



Environment, Housing & Communities Scrutiny Board

Site Visit: Network rail Vegetation Management

Environment, Housing & Communities Scrutiny Board

Site visit: Network Rail Vegetation Management

In late 2021 Cllr Anderson was contacted by residents concerned about the environmental impact of Network Rail's vegetation management programme along sections of the railway in Leeds.

Cllr Anderson met with residents in December 2021 and committed to also meeting with Network Rail to explore the issue further in early 2022.

On 16 February 2022 Cllr Anderson attended a site visit at Headingley station on behalf of the Board to understand the lineside vegetation management process and to discuss the concerns that had been raised with him.

The note below provides a summary of the meeting for Scrutiny Board members.

ATTENDEES

Cllr Anderson	Scrutiny Board Chair
Cllr Walshaw	Headingley ward member & CEAC Chair
Richard Cunningham	Senior Asset Engineer for Lineside
John Keeley	Vegetation Site Manager
Sara Lom	Chief Executive, The Tree Council
Jon Stokes	Director of Trees, The Tree Council
Glen Gerner	Natural Environment Manager
Rebecca Atherton	Principal Scrutiny Advisor

ACTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1	It is recommended that the Chair attends a further meeting with Network Rail and the Tree Council after an initial growing season to better understand the way in which lineside vegetation will replenish.
---	---



VISIT SUMMARY

1. This visit provided an opportunity to discuss issues including:
 - a. The responsibilities of Network Rail as the statutory undertaker of lineside vegetation management.
 - b. Impact of vegetation management on rail services
 - c. Environmental impact of felling trees
 - d. Community engagement
 - e. Fly tipping and graffiti
 - f. Use of glysohates

Responsibilities of Network Rail as the Statutory Undertaker of Lineside Vegetation Management

2. Representatives from Network Rail provided an overview of the way in which work is planned and delivered, including the process of on-site risk assessments and lineside inspections.
3. As an arm's length public body of the Department for Transport Network Rail is required to comply with Government regulations and guidance regarding the environmental impact of their activity. They also have statutory responsibilities for undertaking lineside maintenance.
4. It remains the case that Network Rail's primary responsibility for vegetation management is based upon a process of risk assessment to ensure the safe running of the railway. However, in recent years this has evolved to encompass wider environmental considerations.
5. The current approach is informed by the findings of a 2018 review commissioned by the Department for Transport. That review concluded Network Rail, as a significant public landowner, should regard lineside vegetation as a natural asset and vegetation management should go beyond purely considering safety and performance to also promote biodiversity and the natural environment.
6. There was agreement from all attendees of the importance of rail corridors in providing valuable habitats for plants and animals. Representatives from Network Rail highlighted the extensive natural seed banks within the lineside embankments and advised that, following the removal of overgrown vegetation, those would now replenish.
7. As was discussed in December with residents, the Council has no powers to stop vegetation management along the railway or to impose any conditions on the work.
8. The councillors were informed that a historic lack of regular proactive vegetation management led to excessive growth, which then posed a risk to those using the railway. However, addressing that growth through clearance can initially result in a stark contrast in the appearance of the lineside for residents.
9. Councillor Anderson sought and received assurances that there is a commitment to deliver proactive, regular maintenance in future to protect green corridors and support biodiversity.
10. Cllr Anderson was advised that at a national level future management of the overall Network Rail estate aims to deliver increased biodiversity.

Impact on Services

11. It was noted that benefits of the programme of vegetation management include improving the reliability of rail services and reducing delays.



Environment, Housing & Communities Scrutiny Board

Site Visit: Network rail Vegetation Management

12. At Headingley station train drivers had reported not being able to see the station on their approach due to overhanging vegetation and had described an experience “akin to black ice” due to the number of fallen leaves on the line in Autumn.
13. Since the programme of maintenance has been carried out in Headingley several drivers have contacted the team to thank them for improving their experience of working on the line.

Felling Trees

14. Advice was sought about the implications of tree felling, particularly in the context of the city’s wider ambitions to increase tree planting. Cllr Anderson raised concern about the perception that vegetation management is removing green corridors in inner city areas.
15. The Tree Council is one of several independent organisations that engages with Network Rail to support the development of best practice in vegetation management. The Tree Council representatives at the meeting were supportive of the approach taken in Headingley and advised Councillors Anderson and Walshaw that the team working on the lineside at Headingley had been receptive to advice and had made changes to the scheme as a result.
16. Measures used in Headingley to deliver a more sympathetic approach to tree maintenance included coppicing instead of felling. Habitats had been created through log piles and new hedgerows will be planted in some locations. Coppice regrowth was anticipated for the majority of felled trees but future growth would be managed to ensure those trees did not present a risk to the safe running of the railway.
17. Risk assessments had concluded that trees on steep embankments along the lines in Armley posed a danger to safety. The assessment of the risk posed by these trees was supported by the Tree Council and most of those trees had been removed.
18. There remained ongoing concerns about the risks posed by other trees within the Armley scheme that had not been felled as originally planned.
19. The removal of trees due to Ash Die Back was discussed along with the significant leaf fall created through species such as ash. Options for replanting fruiting species such as Hawthorn to encourage biodiversity were discussed.
20. It was confirmed that where there is biodiversity loss due to vegetation management and that cannot be replaced for safety reasons, alternative habitats will be created elsewhere on the Network Rail estate.

Community Engagement

21. Attendees discussed the importance of communication with residents, who need to be given sufficient opportunity to engage with the long-term lineside plans for their areas.
22. In the case of Headingley, councillors were advised that public information events had taken place, lineside neighbours had received letters about the intended work and where concerns had been raised individual visits to those residents had also taken place.



23. As an example of scheme adaptation in response to local concerns, operators had cut some trees in a 'crown' to reduce the stark appearance of felling for lineside neighbours. Several additional trees that were significantly encroaching into properties had also been reduced.
24. It was acknowledged that in some areas of the city there are lessons to be learned about community engagement. It was noted, for example, that some residents in Armley have expressed dissatisfaction about local communication.
25. It was agreed that it is difficult to demonstrate to local people how the appearance of the lineside will improve after several growing seasons. The intention is to record a video in Headingley to show that changing appearance, which can then be used in future community engagement exercises to provide reassurance to local people.

Fly-Tipping and Graffiti

26. Cllr Anderson raised concerns about fly-tipping and rubbish on the line sides. It was agreed that the removal of vegetation often reveals fly tipping that had previously been concealed. Network Rail confirmed that fly-tipping and graffiti is being removed as part of the line management process.

Glysophates

27. The councillors were advised that the use of glysophates has significantly reduced in recent years and alternative management methods are used where possible. Glysophates are, however, still used in some circumstances – for example on the stumps of trees where regrowth would pose a risk to the railway.

Conclusion

28. It was the view of both the Council's Natural Environment Manager and representatives of the Tree Council that the approach to vegetation management in Headingley has been an example of best practice, with the approach adapted in response to expert advice and stakeholder feedback.
29. It was, however, acknowledged that the national programme is delivered by different teams and as a result there may be inconsistencies in the experiences of different communities.
30. Cllr Anderson agreed it would be helpful to attend a further meeting after an initial growing season to better understand how the appearance of the lineside will change over time.