Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership

Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Hedgerows

Updated September 2015

Hedgerow in a Houghton Conquest meadow
Photo by John Comont

Foreword

We are fortunate in Bedfordshire to have a fantastic range of habitats and species within a relatively small geographical area. It is a county of marked contrasts, with the chalk habitats of the North Chilterns, the heathland and acid grassland of the Greensand Ridge and the woodlands and rolling countryside of the Ouse Valley. The fact that species such as adders, dormice and otters are all now expanding their ranges to varying degrees is something we should be proud of and testament to the work of the organisations and individuals involved, but we should not be complacent. There is much to be done, and these Biodiversity Action Plans set out the scale of that challenge very clearly. Only by continuing to work in partnership, putting the case for nature ever more strongly and clearly, can we hope to build on recent progress, bring the natural environment to the fore of the thinking of key decision-makers and reverse long-term declines.

Jon Balaam, Chair of Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership

Biodiversity Action Plans Overview

The **UK Biodiversity Action Plan** (BAP) was created in response to a commitment at the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. It summarises the status of the most threatened habitats and species in the UK and then sets out a series of actions to halt their decline and then reverse it. There are National Action Plans for 1150 species and 65 habitats. The last meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity took place in Nagoya, Japan during October 2010. During the convention the BAP was replaced by the **Aichi Targets**, which were signed by 192 governments. These 20 Targets aim to halt the loss in biodiversity worldwide by 2020. Within the targets there are a range of challenges, from protecting our best habitats and rarest species, to restoring the services our natural environment provides and tackling climate change. The *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework* (July 2012) describes how the Aichi Targets will be implemented across the UK and is underpinned by a Biodiversity Strategy for each Country. In England this is *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services* (August 2011).

Although the Aichi Targets are the focus from the most recent Convention on Biological Diversity, the BAP is still a very valuable reference nationally and locally. It has been used to draw up statutory lists in some of the more recent Acts of Parliament which aim to protect and enhance biodiversity. In 2006 the **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act** (NERC) came into effect. In Section 41 of the Act there is a list of habitats and species which are "*of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity*". This lists all the BAP habitats and species which are still regarded as priorities for conservation under the *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework*. The list includes 56 habitats and 943 species. It was included to assist public bodies with the statutory duty placed on them by Section 40 of the Act. This is often referred to as the 'Biodiversity Duty' and states that public bodies have to:

"In exercising their functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity."

The aim of the Act is to embed nature conservation within all the relevant policies and decisions that public bodies make. Public bodies include a range of organisations from the Borough and Ward Councils to bodies carrying out functions of a public character under a statutory power. There is a Guidance Document that accompanies this Act to assist local authorities to implement the Biodiversity Duty.

Priority species and habitats are also recognised in the **National Planning Policy Framework** (NPPF), which came into effect in early 2012. The NPPF replaced most of the planning guidance which was previously available. It promotes the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats and ecological networks as well as the protection and recovery of priority species (paragraph 117).

Although the BAP is no longer promoted nationally it is written into legislation and policies which are being currently used. To support this locally, the BAP is still in use to inform and guide many projects and is kept relevant.

Hedgerows

National lead organisation(s):
Natural England

County lead organisation(s):
Bedfordshire Wildlife Working Group

A hedgerow is a more or less continuous line of woody vegetation that has been subject to a regime of cutting in order to maintain a regular shape. This includes both recently managed and other hedges, including hedges with walls or fences.

Current status

National status

The Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (ITE) Countryside Survey 1990 revealed that the total hedgerow length in England had fallen by over 20% during the period 1984-1990, a loss of 9,500 km per year. A further ITE survey for the period 1990-93 showed that the rate of loss had slowed to 3,500 km per year. During the same period new hedge planting increased from 1,900 km per year during 1984-1990 to 4,400 km per year during 1990-93 (Barr and Gillespie 1994).

Results from the 2000 Countryside Survey reveal that overall hedgerow and boundary feature loss in England has slowed to near zero (Defra 2001). The same trend was observed in Environmental Zone 1 (Easterly lowlands) in which Bedfordshire is located (Defra 2001).

Ninety percent of hedgerows nationally include hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, almost twice the frequency of the next most common species, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*. Twenty-eight percent of hedgerows in lowland England were found to be species-rich (Barr, Stuart, Smart and Firbank 2001).

While there was no significant loss of hedgerow trees in the UK between 1990 and 1998, in Environmental Zone 1, 66,000 hedgerow trees were lost, a statistically significant figure (Barr et al. 2001). Such losses can result from trees being removed, growing to become incorporated into a line of trees (i.e. canopies touching) or an area of trees (Barr et al. 2001). Oak *Quercus robur* and ash *Fraxinus excelsior* are the most common hedgerow tree species, making up 65% of the total (Barr et al. 2001).

Local status

Two sample surveys of hedgerow cover were conducted in Bedfordshire using data from the last 50 years. The first examined hedgerow change over the period 1945-76; the second looked at the period 1976-91. The results revealed a rate of loss of 24% in the first survey, which had dropped to just 2% during 1976-91. The total length of hedge in the county in 1991 was estimated to be 4,500 km.

Two recent surveys have been conducted in Studham and Maulden parishes. In Studham, 68% of hedgerows were found to be species-rich (Ward 2006). In Maulden this figure

dropped to 34%. The Maulden survey revealed that 34% of hedgerows were less species-rich than in 1976 and 14% were more species-rich. Results of the study also suggest that blackthorn and elder may be expanding their range in the parish, while some of the climber species may be disappearing (Webb 2007).

The oldest recorded hedges in the county date from 969 AD. A survey of hedgerows in Colmworth parish shows 45.5 km of hedgerow pre-enclosure rising to 110 km in 1838, but falling to 31.3 km in 1976 and 25 km in 1992. A recent survey has shown that 80 km of pre-1901 hedge survives within the urban area of Luton.

Current factors affecting hedgerows

- Lack of targeted grant aid for planting and hedgerow restoration (*e.g*. coppicing, laying)
- Fertiliser and/or pesticide drift
- Loss of hedgerow trees through senescence or removal, without replacement
- Low uptake of appropriate environmental stewardship options and difficulty in acquiring money for hedgerow planting
- Perception of no useful function for hedges in an arable agricultural setting.
- Introduction of foreign cultivars of native species, leading to hybridisation and possible genetic erosion.

Current action

Site protection

The 1995 Environment Act made provision for regulations to be drawn up to allow local authorities to prevent the destruction of 'important' hedgerows. The Hedgerow Regulations came into force in 1997.

Management

Since 1990 The Environmental Stewardship Schemes have made available payments to participating farmers for managing, restoring and improving existing hedgerows or for creating new ones. This seems likely to continue for the life of this plan.

Advisory services

Advice on hedgerow management and potential sources of funding is available from the following organisations:

- National Farmers Union (NFU)
- Natural England
- The Wildlife Trust
- The Greensand Trust
- Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
- Forest of Marston Vale (for farmers within the Marston Vale area)
- Chilterns Conservation Board
- Country Landowners Association (CLA)
- RSPB
- Local authorities

Achievements since publication of first Action Plan

By 2013 more than 60% of farmland was in the Entry Level Stewardship scheme with sensitive hedgerow management prescriptions proving one of the most popular items for inclusion in those schemes. Overall, 5754 km of hedges have been brought into management under environmental stewardship.

Hedgerow removal notices have been few in number during the decade to 2013 and hedgerow planting schemes continue to feature in larger developments.

Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

Maintain and where possible and appropriate expand the network of hedgerows in Bedfordshire

Maintain and where possible improve the condition and species richness of hedgerows in Bedfordshire

Targets

A. Expand the length of 5754 km of hedgerow in management through environmental stewardship by 2020

B. Extend county hedgerow network, where appropriate, for the landscape

Proposed action

Partners

Central Bedfordshire Council	BCN Wildlife Trust	Bedford Borough Council
Luton Borough Council	Natural England	Campaign for the Farmed Environment

Action

Policy and legislation

No local action identified

Site safeguard and management

1. Incorporate planting of native species-rich hedgerows within minerals, waste and major planning proposals, wherever possible using locally produced planting stock.

Advisory

2. Target landowner advise where needed and encourage appropriate Environmental Stewardship uptake for hedgerows

Future research and monitoring

3. Research and identify priority areas for hedgerow planting in Bedfordshire and Luton, taking into account a range of factors such as habitat connectivity, soil conservation and landscape character

Communication and publicity

4. Work with partners to ensure information on hedgerow management techniques that benefit biodiversity reaches the farming community

Monitoring the Action Plan

This Biodiversity Action Plan will be monitored and reviewed by the Wildlife Working Group of the Local Nature Partnership

Complementary plans

Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire have also written action plans for hedgerows.

This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton action plans, in particular those for lowland meadows, woodland and arable margins and arable plants.

Acknowledgements

This plan was originally compiled by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and County Biodiversity Officer and has been updated by the Wildlife Trust in 2014.

References

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