**Don’t Mow Let it Grow**

**Project Update – Allen & Mellon Environmental Ltd**

*Roadside Verges*

As this is the first year of the project, the main task this summer was to identify a sample of suitable road verges from across the Council area. Initially 42 verges were selected matching a series of criteria agreed with the Steering Group and harnessing knowledge of local people and conservation bodies such as the National Trust.

This was then whittled down to 24 sites after preliminary visits were made to assess suitability and further consideration was given to road safety issues. This has resulted in approximately 180 kilometres of roadside verge being included in the first year of the project. Don’t Mow signs were erected at each verge to remind both residents and Transport NI staff that the project was underway.

Between May and August, each site was visited again and surveyed in more detail by the team of consultants. Information was gathered on the condition and vegetation of each verge using survey forms designed for the project. On longer stretches of roadside verge, a series of 2 x 2 metre quadrats were surveyed, while overall assessments were made of smaller sites.

The surveys revealed a wide range of vegetation types and quality with some notable highlights:

* Woodland flora of the Antrim Glens;
* Orchid verges at Garvagh and Coleraine;
* Herb-rich displays along the North Coast.

Not all verges were rich in biodiversity but many of those surveyed showed potential for improvement through the correct management. Some verges were also beset with issues such as untimely cutting and it is hoped that these issues will be addressed as the project progresses.

The survey information is currently being uploaded onto the Don’t Mow Let It Grow website, along with a concise management plan for each verge. These outline the desired mowing regime and timing for follow-up monitoring. These plans will be implemented in 2017, but for this year the verges were cut as late as possible to give plants a chance to set seed for next year.

*Recreation Areas*

In parallel with the roadside verges, 18 areas of Council-owned grassland were also selected, geographically spread to ensure that there are several sites within each legacy Council area. These sites include public parks, recreation areas and parcels of land not currently in use. In most cases small patches of grassland were selected within a much larger site, although in some places such as Riverside Park Ballymoney, a number of patches were selected. If management in these small areas is successful and well-received it is hoped that the areas can be extended in future. The same approach was followed for these grassland areas, with a quadrat-based vegetation survey or full assessment of the smaller patches and a concise management plan prepared for each site.

*Training*

Capacity building and training of operatives and volunteers is an essential part of the Don’t Mow project. Sessions were held with Council and Transport NI operatives in order to introduce the project and to discuss its importance with them. Feedback was mixed with some staff more engaged than others. As it is essential that the level of engagement in the project is enhanced, there will be further tool-box talks and sessions in 2017 to address this.

A successful event was also held at Riverside Park, Ballymoney to introduce the project to potential volunteers and to demonstrate the skills and commitment required, with the aim of matching volunteers with sites for future monitoring. “Shadow” training was also trialled with a key volunteer to ensure consistency of approach in surveying verges.

To assist volunteers, an identification leaflet is being prepared which will include images and text covering a range of the more common plants likely to be encountered. This will be a useful addition to the more detailed standard text books which can be daunting to those starting out on plant identification.

*Summary*

The project has hit the ground running with 180 kilometres of roadside verge and 18 Council areas selected and assessed. It is inevitable that there would be some teething problems with such a ground-breaking project. For example, some of the Don’t Mow signs placed at the selected sites were vandalised or removed completely. More seriously, some sites including the orchid verge at Garvagh were cut inappropriately despite the signage. These examples point to the need for further engagement with local residents and all those involved in management of verges over the course of the project.

Despite this there are many positive examples to progress in 2017 - some residents and members of the public have been very supportive of the project and this goodwill can be built upon. And in an example of where the Council and Transport NI can work together, the species-rich banks and adjacent roadside verges at Portaneevey car park near Ballintoy were left uncut, and provided a magnificent display of wild flowers in late summer.

We look forward to building on these solid foundations in 2017.