

Life on the Verge in Devon - Headline guidance for communities



Orchids at Round Ash Moor, Copyright Derek Harper

Verges can have huge wildlife value

We have approximately 2000 hectares of road verge across Devon (excluding verges managed by Highways England). If managed appropriately our verges (along with adjacent habitats such as hedges, trees and ditches) can provide interconnected wildlife corridors across the county supporting a wealth of wildlife including plants, bees, butterflies, bats and reptiles.

According to Plantlife verges across the UK support over 700 plant species, 45% of our native flora. **This is especially important given the loss of 97% of the UK's wildflower meadows since the 1930s.**

Verges need managing for:

Safety

Devon County Council (DCC) has a duty to maintain the highway network so that it is safe to use and free from obstructions. DCC carries out grass-cutting on verges that are essential to maintaining visibility, such as at junctions, laybys and the inside of bends. Hedge management is the responsibility of the adjacent landowner although DCC cuts some hedges in visibility areas. Note that the M5, A30, A38 and A380 are all managed by Highways England, not DCC.

Wildlife

Management is also needed if we want to maintain verges as wildflower habitats. Plantlife has produced a [guide to verge management](#) which sets out four management principles.

Plantlife's four verge management principles:

1. **Annual management is essential** (coarse vegetation will develop if grass is left uncut for one year. Over time uncut verges turn into scrub and woodland)
2. **Grow, flower, seed, mow** (plants need to grow, flower and set seed in order to thrive)
3. **Remove the cuttings** (grass cuttings smother plants and increase soil fertility)
4. **Mixing it up** (a mix of long grass, short grass, scrub and woodland will support more species)

DCC is encouraging communities to work together to manage their local road network via its self-help initiatives including the **Community Road Warden** and **Self-Help Scheme**. More information can be found at <https://new.devon.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/maintaining-roads/self-help-and-community-support/>

Community management of road verges is essential if we want to maintain and maximise their wildlife value. Please get involved by following the steps below – and thank you!

Headline Steps

1. Contact the Devon County Council Environment Team

Before starting off, contact the DCC Environment Group to understand what is required to get started managing your road verges. Contact: nature@devon.gov.uk or Tel: 01392 383390.

2. Contact your Devon County Council Neighbourhood Highway Officer

Before doing any work please check with your DCC Neighbourhood Highway Officer that the verge isn't already managed to maintain visibility or access. You should also discuss health and safety issues (see below) and whether it would be useful to demarcate your verge (to ensure that others don't cut it). Contact: customer@devon.gov.uk or Tel: 0345 1551004.

3. Health and Safety

Before beginning work on any verge, it is essential that:

- a) **Everyone involved understands what hazards they may encounter when working on verges and how to manage them.** To this end, work must be carried out by people who can evidence that they have undertaken the **DCC highway safety awareness e-learning course** – In order to enrol onto the DCC Highways Safety E-Learning course, please contact your parish/town clerk to confirm that you are interested in receiving the training. They can then contact DCC Highways Services and they will be able to provide the necessary information to enable you to access the new training package.
- b) **Appropriate traffic management measures are put in place, when required, by someone qualified in Chapter 8 training.** The e-learning course will clarify when traffic management measures are required to ensure a safe environment for those working on verges and highway users. DCC will provide training in Chapter 8 of the Traffic Signs Manual free of charge for volunteers who sign-up to the Community Road Warden Scheme.
- c) **A risk assessment form is completed prior to any works being undertaken.** Risk assessment forms are available to download from the DCC webpage - <https://www.devon.gov.uk/environment/wildlife/managing-verges-for-wildlife>

To find out if there is someone in your parish / community who has already received Chapter 8 training please contact your parish council. For further details on all the DCC self-help schemes please see <https://new.devon.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/maintaining-roads/self-help-and-community-support/>

4. Assess the existing value of your verge

In order to know how best to manage your verge you need to understand its existing value.

- a) **Does the verge have an existing wildlife designation or any known value** e.g Site of Special Scientific Interest, County Wildlife Site, ¹Special Verge, Priority habitat? Check DCC's Environment Viewer <http://map.devon.gov.uk/dccViewer/>. If yes please contact nature@devon.gov.uk to discuss management.

¹ **Special verges** are designated by DCC due to their exceptional wildlife value or their value to communities. There are currently 112 across Devon. A survey card and management information is available for each of these verges from nature@devon.gov.uk. For more information see www.devon.gov.uk/wildlife

- b. **Does the verge have any historic designations or features?** Please check the DCC Environmental viewer. If there are mapped designations, or you are aware that there is an historic feature on your verge, please contact DCC's Historic Environment Team on archaeol@devon.gov.uk or 01392 382246.
- c. **Plant identification survey.** What is currently growing on the verge and how can the botanical value of the verge be enhanced? It is important to get this survey right so if you don't have any botanical expertise in your community group, or think you may have found a rare species, please visit the Life on the Verge webpage for a list of Devon based botany experts to see if any are local to your area - <https://www.devon.gov.uk/environment/wildlife/managing-verges-for-wildlife>
- d. **Invasive plants.** It is illegal to cause some species such as Japanese knotweed to spread and these therefore need to be identified and may need special management e.g. **never trim Japanese knotweed.** Other introduced species such as winter flowering heliotrope are beginning to dominate our verges to the detriment of native flora. For useful links see www.devon.gov.uk/wildlife.
- e. **Protected species.** Species protected under wildlife legislation may be present on your verge (e.g. slow worms, common lizard, nesting birds and dormice) and care should be taken to ensure that these species are not harmed. Further information on these species can be found at <https://new.devon.gov.uk/environment/wildlife/wildlife-and-geology-planning-guidance>
- f. **Other wildlife interest.** Depending on the expertise available you may be able to record other species such as butterflies.

5. Management

Use the information from Section 3 to identify the management regime needed to maximise the wildlife value of the verge. Plantlife has published 'The good verge guide' to help - [www.plantlife.org.uk/uploads/documents/Road verge guide 17 6.pdf](http://www.plantlife.org.uk/uploads/documents/Road_verge_guide_17_6.pdf). Remember the four principles given on page 1 above

Headline considerations:

- a. Where the verge has existing wildflower interest the aim is to maintain and enhance this interest. Ensure that the verge is cut after the majority of flowers / any rarer flowers have shed their seed. Remove clippings. Do not reseed.
- b. Where the verge is dominated by vigorous grasses (such as Yorkshire fog and cock's foot), and species which thrive in fertile soils (such as nettle, common thistles and hogweed) the primary aim is to reduce soil fertility and the vigour of the grasses. It may be necessary to cut and remove the vegetation at least 3 x a year for a few years (including in spring) until grass vigour is reduced and other species have the chance to grow. Do not be tempted to sow a wildflower mix, it is better to reduce soil fertility and grass dominance and see what comes up from the seed bank. Consider sowing some locally sourced yellow rattle to reduce grass vigour.
- c. In towns and villages where a more instant result is required to convince residents of the benefits of wildflower verges it may be worth enhancing the botanical value of a verge by bringing in 'green hay cuts' (= seed from a local flower rich meadow or another verge). This will only work where conditions are suitable (low grass vigour and low soil fertility) and top soil stripping may help to speed things up (but should not be done if there is existing wildflower interest). Please contact nature@devon.org.uk to discuss sources of suitable seed and for advice.

Health warning – Not all commercial wildflower mixes contain purely native species. They are not therefore all suitable for use on our verges. Please do NOT sow a wildflower mix on your road verge without first agreeing this with DCC. Locally sourced seed should always be the first option. Also note that whilst sowing annual seed mixed provides instant colour in urban areas the seed needs to be re-sown annually and this is therefore very time intensive. For ecological and time reasons commercial annual mixes are not suitable for rural verges.

If possible produce a **simple Management Plan** for your verge which sets out current value, management objectives and management actions (e.g. timing of cuts). An example will be added to DCC's website shortly.

Equipment: Contact your town/parish council or DCC highways (customer@devon.gov.uk or Tel: 0345 1551004) to see if they are able to loan you any basic equipment (tools, signs etc.)

If you would like advice please contact DCC's Ecology team (nature@devon.org.uk) who may be able to point you in the right direction or know someone locally who can help. However please be aware that the team has only limited capacity to help with community projects. You may need to buy in some survey / management expertise from an existing organisation.

We are looking for both wildlife verge case studies and volunteer wildlife verge champions – please contact us at nature@devon.org.uk if you can help with either.