

Verges

Road verges are essential habitats for wildlife: Almost half (45%) of UK wildflower species occupy road verges, and species include red campion, bluebells and white oxeye daisies, as well as rare flowers which were once found across fenlands and wildflower meadows before modern farming altered the landscape. Roadside grassland may very well be the last remnants of ancient wildflower grasslands.

Verges provide food and shelter for a range of pollinators including butterflies and bees (see **Insects and Pollinators** for more information), as well as other invertebrates, and small mammals such as mice and voles. They play vital but frequently overlooked roles in connecting different landscapes and habitats, and are often small pockets of isolated land, which if joined together in a larger ecological network, could create a combined area of 200,000 hectares (nearly 5 million acres).

Older hedgerows and associated ditches and banks may also have archaeological significance, as defining characteristics of a historic landscape.

Threats

- Overcutting or leaving cut vegetation on the verge. When the plant matter breaks down it can change the chemical composition of the soil, encouraging rank grasses to take over and prevent more delicate wildflowers from growing. However, you must consider road and public safety; verges may need to be cut at bends, junctions or on busy stretches of road, to ensure visibility is not affected.
- Undercutting will lead to scrub developing. Eventually, only a few of species will dominate, and there will be little diversity.
- Pollution e.g. fuel spillage from vehicles, littering and fly tipping.

Benefits to the Council

- Managing roadside verges for conservation can help engage and connect people with nature, as often the only wildlife people see are when they are travelling in their vehicles.
- Undertaking community work to manage verges for wildlife can forge a stronger relationship between local people and the Council.
- Mowing less often will save Council time, reduce fuel consumption and pollution.
- Increasing local biodiversity is something all Councils should be working towards for the benefit of our environment and community.

What you can do

- Encourage people to participate in surveys to determine what species are growing, which ones need protection and which species could potentially thrive if managed in the correct way. However, surveying verges will involve working close to roads, so an experienced, responsible person must be present to ensure participants' health and safety.
- The Council should create management plans to improve biodiversity, detailing the aims, objectives and priorities.
- Cut verges at the right time, ideally from August onwards. This will enable wildflowers to grow and set seed, and insects will have had time to utilise the plants.

- On wide verges, the 1-2 metres at the back should not be managed until after birds have finished nesting, then undertake only a light cutting to prevent destroying essential shelter for small mammals. The [Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981](#) makes it an offence to disturb a birds nest which is in use, under construction, or with eggs, chicks or birds using it regularly - even if they are not actually in it at the time. The general advice is for people not to work on or trim hedgerows between 1st March to 31st July.
- Provide clear signage to inform the public about the important work being carried out for wildlife conservation. This should help to prevent people complaining to the Council or getting directly involved because they think the site is 'untidy' and has been forgotten about. Signage is also an effective way to gain local support and promote the good work the Council is carrying out for the benefit of nature and the community.

Leicestershire County Council is offering Parish, Town, Borough, and District Councils the opportunity to turn urban roadside verges into dedicated wildflower verges as part of the 'URBAN' wildflower verge management/creation programme – details are available elsewhere in this series and if you have further questions please contact either customerservices@leics.gov.uk or CSCParishes@leics.gov.uk

Further information and advice

Leicestershire County Council is running a trial on a strategically selected set of rural routes - selected because they are accessible by machinery, they link grassland sites and have been identified as being of good quality in terms of species content.

The trial will be led with support from our existing grass cutting contractor. They will be mowing and collecting the cuttings, with a full verge cut on these verges this spring and then another cut in the autumn. In each case the cuttings will be collected and taken to LCC-contracted green waste farm sites. The purpose of the trial is to understand the logistics and cost of doing this, to work out the ongoing costs and to estimate whether the project can be widened to other routes.

LCC is also exploring whether the 'Sponsor a Roundabout' scheme can be used to implementation of designing wildlife-friendly roundabouts, as opposed to just aesthetically pleasing ones.

Plantlife

Conservation charity providing advice and guidance, and campaigning to improve roadside verges.

<https://plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/roadvergecampaign>

An excellent source of guidance on how to manage roadside verges.

<https://plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/roadvergecampaign/management-guidelines>

The Wildlife Trusts

Managing verges for wildlife (a Plantlife guide, part-sponsored by The Wildlife Trusts)

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Managing%20grassland%20road%20verges.pdf>

Case Studies on how Wildlife Trusts have managed roadside verges for nature.

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife/managing-land-wildlife/how-manage-road-verge-wildlife>