

A6 DUALLING SCHEME

North West Corridor – Northern Ireland

GRAHAM FARRANS JV

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award Category: *Project of the Year Award (>5 Ha)*

Project overview

The A6 Randalstown to Castledawson, (A6RC), is part of a larger development upgrading 14.7km of road creating a new dual-carriage way between Belfast and the North West. It's used by 18,000 vehicles a day and experiences congestion at key times, making it NI's most essential infrastructural projects in recent years.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

The route was used for agriculture, the intensive agriculture practices have negatively impacted on the region's native flora populations reducing biodiversity and creating monoculture habitats. A section of the development passes by a traditional Whooper Swan feeding site at Lough Beg. The route was selected to minimise impact on the Lough Beg SPA. A Habitats Regulation Assessment, Appropriate Assessment was completed along with an extensive EIA to determine the effects of construction and live traffic on the Swan population. In addition to Swans, baseline studies also found numerous badger setts, bats and otters within the planning corridor.

What were the reasons behind this project ?

Since concept this project has been under scrutiny due to its proximity to a site of international importance. The site team, client and client's representative all made strong commitments to deliver the project whilst having minimal impact on the local area, habitats and communities. Consultations were held with ecology specialists including the RSPB, NIEA and local wildlife groups. To eliminate the impact on the wintering Whooper Swan population a commitment was to suspend all major earthworks along a 2.5km stretch of the scheme between October and March.



Whooper Swans at their established overwintering site



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Camera-trap image of a family of badgers leaving their new colonised sett

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

A Whooper Swan Working Group was established facilitating positive stakeholder engagement between the local community, conservation groups and project team, the following measures were undertaken.

- Major earthworks only undertaken between March and October
- Strict procedure of entry to 'swan section' during winter feeding months, adhered to by all project staff including no Hi-Vis PPE, no entry to fields containing swans and single vehicle access at a time
- Reduction of road footprint to prevent intrusion to swan feeding grounds i.e. no SUDS ponds located along the 2.5km stretch
- Sympathetic design of section including no SUDS ponds and specially designed street lighting
- Detailed landscape design with precise screening approved by the ecology team
- Design and construction of 12 mammal passes totalling 500m. Badger proof fencing has been installed to direct the mammals to the crossing point, allowing freedom of movement and safe road crossing
- Bat hops have been constructed at points where the newly constructed road dissects feeding and flight paths
- Sand martin nesting areas were created to allow sand martins to nest while not being disturbed by construction traffic
- Large heavily farmed fields dominated the route corridor. A significantly more diverse mix of native plant has been reintroduced along the road incorporating:
 - 22.7 miles of native hedgerow
 - 20,000 m2 of wildflower areas
 - 463,875 m2 of planting (equivalent of 65 football pitches)
 - 472,088 plants



Image of mammal pass allowing badgers to safely cross the A6 site



Further information

This Project is ongoing and due for completion in Spring 2021 . The working group has been liaising with landowners to establish 'swan friendly lands' to better cater for the over wintering migrating population. This involves removing boundary hedges increasing the available land area for the swans who prefer larger landscapes. The farmers will also benefit as they can claim benefits from helping to maintain the land for wildlife friendly initiatives such as a reduced silage cutting during season and only cutting the grass to a certain height. The vast native species planting scheme will have a positive lasting impact. The reintroduction of native plant life connected to a permanent infrastructure development ensures its continued presence and growth and supports a wealth of biodiversity. It will disrupt monoculture habitats and cater for a multitude of birds, pollinators and mammals helping to create suitable safe habitats for a wide variety of Ireland's native wildlife. The project incorporates considerations for local and international important wildlife allowing it to flourish in their natural habitat alongside development and improved infrastructure. Over 500 whooper swans were seen at Lough Beg in winter 2018. There are also about 40 resident birds, and in 2017 there were 6 nesting pairs – more than on any other lake in the world.

Project Team

- GRAHAM Farrans Joint Venture
- AECOM
- Department for Infrastructure
- RSPB
- ARUP
- ROD

What was the motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

The A6 is one of the most essential pieces of infrastructure in Northern Ireland, while this is true the project teams have a strong drive to protect and enhance biodiversity. The whooper swans have a right to go undisturbed during their winter-feeding patterns, the project team recognise this and strictly adhere to the rules put in place. By creating habitats such as the sand martin nest sites, the project team can demonstrate that the scheme has gone beyond its environmental commitments benefiting the local biodiversity and promoting an increase in the regions diversity of plants and wildlife.