

General feed back to the villages in the Richmond Rotary Best Kept Village Competition 2025

Congratulation to all the villages in the competition you make the judging more difficult each year. The overall standard of maintenance and development of the village spaces and resources was again high and this was reflected in all the judges' comment. The villages are such an outstanding feature of Richmondshire, not just because they are attractive or that they showcase the heritage, but because they are lively and welcoming communities, enhancing creatively the life of those who live there and providing space and habitat for the wildlife that share the locality.

Winning awards is a recognition of this, but what is clear is that the motivation for the effort of Parish Councils and other groups involved is far deeper. So please pass on congratulations to all involved for their tireless effort and for the response they obviously evoke from communities. We present this feedback as a guide and we hope that the competition remains a fun experience for all.

This feedback is arranged in three sections and clearly of a general nature, but we hope you find it a helpful guide and accept it as a 'thankyou' from the Rotary Club for the effort you all put in.

Section 1 Village environment: -

Categories 1-5, 8 and 10- These are features that contribute to the attractive nature and ambience of each village.

In almost every case there was an absence of litter. Where there was some litter, it was minimal and incidental. Nowhere did it reflect a general neglect. It was clear that the cleanliness was due to a combination of individual responsibility and village cleaning routines. Well done to those who have clearly litter picking groups that tackle issue of 'through traffic litter.'

Grass cutting was again well done, framing the village settings. There were variations, and judges noted areas in some villages where the grass could have been tidier. These were not areas left for wildlife simply corners and spaces missed by the grass cutters. There was evidence in some cases that volunteers ensured grass cutting targeted those areas inaccessible to machines. Judges noted how some villages differentiated well, between central areas that were for visual amenity and those spaces and corridors left for wildlife. Weeding of paths was varied yet judges tried to differentiate in their judgement where this was done to encourage varied fauna.

In general, but not universally, hedges and fences were well maintained. This in the main is the responsibility of private owners and the effort to join in was widespread. Some villages had left stretches of hedgerow as corridors to encourage wildlife but this purpose was generally differentiated and not due to a lack of maintenance.

Again, gardens were a picture and a highlight feature of the villages. Communication with individual homeowners was obviously well done and the response excellent. There was high praise for the varied and creative gardening seen in all villages. There appeared to be less note of individual vegetable gardens being maintained this year but there were some very good examples. Of course, there were exceptions to the highest of standards and judges believed that this generally reflected intermittent occupancy. However, villages generally reach out to all such occupants and the response in some cases is excellent. Judges understood this was a bigger issue for some villages and they endeavoured to recognise the extra effort to include all.

Judges also praised those villages that had established community gardens and orchards and churchyards which will be mentioned later in section 2

The decorative features in gardens and business premises were noted by judges. They were enhanced by tubs, hanging baskets and other creative features. Judges also noted where the effort had been made to do the same for shared areas and communal buildings to remarkable effect.

The 'buy in' by local businesses was varied. Life for small businesses and farms can be challenging. However, judges noted some good examples where businesses are deeply involved in the village project and not only maintain tidy and attractive premises and accesses, but support the effort by practically using their premises and resources.

Included in this feature are local Pubs, Inns and Guest Houses. They are often central to the life of villages and they contribute to the attractiveness of the environment. Again, in general these special features of the

villages, provided attractive focal points and were well maintained and often decorated with flower beds and other features. Car parks and associated features where they maintained and presented, have big impact on the attractiveness and welcome of the village. Judges were especially aware of the challenge provided by tourism in the larger villages. However, maintaining public toilet facilities and other shared and frequently used resources was in general well done. The partnership between providers of accommodation and catering can be challenging, but offers many opportunities and judges recognized this, and the effort made.

Section 2 The Encouragement of nature and wildlife: -

Although this is included mainly in section 6 it is however reflected in the village response in all three areas of judgement.

The whole village environment is part of the habitat for the natural world this includes amenity areas of lawns and gardens, individual gardens, buildings, shared spaces, business premises, created community gardens as well as those natural features, woodland, streams, and ponds. Judges comment included observations on all these aspects which ensured all environments were treated with equity.

Judges noted individual gardens where the householder had created some small areas of uncut grass to encourage small mammals, hedgerow flowers, insects, and butterflies. There were examples of selected planting to encourage butterflies. In others there were woodpiles, insect hotels and secluded areas. There were garden ponds also in evidence. Buildings and gardens exhibited a wide variety of bird feeding and nesting boxes. The former were not always maintained with feed but judges understood that in midsummer feeding may have been suspended as natural sources were plentiful. There was a variety of nest boxes including those encouraging song birds to specialist ones for swallows and martins and others.

Although not mentioned on the reports judges looked for evidence of corridors between private gardens for wildlife to move. This however was happening where hedges and footpaths provided highways.

Judges looked for examples of businesses including farms where the encouragement of wildlife was a feature and noted, roadside flowers and birdboxes among these. This is a feature villages may like to pursue.

Those villages which had natural features such as ponds, and streams, have extra responsibilities regarding development, and in almost all cases these were cleaned and maintained while providing the best possible habitat for wildlife. Maintaining the difference between creating lawned ambient spaces for recreation and letting wild spaces grow is never easy and judges noted where villages managed this differentiation well and those where it was less clear.

A very special feature of both some larger and some small villages was the maintenance of public gardens and churchyards and the creation of special wild or community gardens or orchards. These featured, delayed mowings to encourage varied flora and fauna, special bush and tree planting and wild flowers to encourage variety of species, the encouragement of bird nesting, insect hotels, and woodpiles. Judges were encouraged to look for good access to these spaces and the encouragement of all to enjoy. There were the occasional examples of information boards but these were not always current or updated to encourage village interest.

Judges were grateful for the information provided by the parish councils in the 500 pre judging submission which guided judges to these special features which were often tucked away out of sight or on the edge of villages. This ensured areas of interest were not missed.

Section 3 The encouragement of Community life -sections 7 and 9 however evidence was gleaned across all aspects

Although we have this year emphasised this special feature it is built from all those features which were already at the heart of the competition and central to our interest as Rotarians, which is the encouragement of communal life, recreation, neighbourliness, access, safety, and inclusion. We of course could not judge outcomes, simply the evidence of the measures taken.

Information Information is at the heart of this feature and judges made comment on the **village notice board**. This included where it was positioned and how accessible it was to all villagers, the relevance of the information, if it is up to date and easy to read.

Judges sought to find information such as the following

Does it enable all to access the safety features such as a public telephone or defibrillators.

Does it enable all to find access to advice from the Parish Council or other providing bodies

Does it indicate where and how to access public transport or where these are available, shared lifts etc.

Does it signpost places of public access, seats, and other community spaces

Does it sign post current and upcoming village events and how to be involved.

Village Hall, or other Community Buildings. Not all villages have Villages Halls but this did not detract from shared village activity. Judges again noted how access to information was provided and what events were planned.

Churches Judges again noted the signage provided, access arrangements, and information about activities. The many activities included worship, space for meeting and creative activities and reflection, as well as resources for local people and visitors including walkers.

Bus Stops and shelters Judges noted the generally good provision of relevant information, but on occasions the shelters could have **had better up keep and cleanliness**.

Telephone boxes Even in the days of digital phones, Judges considered and commented on the cleanliness, provision of good access and clear information.

Heritage sites. Local war memorials were maintained with care and respect even when small and tucked away out of easy sight.

Use of Redundant Buildings and Community Ownership Judges commented favourably on numerous redundant buildings and spaces, now repurposed as inviting meeting places, with book and newspaper sharing. Note was made of certain community investment projects.

Seats All villages provided seats of various kinds to help villagers enjoy vistas or quiet corners. Judges commended these and looked at how accessible they were to all users and positioned to encourage people to meet.

Footpaths Judges were aware that these often were maintained by the County Council or the National Park, but noted how some villages enhanced these to encourage local as well as visitor use.

The community sport and recreation facilities All but the smallest of villages have some sports facilities which include sports fields and spaces and children's playgrounds. Larger villages have greater infrastructure to maintain, and judges are aware of the partnership between the village and sports clubs or schools.

Village Produce and Wild Gardens and Orchards. These are now a feature of a number villages both large and small. Judges commented how well these sought to improve wellbeing and provided produce in some cases. They also commented on how these provided access for all.

Schools

These are only present of some of the sample but Judges looked for evidence where possible of how the schools interacted with the village, in the care of the environment and in the sharing of facilities.

Provision of information prior to the Judging Judges wish to thank all those villages who took the opportunity to provide the 500-word information page. It made sure they were able focus on the activities not easily evidenced on the ground and access more secluded resources. In particular, some villages highlighted the efforts made both to encourage nature and to highlight community activity. This was really very helpful to judges.