

The Benefits of B-Lines to Local Authorities in Northern Ireland



© Donna Rainey

What are B-Lines?

B-Lines are 3 km wide linear pathways, “insect super-highways” composed of stepping stones of flower-rich habitats which link together existing important flower-rich areas (e.g. Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), Sites of Local Nature Conservation Interest (SLNCI), Local Nature Reserves (LNRs)) and Priority Habitats. They have been mapped on a county by county basis through a process of data collation, connectivity analysis and workshops with local stakeholders. Within B-Lines, together with partners and individuals, we are creating additional flower-rich stepping stones, big and small, to help pollinators and other insects travel safely through our landscapes.

B-Lines is a landscape-scale biodiversity initiative, developed and mapped by Buglife across the UK in partnership with local nature partnerships, statutory agencies, local authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other conservation partners. B-Lines is creating a UK-wide network of flower-rich habitats in line with commitments made in the Lawson review 2010 “Making Space for Nature”; identifying and creating linkages between flower-rich habitats. B-lines, as a landscape-scale framework, makes major contributions to the commitments required by the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021-2025, contributes to a Nature Positive 2030 and helps maintain several of the Strategic Environmental Outcomes set out in the Environmental Improvement Plan.



UK B-Lines network. Interactive map accessible at buglife.org.uk



Top left: Orange-tip Butterfly (*Anthocharis cardamines*) which requires Cuckooflowers as a larval foodplants, often lost to intensive mowing alongside dandelions © Joshua Clarke. **Top right:** Species-rich road verge, Cam road, managed by the Department For Infrastructure and Roads © Donna Rainey.

Local authorities are a key part of delivering B-Lines

Here are 6 actions for local authorities to support B-Lines and help local pollinator populations:

- 1 **Check the [B-Lines map](#)** to see where they run through your local authority, and prioritise wildflower habitat enhancement and creation work within the B-Lines network where possible.
- 2 **Ensure that designated sites, wildlife sites and Local Nature Reserves** in B-Lines are being well managed to maintain a favorable condition of habitats and species.
- 3 **Review the management of green infrastructure** to create more wildflower-rich, chemical free, pollinator friendly natural habitats of value to both wildlife and local residents.
- 4 **Create flower-rich areas** in parks, school grounds, roundabouts and other public open spaces.
- 5 **Encourage local people** to manage gardens and community greenspaces to benefit pollinators and other wildlife as well as the local community.
- 6 **Create and adopt** a Pollinator Strategy within your local authority.

How can you use B-Lines and how can they help you?

Local authorities have a duty to conserve, “and enhance” biodiversity in exercising their functions under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which has been strengthened by the Environment Act 2021. Supporting and helping to deliver B-Lines will help to deliver many local authorities’ commitments to biodiversity, whilst

also contributing toward delivery of key objectives outlined in the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan. B-Lines provides a very simple strategic framework within which local authorities can deliver their obligations; benefiting both wildlife and their local communities.

B-Lines maps can assist in prioritising and delivering Green Infrastructure and other wildlife initiatives, in targeting action on your own estates and in strategic development planning work.

Using the B-Lines in strategic planning and green infrastructure work

Local authorities can use B-Lines as part of the biodiversity ‘evidence base’ to support Nature Networks and habitat mapping. This will help to ensure that pollinators are properly considered in emerging Local Plans, Biodiversity Action Plans and other relevant strategies. They can also help to drive the creation, restoration, expansion and contiguity of individual Priority Habitat types and support action plans for local prioritised species. B-Lines is a simple yet effective approach to green infrastructure, which is highly attractive to local communities and simple to understand. Local authorities should identify synergies between B-Lines and existing green infrastructure and brownfield site mapping and then use the B-Lines messages to promote and deliver action on the ground.



Ruby-tailed Wasp (*Chrysis* sp.) © Joshua Clarke



Orange-tailed Mining Bee (*Andrena haemorrhoa*) © Joshua Clarke

Supporting local planning

It is important that wildlife habitat is properly considered within all planning decisions, including the potential impacts on the connectivity of flower-rich habitats. Although not a statutory consideration, B-Lines can help to identify where important wildflower networks exist within the landscape. The Mitigation Hierarchy (avoid, mitigate, and as a last resort compensate) should always be strictly adhered to in planning decisions to help protect flower-rich habitats.

B-Lines are also a useful lever to encourage developers to make their green spaces truly multi-functional and to deliver for pollinators, rather than creating traditional species-poor amenity grassland areas. Flower-rich habitats can support local place making and can be focal points for community activity in well planned developments. B-lines are a prioritised and connected landscape, a nature recovery network, so should be considered a local biodiversity priority.

Supporting improved land management

Local authorities can make a significant contribution by implementing positive management regimes on any flower-rich habitats and wildlife sites which form a key part of the B-Lines network. Many local authorities have significant land holdings, which have the potential to be managed more sympathetically for wildlife. Small changes to management regimes, such as reducing cuts and removing cuttings, carried out on roadside verges, parks and other amenity space can have a huge impact on the value of land to insect pollinators and other wildlife. Cumulatively this can make a major contribution towards enhancing the wildlife value of the environment at a landscape-scale. By creating more accessible, natural wildlife rich greenspace, B-Lines will bring more nature into more people's lives, with benefits to both physical and mental wellbeing.

Guiding habitat restoration ambitions

Restoring pollinator populations within B-Lines will depend on a large number of habitat restoration and creation projects being implemented across the UK. If local authorities focus their habitat restoration ambitions within the B-Lines network, the biodiversity benefits of their actions can be increased. B-Lines can be a useful driver of both local support and funding for habitat restoration objectives.

Enthusing and educating others to take action

Significant parts of the B-Lines network can be developed by enthusiastic individuals and groups often just taking action on small areas of land. Schools, businesses, local communities, and private individuals can all help to develop the wildflower-rich habitats needed within B-Lines. We would encourage local authorities to use B-Lines to enthuse and work with local people to help conserve our insect pollinators and other wildlife.



Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park, Belfast © Wild Belfast



Two-banded Longhorn Beetle (*Rhagium bifasciatum*) © Claire Pumfrey



Common Blue Butterflies (*Polyommatus icarus*) © Liam Olds

Legislation & policy background

Environment Act (2021)

The Environment Act (2021) created a new legislative framework for governance of Northern Ireland and the requirement for the creation of new “Environmental Improvement Plans” which should establish aims to significantly improve the natural environment and set out steps as to how this occurs. As such, the Environment Act presents an opportunity to deliver the aspirations of B-Lines and create and restore wildflower-rich habitats, improving the extent and connectivity of habitats to help pollinators recover from their historic declines.

Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland (2024)

The first Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) for Northern Ireland supports rebuilding resilient ecosystems and reconnecting communities with nature. It outlines six Strategic Environmental Outcomes (SEOs), with B-Lines directly addressing two:

- **SEO3:** Creating thriving, connected wildlife.
- **SEO2:** Developing a healthy, accessible environment for all.

Integrating B-Lines helps manage and connect wildflower-rich sites with protected areas, making nature more accessible - from roadside verges to parks, supporting long-term conservation and sustainable practices.

Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG15 & SDG13), the EIP also builds on Lawton’s principles and Nature Recovery Networks, using B-Lines to restore habitat connectivity for pollinators.

Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

The WANE Act (2011) requires public bodies to support biodiversity conservation while carrying out their functions. Local authorities must consider the species and habitats listed in Section 3 when making policies or decisions.

Enhancing and managing these habitats, especially within B-Lines, can significantly benefit pollinators and other wildlife, including threatened Priority Species.

Restoring and improving these habitats aligns with Lawton’s “bigger, better, more joined-up” approach, helping local authorities meet their legal duties under the Act.

Conservation (Natural Habitats etc.) Regulations 1995 (Northern Ireland)

These regulations require development plans to promote the management of key landscape features, such as rivers, hedgerows, ponds, and woods, which support wildlife movement and genetic diversity.

The regulations implement the EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) in Northern Ireland. Since the UK’s exit from the EU, responsibilities previously held by the European Commission were transferred to local authorities in 2019 by changes made by the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.



Greater Butterfly Orchid on a road verge managed by volunteers with an annual cut and rake off © Donna Rainey



Species-rich grassland managed by Don't Mow volunteer farmer with cut and bail © Donna Rainey

Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022

The Climate Change Act, approved for the first time in Northern Ireland in 2022, sets out targets for 2030, 2040 and 2050 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Act requires the development and publication of Climate Action Plans which along with greenhouse gas and air quality targets includes soil quality and biodiversity targets. B-lines encourage species-rich grassland over short, species-poor amenity grasslands. Species-rich grasslands sequester and store more carbon than species poor grassland contributing to climate change targets. Additional ecosystem services linked with climate change provided by species-rich grassland include, increased water filtration rates compared to short species-poor areas leading to reduced flood risks and in a heat wave, a diverse, long grassland with varying root depths has a greater ability to stay green and contribute to urban cooling.

The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985

The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Act provides powers to establish and manage nature reserves, especially on derelict sites, to protect wildlife and make them accessible to the public. B-Lines can improve connections between these sites and support efforts to acquire, manage, and open them up for public enjoyment. For example, B-lines can identify Open Mosaic Habitat on Previously Developed Land, a priority habitat for invertebrates, that might otherwise be overlooked. Protecting and opening such areas for recreation could create valuable green spaces in urban areas, improving access to nature and helping to climate-proof cities across Northern Ireland.

All-Ireland Pollinator Plan

The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan for 2021-2025 is a five-year road map that aims to help bees, other pollinating insects and our wider biodiversity. The Plan is even more ambitious

than the first (2015-2020) – with more partners coming together to deliver more actions and supported by all councils across Ireland. It encourages a better way of managing our whole landscape to permanently support struggling biodiversity including seeking to conserving rare pollinators. B-Lines prioritise the habitat creation and restoration needed to help restore pollinator populations in Northern Ireland.

References

Lawton et al., 2010: Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network. Defra.

[All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021-2025. National Biodiversity Data Centre Series No. 25, Waterford. March 2021.](#)

[Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland](#)

[Natural England, JNCC, Natural Resources Wales, NatureScot & Northern Ireland Environment Agency \(2021\) Nature Positive 2030 - Summary Report. JNCC: Peterborough. ISBN: 978-1-86107-636-6](#)

[Climate Change Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2021](#)

[The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1985](#)

[Wildlife and Natural Environment Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

[Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act \(2006\)](#)

[Environment Act 2021](#)

[Buglife B-Lines map](#)

C. McKinney, R. Richards, D. Smith and J. Robins (2025) The Benefits of B-Lines to local authorities in Northern Ireland.