

OUR APPROACH TO MANAGING HIGHWAY VERGES



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1. NEW APPROACH TO MANAGING DORSET'S HIGHWAY VERGES

A new approach to managing highway verges was approved by the County Council's Cabinet in 2014 and this is being progressively implemented as resources allow. It involves three principles:

- lowering fertility of roadside verges where possible to reduce grass growth
- reforming operational and contractual arrangements we have for both urban and rural cutting regimes so that we reduce both the amount and frequency of cutting where we view it is not necessary
- working with local communities to provide information on the service they can expect, to gather information from them on our performance, and to identify opportunities where together we may be able to deliver a more effective service

We need to reduce substantially the cost of managing our verges while at the same time maintaining high standards to allow safe passage along the highway, and to look after the wildlife and landscape values of the roadsides that contribute so much to the character of the Dorset countryside.

How the grass verge ecosystem works

The need to cut verges is linked to the underlying fertility of the soils in which the grass grows. With the squeeze on public finance we have much less money available to satisfy this demand, and with milder autumns and springs leading to extended growing seasons, there is greater public pressure on us to cut more rather than less often.

In Dorset we are taking a different approach to these problems, and we start from the principle that if we can reduce the amount that grass grows in the first place, we will have less to cut, and this should cost us less. We look on a grass verge as an ecosystem to understand what makes grass grow and how we might put measures in place to limit that growth, while improving its environmental quality.

Of the 4 main components of the ecosystem that make grass grow – light, water, temperature and soil nutrients – it is only the fourth, soil nutrients, over which we have some control.

The new approach to verge maintenance provides the means to reduce the nutrients available to make the grass grow less, so we can change from a system where we 'cut when we need to' to one where we 'reduce the amount we ever have to cut in the first place'. Soil nutrients largely come from the intrinsic 'goodness' in the soil (based on its geology), natural breakdown of grass we cut and leave behind (nutrients get recycled when the cut grass rots down), and dissolved nutrients in rainfall.

There are two main ways we can reduce soil fertility:

- On existing road verges, where possible, we can collect the grass cuttings and remove them, gradually reducing the amount of nutrient which fuels grass growth. We can also add plant species such as Yellow Rattle which naturally parasitises grasses by sucking the life out of grass roots, reducing the amount the grass grows.

- When designing a new road scheme, or as part of works to existing roads, make sure the finishing layer of soil is as low nutrient as possible - or leave it as bare mineral - and add some wildflower seed. The ecosystem established will never require high levels of maintenance.

Typical flail collector machinery



Yellow Rattle



2. THE BENEFITS

2.1 Cost savings

Is the new approach saving us any money? Yes it is. Through a combination of reviewing contract spend, our targeted efforts to reduce soil fertility, and working with communities to create wildflower verges, we have saved c. £100k in 2015/16 and 2016/17, and are confident about achieving a further saving of c. £50k in 2017-18. There are also hidden dividends from this approach as we are able to redeploy our in-house teams to other highway tasks such as maintaining Rights of Way.

2.2 Improved environment

As soil nutrients decrease in a grassland ecosystem, the number of plant species that can survive increases, and the dominance of coarse grasses and 'weeds' like docks, ragwort and thistles declines. So, the benefit of our approach is also that it produces a more diverse roadside environment for wildlife and adds to the biodiversity of the area.

The most extensive example in Dorset is the creation of 6ha of wildflower verges as part of construction of the Weymouth Relief Road. No topsoil was applied to the steep banks in the road cuttings and since the road opened in 2011 there has been a profusion of wildflowers all summer. 23 species of butterfly have been recorded on the banks, including two Dorset specialities, Small Blue and Adonis Blue, together with an abundance of the Marbled White. It is currently costing DCC almost nothing to maintain the 6ha of banks – the long term maintenance liability was deliberately designed out to create the wildflower banks we now enjoy. Between 2017 and 2019 we are planning to extend the ecological approach to the remainder of the verges on the Relief Road, and to encourage wildflower verges throughout.

2.3 Reduced maintenance

The verges of the Blandford Bypass are a good example of how to reduce the amount of maintenance we do through the cut-and-collect approach. These verges, created in 1992, used to be cut at least twice a year. The combination of cut-and-collect, and abundance of Yellow Rattle established following its sowing, now means we need only cut this verge once a year, saving us money. The verges have now been recognised as a Site of Nature Conservation Importance by the Dorset Wildlife Trust, and the grassland supports a beautiful showing of Pyramidal Orchids in summer along with abundant Ox-eye Daisy and Knapweeds.

Working with local communities we have been identifying wide verges in urban areas where, for no other reason than tidiness, we have until now been cutting the grass 7 or more times a year. Under our new approach, areas are treated in the winter or early spring to remove the grass and seeded with an annual or perennial wildflower mix, depending on soil fertility. After the flowering season has finished in late autumn, the area is cut and arisings collected, which helps to reduce soil fertility and increase the diversity of flowers in the following years. Normally the local community has offered to buy the seed and we have then committed to looking after the area. Where these wildflower verges have been established they have proved to be very popular.

Our approach provides significantly better habitat for pollinators, species of insects including bees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths, which are essential for helping plants and crops to grow. Our work on verges is helping DCC to deliver its commitments made in its [‘Action Plan for Pollinators’](#) in 2016.

2.4 Dorset’s Conservation Verges

DCC has a long-established partnership with the Dorset Wildlife Trust to maintain a suite of roadside verges which are particularly important for wildflowers. Currently there are over 120 spread across the county, marked at either end with Blue Posts. The Conservation Verge scheme continues, but we have made significant modifications intended to improve the management of these verges for their wildlife value. The Conservation Verges will be cut by our in-house staff, rather than contractors, so that we have direct control of when they are cut. Each verge has a management statement produced by DWT to indicate when from the wildlife viewpoint it would be best to cut, but almost invariably in previous years the contractor has cut too late. Once we have cut the verges we would also like to work with volunteers in the most suitable areas to help rake the cuttings away from the verges into the hedge so that we reduce soil fertility over time, and remove the deep grass thatch which prevents the wildflowers from germinating and thriving.

The Weymouth Relief Road slopes below Ridgeway



3. WHO MANAGES THE VERGES?

Management of road verges is split into two in Dorset, with distinct programmes for cutting in rural and in urban areas.

3.1 Rural areas

The rural cutting programme covers all verges beyond the 30mph signs at the edges of towns, villages and built-up areas.

The total length of rural roads being cut in Dorset is 2691km (1672 miles):

A roads – 319 km (198 miles)

B roads – 289 km (180 miles)

C roads – 1025 km (637 miles)

D roads – 1058 km (657 miles)

Cutting is being undertaken according to an agreed programme – please see Appendix B.

Cutting is undertaken by contractors on behalf of DCC, and in 2017 there are two contractors managing different parts of the county – please see the Appendix A.

Simon Jackson Contractors are cutting the East and Purbeck areas

James Rose Contractors are cutting the West, Central and North areas

Two cuts of the A and B class roads are planned, including the dual carriageways, and one cut of the C and D class roads. The junctions and visibility splays are cut by the contractors and also regularly throughout the year on an ‘as needs’ basis by our in-house staff, and we will undertake additional cutting anywhere on the network later in the season where this is required to maintain safe passage along the highway.

3.2 Urban areas

The urban areas, defined as those within the 30mph zones, are cut in a combination of ways according to local agreements with mainly Borough, District and Town Councils. Currently we have the agency agreements in place with the following organisations:

Boughton Parish Council (parishclerk@bourtondorset.org)

Bridport Town Council (enquiries@bridport-tc.gov.uk 01308 456722)

Dorchester Town Council (admin@dorchester-tc.gov.uk 01305 266861)

East Dorset & Christchurch areas - cut by East Dorset & Christchurch Council staff, and supported by a team of in-house DCC staff (www.dorsetforyou.com/contactus; Aottaway@christchurchandeastdorset.gov.uk 01202 795449)

Gillingham Town Council (GTC@gillinghamdorset-tc.gov.uk 01747 823588 / 01305 221215)

Shaftesbury Town Council (enquiries@shaftesburytowncouncil.co.uk 01747 852420)

Sherborne Town Council (t.savage@sherborne-tc.gov.uk 01935 812807)

Sturminster Newton Town Council (admin@sturminsternewton-tc.gov.uk 01258 475136)
Weymouth & Portland Borough area (Dorset Councils Partnership)
(www.dorsetforyou.com/contactus; TWilliams@dorset.gov.uk 01305 838297)

Our partners receive payment from the County Council via a Service Level Agreement which sets out the standard, frequency and geographical area of cutting we expect for our money. Most partners currently prefer a more frequent cutting regime, and add extra cuts to the standard 7 per year using their own financial resources.

The remainder of cutting within urban areas outside of agency agreements is undertaken by our in-house staff.

Under most circumstances the urban cutting cycle is 7 cuts per year between March and September, and the County Council believes this is a sufficient level to maintain the safety of the network in urban areas. In Blandford, where the cut-and-collect approach has been trialled for the past three years, the number of cuts has been reduced to 4 per year in some places, without a diminution in quality of service provided.

4. WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

As part of the County Council's 'Working Together – Highways: Local Communities, Local Priorities, Local Choices' initiative, we are keen to hear from any local community about how they think they can help us with the ecological approach to verge management in their area. We ask you to let us know if:

- We, our contractor or agents have missed a particular verge in the cutting round
- Where you think an area would benefit from less cutting or where cutting is unnecessary
- If your community would like to take on management of the verges in line with the ecological approach
- If you would like to volunteer to help us look after one of the special Conservation Verges
- You know of areas in your community that we currently mow regularly that would be suitable to establish a Wildflower Verge

We have very limited financial resources for establishing new Service Level Agreements with communities, but we are keen to hear from you with your ideas on how we can work in partnership.

Wildflower Verge Trial



5. WEED SPRAYING

In 2017 we will be undertaking a single weed spray, as we did in 2015 and 2016, on the sealed highway surfaces in urban areas across the county. The contract is likely to begin at the beginning of June 2017 in the east of the county, moving west. Depending on weather conditions the county will be completed within four to six weeks.

There is both a need and a desire to keep the surfaces of highway land free from weeds.

The primary need is to protect hard surfaces, such as the blacktop, kerbing, paving and concrete structures from deterioration which may result from weed growth, in particular, the effects of perennial weeds which can establish and expand, and cause cracking in surfaces and water ingress. Without treatment of weeds, the lifespan of the sealed surfaces could be reduced.

There is also a secondary desire to ensure that the sealed surfaces are clean and tidy and we recognise the contribution that well-managed public space makes to a sense of pride that the community holds in an area. We have been able to provide this service in the past, by completing two or more circuits of the county per year. However, it is not essential to undertake the extra spraying and inevitably in response to budget reductions the cosmetic spraying circuits have stopped.

As with other areas of highway management, we are looking to work with Town and Parish Councils to take greater responsibility for non-essential services where they remain a local priority, and if you would like an extra spray in your area, please contact us to discuss how this might be achieved.

6. LITTER ON ROAD VERGES

The Dorset Waste Partnership (DWP) is responsible for the removal of litter from highway verges in Dorset, apart from the A35 Bere Regis westbound to the Devon county border which is the responsibility of Highways England.

DWP and the Coast & Countryside Service co-ordinate our work to ensure that when possible litter picking and verge cutting works are combined or phased. Weymouth and Dorchester areas are a particular focus at the moment and we share dates, times and contacts to try to provide advance notice to each other of verge cutting and litter picking dates.

Along the Weymouth Relief Road in 2017 we will be looking to see how much litter we are able to pick up as we implement the grass cut-and-collect along these verges. It is hoped that we will be able to gather up mechanically most litter as we cut these verges, thereby allowing DWP to sort the from the verge arisings in designated safe areas away from the carriageway. This should reduce the cost of litter picking, and the inconvenience to motorists from traffic restrictions we currently must put in place to protect the workforce while working near the road edge.

The Dorset Waste Partnership is developing with the Coast & Countryside Service a strategy to reduce littering across Dorset, known as Litter Free Dorset (LFD). The DWP is funding a 14 month trial of a community officer to support the vision of Litter Free Dorset to work together as an independent partnership effecting positive behavioural change to reduce litter across Dorset's towns, villages and open spaces. We are all concerned about the levels of littering along highways and elsewhere and, through education and communications, we can all try to improve the situation through the LFD project.

7. COMPLAINTS & COMPLIMENTS

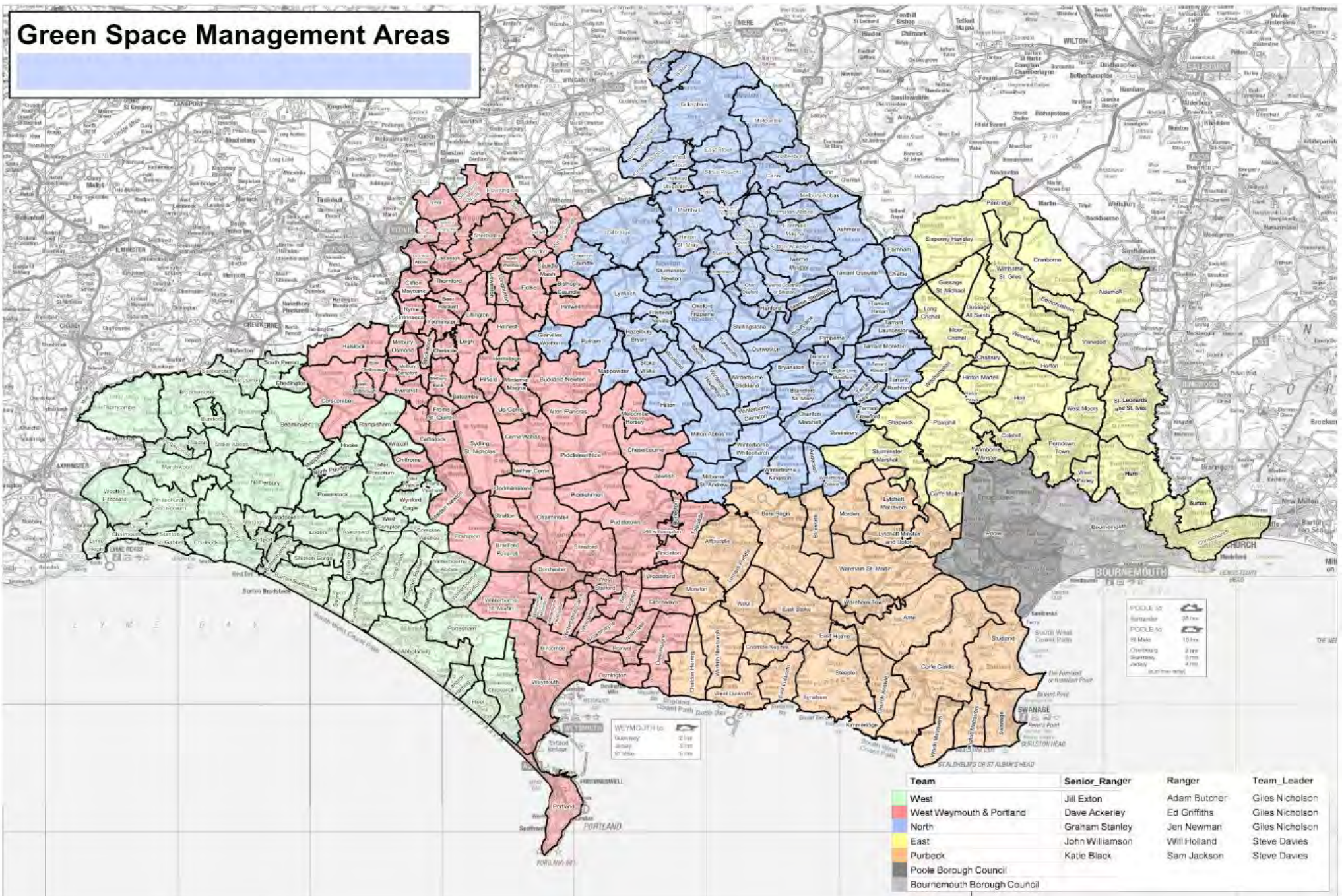
We receive varying numbers of complaints each year from the public dissatisfied with the amount or timing of grass verge maintenance we undertake. Analysis of the complaints received in 2014 suggested that verge management is something of a no-win situation as they reflect conflicting demands. The majority of complaints are of the view that the grass was cut too little, but others suggested the grass was cut too early for wildflowers to set seed, or was not cut early enough in the season, or the grass had been cut but the arisings left behind caused a mess.

By contrast, our wildflower verge trials have also proved exceptionally popular with the public. In summer 2016 this was the first year when numbers of compliments outweighed the number of complaints.

8. CONTACTING US

To ensure you get to the right person please contact us via Dorset For You (<https://www.dorsetforyou.gov.uk/contactus>)

APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B

HIGHWAY PLANNED/ROUTINE VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME 2016/ 17 / 18 ☐

	Mar (wk begin)					April (wk begin)					May (wk begin)					June (wk begin)					July (wk begin)					Aug (wk begin)					Sept (wk begin)					Oct (wk begin)					Nov (wk begin)					DEC	JAN	FEB
ALL DATES SUBJECT TO CHANGE	2	9	16	23	30	6	13	20	27	4	11	18	25	1	8	15	22	29	6	13	20	27	3	10	17	24	31	7	14	21	28	5	12	19	26	2	9	16	23	31								
RURAL GRASS CUTTING																																																
A & B full cut																																																
Dual carriageway full cut **																																																
C & D full cut																																																
No schedule for narrow lanes requiring flailing with a small machine. But should be completed by end of phase 2.																																																
Non scheduled / reactive work																																																

Proposed time table Rural grass cutting

Dual Carriageways	22nd May 2017 & end Sept / early Oct 2017
Phase 1 A + B Full Cut	3rd May 2017
Phase 2 C + D Full Cut	early June start, to finish mid/late July
Phase 3 A + B Full Cut	likely to be August following review of growing season
Phase 4 A, B, C + D Cut ***	Oct / Nov following review of need on which if any sections need cutting

Dual carriageway full cut **

A30 SHERBORNE, A352 OWERMOIGNE, A338 CHRISTCHURCH A338, A35 UPTON by pass