

Report presented to Northumberland National Park Authority Management Group meeting on Wednesday 17th November 2004.

MG - 672: SEEDING CHANGE IN NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK

Decision Required:

The Management Group is requested to:

- **Support the development of the project and an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund;**
- **Allocate the resources for staff time; and**
- **Recommend Northumberland National Park Authority contribution towards the project.**

Background

1. Northumberland National Park has some of the best hay meadows in Europe (4 designated SAC sites) and approximately 25 other species rich meadows. Upland hay meadows are a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and in the Northumberland National Park BAP. The NNP Upland Hay Meadow Habitat Action Plan has (amongst others) objectives to:

'Recreate upland hay meadow communities on improved in-bye fields'
'Increase awareness of upland hay meadows as important biodiversity and landscape features'

Roadside verges are important reservoirs of wild flowers and together with the last remaining species rich meadows these verges are the best places to see flowers typical of Northumberland National Park. Verges are easily accessible on foot and by cycle and car. Indeed, the guided cycle ride and walk at the Celebrating Hay Meadow event used the verges as a resource as much as the meadows. The Tasset Archive Group has started to survey the verges around Tasset and Greenhaugh recording the flower species present and identifying the most important stretches.

Some trials have already taken place to collect seed from species rich hay meadows and spread this on nearby meadows to diversify them. This summer a survey of 45 meadows managed under Countryside Stewardship was undertaken to assess how fields have changed and to identify meadows that need diversifying. Seed has also been collected with a WI group and grown on by them; the resulting plants are to be used to enrich fields and verges.

Seeding Change in Northumberland National Park

2. This project will have 3 interlinked areas of focus based on local wild flowers and their seeds:
 - i) Restoration of hay meadows to increase diversity,
 - ii) Community verge surveys and restoration around settlements,
 - iii) Engagement of local people and visitors with the wild flowers of the National Park.

Aims

- Restore a number of upland hay meadows by addition of locally collected seed and community grown plants. Link this to the understanding and celebration of traditional management and the hay making heritage within the National Park.
- Encourage communities in and around Northumberland National Park to identify important areas of wild flowers and restore other areas using locally native seed, building on these special qualities and allowing people to better connect with and appreciate them.
- Increase awareness of the wild flower heritage of Northumberland National Park and help tourism providers use these key local assets to 'sell' their local area.
- Use wild flowers as a common link between town and country to engage currently excluded groups.

Integration of purposes, added value or a holistic approach

3. This project integrates community based activities involving seed collection, growing native plants and identifying flower rich areas with practical improvements to meadows and verges in the National Park. It adds value to current Countryside Stewardship schemes funded by DEFRA by continuing to improve meadows already in traditional low input management.

Relevance – to the Vision and to stakeholders

4. Hay meadows are one of the most important habitats identified in the Northumberland National Park BAP and this project would help improve the special wild flower resource of the area. It will give local people and visitors (including previously unengaged groups) opportunities to enjoy and contribute to maintaining the resource. All restored hay meadows will be visible from footpaths, roads and villages giving opportunities to view and enjoy the fields. The verge surveys and restoration will be centred around settlements in the National Park and will be located to enhance community initiatives such as the Wild Redesdale walks. This aspect of the project enables local people to take ownership of the verges and flowers in their local area.

Is timely

5. The background preparation work has been carried out for this project and information is in place to start the project as soon as funding is available. Community groups have recently shown an interest in their local verges and flowers and others have taken part in growing on seed, therefore this project would build on and not lose this momentum. English Nature has committed support for the next three years and allocated funds under the EN/NNP joint action process. The local officer of the Heritage Lottery Fund has expressed interest and preliminary support for the project and although this is good news, the HLF is a source of funding that is shrinking due to declining ticket sales and may not be available in the same scale in the future.

Is facilitative or collaborative

6. Initial support for this project has been given from English Nature, HLF and DEFRA. The project will help local people to identify and improve the diversity of meadows and verges in their local area themselves. There is also support from community groups such as Tasset Archive group and the Women's Institute.

Enterprise and lack of risk aversion

7. This year the National Park Authority purchased two second-hand seed harvesters (only a few are currently working in the country) to trial wild flower seed exchange in the National Park. This project will use this innovative method of meadow improvement to enhance a declining habitat. The results are not guaranteed but different timings and seed broadcasting methods will be investigated during the project. This will have benefits outside the National Park as well.

Member involvement

8. It is suggested that Members could be the advocates for this project in their communities. They could help organise the local surveys and identify areas they know as flower rich. Members who own land could help develop best practice methods and improve their fields where suitable.

Evidence of community or business need and engagement

9. This year hay meadows have been the theme for the 'Celebrating Biodiversity' events. There was a lot of interest at the main event in Greenhaugh, mainly from local people who wanted to learn more about their special meadows and the flowers in the countryside around them. This underlined the need for more events and activities relating to wild flowers. It is anticipated that local contractors will be used to help in seed collection and spreading, providing additional income for contractors and/or farmers.

Value for money / effective use of resources

10. Approximate project costs are £100,000 over three years. The cost to the National Park Authority would be £10,000 per year – the remainder of the funds coming from HLF and English Nature; a significant 'gearing' ratio.

A legacy or exit strategy to preserve the investment

11. By engaging the local community there will be a local commitment to protecting flower rich areas for the future. Local groups will also be encouraged to take on long-term monitoring of these areas. Meadows that are in Countryside Stewardship (that will be enhanced by adding seed) are in 10 year agreements and owners will be encouraged to continue sympathetic management under the new Higher Level scheme.

Conclusion

12. The Seeding Change project will be carried out throughout the National Park and not in just one Action Area. North Tyne/Redesdale and Coquetdale are

likely to be the main areas of the National Park for the hay meadow restoration part of the project, but engaging local communities and verge work will be Park-wide. This project will help to enhance one of the special features of the National Park and deliver a NNP Habitat Action Plan for an internationally important habitat with a strong element of community involvement. Ideas have come from the interest already shown in wild flowers by members of the National Park community and this provides an opportunity to spread initiatives around the NNP. This project has been devised from discussions with all sections of the NNPA staff to ensure that this is an integrated project consistent with the Authority's new ways of working. It is grounded in supporting a sustainable rural economy based on maintaining traditional farming practices and celebrating a distinctive feature of the National Park landscape and using this to diversify nature-based tourism.

Authors

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REMOVAL OF PAYPHONES IN AND AROUND NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK

Background

A report was taken to the Northumberland National Park Authority Planning and Urgent Business Committee on the 20th October 2004 relating to the plans that British Telecom Payphones (BT) have to remove up to six "street payphones" of the fourteen that exist in and around the National Park. In addition there are six other payphones that may be at risk in the future. BT is committed to keeping the remaining two payphones at Elsdon and Harbottle. It is not thought that any of the phone box structures themselves are important from a historic viewpoint, but this is being checked. Of the 72,000 phone boxes in Britain, only 30,000 are profitable and cover their running costs. The number of calls from BT payphones has almost halved in the last three years and revenue has dropped by 41%. Around 99% of homes now have a phone and 85% of people have a mobile phone.

At the Authority meeting Members agreed to support a holding objection to the removal of all the payphones mentioned in the report and authorised officials to enter into a dialogue. As a basis for further discussion it was suggested that the following factors be taken into account:

- Safety, particularly that of hill walkers
- Mobile phone coverage
- The scope to increase the utility of the boxes

Any decision on the future of the payphones is now on hold for six months until discussions with the Authority, as the strategic planning authority, have been completed.

Progress

The first of two planned meetings with BT Payphones was held on the 26th November 2004. During this discussion a number of details emerged:

- The use of payphones in rural areas is very low, with the income for the phones in question being as follows:

Payphone	Cash income in the last 12 months. (£)
Cawburn	34.40
Lanehead Tasset	449.70*
Kirknewton (Southern Knowe)	36.50
Holystone	67.20
Greenhaugh	80.60
Ryehill Farm, Thropton	109.70

* this figure represents abnormal activity in July and September 2004 - almost certainly caused by drug dealers using a remote rural phone to conduct their business away from police monitoring. Such activity is regularly reported to the police by BT.

- Information on the number of calls made from each box is awaited. This can be different to the figure indicated by cash income, due to the widespread use of "BT Chargecards".
- The average cost of maintaining a payphone is £1,650, but in remote rural areas, such as the National Park, this figure can be as low as £300. Even so the phones in their current format are clearly not commercially viable.

- Surveys by BT have shown that while local communities are vociferous in their desire to keep payphones, many local residents admit to never using them. Few visitors also take advantage of the facility. The historical role of the phones has been overtaken by technological and social changes.
- Nevertheless only two of the phone box locations are in areas where a mobile phone signal is available. Mobile phone coverage is not something that BT can affect, but is determined by the commercial decisions of the mobile network providers. They are seeking to expand coverage to fill in the remaining gaps and within five years it is likely that this will be much improved.
- Not one of the six phones in question has been used to make a 999 call in the last 5 years. (Only 7% of emergency calls are from payphones and less than 1% of these turn out to be genuine.) Nearly all walkers now routinely carry mobile phones and a signal is available over most of the National Park. The main gaps in coverage are the deep valleys.
- Some payphones are now being updated to provide internet access and this is seen by BT Payphones as essential diversification, which will provide additional funding streams. To do this the company looks for additional capital funding from other organisations, such as local authorities. It costs £3,000 to convert a box and this sum includes a five year maintenance contract. If the National Park Authority supported this approach (using some of its funds) it would be possible to have immediate access to the National Park website at these locations and to corporately brand the boxes, effectively turning them into micro-information centres. This would enable, for example, information on open access restrictions to be available in a number of key locations and dramatically change the role and function of payphones in and around the National Park. In order to convert payphones they do need to be within 5.5 kilometres of an exchange, but new technology will soon extend this to 10 kilometres.
- It is also possible to include CCTV cameras and webcams as part of the updated package. Speakers can also be incorporated into the structure so that music and other sounds are available. Upgraded payphones can also act as wireless broadband points, providing a signal radiating some 150 metres from the box. It would be therefore possible to work from a nearby car with a suitable laptop.
- Payphones can be replaced completely by cash points using the same site and phone links. In these cases a new structure replaces the phone box.

Next steps

A further meeting with BT Payphones is planned, before Christmas, to further explore some of the options outlined above and to obtain additional details on existing levels of use. BT is also looking at the location of payphones in the wider surrounding area, including the Scottish Cheviots. There are clearly options for innovation in line with the National Park Authority's new Vision. From the available evidence it is obvious that a new and wider role for payphone sites needs to be developed if these structures are to survive. Merely objecting to the removal of the existing payphones will only delay their inevitable decline and disappearance.

Jonathan Mullard
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29th November 2004