

Press release: Highways England and conservation volunteers pick up top environmental award

Highways England and a group of environmental volunteers have picked up a major award after transforming land alongside the A30 in Devon into a hotspot for wildlife.

The Big Biodiversity Challenge – Maintenance and Management Award was won by Highways England and the Sticklepath and Okehampton Conservation Group (StOC) for an innovative scheme at Blackhall Farm enhancing habitats and creating stepping stones for wildlife species to move across the area.

The land, owned by Highways England, had already been identified as having potential and benefits for habitat connectivity but funding needed to be identified to take the project forward.

With the help of StOC volunteers, labour costs were kept to a minimum and just £1400 was spent on materials and the hire of a mini digger.

Over a three year period a wetland area has been created, new hedges laid and woodland has been looked after and actively managed at the 1.5 hectare site.

Highways England ecologist Leo Gubert, said:

I am delighted for all of us that we have won this CIRIA award. It is a perfect example of how community involvement can result in wonderful benefits for biodiversity on the land we manage while providing a real sense of achievement for everyone involved.

The hard working volunteers from StOC kept working under all weather conditions with a never fading enthusiasm. It has been a real pleasure to work with them.

The new approach of Highways England ecologists working alongside volunteers has seen numerous benefits at Blackhall Farm, including:

- An explosion in wild flower species providing foraging habitat for pollinators
- A large woodland area thinned and coppiced and hedges laid providing habitat for dormice, birds, invertebrates and other small mammals
- Habitat created for aquatic species, including a rare local damselfly

StOC group coordinator Mike Watson said:

The group has thoroughly enjoyed taking part in this project with

Highways England and Kier and it's wonderful the work has been recognised by this award.

It feels good to know that we have made a difference and achieved so much in the three years we have been involved. We are looking forward to getting back to the site and continuing the good work.

The project will continue for the foreseeable future and plans include installing a bee bank using soil from a nearby construction scheme and planting woodland bulbs in the coppiced area.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.