apse association for public service excellence

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Trees planting is not the only option – Hedgerows and hedges can be part of the response

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1 Executive Summary

With over half a million miles of hedgerow in the UK, crisscrossing countryside, farmland, landscaped gardens, private gardens and public spaces, we would seem to have a valuable environmental and ecological resource to help combat many of the concerns raised by climate change and biodiversity loss in the UK. But since 1950 the UK has lost 50% of its hedgerows, largely due to the intensification of agriculture. As if this figure isn't worrying enough, around 60% of the hedgerows which remain are not in good condition.

Although the loss has slowed since the 1990s, neglect, damage and removal remain significant threats. Indeed, the loss of hedgerows has been identified as a factor in the decline of many of the UK's plant and animal species.

Healthy hedgerows are essential habitats for UK biodiversity, supporting over 2,000 species including the hedgehog and several European Protected Species, notably the dormouse, various species of bat, the great-crested newt and many more.

Their importance has been recognised by The Climate Change Committee which has advised that the UK needs to increase hedgerows by 40% to meet the UK'S 2050 net zero target, which means planting 200,000km of new hedgerows – the equivalent of half the length the UK road network.

The 1997 Hedgerows Regulations gives local authorities limited powers to protect certain rural hedgerows which they consider to be of environmental importance.
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1997/1160/contents/made

2 Section Two: Hedgerows or hedges, and do they really matter?

In this briefing it needs to be made clear that when discussing hedgerows, the briefing is also considering hedges as well. For clarity a **hedge** is a linear form of woody vegetation often found in urban as well as rural areas, whereas a **hedgerow** is a hedge with standard trees and most commonly associated with a rural setting.

Hedges and hedgerows are lifelines for wildlife: providing habitat, shelter, food and connectivity between habitats, indeed hedgerows are the UK's largest priority habitat – and are home to 80% of our woodland birds including 12 of the UK's most threatened bird species, including cirl buntings, house and tree sparrows, bullfinch, dunnock, linnet, marsh tit, song thrush, spotted flycatcher, turtle dove, willow tit, and yellowhammer.

In areas with few woods, many species of birds depend on hedgerows for their survival. In some parts of the country, hedges and hedgerows are the only natural or non-crop habitat available to mammals, birds, insects, and other animals.

Hedgehogs and dormice and even some species of bats favour hedgerows because of their value as safe nest sites, larders, as well as their importance as highway to other greenspaces, their cover protecting them from predators as they move about.

Hedgerows also support up to 30% of our butterflies, which cannot be underestimated, as the loss of ash trees, and common hedge trees, from our landscapes due to ash dieback is having a negative effect regards the availability of natural habitats.

Although the net length of hedges now appears stable or possibly increasing, it is important to remember that newly created or restored hedges may not have the same value in terms of wildlife, landscape, and historical significance as long-established hedgerows. In fact, some hedgerows are

so important that no amount of planting could replace them. Therefore, the government via the 1997 has brought in legislation to protect hedgerows of key importance to which local authorities can refer to if they feel a hedgerow is threatened via the previously referenced Hedgerow Regulations 1997

3 Section Three: The importance of hedges in urban areas

Urban air quality continues to be a primary health concern as most of the world's population currently lives in urban areas (57% in 2023), and this percentage is projected to rise to 60% by 2030; this is coupled with the fact that one of the main global sources of air pollution in cities is traffic emissions. Studies show that future urban planning needs to consider designing and implementing more "green infrastructure", such as trees or hedges in the built environment to create a healthier urban lifestyle. These green solutions act as porous bodies which influence local dispersion of pollution and aid the deposition and removal of airborne pollutants, making the air cleaner. Further studies point out that low hedges reduce the impact of pollution from vehicles in cityscapes where there are large buildings close to roads, far more effectively than taller trees. Higher trees only have more of an impact in reducing air pollution in areas which are more open and are less densely populated by taller buildings.

Other benefits of urban green infrastructure include urban heat island mitigation, the potential reduction in energy consumption, better stormwater management, and climate change mitigation.

4 Section Four: Protecting, conserving, and increasing areas of hedgerows and hedges – The role of local authorities.

There is a great deal of advice and guidance on how hedges and hedgerows can be protected and enhanced. An organisation known as **Hedgelink** provides important advice on the way hedges can make a difference to our urban areas, both for nature and as educational resources to help all ages reconnect with nature. https://hedgelink.org.uk/hedge-hub/ The Royal Horticultural Society also provides some useful advice on the best plants to include in your hedges.
https://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/types/hedges

The opportunities to increase urban hedges cannot be underestimated, they are ideal screens for allotments, parks, cemeteries, playing fields and other natural areas, bringing far more benefits than fences and walls, and where a replacement opportunity arises, then hedges should be considered, often using engagement with local volunteers to help maintain them.

Many schools are also now using hedges to screen playgrounds for the shelter, shade, and air quality improvements they can bring, as well as the educational opportunities for pupils to learn about wildlife, recycling and food.

As previously mentioned, it has been estimated that over 200,000 kilometres of new hedgerows are required to help replace the historic hedgerows lost in the UK. This may seem a huge ask, but it amounts to 3 metres per person in the UK (Tree Council statistic), and local authorities can play a major part in promoting this information through their community and resident networks.

Again, there are many examples of organisations across the UK working to plant new hedges within their area, below are links to just a few examples.

- https://www.cpre.org.uk - Hedgerow Heroes phase 2: explore this year's projects
- https://www.norfolk.gov.uk - Thousands more trees and hedgerows to be planted in Norfolk this winter

4.1 Management of hedgerows

The real key to successful hedgerow creation and the ongoing care for existing features is their correct management, for just as their complete removal has caused problems in the past, incorrect management can also be just as threatening to their sustainability.

Hedgerows require management in order to stop them developing into a line of trees. As previously mentioned, over half the UK's 'priority species' mammals make significant use of hedgerows for food, nesting/roosting and travelling through the landscape. As hedgerows grow upwards into a line of trees, the low shrubby cover that's needed by wildlife for shelter, food and as corridors for travelling along, is gradually lost. A line of trees also develops gaps over time as trees are lost. Once a hedgerow has become a line of trees, it's very difficult to return it to a shrubby hedgerow structure, and it will have lost many of its wildlife credentials. It's therefore essential to prevent this structural decline.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, over-management can also threaten hedges. Cutting a hedge too often and at the same height, reduces the value of the hedge to wildlife and threatens the future of the hedge structure. Over-management causes stem health to deteriorate which leads to gaps forming in the hedge. This impacts the hedge's value as a wildlife corridor. Cutting hedges every year also significantly reduces the number of flowers and fruit available for wildlife to enjoy, as many of Britain's native berry bearing species found in hedgerows only flower on growth that is two years or older.

The timing of hedge cutting is also of huge importance to wildlife. 84% of Britain's farmland birds for example, rely on hedgerows for food and protection; for over half of these, hedgerows are their primary habitat. No hedge should be cut in bird nesting season between March and the beginning of September. Ideally, trimming is left until January, so that hedgerow fruit/nuts are available to wildlife through the winter months.

Whilst it is unlikely this type of consideration is something private garden owners would need to consider, there is a role for local authorities to offer advice to homeowners who do have hedges, about the correct management of such garden features. as it would be a shame to have the situation where garden owners are putting bird food out for garden visitors whilst destroying the habitats on which they depend through inappropriate management.

Recently Government has launched a consultation on collating views on how to improve hedgerow protections. This can be found on this link:-
Government consultation on hedgerow decline

The consultation recognises the value of hedgerows and the environmental benefits they bring, although the consultation is largely aimed at farmers and larger rural hedgerow, it does offer an opportunity for local authorities to voice their concerns and ideas about the inclusion of urban hedges and the benefits these can also bring.

4. APSE Comment

There has been a great deal of attention placed upon tree planting as a key action in combatting the affect of climate change with regards to absorbing carbon emissions, reducing temperatures, absorbing heavier levels of rainfall and preventing flooding caused by extreme weather events and additionally improving air quality.

However, we cannot lose sight of associated works which can amplify the response to many of these issues. Although often used as parish and field boundaries in the past, many hedgerows and hedges were lost as agricultural practices changed and larger fields were created to grow more food and allow larger machines to harvest crops. Yet hedgerows and hedges are now being recognised as an important part of nature's ecosystem services, working alongside the wider pantheon of natures flora and fauna which contribute to maintaining the natural balance or '*gaia*'.

Although a man-made feature, hedges and hedgerows can play a positive role in addressing some of the climate change problems and ecological imbalances we now find ourselves facing. Whether in rural areas or in small private gardens, local authorities can play a major role in protecting, managing, promoting and planting hedges and hedgerows in their areas, reaping the multiple

benefits they bring. Tree planting is important, but equally the supporting and planting of, hedgerows, increasing opportunities for flora and fauna and fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of the natural world around us is essential if we are to create a sustainable future for the generations to come. For it needs to be realised, using a well-used but nevertheless still as potent quote, "Only when the last tree has died, and the last river been poisoned, and the last fish caught we realise we cannot eat money".

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