

## **IWLAC topic meeting 25th February - Second part**

Presentation by Island Roads regarding roadside verges. David Wallis and Stewart Chandler of IWC Highways and Transport Manager Discussed that there thousands of square meters of verges that they are responsible for maintaining. Island Roads talked about the safety issue- cutting verges and hedges is undertaken to ensure safety. Island Roads says they carry the legal responsibility for road safety. Due to the Isle of Wight council savings programme number of tractors was reduced from 2 to 1 which has resulted in it taking them 4 months to complete the rural verge cut. Island Roads also use pesticides in urban areas three times a year- in May, July and September. Issue of non-native invasive species attempting to colonise verges. There are 209 identified special verges on the island for which alternate cutting practices are in place.

Gillian Belben of Chillerton and Gatcombe Parish Council presented her presentation regarding the importance of verges, highlighting that 97% of meadows have been destroyed since the 1930s. This means that rural areas like the island are a vital refuge for pollinators and other wildlife, however this network is under threat due to poor management pollution and erosion because of narrow country lanes being used by too many and too large vehicles. This has led to a drop in floral diversity and wildlife. Badly managed verges are those which have been cut too often, or at the wrong time meaning wildflowers do not have a chance to set seed, and fertiliser runoff from fields encourages rapid growth of weeds. Recommended approach: cut verges from late winter to promote early flowering and then in autumn after seeding. Presented an example of a verge in Brighstone being inappropriately cut.

After this, the Chair asked me to speak because I was part of the reason for this Topic meeting due to previous comments I had made at the executive meeting. I brought up the fact that flail cutting is known to be bad for the health of hedges as well as having a detrimental impact on the animals such as birds and mice which live inside this hedges- once cut in the brutal manner that the flail does, it leaves holes which makes the habitat no longer safe for them. I mentioned how important it is to conserve wildlife on the island and how lucky we are to make all the nature we do but we must work to protect it, not work against it. I also mentioned that it is a bit ironic that the main reason for these invasive cuts is safety when there are many unsafe things about many roads on the island. I gave the example of Firestone Copse Road (FCR) on which I live which is a narrow country lane. It is the only road that pedestrians can use to access Firestone Copse from Fishbourne and Wootton and is thus frequently used by pedestrians, cyclists and even horseriders. There is no path so everyone has to share the path which is very dangerous on such a narrow road where the national speed limit applies- people do not feel safe walking there which is sad as it discourages people from making use of the copse.

The representatives from Island Roads replied saying that flail cutting is an established and practical way of cutting hedges but they admit that it can look very brutal on the hedges and trees. They also said that there is going to be an island wide speed limit review which will include roads such as FCR. It was also mentioned that there were plans under the quiet road scheme for FCR and other similar roads but it was not clear to me how far these plans got or what was the outcome.

Gillian replied to the remarks made by island roads and said that what we would like is not for the hedges and verges to never be cut, but that we need a more sustainable cutting plan. She gave us the example of Devon council which has implemented a very successful sustainable roadside verge and hedge cutting scheme which actually saved money for the council so it was not more expensive which there have been concerns regarding.

Island MP Bob Seely made a couple remarks including that this topic has been talked about for many years to no avail and it is time that things do change. It was thought to be too difficult and logistically complicated to implement this in the past. The fact that Devon has successfully implemented such a scheme shows us that it is possible and we should take example from them to do the same on the island. He did mention that this might be difficult due to pre-existing contracts between the Island council and Island Roads, but that he thinks there must be some way around this.