

Biodiversity No Net Loss on The Greater West Programme
Maidenhead to Swansea through Bath & Bristol, and to Oxford and Newbury
(Network Rail)

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award category: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Project overview

The Greater West Programme (previously known as GWEP and GWRM) is funded by the Department for Transport and delivered by Network Rail Infrastructures Projects (IP). It includes the electrification of more than 300 miles of railway from Maidenhead to Swansea through Bath & Bristol, and to Oxford and Newbury by 2020. Electrifying this key stretch of railway will mean faster, greener and more reliable journeys for thousands of passengers and a quieter, cleaner environment for lineside neighbours. The railway line crosses large urban areas such as Reading, Swindon and Bristol but mainly passes through rural settings. As the works include the unavoidable loss of lineside vegetation, Biodiversity No Net Loss was introduced. This initiative is led by Network Rail and involves quantifying the loss of biodiversity and actively engaging and consulting with a wide range of stakeholders along the railway route, including 20 Local Authorities and 6 Wildlife Trusts in England & Wales.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

Lineside habitats are generally dominated by common habitat types, typical of neglected land on roadsides and railway corridors. The Programme will result in a change in the composition of the habitats along the railway as woody vegetation within 3.5m of the overhead line will be replaced by low-lying habitats.

Were there any specific conditions that led you carrying out this work?

In 2013 Network Rail published its Sustainable Development Strategy based on its vision of a railway fit for the future and set a strategic output objective to “manage our land sustainably, enhancing its ecological diversity, and increasing its economic and social value”. In 2014 Network Rail Infrastructure Projects (IP) committed to “a measurable net positive contribution to biodiversity in the UK” and The Greater West Programme pledged to be a pilot project and achieve No Net Loss (NNL) of biodiversity for its electrification programme. This was a voluntary commitment, not bound to any planning obligations or client requirements.

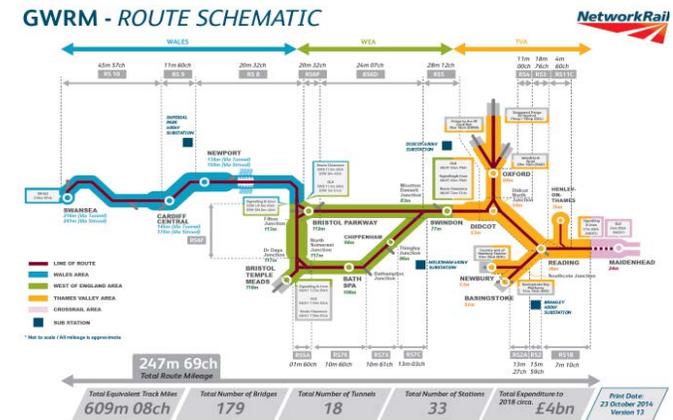


Photo Description: Programme Route Schematic

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

A calculation of biodiversity units before and after vegetation clearance was undertaken based on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) methodology and using the ecological information provided by the route-wide Phase 1 habitat surveys commissioned by Network Rail. This study showed that the Programme would not achieve No Net Loss without further interventions due to the limited opportunity to replant woodland along the operational railway. The Biodiversity No Net Loss initiative was then launched aiming to identify, develop and deliver scrub woodland mosaic habitats planting and enhancement projects. Network Rail's approach is based on good practice principles of biodiversity offsetting, providing a robust and challenging framework to achieve development with long-lasting net positive outcomes for nature conservation. These good practice principles have been developed by the Business and Biodiversity Offset Programme (BBOP) and by Defra for its national pilot test on biodiversity offsetting. As part of the early stage of the process, The Greater West Programme has been actively engaging, consulting and developing partnerships with Local Authorities and Conservation organisations along its Route, with the aim to identify, assess, select and fund biodiversity enhancement projects. Engagement was undertaken through a number of stakeholders' workshops in England and Wales, Local Authority area-specific follow-up meetings and biodiversity 'Summits' at a more strategic level (Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Wiltshire and West of England) with the aim to provide an understanding of the Programme scope of works, explain the reasons for vegetation clearance, present the measures taken to minimise environmental and ecological impact assessment, introduce the rationale behind the Programme approach to Biodiversity No Net Loss and identify local enhancement opportunities with the objective to deliver the first offset project by the end of 2016. With this initiative the Programme has committed to a complex and innovative approach to biodiversity restoration and aims to define and set out the processes to make it replicable across the rail industry.



Photo Description: Biodiversity No Net Loss Workshop



How would you best describe the project?

An enhancement

Further information

This innovative approach allowed a direct engagement with local stakeholders which might otherwise not have happened. It has the potential to create positive working relationships that will benefit Network Rail as well as nature conservation and the local community. It was well received by stakeholders as shown by the following statements:

“The Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) has been involved at all stages of Network Rail’s ‘no net loss of biodiversity’ programme. I have been impressed with Network Rail’s obvious commitment to engaging with a wide range of stakeholders to create a scheme that aims to offset the loss of biodiversity caused by the project. Network Rail’s team have been innovative in their approach, and their process should be used as a model for other, similar schemes in the future.”

Alex Cruickshank, BBOWT Senior Land Manager (Berkshire)

“Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) are pleased with the stakeholder-led consultation which has been carried out so far by Network Rail for the “No Net Loss Greater West Programme”. We also support the aim of ‘no net loss’ of biodiversity. We hope that the recommendations of the stakeholders are supported by Network Rail as we strongly believe they are the best way to deliver no net loss of biodiversity.”

Camilla Burrow, TVERC Director



Photo Description: Stakeholders consulted (England only)

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

I am delighted to be part of this challenging and trailblazing initiative which aims to make a difference and deliver positive benefits for nature and local communities. Proactively engaging with stakeholders working towards the same objective of halting biodiversity loss in the UK was another source of personal satisfaction.



Further information (continued)

"The West of England Nature Partnership (WENP) have worked with the GWRM team to support the delivery of projects to ensure 'No Net Loss' of biodiversity resulting from the electrification scheme. The process has been well communicated to a variety of stakeholders and we felt fully engaged at every stage, from the early scoping and exploration meetings to the full Biodiversity Summit that took place last year. We look forward to continuing working with GWRM and delivering projects that demonstrate biodiversity gain across our region."

Shelly Dewhurst, WENP Manager

"Bath & North East Somerset Council has been involved at all stages of Network Rail's 'no net loss of biodiversity' programme working with the GWRM team and the West of England Nature Partnership (WENP). I have been impressed with Network Rail's obvious commitment to engaging with a wide range of stakeholders to create a scheme that aims to offset the loss of biodiversity caused by the project. Network Rail's team have been innovative in their approach, and their process should be used as a model for other, similar schemes in the future."

Mark Minkley, Bath & North East Somerset Council Environment & Design Team Manager

"The Forest of Avon Trust is the charity for trees and woodland in the West of England, with an interest in a number of biodiversity offsetting projects in the Great western Man Line corridor. Network Rail provided a clear and thorough explanation of their Biodiversity Offsetting project to all four local authorities and collectively to partners in the West of England. They were responsive to questions and very supportive in terms of developing project proposals. We very much support Network Rail in its bid for funding and look forward to working with them to deliver woodland biodiversity projects in the West of England."

Jon Clark, Forest of Avon Trust Executive Director