

Highway Verge Management Policy

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1. Introduction

Warwickshire County Council (WCC) is responsible for maintaining around 25 million square metres of highway verge. It is one of the most valuable natural resources that the authority is responsible for managing.

The Council has a duty to maintain the highway network so that it is safe to use and free from obstructions. WCC carries out grass-cutting on verges to ensure that vegetation does not restrict visibility for highway users and to provide a safe refuge for pedestrians.

The Council also recognise that highway verges are a valuable resource for wildlife and biodiversity and, as such, they need to be managed with care and attention. As well as being a wildlife refuge, they also contribute greatly to the visual appeal of the street scene and are easily accessible to all.

If managed appropriately Warwickshire's' highway verges (along with adjacent habitats such as hedges, trees and ditches) can provide interconnected wildlife corridors supporting a wealth of wildlife including plants, bees, butterflies and reptiles.

2. Aims and Objectives

This policy aims to raise awareness of the biodiversity value of our roadside verges in Warwickshire and sets out how verges can be managed to maintain their high value, whilst recognising the over-riding importance of road safety.

This policy will contribute to the wider corporate objectives by setting out how maintenance of roadside verges will be carried out in such a way as to maintain Warwickshire's transport network in a safe, sustainable and integrated way.

The primary objectives of the verge maintenance regime will be:

- To maintain safety.
- To prevent obstruction of sight lines, road traffic signs, barriers and other structures.
- To inhibit the growth of dangerous weeds
- To prevent encroachment of vegetation onto the carriageway.
- To manage the roadside verges in a manner that promotes biodiversity by conserving, wherever possible, special wildlife habitats and wildflowers.

3. Maintenance Strategy

The authority commits a vast amount of resources each year maintaining our highway verges. The main focus of the maintenance regime is to ensure road safety, so we cut grass verges to ensure that vegetation does not restrict visibility for highway users and to provide a safe refuge for pedestrians.

WCC separate our highway verge maintenance into two programmes; rural and non-rural and there are various contractors engaged in this work, on our behalf, around the county.

The County Council's highway term maintenance contractor undertakes the maintenance of rural verges. Rural verges are those outside of the towns and villages that typically have speed limits in excess of 40mph. Our policy is to carry out mowing on a safety basis, by cutting a one-metre width swathe plus additional areas at junctions and on bends, for visibility purposes, three times a year.

To encourage biodiversity and to create wildlife corridors to improve the connectivity of habitats within the surrounding landscape, selected roadside verges in rural areas will be cut in a different way. Highway verges considered to have good biodiversity value will be cut only once a year, between mid-August and mid-October, with the grass cuttings removed. This will allow for the growth, flowering and seeding of wildflowers, as well as preventing the verges from being dominated by more aggressive plant species. This will provide an ideal habitat for bees and other pollinating insects.

This is a long-term project and it will take at least two years before the first wildflowers show. Some verges may appear overgrown or unmaintained in the first year, but this a natural part of the new habitat establishing itself.

The verges that will be cut in this way will be identified using wildlife and ecology data. We will target areas that have a medium to high quality of vegetation and diversity of species, and so are most likely to successfully establish themselves as wildflower habitats.

The non-rural roadside verges in towns and through villages provide important gateways and contribute to the civic pride of an area. These verges are usually maintained by District and Borough councils on the County's behalf. The number of amenity cuts differ dependant on the arrangement within the relevant borough or district council.

In response to an increase in the level of public interest in sustainable management of grass verges the county council are introducing a community engagement scheme to enable residents and local groups to have their say in how verges are managed.

4. Community Engagement

Following an increase in the level of interest the council are introducing a scheme for local groups to explore the possibility of reducing the level of cuts to enable the existing flora and fauna to flourish or to plant wildflower areas. The scheme will allow local groups to work with the parish, district or borough councils to apply to the county council to collectively contribute to improving biodiversity and to increase the aesthetic appeal of their area.

The county council will only enter into discussions about a change in the mowing regime, or introducing wildflower areas, with parish, district or borough councils, where it meets the criteria as set out below.

We are aware that discussions regarding grass cutting and whether it should or should not be cut can become quite controversial and making a change is not something we would consider unless the request comes from a parish, district or borough council.

The improvement of the biodiversity value of roadside verges needs to be dominated by the need to maintain road safety. It is essential that road safety remains the overriding objective.

In order to grant a request, the County Council have set out criteria that every application must meet for each proposed location.

5. Community Engagement Scheme Criteria

In order to grant a request, the location proposed for the wildflower verge must meet the following criteria:

- Chosen area must be on WCC highway land
- Speed limit must be 40mph or less
- Cannot compromise the safety or hinder the safe passage of highway users
- Consultation needs to be made with any affected properties within the vicinity of the verge
- Co-ordinate with the plans of any statutory undertakers that have assets within the area
- Area must be directly accessible

As with everything there may be costs incurred, if the council decides to grant approval the applicant must be prepared to pay for:

- The cost of purchasing the wildflower seed
- Regular maintenance of the wildflower verge, i.e. weeding, re-seeding and any desired cutting.
- Applicants will be entirely responsible for any health and safety requirements being fulfilled. This includes the purchase of the correct personal protective equipment for volunteers to wear while working on the verge.
- Public liability insurance must be in place to the recommended value to allow work on the public highway.

To maintain public safety the Council have stipulated the following restrictions:

- This opportunity is a wildflower process, meaning that it grants permission for wildflower seeding or grass cutting only. It does not allow for the planting of bulbs or for any digging or excavation in the verge.
- Not all grass verges are suitable to be converted into wildflower verges or for reduced cutting frequency. The suitability will be determined by an officer from Warwickshire County Council during a site visit. The officer may also decide that the site is unsafe for volunteers to work on. The decision of the County Council officer is final. The County Council accepts no responsibility for any additional costs.

Details of the community engagement scheme and how to start the process can be found on the Warwickshire County Council website.