 2022 we now have an overwhelming 50 parishes signed up to the scheme with around 64 verges in total, a huge milestone given that the project initially started with 13 as part of the original pilot. The project continues to grow in momentum year on year which is great! Attitudes are finally starting to change and more people are becoming increasingly aware of the value of verges for wildlife,, especially with less intensive management.

Some of you may be more familiar than others regarding the next steps if you are part of the scheme already, but just for those who are new to the initiative I thought I would provide an update. Things may appear quiet over the next few months, but please do not worry as we are working behind the scenes. Now that you have a completed wildlife agreement in place and have had your verge/s approved the highways grass cutting contractors will be notified of these verge/s to be left un-cut that belong to the scheme, the grass cuttings season is due to commence on Monday 4th April so all cutting maps will be updated accordingly.

2022 Parishes

We strongly advise and advocate that those participating in the scheme who have not yet had any prior baseline Naturespot (NS) surveys or management advice **do not undertake any management** of the verges in the meantime. This includes sowing, cutting or plug planting etc. This is because we need a clear and accurate representation of your verges current value come **June/July** when most wildflowers and grasses are at their peak. Many verges currently hold some existing interesting species but have never had chance to flourish due to a frequency of cut. With a reduction in cuts it will allow many of these dormant seed banks to flower which will be picked up in your NS survey this year.

Over the next few months you will be contacted to arrange a suitable time to undertake a wildlife survey of your designated verge/s, we **cannot undertake this prior to June/July** unfortunately due to the seasonality aspect of wildflowers and grasses. Once the survey has been undertaken you will get some management recommendations on how best to maximise the value of your verge/s for biodiversity. This is usually 1/2 suggestions. 1) To continue with just one annual cut around mid-sept, leaving cuttings in situ for 7 days before removal, this is usually because your verge already has a relatively rich flora, and/or 2) to prepare and sow the verges with native wildflower mixes which we will advise on. All the information will be provided to the parish along with the wildlife data which will also be deposited with the Local Environmental Records Centre via NS.

In addition, all parishes in the scheme get a minimum of two annual surveys undertaken by specialist volunteers and recorders at Naturespot who are one of the key partners in this initiative. Parishes participating also get a free complimentary bespoke '**Wildplaces Page**' to showcase there verge/s and wildlife areas, a hub for photos, wildlife record submission and info. I have already contacted some of you whose pages are ready, for those yet to receive there's I will send in due course. The pages are built on over time, so initially may not have much data until the first survey or any additional volunteer efforts beforehand which we strongly encourage!

Here is one example of a more established page for reference:

https://www.naturespot.org.uk/broughton_astley_verge_cosby_rd

Existing parishes 2020/21

All existing parishes in the scheme will be contacted as above in the next few months to undertake your **second annual survey from NS volunteers** as of previously, the management recommendations still apply prior to any follow up survey that may suggest any changes etc.

Training & ID

Great news for this year, we are in the process of arranging more specialist training for volunteers and communities, dates are still to be confirmed but workshops will include **grass and wildflower ID for beginners, verge wildlife and a series of verge open days where the community are invited to come along and join NS volunteers to undertake the wildlife surveys** so they can pick up skills and knowledge going forward to build longer term project sustainability. A number of **bespoke ID sheets are also been produced to aid ongoing survey and ID efforts for volunteers.**

We will also be offering x10 volunteers a chance to partake in our AQA Unit Award Scheme pilot where we have select modules on grassland habitat where volunteers can get an informal accreditation for this to aid there personal and professional development. If you are interested in finding out more please let me know.

PLI, Employee Insurances & Wildflower Agreement Forms

All parishes involved in the scheme were recently contacted either by myself or my colleague Laura Platts in our admin team as we were undertaking applicant checks for all involved in the scheme going forward, in which we were made aware that a number of documents were missing for some of the earlier established parishes prior to my involvement and the project coming to the Environment team. Thank you to those who have since sent these through, your record's have been updated accordingly.

However, we are still missing a number of copies from a considerable amount of parishes who were contacted with an initial deadline, whilst the grass cutting teams have been notified of all verges in the scheme, without a full agreement some verges can be missed and accidentally cut. We are hopeful this isn't the case but wanted to make parishes aware that this can be an issue without the appropriate forms so are keen to mitigate as much as we can to prevent this and all the amazing momentum.

Secondly, parishes partaking in the scheme who haven't since sent appropriate dated copies of PLI for there year/s involved will be responsible for any liability issues/s on their verges as the council **will not** take responsibility for this without the appropriate procedures and checks in place as this is the parishes responsibility in signing up to the scheme, and parishes should have these documents as standard as a parish council.

If you still haven't sent these please can you send this **no later than Friday 31st March by 4pm**, as the grass cutting season commences the following Monday (4th April) so we would like to update our records-Thank you.

Service Level Agreements (SLA)

A small minority of parishes in the scheme will have existing SLA with their own grass cutting contractors separate to LCC contractors, therefore it is the parishes responsibility to make their contractors aware of verge/s they have entered in the scheme that should not be cut until the survey has been undertaken. We still endorse parishes with SLAs in the scheme because we still have the highways permissions etc. However, most in the scheme are managed by our internal grass cutting teams in our highways dept.

Whilst the project has since moved to our team in 'Environment', any grass cutting queries or issues are still been dealt with by Highways.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to message me and I will do my best to assist, in the meantime I cannot wait to meet more of you and continue with this great project, a big thanks to all involved, including NS!

Kind Regards,

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