Report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director: Commercial and Director: Business Development

Decision to be taken after: 12 January 2021

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT AND STRATEGIC PLANNING CABINET MEMBER

MANAGING ROAD VERGES FOR WILDLIFE

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

1.1 To provide information on the importance of road verges as habitat corridors and highlight threats to plant communities.

1.2 To seek approval to manage road verges to benefit wildflowers and declare Roadside Nature Reserves.

1.3 To seek approval to explore the use of road verge cuttings in local anaerobic digesters.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.1 In Lincolnshire, 99.7% of unimproved or flower-rich grassland has been lost since 1938. Road verges can be some of the most important remaining refuges for wild flowers and are used by butterflies and other pollinating insects. Wide drove road verges are a feature of the Lincolnshire Wolds area of high landscape value in particular.

2.2 Sadly, road verges face threats of their own. Wild flowers may be lost when verges are cut too often or too little. When grass cuttings are left to rot down, wild flowers may be smothered and pushed aside by nettles and hogweed. Road works, trenching for pipes and cables and rutting due to vehicles may all cause physical damage. Road salt, fly tipping and passing traffic may cause pollution and an excess of nutrients.

2.3 Through Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust's "Life on the Verge" project, local volunteers and expert botanists worked together to survey many miles of road verge for wild flowers. We then selected the best sections as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). Some of the LWS are connected by verges of more moderate value, forming a habitat network. Middlegate Lane above the Wolds villages is a good example of this.

2.4 To benefit wild flowers, we should manage the best verges with a traditional hay cut. Here, we allow the grasses and flowers to grow

through the summer until mid-August or September. We then cut the grass and remove the cuttings. We need fewer visits than with typical road verge management. However, the collection of cuttings adds time and expense to the cut. Where scrub and brambles are becoming established on flower-rich verges, we need to cut them back.

2.5 We currently cut highway verges to one breed, (approx. 1.2m) twice during the growing season (April – October). More extensive cuts are carried out were visibility is an issue (e.g. junctions) and the safety of drivers has been assessed at greater risk. All these cuts are based upon a well-established programme that has been developed over a long period of time and is reviewed on an annual basis.

2.6 In Lincolnshire, some of the best road verges for wild flowers are declared as Roadside Nature Reserves. They are managed by the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust in partnership with Lincolnshire County Council.

2.7 Pilot projects have successfully demonstrated that road verge cuttings can be used as a feedstock for anaerobic digesters (AD). They showed that the use of road verge cuttings could be economically beneficial for AD operators, leading to an increase in methane yield and releasing land to grow crops. The Biorenewables Development Centre in York allows AD operators to test road verge feedstocks in laboratory conditions, without impacting on the smooth operation of their existing plants.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 Option 1- Make no changes to road verge cutting programmes.

3.2 Option 2-

- Carry out a wider review of road verge management.
- Introduce hay cutting to LWS road verges The works required are set out in a generic management plan in Appendix 1. The works would apply to 24 sites of differing lengths.
- Declare nine of the best verges as Roadside Nature Reserves (see attached maps).
- Work with local farmers or community groups, to manage flower-rich verges
- Develop procedures to control trenching and other works on road verges
- Explore the use of road verge cuttings in local anaerobic digesters.
- Sow and maintain road verge flowers for pollinators in gateway locations and urban areas.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

4.1 4.1 Option 1

4.1.1 If we continue to manage road verges in the current manner, our most valuable verges may fall into decline due to the threats identified in section 2.2 above. If we do not manage LWS road verges, the results for one of our key performance indicators will decline. This is single data set 160, which measures the percentage of local sites that has positive management.

4.1.2 Option 1 is not recommended.

4.2 Option 2

4.2.1 To carry out this option, the first step would be to introduce hay cutting to LWS road verges. The hay cutting works will allow us to improve our performance in terms of single data set 160. Wild flowers, butterflies and pollinators will benefit from works within the LWS.

4.2.2 With option 2, we would also carry out a wider review of grass cutting on road verges. The aims would be to maintain road safety, cut costs and encourage wildlife. We would declare the best verges as Roadside Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). We would aim to have declared up to 3 LNRs by the end of 2020, up to 6 by the end of 2021and up to 9 by the end of 2022.

4.2.3 We would maintain important visibility splays, but reduce the number of cuts elsewhere. With hay cutting, efficiencies may be achieved by cutting long lengths of verge in the same manner, rather than just the short lengths of LWS. This will reduce the cost per metre and will connect sites to create larger habitat networks.

4.2.4 In some areas, we may be able to work with local farmers or community groups, to manage flower-rich verges. Where this happens, we will need to provide training, ecological advice and health and safety guidance. We have already trialled this in a small number of locations.

4.2.5 Also with option 2, we would develop procedures to control trenching and other works on road verges. Where works are carried out, we should ask for verges to be reinstated with wild flower mixes sown on inverted soils to a required standard. Sections 71 and 72 of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 give us the powers to require appropriate reinstatement. Sections 9.3 and 9.4 of the associated Code of Practice provide further guidance.

4.2.6 As a further development of option 2, we would carry out a feasibility study into the potential to use road verge cuttings, and arisings from the management of Local Nature Reserves, as a feedstock for local anaerobic digesters. We would make initial approaches to existing AD operators and consider the costs and

benefits of creating a new facility. The costs and benefits of the changed way of working would be clearly set out before making any decision to progress further. Potentially, we would look to amend existing road verge maintenance contracts to account for the move to AD by the year 2025.

4.2.7 Within option 2, the maintenance of semi-natural grasslands of high wildlife value in the open countryside is a top priority. It will not normally be appropriate to sow wild flowers into existing verges in the open countryside. However, in gateway locations within town or village boundaries, it may be desirable to sow and manage wild flowers where soil conditions are favourable. This will benefit pollinators, will provide amenity value and will enhance the sense of place for residents and visitors alike. In rural areas, we will seek to use locally native wild flowers of UK origin. Within towns, it may be acceptable to use a wider mix of pollinator-friendly plants, as has already been trialled on Mortal Ash Hill and other parts of Scunthorpe. Once sown, wild flower areas will need to be managed by hay cutting in accordance with the generic management plan.

5. FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (e.g. LEGAL, HR, PROPERTY, IT, COMMUNICATIONS etc.)

5.1 Introducing hay cutting to LWS may result in a small increase in grass cutting costs. As the area of hay cutting increases, the aim is to reduce revenue costs in the medium term. In a 2020 trial period, sensitive mowing of eight of the nine priority verges took around 300 person-hours of grade 5, 4 and 2 staff, at a cost of around £9,000.

5.2 With Option 2, staff time will be required to review grass cutting arrangements, amend contracts and work with partners to find new ways of working. Staff will also need to support farmers and community groups.

6. OTHER RELEVANT IMPLICATIONS (e.g. CRIME AND DISORDER, EQUALITIES, COUNCIL PLAN, ENVIRONMENTAL, RISK etc.)

6.1 There are no implications of the decision on crime and disorder pursuant to section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

6.2 There are no implications of the decision under the Equalities Act 2010.

6.3 Taking action to enhance the biodiversity value of road verges will help to meet the Council's priority of "Keeping people safe and well" by helping to "Provide cleaner and greener space for people to enjoy and use."

6.4 In terms of environmental implications, the aim of Option 2 is to maintain and enhance the biodiversity value of roadside verges. Future use of verge cuttings as a feedstock for local anaerobic digesters, would provide a supply of renewable energy, making use of what would otherwise by a waste material.

7. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)

7.1 The Integrated Impact Assessment reveals that Option 2 is expected to have a positive impact on biodiversity and landscape and to maintain current levels of road safety. We expect cost savings and may be able to use grass cuttings for green energy.

7.2 In some areas, residents may see the verges being cut less often than at present. We will take care to make sure that the roads are still safe. We will use a publicity campaign to explain the benefits to the environment.

7.3 When we work in the highway, we need to consider safety and the maintenance of traffic flows. This is particularly important when working with volunteers, contractors or staff who are not used to highway works. In all cases we will carry out full risk assessments of work to be carried out and will make sure that everyone involved works safely. In many cases, we will be able to carry out works without traffic management.

8. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED

8.1 We have consulted colleagues in Transport, Highways, Neighbourhoods, and the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust on earlier drafts of this report and have met to discuss the next steps. The report has been redrafted to include suggestions on verge reinstatement, gateway verges, anaerobic digesters, the timing of works and work safety in the highway.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 That we approve Option 2, so that we:

- introduce hay cutting to Local Wildlife Site road verges as part of a wider review of road verge management, including the consideration of anaerobic digestion of verge cuttings.

- designate Roadside Local Nature reserves as outlined in appendix 2.

- sow UK origin wild flowers in a small number of appropriate gateway locations.

DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE AND DIRECTOR: COMMERCIAL AND DIRECTOR: BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

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Date: 24 November 2020

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report –

Cheffins, N. 2019 Biomass Biodiversity Feasibility Study. Peakhill Associates Ltd. Report to East Riding of Yorkshire Council.

Plantlife (undated) England's Green Unpleasant Land? Why urgent action is needed to save England's wildflower grasslands.

Appendix 1 – Generic Road Verge Management Plan

SECTION A: AIM

To maintain and enhance the unimproved grassland habitat of the verge.

SECTION B: ACTIONS

Option 1: Ideal Management

Main Grass Cut	• Each year allow verge to grow uncut until at least mid-August. • Between 15th August and 15th September: Mow Verge and remove all arisings.
Aftermath Cutting	• Mow verge at least once in the Autumn after the main hay cut, between 1 October and 15 November to leave a sward height of 5-10 cm in November. • Remove all arisings after each cut. • Multiple aftermath cuts are unnecessary as long as the sward is short at the end of the growing season.
Scrub Control	• Carry out scrub control in year 1 and repeat every five years as needed. • Work must be done between 1 October and 28 February, outside the bird-nesting season. • Aim for less than 10% cover of scrub and cut back encroaching hedgerows where necessary. • Cut down to ground level and treat stumps with approved herbicides.
Machinery & Personnel Options	• Compact tractor. • Mower/flail. • Baler/minibaler/forage harvester • Volunteers can help with scrub control, litter clearance and raking.
Options for Arisings	• If hay is of sufficient quality, it can be sold for animal feed/bedding. • Poor quality grass and brash to go to green waste skips/composting schemes or anaerobic digesters. • Litter and fly-tipping to be disposed of in accordance with Council policies.

Option 2: Standard Management

- As Option 1, but omit aftermath cutting. This single “Main Grass Cut” should be later than Option 1, between 15 August and 30 September. If many verges are to be mown to this standard, it may be necessary to spread the cutting over a longer season from 15 July to 30 September. However, cutting times should be rotated so that no verge is cut before setting seed more than one year in three.
- Upgrade to Option 1 when resources allow.

Option 3: Minimum Acceptable Management

- As Option 2, but carry out “Main Grass Cut” at least one year in three and remove arisings. The two years in three without a main grass cut there should be no cutting at all.
- No cutting at all should take place during the two years in three without a main grass cut.
- Upgrade to Option 2 when resources allow.

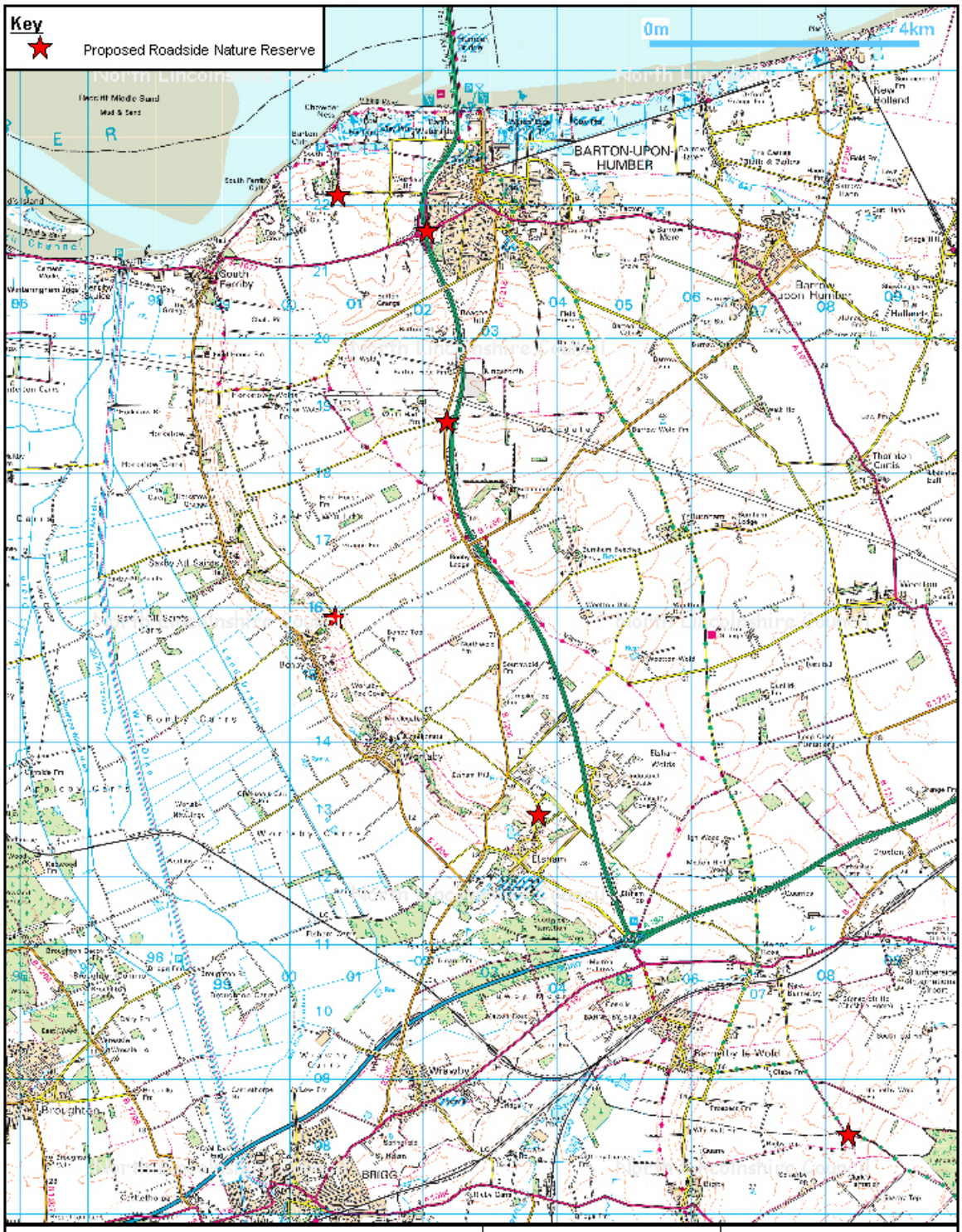
SECTION C: RESTRICTED AND PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES

- Do not cut or flail vegetation without removing arisings.
- Do not permit use of fertiliser.
- Do not use herbicides to control non-woody grassland plants unless specifically approved by North Lincolnshire Council Environment Team beforehand. If approved strict guidelines must be followed.
- As far as possible, discourage litter, fly tipping, vehicle damage and trenching.

SECTION D: MONITORING AND REPORTING

- A Local Wildlife Site or Life on the Verge Survey should be carried out once every 5-10 years.
- Informal monitoring, fixed point photography and inspection of works shall take place in between formal monitoring visits.
- Following monitoring, any improvement or decline in habitat quality shall be noted and management amended accordingly.

Appendix 2: Proposed Roadside Nature Reserves.



Title: Proposed Roadside Nature Reserves- Wolds		Drawing No:	Version: 1
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Director of Business Development
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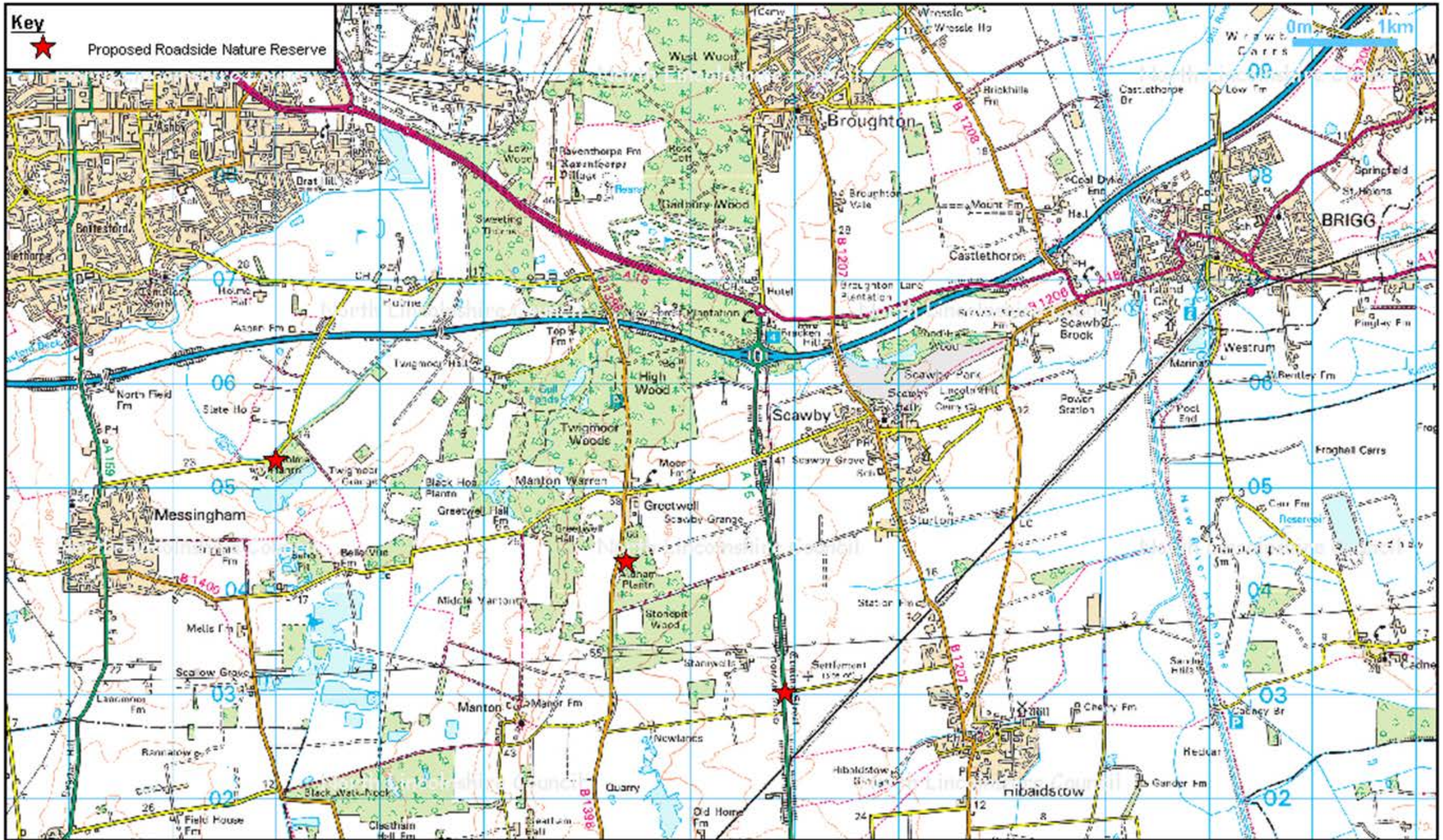

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Title: Proposed Roadside Nature Reserves- Lincoln Edge

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Drawn by: Andrew Taylor	Date: 15/04/2020
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