



Department  
for Transport

## **Enhancing Biodiversity and Wildlife on the Lineside**

July 2019

## 1. Introduction

1. We have an obligation to protect the environment for future generations. Rail transport provides an opportunity to reduce our impact on the environment. There is much we can do to reduce the railway's environmental impact by further reducing carbon emissions, improving air quality, reducing noise, waste, and water use, and by managing lineside vegetation in a sustainable manner. We should deliver this while ensuring we provide a safe and efficient transport system for the public. By using railway land more sustainably and creating new habitats for wildlife, we can help stop the decline in native species and enhance biodiversity for all to enjoy and benefit.
2. In May 2018, the then Minister for Rail, Jo Johnson MP, commissioned an independent review to examine Network Rail's approach to lineside vegetation management across England and Wales. John Varley was appointed to lead the review in June 2018, using his significant experience in environmental land management. John Varley's report, which was published in December 2018, contained six recommendations, which were welcomed by Government and Network Rail. This policy statement addresses the first of these recommendations.
3. Network Rail is in a unique position to deliver improvements in biodiversity within the UK. As one of Britain's largest publicly funded bodies and one of its largest landowners, it is responsible for 20,000km of track and 52,000 hectares of land on its estate. Its railways run through some of the most fragile and valuable habitats within our country, and also provide important corridors for wildlife. Despite recent changes, there is significant scope for improvement: much of the vegetation that has grown up alongside railway lines is comparatively recent and does not always reflect the biodiversity of surrounding areas. Through careful planning and management, and by working in partnership with its neighbours and environmental groups, Network Rail can improve biodiversity, while at the same time continuing to improve safety and performance.
4. The Government believes that the ambitious policy it has set for Network Rail will enable it to become one of the UK's most environmentally responsible land-owners, in line with the Government's sustainable development targets and its ambitions to deliver a safe and reliable railway.
5. We hold our natural environment in trust for the next generation. By implementing the recommendations outlined in John Varley's report, we can become the first generation to leave the lineside environment in a better state than we found it and pass on to the next generation a natural environment protected and enhanced for the future.

## 2. Lineside Policy

1. The Government expects Network Rail to achieve no net loss in biodiversity on its existing lineside estate by 2024 and to achieve biodiversity net gain on each route by 2040. The Government will review progress on this in 2024. We expect Network Rail to produce a vision statement and a *Biodiversity Action Plan* by December 2019 outlining how they will meet these goals for biodiversity, in alignment with the goals set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan<sup>1</sup>. This vision should be in line with best practice, such as industry good practice principles and guidance for net gain, and deliver improvements in biodiversity across all routes on the network.
2. The Government expects well designed and maintained habitat management of its lineside estate to be fully integrated into Network Rail's objectives, culture, and decision-making and management processes, alongside its existing responsibilities for safety, performance and ensuring value for money. The Government recognises that maintaining safety and performance will remain of paramount importance, and expects Network Rail to carry out these activities in a way that minimises harm, and wherever possible improves, the natural habitat.
3. Where it is not safe or practical to mitigate habitat loss on its lineside estate, we expect Network Rail to make use of opportunities to improve biodiversity elsewhere on its estate or more widely.
4. The Government recognises the challenge of meeting these goals in the context of the urgent need to address the backlog of safety-critical work to meet the safety standard during the remainder of Control Period 6. Nonetheless, we expect Network Rail to make full use of the opportunities this presents to improve biodiversity on its lineside estate during this period.
5. The Government expects Network Rail to publish annual reports on its activity and on progress towards meeting these goals using recognised reporting metrics, which it would need to agree in advance with the Government and its key environmental stakeholder groups. Progress will be measured against an agreed and published baseline, which we expect to be in place across all routes by 2024.
6. The Office of Rail and Road (ORR), as the regulator of Britain's railways, will monitor Network Rail on its performance against its *Biodiversity Action Plan*, which will be captured annually in the ORR's Network Rail Monitor.
7. The Government expects Network Rail to follow best practice in habitat management, drawing from the experience other bodies within the UK and internationally, and updating its approaches as and when necessary to reflect

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<sup>1</sup> 25 Year Environment Plan goals for biodiversity: restoring 75% of protected sites to favourable condition; creating or restoring 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat; taking action to recover threatened, iconic or economically important species; and increasing woodland.

changes in the regulatory framework. In particular, Network Rail should consider opportunities to improve or replace habitat with priority habitats and threatened, iconic or economically important species in the context of the local area or region, consistent with the Government's *25-year Environment Plan* and *Biodiversity: 2020 Strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services*. Where offsetting is used to compensate for unavoidable habitat loss, the actions should be ecologically relevant to the offset site, rather than the original site.

8. We also expect NR to work in partnership with its lineside neighbours, local landowners and environmental groups to ensure that its lineside estate contributes to improving the biodiversity of the local area, and also maximises the value and connectivity of its routes as wildlife corridors.
9. The Government expects Network Rail to use the funding envelope provided for in Control Period 6 (2019-2024) to meet the policy goals set out above, and will be expected to bid for appropriate funding to enable it to achieve its long-term goals through future periodic reviews.
10. The Government will ensure that the terms of Network Rail's licence with the Department for Transport are amended before Control Period 7 (2024-2029) to reflect the policy set out within this document.