



## Verges Document 2: How to manage your verges for greater biodiversity

### Introduction

The purpose of this leaflet is to show how to manage your verges for greater biodiversity. All councils, County, Town and Parish are now legally obliged to take account of biodiversity in their decision making.

As a result, Warwickshire County Council and Stratford District Council have established more wildlife friendly mowing strategies for the verges/green spaces for which they have responsibility. This document sets out thinking for discussions for improving the biodiversity of verges/green spaces managed by Parish Councils or other bodies such as developers.



Compiled by a working group of SWAN members. This overview can be used in conjunction with 'Verges Doc 1: Why should we manage grassland verges for wildlife?' and the accompanying PowerPoint presentation.

### Getting started

#### Who owns and maintains the verges and green spaces?

Before you can change current mowing practice you need to know who is responsible for contracting out the mowing and liaise with them to understand current practice, contracts in place and costs.

#### Other stakeholders?

Depending on the location of the verges and green spaces there may be other stakeholders who need consulting. For example, if the verge is lined by houses, householders will take a keen interest in any change of management and will need consulting.

#### Contractors

The contractors will ultimately need to be consulted too, to understand what equipment they have or will need, how flexible they can be and likely changes in costs.

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### Current practice

Verge mowing contracts are typically around 18 mowings per year. This is spread across the year and typically means fortnightly mowing across the growing season. This leaves no chance for plants to flower (other than a few very low growing species) so they don't set seed or produce nectar for insects. Mowings are not removed, which is a key issue since they increase soil fertility favouring a few dominant species - hence biodiversity of these verges is poor.

### Recommended practice

There is an ideal scenario set out in detail by the experts at Plantlife. Plantlife is leading the charge to bring about a systemic change in the way Britain's verges are managed, bringing benefits for nature and climate resilience.

**This approach typically involves mowing only once or twice per year.**

Commented [RC1]: Should there be a visual?

Management option	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
<b>One cut</b>								full cut				
Summer and autumn cutting								partial cut		full cut		
<b>Two cuts</b>			full cut						full cut			
Late winter and autumn cutting			full cut						full cut			
Dry verges (short vegetation)			regular cuts						regular cuts			
Species-rich verges with mown edge		1m strip							full cut			

"Managing grassland road verges: a best practice guide. J. Bromley, B. McCarthy, C. Shellswell. Plantlife 2019"

Plantlife also recognises different mowing regimes for different wildlife and situations.

*For biodiversity, a period of 6-8 weeks without mowing during May and June is a minimum requirement.*

For bio-diversity 'No Mow May' is a great rallying call for action and highlighting the issue but alone is of limited practical value to wildlife.

You also need to remove grass cuttings to reduce fertility of the soil.

### Compromises

For safety and vehicle access, mown strips would still be needed alongside the road edge and to create walkways.

In some situations, the initial recommendation above may need to be modified for something more practical, affordable or simply more acceptable to the majority of stakeholders. But remember, cutting mowing frequency down to 15 or 12 times per year is unlikely to yield much wildlife benefit.

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Instead, the first compromise might be to adopt the new mowing regime on a part of the verges and green spaces, not the whole estate e.g. somewhere more acceptable or as a test area and then to adopt it more widely.

#### **Do you need to plant wildflower plugs or resow or returf with wildflower meadow?**

The best solution is to let the soil and seed bank regenerate naturally although this will take time. In small areas you can try to accelerate the process with wildflower plugs or wildflower turf but it may be short lived and expensive – perhaps only worth considering on a 'showcase' area if you have the resources.

#### **Involving and educating the community**

There may always be some who see uncut verges as 'messy' rather than natural. Raising awareness and increasing understanding of the benefits for carbon take-up and wildlife will encourage acceptance of any change. This may be achieved by putting up signs in the relevant area, writing articles in local newsletters and getting people involved e.g. making a compost heap for mowings or sowing seeds.

Whatever you do, it is only the start of a journey. Every patch of grass is different and you don't know what any new regime will look like. So, one needs a long-term commitment to change and to expect to have to make changes over the years. It may take 10 years or more to see the full benefits. See our 'Why Should We Manage Grassland Verges for Wildlife' for all the reasons.

#### **Summary**

Verges managed for wildlife represent an opportunity for a positive community-wide effort to help with habitat loss and climate change – the most noticeable benefit being for grasses, flowers and invertebrates.

Costs may be different from current mowing contracts but the environmental cost of the status quo is much higher and unsustainable as we see our wildlife declining faster than ever.

#### **References**

- Plantlife ([www.plantlife.org.uk/our-work/road-verges/](http://www.plantlife.org.uk/our-work/road-verges/)).
- Warwickshire County Council [www.warwickshire.gov.uk/grassverge](http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/grassverge)
- Cameron, R. and Hitchmough, J., 2016. *Environmental horticulture: science and management of green landscapes*. Cabi.

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