

Derbyshire Road Verges Project

Following the County Road Verge Conference, the Leader of Derbyshire County Council announced that the Council would be looking at how it commissions road verge maintenance work so that we can have healthier and more biodiverse grassland verges throughout the County.

Road verge maintenance is mainly undertaken by District and Borough Councils on behalf of the County Council under the specifications set out in Agency Agreements. It is important every opportunity is taken to make sure our maintenance work is done in the right way, at the right time, for the right money and fulfils the Council's legal duties, including the duty to biodiversity.

If we want to increase the wildlife value of highway verges, it is likely that the number and timings of grass verge cuttings will change, and we will have to find ways of dealing with cuttings differently. We know that this is not as easy as it may seem at first.

Changing how verges are maintained means we must look at safety for pedestrians and road users. We must also review the equipment used and available, who does the work now and how changing one part of a maintenance crew's work impacts on the whole annual programme.

Why are we doing this?

The Environment Act 2021 has extended existing 'biodiversity duties' which apply to local planning authorities. All public authorities must review how their activities can affect or improve biodiversity, and to plan for how they can conserve and enhance biodiversity as they carry out their work.

The Nature Recovery Network (NRN) is a major commitment in the government's 25 Year Environment Plan. The NRN will help us deal with 3 of the biggest challenges we face: biodiversity loss, climate change and wellbeing.

Highway verges are linear habitats that deliver on all the NRN commitments. In our towns and villages, they are mostly managed in the same way as we would recreational grasslands – frequently mown with the cuttings left in place. In the countryside however, verges are often cut much less frequently – often once every three years – but this also isn't ideal for many wildflower species. But we don't have to manage our verges this way and there are many good reasons to do it differently.

There are more than 5,600km of Highway in Derbyshire, and even with only a one metre verge on either side of these roads, this would amount to an area of land greater than 160 football pitches. We cannot ignore the opportunity this much grassland could provide to wildlife, the benefits this could offer for air quality, and the beauty that could be added to our streets and roads.

Having the right the equipment in place and reducing the number of cuts carried out in heavily managed areas could create a long-term financial saving for the Councils in urban areas. Although some kinds of wildlife-friendly verge management, particularly on the rural roads, could be more expensive than the current practices. We must find wildlife-friendly ways to manage our verges that balance costs and environmental improvements and do this in a way that helps the District and Borough Councils to appropriately manage their budgets too.



What we are doing

A Project Officer has been appointed to deliver a two year programme of work. This project will:

- Clarify and document current practice on the delivery of verge management under the Agency Agreements.
- Review and report back on innovations in verge management already underway in Districts and Boroughs and through Derbyshire Wildlife Trust's Road Verge Reserve project.
- Identify national good practice in road verge maintenance.
- Review and report back on the legal duties there are around verge maintenance, including safety.
- Identify the opportunities available within the existing Agency Agreements and through the application of Cultivation Licences.
- Work with two Districts or Boroughs, one broadly urban and one rural to develop and test a different road verge management schemes.
- Work with stakeholders, including Derbyshire Wildlife Trust and the Peak District National Park Authority to develop a strategy that is both robust and sustainable.
- Establish what equipment is available and best suited to 'cut and collect' operations on the Highway. This will include examining the short and long term cost implications.
- Look at other schemes and proposals that may change how Highways verges are managed. This could include trees, water, and recreational uses.
- Look for ways to manage the arisings collected from the verges if we are to move away from the current system.
- Examine if, where and how changing the verge maintenance regime could benefit biodiversity and save money and identify where biodiversity improvements would incur extra expenses.
- Produce a report which sets out recommendations for management that could be implemented in Derbyshire, taking account of practical considerations, costs, equipment requirements and more
- Develop and implement a system for surveying and monitoring verges before, during and after a change in management.
- Develop a policy and specification for the creation of new verges associated with development.

A project Sponsor will be appointed to ensure that cross-service provision is in place, to have an oversight in progress of the project, to champion the project at a strategic level.

A Steering Group will be set up to support the Project Officer in delivering the project, offer guidance and ensuring that work is timely and to plan.

Two District Councils will be invited to pilot the project, to test how changing specifications impacts on work programmes, efficiencies, and cost, measure the effectiveness of management decisions, and identify resource requirements.

Key Supporting Documents

Managing grassland road verges. A best practice guide. Plantlife <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/our-work/publications/road-verge-management-guide>

Derbyshire County Council statement, Verges, trees and hedges beside roads and footways

<https://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/transport-roads/roads-traffic/road-maintenance/grass-cutting/trees-hedges-and-grass-verges.aspx>

DCC Highways Network Management Plan and Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan



