

# Position Statement

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## **RAILWAY LINESIDE MANAGEMENT**

There are over 800 kilometres of surface railway lines in London, of which a significant proportion support linesides with habitat of wildlife interest. These will include areas of grassland, scrub, recent woodland and wasteland communities, together with built infrastructure, such as walls and bridges, that will support some plants. The linesides are subject to management by the various railway companies to ensure that they are operationally safe. However, this often leads to controversy due to the scale, timing, and /or impacts of works to local residents, which can lead to London Wildlife Trust being asked for advice or support for campaigns to stop or amend works. This sets out the Trust's position on railway lineside management.

### **I. Position**

- London's railway linesides form an important component of the Capital's wildlife habitats, supporting a range of habitats and species and acting as important linkages within the network of the city's greenspaces;
- London's greener railway linesides also provide landscape and amenity benefits, softening the built environment and acting as screens and buffers, as well as offering potential for climate change adaptation;
- The best stretches of railway land for biodiversity, whether woodland, grassland or wasteland, should be protected from adverse development, and managed appropriately to conserve their interest;
- We recognise that railway linesides need to be managed for operational and safety reasons, and this does not need to necessarily compromise their biodiversity interest, indeed the restoration of rough grassland habitats from secondary woodland could be viewed as beneficial in the longer term;
- We believe that railway linesides should be managed with Biodiversity Action Plan objectives in mind, and welcome the developments made in this respect by some of the railway companies;
- Any proposed felling of trees on railway linesides needs to be managed sensitively, and due regard given to legislative requirements, the lineside's existing biodiversity interest as well as potential impacts to neighbouring properties;
- We will endeavour to proactively work with relevant railway companies to ensure that biodiversity on linesides is protected and enhanced;
- We encourage active control of invasive species which would negatively impact local biodiversity if left unchecked.

The Trust will review this policy and amend it following any changes to legislation, planning guidance or scientific evidence, as appropriate.

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## 2. Context

### ***Rail system in London and operation***

London's surface railway network covers over 800 kilometres, primarily in a radial network of lines from the centre. These are owned and operated by a number of companies primarily Network Rail, London Underground, Docklands Light Railway, and TramTrack (the latter three under the aegis of Transport for London). In some cases the companies own just the underlying assets (tracks, linesides and infrastructure), whilst others also own the train stock. Network Rail owns most of London's surface railway lines, and these service at least 10 Train Operating Companies (TOCs).

### ***Value for biodiversity***

It has long been recognised that the collective network of London's railway linesides is important for wildlife both in providing a range of habitats and acting as conduits and corridors linking the network of green spaces within the Capital.

#### *Diversity of habitats*

The predominant habitats found along London's railway linesides are grassland, scrub and woodland, together with ruderal and wasteland communities. These are legacies of the original landscaping carved out and created as the railways were laid out after the late 1830s, and in many cases either reflect the underlying geology or the substrates brought into to support embankments and cuttings (for example brickearths, clays and, more recently, concrete), as well as the surface ballast. For much of the railways history under steam traction, linesides were managed intensively to prevent fires, and were maintained as grasslands.

The succession to woodland is largely a result of the 1955 Modernisation Plan and the transition to electric and diesel traction, also involving a loss of lineside management labour. Consequently large tracts of grassland developed into scrub and woodland; some of these are now extensive and relatively mature, merging with adjacent woodlands.

Wasteland communities are predominantly found around sidings and marshalling areas, especially where these have become redundant, and can thrive on the well-drained substrates. Over time these may develop into pioneer woodland (consisting of birch and willow) and scrub, however, these are much rarer following the loss of redundant marshalling yards such as at Temple Mills and Alexandra Park to development.

#### *Important stretches*

Over 1000 hectares of lineside have been identified as Sites of Nature Conservation Importance in London. The longest and most important is that running between New Cross Gate and Forest Hill in Lewisham, a Site of Metropolitan Importance which incorporates a number of nature reserves en route (including New Cross Gate Cutting, Garthorne Road NR and Devonshire Road NR). Others include, for example, Brackenbury Cutting (Hillingdon), Sydenham Hill Station (Southwark), Stanmore embankment (Harrow), High Barnet embankment (Barnet), East Sutton railway land (Sutton), and various stretches in Islington (collectively identified as of Borough Importance). In addition a number of local authorities have awarded a level of protection to some tracts of railway linesides as green corridors within their planning documents, for example Lewisham and Ealing and/or as Biodiversity Action Plan targets, for example in Lambeth.

#### *Conduits and corridors*

Linesides can also act as corridors for certain species, especially mammals and reptiles, enabling them to move across parts of London. In some cases these stretch almost interrupted from the centre of London out through the suburbs and into the surrounding counties, and can provide opportunities for the movement of animals and plants. The dispersal of Oxford ragwort (*Senecio squalidus*) from the Oxford Botanical Garden from 1794 and eventually onto the city's railway tracks is a classic example. The clinker and ballast mimicked the volcanic substrates of its original Sicilian habitat, and the movement of trains have subsequently helped to distribute it across much of the UK. Other examples include rosebay willowherb, Italian toadflax, and common evening-primrose.

### *Key species*

A number of key species are commonly associated with lineside habitats:

- grasslands: include slow-worm, common lizard, kestrel, orange-tip butterfly and various grasshoppers
- woodlands: great tit, great spotted woodpecker, sparrowhawk, chiffchaff, and various bat species
- scrub: blackbird, lesser whitethroat, speckled wood butterfly
- wastelands: common evening-primrose, rosebay willowherb, various bees and hoverflies

A number of invasive species also thrive in lineside habitats, and a few of these can potentially damage existing habitats (such as Japanese knotweed), or cause damage to built infrastructure (for example, buddleia). In addition, lack of management has tended to lead to large patches of bramble scrub developing which can also have adverse impacts on grassland habitats.

### *Threats to habitats*

Ordinary railway operations aim to keep a clear passage of tracks, through chemical weed controls and vegetation management to remove sight and physical obstructions – these can have an impact on some habitats. There is also the need to reduce the impact of ‘leaves on the line’ (the decomposition of some leaves, especially sycamore and lime, leaving a mucilaginous surface on the rails and conductors, effecting traction and electrical pick-up). This has led to a programme to reduce the numbers of soft-leaved deciduous trees within a several metres of the operational permanent way.

Inappropriate management can often have significant short-term impacts, whilst under-management can lead to a loss of species-rich habitats over time.

In addition the following issues can also adversely impact on railway lineside biodiversity:

- loss of or damage to habitats through lineside or neighbouring development
- garden encroachment
- flytipping and rubbish (domestic (including garden disposals) and commercial)

### **Operational constraints**

Railside land owners and managers are under an obligation to manage both rail lines and linesides for operational and safety reasons. This does not, however, need to necessarily compromise lineside biodiversity interest. Management frequently includes removal of overhanging or dangerous trees, scrub or vegetation, thinning of trees to reduce ‘leaves on the line’ issues, grassland management to reduce risk of fire, and work to maintain stable embankments or cuttings.

The Trust recognises the essential need to manage linesides to assist the safe and smooth operation of all rail services. We also acknowledge that Network Rail, for example, is financially liable to the TOCs for ensuring the operational infrastructure allows them to operate to the timetables set within their contracts, and that penalties causing delays and/or problems can be significant.

The increasing use of contractors for lineside management and the drive to demonstrate cost savings, meet performance targets and minimise interruptions to rail services has meant that there is little consideration of nature conservation issues. In addition contractors may be unaware of legal obligations or best practice, and can be reluctant to alter work timings or patterns to take into account nature conservation issues.

In addition, some management practices such as the restoration of rough grassland habitats from secondary woodland could be viewed as beneficial in the longer term. However, people’s perception of change, destruction of one form of habitat in favour of another and in particular their attachment to trees can colour what may be in the long term best interests of biodiversity.

The Trust believes that any proposed management on railway linesides needs to be undertaken sensitively, with due regard for legislative requirements, the lineside's existing biodiversity interest as well as potential impacts to neighbouring properties.

### 3. References

Frith, M. (1998), *Wild linesides; wildlife on London's railways*, London Wildlife Trust.

Greater London Authority (2002), *Connecting with London's Nature; the Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy*, GLA.

London Biodiversity Partnership (2000), *The London Biodiversity Audit*, LBP.

Sargent, C. (1984), *Britain's railway vegetation*, Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, NERC.

### 4. FAQs

#### ***Can I stop the railway company cutting down trees?***

- Railway companies are under an obligation to provide the safe and secure operation for railway services. This may necessitate the removal of overhanging/dangerous branches or trees. This should be done with due regard to protected species (e.g. bats and nesting birds) and having undergone both Health & Safety and environmental company processes and assessments. Legally, lineside management falls under a number of Acts including the Transport & Works Act 1992 which excludes companies from the need to consult and apply for planning permission for works that affect railway operations.
- For full details of works being undertaken you should contact the rail track management company (e.g. Network Rail <http://www.networkrail.co.uk> or hotline 0845 711 4141) or contact your local council.
- It is also worth remembering that the removal of trees is not necessarily to the detriment of biodiversity, indeed if done to create a new or improve/manage an existing habitat can be of significant benefit to biodiversity. Obviously this will need to be assessed on a case by case basis.

#### ***Do the railway operators need a licence to carry out felling?***

- Not if the trees to be felled are interfering with operational work. This is permitted under the Transport & Works Act 1992. However, a licence is required from the Forestry Commission to fell trees above a certain size and number on non-operational land e.g. derelict lines, sidings etc, and other land owned by the railway companies (although felling licences are not required in inner London boroughs).

#### ***Can my local railway lineside be protected for wildlife?***

- Wildlife habitats can be protected under a number of designations; however in London, lineside habitats can be listed as Sites of Nature Conservation Importance and can be either of Metropolitan Importance or Borough Importance. Those of Metropolitan Importance are designated through the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority. Those of Borough Importance are co-ordinated through individual Boroughs and the London Biodiversity Action Plan system. In addition, a number of lineside sites are also designated as Local Nature Reserves and specifically managed for biodiversity and/or wildlife interest.

#### ***I have seen a species of interest on railway land. How can I ensure that this species is recorded/protected?***

- To record a species of interest go to Greenspace Information for Greater London (GiGL) at <http://www.gigl.org.uk/Submit/tabid/63/Default.aspx>.
- A few species found on London's railways are afforded varying levels of legal protection, primarily if they may be affected by development proposals (involving the loss of or changes to habitat). If you think this may require further investigation contact your local authority's biodiversity or ecology officer.
- A number of lineside habitats have been identified as Sites of Nature Conservation Importance and given a level of protection within local plans. In addition, a number of lineside sites are also designated and managed as nature reserves. Please contact your local authority's biodiversity or ecology officer, or with the planning

department, to ascertain the level of protection of any given stretch of lineside and/or to discuss its potential merits of being afforded protection.

***My garden backs onto a railway lineside, there is a real problem with rubbish/overhanging trees/invasive species. What can I do?***

- Once rubbish, overhanging branches or invasive species enters your property, they become your responsibility, unless of course a tree or other structure growing in a neighbouring property falls through a boundary line and causes damage.
- With regard to branches, you are within your legal rights to cut anything overhanging your property (as long as by doing so it does not cause damage to your neighbour's property), however, you will also be responsible for dealing with cut material (throwing it back over the fence is, we suggest, not a responsible action and would recommend composting or creating a small habitat pile in a corner of your garden).
- Rubbish, windblown in, will also be your responsibility. If this is persistent and significant, you may wish to contact the landowners/management company to discuss the issue and see if they will erect a better fence or provide another solution. If this is not possible you may need to consider putting up something yourself, for example planting a hedge or shrubs which will impede rubbish. We also advise contacting your local authority's environmental health service.
- Invasive plants within your property, depending on the species, can occasionally be a major problem. However, the two species likely to be of concern (requiring special treatments) are Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed, both subject to management constraints under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981. We strongly advise you to seek expert advice from the local authority, and or companies specialising in invasive species treatment, etc. It would also be worthwhile contacting the lineside managers to see what action they are taking and if they could also tackle the plants that have spread onto your land. As a good neighbour and responsible company one would hope that they would act in a conscientious way.

## **5. Links**

Network Rail: <http://www.networkrail.co.uk/asp/1051.aspx>

Tubelines: [http://www.tubelines.com/community/environment/policy\\_objectives.aspx](http://www.tubelines.com/community/environment/policy_objectives.aspx)