membership resources

Briefing 15-06 February 2015

APSE response to The National Pollinator Strategy 2014

This briefing is provided to APSE member authorities in England but will be of interest to the parks, grounds and horticulture sector on a UK wide basis.

Key Issues:

- This APSE briefing highlights the overall aims of the National Pollinator Strategy issued by Defra which highlights the desire to ensure bees and other pollinators are protected and promoted in order to improve the sustainability of the natural environment in urban and rural areas as well as the wider economic benefits associated with pollination.
- APSE acknowledges that there are still large gaps in understanding the threats and actions required to address these issues, but feels that some of the land management priorities within the strategy could be addressed effectively through grounds maintenance operations carried out by local authorities.
- The briefing also provides case studies where local authorities have undertaken land management schemes which support pollinators

1. Introduction

The Strategy has been developed because of national concerns about the perceived loss of bees and pollinating insects over the past decades. Although there is still a need for more detailed research it is accepted that pollinating insects have declined. The main causes suggested for this decline are:

- Habitat loss
- Pest and diseases
- Extreme weather

- Competition from invasive species
- Climate change and
- Use of some pesticides

It is believed however that the loss of flower – rich habitat as the likely primary cause of the recorded decline in diversity of wild bees and other pollinating insects. Loss of these habitats is associated with past intensification of agriculture, urbanisation and industrial development. It is estimated that 97% of flower-rich grasslands - prime pollinator habitats, have been lost since the 1930's.

The worry is that if pollinating insects went into a serious decline then the viability of the UK's £100bn food industry, which is at the heart of our economy, would be damaged. However, it is not only the food industry which would suffer as food crops became scarcer and more expensive, but also the beauty contained within our parks and gardens would also be adversely affected. It is therefore the aim of this 10 year strategy to build a solid foundation to bring about the best possible conditions for bees and other pollinators to flourish.

A concern of many is that the evidence base about the state and abundance of pollinating insects is not sufficiently robust enough to allow definitive statements to be made. Neither is there a full understanding of how resilient agricultural and natural plant systems are to changes in pollinator populations. What is quite clear, however, is the need to take action rather than wait to be absolutely sure we have a problem which is a point worth considering in the context of loss of habitat alone

Therefore the strategy highlights actions which can be taken now to improve the future of pollinators. Many of these actions are about expanding food, shelter and nest sites across all types of land so that the UK's 1500 pollinator species can thrive and survive.

2. The Role of local authorities

Local authorities as public bodies have a statutory responsibility under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) to have regard to conserving biodiversity in exercising their functions, and as such have the opportunity to play a significant role in not only working with the strategy to achieve its objectives but also to raise public awareness about the need to protect and improve the future of pollinators which are such a vital element of our natural ecosystems.

Local authorities through their planning and land management functions as well as their strategic partnerships, can ensure habitats for pollinators are created in areas such as parks and amenity grasslands, brownfield sites, existing and new housing developments, retail and leisure parks, school grounds,, distribution centres, factory sites, car parks, cemeteries, allotments and transport

and other infrastructure such as road verges, land beside railway lines, flood defences, sewage works and water treatment plants.

There are a wealth of advisory groups who will support land managers and developers with expertise and advice on how to adopt pollinator-friendly management and planting approaches. These groups include Buglife, The Wildlife Trusts, Plantlife, the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Butterfly Conservation, Garden Organic, Sustain, The Royal Horticultural Society to name just a few. APSE's own *'Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance Advisory Group'* also endeavours to regularly share best practice on bio-diversity issues and is free to attend for APSE member authorities.

3. Actions

The strategy highlights 5 actions which landowners can undertake to support pollinators, these are:

- Grow more flowers, shrubs and trees that provide nectar and pollen
- Leave patches of land to grow wild with plants which provide breeding and nest sites for pollinators
- Cut grass less often and remove the cuttings to allow plants to flower
- Avoid disturbing or destroying hibernating insects in places like grass margins, bare soil, hedgerows, dead wood etc.
- Avoid the use of pesticides where pollinators are active or nesting or where plants are in flower.

4. Local Authority case studies

Local authorities are perfectly placed to change current land management practices in some areas to support the protection and promotion of pollinators. Many local authorities have taken up these challenge, indeed some were already supporting pollinators long before the strategy was published. What follows are a few examples of the measures being implemented:

Peterborough City Council has:

- Introduced 9 biodiversity areas which are cut once a year,
- Reduced grass cutting frequency across all other open spaces, including 57km of protected road verges
- Are creating suitable conditions for wild flowers in woodlands

- Are working in partnership with BugLife on a community project to sow wild flowers in open spaces owned by the Council

Kent City Council is:

- Working with local businesses, environmental groups, farmers and land owners to develop Kent's Plan Bee
- Planners set pollinator habitats as conditions for planning approval

Bristol City Council:

- Uses invertebrate friendly plants wherever feasible in new planting schemes.
- Leave patches of land to grow wild and have several natural meadows
- Issues wildlife gardening advice to encourage gardeners to support pollinators and other wildlife.

Other local authority examples include:

- Converting annual flower beds to more pollen/nectar rich perennials
- Reduced or even stopped the use of pesticides and herbicides in areas where pollinators are active
- Provided information boards for community/local schools
- Manage nature reserves to provide habitats to support a wide range of species with benefits to pollinators
- Created wild flower meadows particularly along roadside verges

Regardless of whether a local authority is largely urban or predominately rural, the role they have to play is of equal importance, for it is a known fact that pollinators are as common in urban areas as in farmland, there are also more bee species in cities some of which are classified as being rare.

As well as improving the environment for pollinators, local authorities have received regular compliments from the public on the beauty of many of their wildflower planting schemes.

However one of the most noted indirect benefits in helping pollinators is that the reduced maintenance brought about by fewer cuts to grassland, and in some cases, the reduced need for road closures on highway verges associated with regular mowing, has seen many local authorities report savings as a result of their changes in land management practices.

APSE Comment

Whilst it is accepted that there are many gaps in information about the importance of pollinators to the food economy, and the level at which their numbers are declining, what is clear is that there is a need to preserve pollinators as part of the larger ecosystem. There is no doubt that pollinators do play a significant role in pollinating a wide variety of plants, many of which are beneficial to humans as either food sources or simply for their aesthetic value, certainly our environment would be a much drabber place without them.

Local authorities are at the vanguard of the work which needs to be done, and for relatively little effort, the long-term gains are considerable, whether they are economic, environmental or social. As can be seen within the briefing note many are already embarking on re-establishing habitats for pollinators and there is a good deal of support from local businesses and communities for this work. However, there is a recognised need to balance the creation of habitat with the reduced use of pesticides, most notably neonicotinoids if a true response to halting pollinator decline is to be achieved. Although primarily an agricultural pesticide, local authorities still need to consider whether their use of pesticides cannot be reduced or replaced if their actions are to be worthwhile also. Many have already begun to reduce pesticide and herbicide use particularly where they are carrying out pro-pollinator projects.

APSE therefore welcomes the strategy, but feels more work is needed to address the gaps in knowledge, as the Strategy itself recognises. The Strategy deserves to be heeded by local authorities, and wherever possible supported and promoted. However this may also require improved education and information to residents as to why land is being managed in a particular way, or why land management strategies have changed; for example leaving longer grass cuts or introducing wild flower meadows in place of more formal approaches to land management.

APSE will play its part in supporting the objectives of the strategy by keeping members updated through inclusion of this topic in its seminars and advisory groups, as well as providing briefing notes, as further information and developments occur.

For more information about this topic or about APSE's '*Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance Advisory Group*' please contact Wayne Priestley on wpriestley@apse.org.uk

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