



Information and Advisory Note for Parish and Town Councils

Biodiversity and Verges

Why are road side verges important?

Gloucestershire's road side verges sometimes support remnants of old meadows and may be bounded by species-rich hedgerows or mature trees. Verges can be refuges for wildlife and can act as corridors connecting species and habitats across the county.



A selection of the most important sites for biodiversity has been identified by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust working in partnership with Gloucestershire County Council (GCC). These locations may be marked by road studs in the highway and are called 'Conservation Road Verges' (CRVs). An up to date register of these CRVs is available at <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/highways/plans-policies-procedures-manuals/biodiversity-and-highways/>.



Safety

Maintaining the safety of road users and the fabric of the road are of paramount importance. Part of this involves cutting verge or overhanging vegetation so as to maintain visibility particularly at junctions and on bends. Cutting is also sometimes needed to create refuges for pedestrians, keep road signs visible or to maintain drainage (e.g. grips). However despite these activities there are often opportunities to conserve and enhance biodiversity as part of verge management.

Who manages road side verges?

Highways England maintains verges next to motorways and trunk roads (i.e. strategic routes such as the M5, M50, A419/A417). GCC looks after other verges that are not privately owned. The latter can be found next to some minor roads in rural areas. As a general rule, hedges, trees growing in the hedgerow, and the ditches in front of them, are owned by the adjoining landowner. They are seldom the County Council's responsibility.

Even if a verge is not owned by GCC the management of vegetation is still a matter of concern. GCC as highways authority has powers to make sure verges next to roads are managed in a way that they do not pose a safety issue for road users or a risk to a road's structure or its function.

Many parish councils undertake verge cutting within villages under delegated schemes offered by the highway authority. For parishes that wish to maintain verges instead of the highways authority then an agreement can often be arranged with GCC. This usually includes a calculated commuted sum equivalent to the amount GCC would normally spend on cutting grass verges in the parish. Further details of such agreements can be obtained from your Local Highways Manager.



How can road side verges be best managed for biodiversity?

GCC is now, through its highway authority role, seeking to improve the biodiversity value of verges. Hopefully parish and town councils, who also have a statutory duty to conserve biodiversity, might be able to assist GCC where they can. GCC has a helpful highways and biodiversity guidance document which can be found at <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/highways/plans-policies-procedures-manuals/biodiversity-and-highways/> . The guidance is of use to all councils as well as utility companies and developers whose actions may impact on verges. It sets out how to protect biodiversity associated with highways (not just verges) including what opportunities might

exist to enhance wildlife. In respect of managing grass verges the guidance closely follows the approach advocated by the charity Plantlife nationally (technical guidance on their website).

The general methods to conserve and enhance biodiversity on verges are:

- *Annual mowing ideally in August / September or autumn /winter if conditions acceptable.*
- *NO cutting between April and July except for safety cuts or to control coarse grasses for a time so as to eventually restore species diversity.*
- *Collect cuttings if possible and place in a sacrificial area or take away for green recycling including use as compost or if arrangements exist a biofuel.*
- *Vary cutting height and frequency to create different zones or sections to benefit a larger range of species including invertebrates.*
- *Keep a record of management and let others know, e.g. between the Parish/Town Council and the Local Highways Manager, and using media such as Twitter, local newsletters and website pages.*



Trees

Trees can have an amenity, landscape and biodiversity value depending on location, numbers, species and growth form. The County Council generally owns only those trees that have been planted or have established themselves within the highway limits, otherwise most trees belong to the adjacent landowner. This means tree management is not often carried out by GCC as highways authority. Trees will normally be retained if they are not causing a risk to the road structure or a potential hazard to road users. Unfortunately due to ash die-back some trees next to highways will have to be felled and the Local Nature Partnership has agreed a position statement covering this matter.

GCC's highways guidance provides information on how to maintain the biodiversity value of trees and adjoining hedges. Additionally a useful new guidance document on the management of highway trees is available from the Forestry Commission. This is focused on street trees and how they can be retained, protected and maintained next to roads within settlements.

If a tree is causing visibility or access problems on a highway, the landowner will be asked to undertake appropriate management. Where trees are causing a safety issue, e.g. diseased and already or will become unstable, and this cannot be dealt with in any other way, the County Council will take action. In an emergency situation (such as after a storm where trees and branches have fallen across main roads) the County Council will also normally act immediately.



Injurious Weeds and Non-native Invasive Plants

Injurious weeds covered by the Weeds Act or non-native invasive plants listed under the Wildlife & Countryside Act may need controlling. If these plants occur on masse and are not likely to decline soon without intervention action will normally be taken. Species involved here include creeping thistle, spear thistle, broadleaved dock, curled dock, Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed and Himalayan balsam. Although a native plant common ragwort may sometimes need to be controlled too on verges. This is only when found in large abundance and there is a proven additional risk posed to grazing animals nearby.

Landscaping, Planting and use of Top Soil

After alterations to highway layouts some restorative landscaping may be required. Increasingly natural re-colonisation by native plants should be chosen as an option with suitable follow up weed control if necessary. The use of top soil should be limited to where it is really needed, e.g. as a medium for the planting of new trees. This is because most wildflowers will thrive best on nutrient poor substrates. Sometimes a helping hand is justified but only if seeds of native species are used that derive from a suitable and regional origin. Alternatively the strewing of local green hay could be employed in late summer.

Cultivation Licences

Members of the public are encouraged to take on the general maintenance of the verge area outside their property. This could include grass cutting, planting some low growing plants, or creating flower beds. However, there may be certain restrictions that may need to be adhered to, e.g. the depth of excavation, the height and type of certain shrubs, the non construction of structural features or hard landscaping, no enclosing of the area with fencing, walls or shrubs etc.

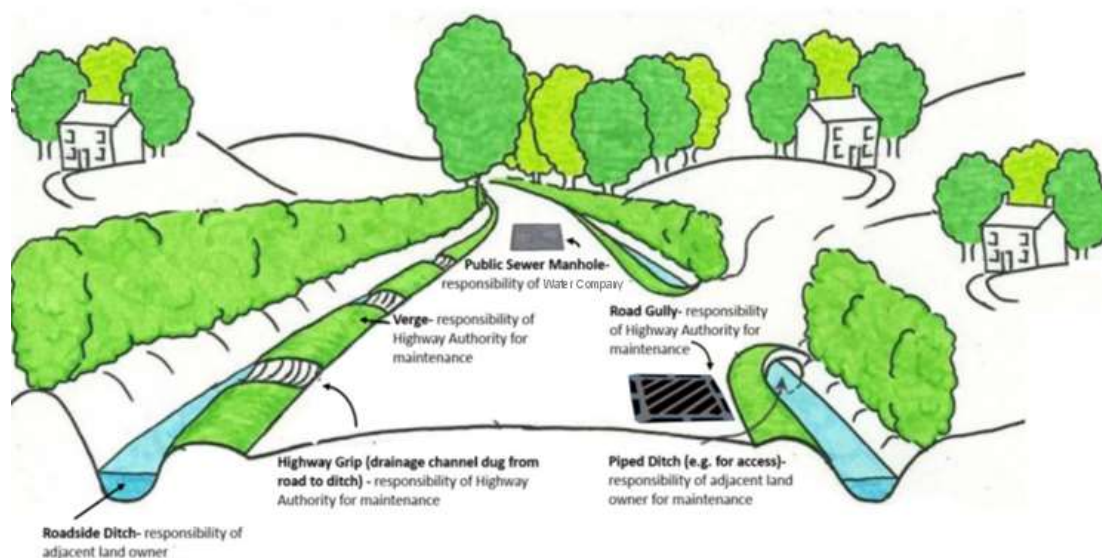
Applications for cultivation licences are dealt with by the relevant Highway officer and must be made in writing. If approved, a licence agreement will be drawn up which will set out any conditions that need to be adhered to.

Parish Councils can also request to maintain areas of highway land within their Parish. Again a request will need to be made in writing with a plan indicating the area concerned.

Drainage

The below diagram shows the general drainage pattern and responsibilities present on or next to a typical road. Some roadside ditches may have biodiversity value and so are best

cleared, if required in autumn or winter and some material is left on banks to allow small animals to re-enter the water.



Litter

District Councils normally have responsibility for collecting litter from verges where it is a problem but parishes and town councils can assist with this.

Planning Applications

As part of their comments to Local Planning Authorities, parish and town councils can consider any potential effects of new developments on road side verges they consider to be important. Effects can not just be negative (loss) because as part of new development there may be opportunities to better manage existing or newly created verges, embankments and cuttings.

Useful References

- Buglife (2019) 'Road verges and their potential for pollinators' see Table 1 at <https://cdn.buglife.org.uk/2019/10/Roberts-Phillips-Managing-road-verges-for-pollinators-report-040119.pdf>
- Cotswold Conservation Board (2009) 'Managing roadside verges – a brief guide for Parish Councils' at <https://www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Verges-Guidance-for-Parish-Councils-Dec09.pdf>
- Forestry Commission (2019) 'Highway Tree Management' Operations Note ON051 at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/highway-tree-management-operations-note-51>
- Gloucestershire County Council (Current) 'Highways & Roads webpages' at <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/highways/roads/> but particularly <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/highways/roads/road-maintenance/>
- Gloucestershire County Council (2019 onwards) 'Gloucestershire Highways Biodiversity Guidance' at <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/highways/plans-policies-procedures-manuals/biodiversity-and-highways/>
- Gloucestershire County Council (2018 onwards) 'Conservation Road Verge Register' at <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/highways/plans-policies-procedures-manuals/biodiversity-and-highways/>

- Gloucestershire Local Nature Partnership (2019) 'Ash Dieback Position Statement' at <https://www.gloucestershirenature.org.uk/forum/nature-recovery/ash-dieback-position-statement>
- Plantlife (2019) 'Managing grassland road verges – A best practice guide' at <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/our-work/publications/road-verge-management-guide>