

## Notes of Managing Spaces for Biodiversity meeting 16 December 2020

Present: 43 individuals; 7 presenters and 36 guests (including members of Bexhill, Northiam and Battle environmental groups)

### Introduction by David Pankhurst, RALC Chair

The meeting was called further to interest shown at recent Rother Parish Conference.

Guests from Bexhill, Northiam and Battle environmental groups were welcomed to the meeting.

The meeting would be recorded for benefit of RALC members [link to be circulated by Clare Fletcher to those present, and by Gill Colquhoun, RALC Secretary to all Rother Clerks].

### Speaker 1 Keith Datchler/Fergus Dignan

Diversity is key, very important – Keith and Fergus argued the benefits of diversity

*Q What were lessons learnt in Battle?*

*A Managing public perception – ‘tidiness’ gauge for village/town. Need to make it a welcoming experience, also mow paths through it.*

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*Q Local Govt finance department like savings quantified how do we do this, hard to get past finance departments*

*A Not difficult to do: labour study hours and depends on machinery available. Lincolnshire now ahead of game and harvesting grass and producing power from it. Need to work with Highways.*

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*Q How did you overcome public resistance*

*A Not totally overcome, results show people what can be achieved. Need to be clever where you will site wildflowers. Not a blanket policy to have long grass.*

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*Q Battle is looking at being even more diverse, but proving difficult (what to do with cuttings ‘arisings’)*

*A There is a rough edge on amenity field, the rest is taken by Highways at the end of the season. Communities need a composting area*

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*Q So not number of cuts but type of cuts. Is guidance available?*

*A Speak to James Newmarch. There is guidance, but not widely available. See Plantlife – verges management guidance leaflet. <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/our-work/publications/good-verge-guide-different-approach-managing-our-waysides-and-verges>*

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*Q Mention of digging, can we get farmers to dig again.*

*A People shouldn’t be afraid of gardening, it is all part of the process.]*

### Speaker 2 James Newmarch Verges in ES Highways area

Explained verges in context of work of Council. 1500 hectares of verges in ES, some of which are wildlife verges (do have legal duties to conserve and enhance biodiversity). Value of verges: buffers; views; reflect distinct local landscape; wildflower corridors; when managed correctly they can support very diverse species; good management often means simply do less. Next year ES undertaking a trial to cut rural verges less. 10% of county has been approached to take part. At present rural verges cut a year – May and later. Trial would reduce to one visibility cut and another cut later (so do not cut except for visibility at a time when pollination at a peak). Safety issues will remain a priority. Those invited have a deadline of 15 January to say whether wish to take part in trial. Verge management – can be designated as wildflower, application form with accompanying guidance including H&S. <https://www.eastsussexhighways.com/our-services/vegetation/grass?topic=how-do-you-maintain-the-rural-verges>. Project manager confirms and then Parish confirmed in writing.

*Q Is there a target for raising no of wildflower verges and raising height of cut*

*A ESH measure the change in number, generally happy to increase. Height of cut is a different issue, typically allowed to grow as wish and then cut and clear normally in the Autumn*

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*Q How can Parishes get onto the trial, and get verges surveyed for wildlife importance*

*A Parishes have been approached; others interested if feel very strongly can email James to pass onto Project manager of trial. [James.newmarch@eastsussex.gov.uk](mailto:James.newmarch@eastsussex.gov.uk) Not necessarily expecting all offered to take part will do (ESH do have a reserve list of Parishes). Surveying verges – a lot is down to volunteers. It is a simple species survey and making a rough assessment based on what found. It is good to know if already have rare species before you try to enhance it. Importance to have a baseline survey first. Application form <https://www.eastsussexhighways.com/our-services/vegetation/wildlife-verges?topic=what-do-we-do-in-east-sussex> [On the ESH website you can access two documents from Plantlife - The Good Verge Guide and Managing Grassland Road Verges. However, no ESH policy document].*

### Speaker 3 Crowhurst John Feltwell local ecologist and Deborah Upton, Crowhurst Parish Clerk

Crowhurst has 877 hectares, with no footpaths. 5 conservation verges. The Parish started auditing species two years ago. A community effort. You can see your parish spaces on magic website. <https://magic.defra.gov.uk/magicmap.aspx>

Deborah, Parish Clerk explained how pay for wildflower verges, and why the Council chooses to pay for it. PC has made the environment a priority (see Parish website), with a very active environment group. Cost of having wildflower verges cut by contractor is minimal, as it is a small amount of area, but they have to collect (collection is the main cost). If asked to collect on every verge it would be different. Environment group gets annual grants from parish councils, in the coming year the PC has set aside a small budget for promoting wildflower verges, and the work of the council on environment).

*Q no street lighting, do you have a dark skies policy?*

*A not yet*

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*Q ESH website does not include an ESH policy document.*

*A James Newmarch to investigate*

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*Q Are Crowhurst volunteers who work under direction of Parish Council]*

*A Volunteers, who work in line with the P Council/with support of Parish Council*

*H&S issues? They have their own insurance (applied for PC grant to help pay for this)*

*How do they go about that?*

*A James – ESHighways are very keen that anyone is appropriately qualified, insured etc when working on highways. Useful if link to local council. Most groups do have H&S arrangements – a lot of sharing of H&S documents. Qualified – see highways providers. James to circulate*

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*Speak 4 James Fraser, Mountfield Parish Vice Chair of Darwell area conservation society*

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*Described the parish and audit. For useful mapping of your area see mapping by Sussex Botanical Society. <https://www.sussexflora.org.uk/>*

*Mountfield has also undertaken their own survey of Mountfield Lane – 119 flowering species on lane, and 158 on Banks Farm etc.*

*In May 2020 the council cut the verge on Mountfield Lane, leading to destruction of habitats. As part of conservation group trying to get ESH to take action, to stop this happening. The Council has a responsibility to conserve biodiversity including habitats. ESH response is rural cutting is undertaken where speed limit is 50mph or above...due to safety implications working on higher speed roads. Council policy is currently to only protect where particular ecological interest - can then apply for verges to become wildlife verges. Mountfield has applied for that lane to be designated, and will continue to undertake audits.*

*James Newmarch stated that trial is result of lobbying. Mowing times a lot is to do with traditional practice, there will be a new Highways contract in a couple of years and changes could be made. If anyone in a Parish offered chance to take part to come back and accept the offer, and any others to email so he can pass on.*

*Q Is 31 December a deadline still for verges decision stil?*

*A James to find out.*

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*QWill trial cover different approaches to dumping cuttings*

*A No?*

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*Q Where ESCC clears gullies along verges can they not also seed wildflowers at the same time into the bare soil. Seems like a very easy to do opportunity.*

*A A baseline survey would what is growing.*

*Fergus: our experiments here has shown when clippings are left you get a more open sward and as a result a different mix. and a different dynamic around seeding. Not always bad. we leave some areas but take off the rest. Keith: don't want to import, don't interfere more than have to, do not import soil to repair, leave dug out soil on site.*

CLlr Prochak introduced herself as Councillor for RDC. Thanked everyone for attending. Mentioned Sussex Nature Partnership and that the new Environment Bill will mean that every planning application will need to show an environmental gain (by 2023).

Kristina Somdokova (Rother Environmental & Policy Manager) circulated a reminder for Rother Verges policy <https://surveymechanics.com/s/wildlifeverges> (closes end of December). Kristina will present results at the next RALC meeting in January.

David Pankhurst thanked everyone for attending. The meeting ended at 16.11 pm

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Gill Colquhoun RALC Secretary 16 December 2020