



PeCAN asks EHDC Councillors to make space for nature by supporting a new approach to verge management.

1. The importance of our verges in the biodiversity crisis

You will have registered the critical news last year of how many insect species face extinction, with possibly a 35% drop in populations, many of them valuable pollinators. Road verges can provide important connectivity not only for insects, but birds, mammals and plants, as corridors joining with our parks, gardens and the wider countryside.

When managed well, road verges can sustain an astonishing amount of wildlife: more pollinators are found on well-managed verges than in the neighbouring countryside, where virtually all our flowering meadows have disappeared. As a result of catastrophic habitat loss, almost **half** of the UK's total flora is found on verges.



Species-rich verge W Sussex

2. A significant biodiversity win

Managing verges in East Hampshire for biodiversity would help meet Strategic Objective 2 of EHDC's **Climate and Environment Strategy 2020-2025** – "Protect, improve & enhance our natural environment locally for biodiversity net gain".

The Council sets specifications for the procurement of goods and services and then budgets for them. How services are delivered is not set in stone. It is possible to review and vary contracts, to set and agree budgets for the work, or to use reserves for capital purchases, such as the Environmental Initiatives Reserve, which was created to support the Climate and Environmental Strategy 2020-2025.

Proposal on verges

3. What the biodiversity approach means for verge management

This primarily requires reducing cutting frequency and removing the arisings.

These two actions will -

- lower the management burden over time (by reducing the amount of biomass)
- reduce the Council's carbon footprint
- lead to biodiversity gain through its green infrastructure
- go a considerable way to fulfilling the Government's target to designate 30% of land for nature recovery.¹

It happened in 2020 thanks to COVID-19

During the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown residents and visitors to Petersfield appreciated the abundance of wild flowers growing on our verges. Owing to working restrictions, mowing did not take place in April, May and early June. This resulted in an immediate bounce-back for wildlife at all levels of the food-chain. Large verges such as Petersfield's Tor Way were mowed in March, late June and August. Over 17 pollinator friendly plant species flourished there including white clover and ox-eye daisy.



Tor Way, Petersfield in May 2020

Officers at EHDC Environmental Services received no adverse comments from the public in 2020. If this is done for biodiversity reasons as opposed to COVID-19, it is possible that some people may object to the change in appearance of verges, especially if the mowing policy is not explained. However, the large majority of people support making space for nature as was evident from polls during the Covid lockdowns and both PeCAN and the Petersfield Society are working to increase

¹ The forthcoming Environment Bill will set out paths to nature recovery including a role for local authorities to agree Local Nature Recovery Strategies. This will impact on Local Plans and will ask that 30% of all land is for nature recovery.

Proposal on verges

awareness of the biodiversity crisis.²

4. The current arrangement for verge mowing

Hampshire County Council (HCC) delegates to EHDC to manage urban grass and vegetation on the public highway in East Hampshire. This comes under the umbrella of Environmental Services at EHDC, who then delegate to Havant Borough Council (HBC) to deliver the service via a Joint Venture Company, NorseSE, the Service Provider. The Service Level Agreement (SLA) with NorseSE is for street-scene services that include grass cutting & litter collection, as well as other services. EHDC Environmental Services provides a liaison/oversight function between HCC and HBC. In addition, the EHDC Property Team has responsibility for the management of EHDC owned land (eg. cemeteries & some small verges within local housing); they should be included in a District-wide drive to increase biodiversity.

The SLA currently specifies 3 management schedules:

- (i) urban verges that are cut 4-9/yr e.g. main roads into Petersfield such as Tor Way (where there are spring bulbs present verges are cut 5-6/yr)
- (ii) verges that are cut once a fortnight e.g. along some main roads (sight-lines), within housing and in cemeteries
- (iii) areas of rough scrub-land that are strimmed 1/yr by pedestrian flail or strimmer

Verges in schedule (i) comprise EHDC G4 (9 times a year) 463,285.3 m² (46 hectares) for a total length of 105,670 metres (105 km). Grass cut on behalf of HCC is 639,209.1 m² (64 hectares) for a total length of 566,137.3 metres (566 km).

HCC currently requires a minimum of four cuts per year to the G4 verges. Councillors could negotiate **a minimum of two cuts per year**, giving the option of reduced mowing on selected verges. In urban areas such as Petersfield this could include all verges apart from those where traffic safety concerns require a higher number of cuts.

We understand that EHDC liaison officers at Environmental Services have opportunities to make changes to the SLA if given a mandate from Councillors. The staff team could be asked to put together a feasibility study with costs and implications arising from the preferred biodiversity management of most of the G4 verges. Savings might come from reduced mowing frequency; separating the mowing and litter schedules might allow for efficiency gains; seasonal staff might be asked to carry out raking up and removal of arisings, though we accept there could

² A survey conducted by YouGov for the RSPB, "Recovering Together", found that adults in England:

- overwhelmingly support protecting and investing in nature and increasing accessible natural greenspace as part of our recovery from Coronavirus (80-84%)
- strongly oppose the UK Government reducing spending on nature or putting less emphasis on protecting nature (80%)
- see nature as important for health and wellbeing and access to nature close to home as beneficial during the Coronavirus crisis (77%).

Proposal on verges

be an extra cost to this. Some Councils are investigating the use of arisings to produce biofuel; this might also be investigated by the staff team.

Changing the SLA in the longer term will likely necessitate different cut & collect machinery.³ Some of these costs may be absorbed over time by the contractor as part of their own hardware replacement, and some could come from the Environmental Initiatives Reserve. **If a financial commitment is needed, it should be reflected in the 2021/2 EHDC budget** (including capital expenditure, labour, transport & disposal costs).

HCC revised contract could be rolled out

HCC is currently working with the conservation charity Plantlife and looking to vary their SLA with Skanska and are aiming a significant reduction on mowing rates on rural verges and highways. HCC will carry out only one full mowing a year of such verges, in late summer. Any safety margins will have an additional cut in Spring/early Summer but will not be cut again until July/August. Similar arrangements are being agreed with local groups, such as New Leaf in Alresford.

PeCAN and the Petersfield Society would be interested to help identify verges within G4 that would become a first list of candidates for conservation mowing.

5. Pesticides

Pesticides (this includes herbicides, insecticides and fungicides), are used to control wildlife. Pesticides have contributed to the long-term decline of animal numbers including pollinators, birds, butterflies, toads and hedgehogs as well as harming soil health. Millions of pounds are spent removing pesticides from water. EHDC has already committed to a phase-out of pesticide use, though pesticide spraying is managed by HCC and is not part of our NorseSE SLA. We understand that EHDC has met with HCC to agree an approach for the use of pesticides. Infrequent mowing and removal of grass clippings plays a role in reducing the requirement for pesticide since this reduces the vigour of undesirable plants over time.

6. Proposal

PeCAN proposes that given sufficient enthusiasm from our elected Councillors, such changes could be made within the NorseSE SLA. EHDC Environmental Services would need a mandate from you, our elected Councillors, to begin the process of costing and negotiating a revised SLA. They would need to look at solutions to the problem of collecting arisings. Over this year efforts will need to be made to hire or procure cut & collect machinery and appropriate budgetary allowance made for next year. All of these aspects have already been addressed by Dorset, Gloucester and Lewes Councils (see case studies below) whose officers may, if contacted, be willing to offer advice to EHDC.

³ Grillo Hydrostatic Outfront Mower FD2200 TS 4WD @£30,000 - unfortunately diesel powered

Proposal on verges

PeCAN asks you to:

- ensure a commitment to managing *at least 30%* of EHDC verges for biodiversity in the forthcoming Climate Strategy Action Plan
- support an officer-led feasibility study looking into the cost and practicality of varying the current Service Level Agreement between HBC & NorseSE to meet biodiversity targets within the Climate Strategy 2020-25
- work with PeCAN and PfS to identify verges for conservation management
- ensure any required increase in funding to deliver this will be included in EHDC's 2021-22 budget so that biodiversity gains can be achieved

Thank you



Plantlife Case study, Sheffield (left 2015, right 2018)

Date for your diary:

The Petersfield Society's Green Infrastructure Group is presenting a Forum on **Valuable Verges on May 12 at 7pm**. All Councillors will be invited. The Forum will hear from Dr. Kate Petty, Plantlife Road Verge Campaign Manager who is currently in discussions with HCC.

Contact: Melanie Oxley at pecan.email@gmail.com

Proposal on verges

Case study 1. Dorset County Council

DCC's Cut and Collect approach was approved in 2014 following trials.

Dorset CC have adopted three principles -

- a) lower fertility of roadside verges and where possible to reduce grass growth,
- b) reform operational and contractual arrangements of both urban and rural cutting regimes to reduce amount and frequency of cutting and;
- c) work with local communities to gather information on performance and identify opportunities where together might be able to deliver a more effective service.

Lower Fertility – results in less vigorous growth, less grass to cut and lower costs.

Through collection of arisings the nutrient load is reduced.

Reform of contractual arrangements - when designing/re-designing road schemes to ensure the finishing layer of soil is as low nutrients as possible, or leave as bare subsoil in which to sow wildflower seed, and add wildflower seed

Giles Nicholson, Countryside and Greenspace Manager, Dorset

Coast and Countryside (Countryside advice: <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/>

Countryside)

“On some verges we are trialing a cut-and-collect approach to verge management.

The results have been very encouraging. Collecting the arisings reduces verge fertility, which reduces future growth rates and therefore the need for cutting. Low fertility also benefits wildflowers which only thrive in a low nutrient environment and provide an attractive road side. We hope to expand the cut-and-collect method across Dorset, improving the environment and reducing costs.

The ride on mower we are moving to is a Grillo Hydrostatic Outfront Mower FD2200 TS 4WD. This method also has the advantage of leaving very neat verge once we have cut it, leaving no mess. We deposit the collected arisings as we go, on suitable parts of the highway verge, meaning we don't have expensive transport costs of transporting grass long distances. As we have expanded this methodology we have found many places where we can deposit the arisings.

This keeps the method simple and cost effective. It is similar to the gardener who mows the lawn with a boxed mower and then empties it into a specific compost heap in the corner of the garden.

By doing this, we avoid the nutrient recycling with conventional “cut and leave” Highway mowing: this improves the soil conditions for wildflowers to thrive and reduces the vigour of the sward requiring less mowing. We have done very little seeding, the wildflowers appear as we change the habitat to suit them”.

See:

Our Approach to managing Highway Verges - dorsetforyou.gov.uk

Case study 2. Gloucestershire County Council

In Stroud, pioneering Cllr Rachel Smith has been taking strides to change the way verges are managed. Cllr Smith chairs the Gloucestershire County Council's biodiversity task group which was formed in 2019 and is dedicated to finding ways to protect and encourage biodiversity through the county. Cllr Smith began speaking to the Council's Principal Ecologist, and brought a motion to full council seeking a task group to look in more detail into changing our road verge management for wildlife, and to get councillors involved from across the political spectrum.

The motion received unanimous support because it ticked a lot of boxes for people with different priorities - for example, long term monetary savings, as well as supporting traditional conservation and habitat restoration.

She says, “Coming together on the wording of the recommendations was the most difficult aspect because the approach needs some flexibility with timings of the cut depending on the weather. We were all committed to managing the verges in the best possible way for wildlife, and we also have to balance safety concerns. We also needed to be mindful of some of the complexities as a three-tier local government -

Proposal on verges

we can potentially be in a situation where county, district and parish councils can all be mowing the same patch of verge! The task group process itself also drew our attention to other connected issues such as litter, use of herbicides, managing drainage, hedges, and roadside trees”.

There is a statutory duty on Councils to conserve biodiversity (Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act), from which GCC produced a detailed Highways and Biodiversity Guidance document. This is a useful reference for all those who carry out works on county roads and Public Rights of Way. The document is in line with Plantlife’s best practice guide (2019) but covers a much wider range of topics than just verge management alone.

[Gloucestershire Highways and Biodiversity Guidance \(PDF, 1 MB\)](#)

Case Study 3. Lewes Town Council

In December 2018 Lewes Town Council made their decision to adopt wildflower-friendly road verge management. The community group Wildflower Lewes has been instrumental in persuading the council to adopt measures that will allow wild flowers to thrive in the town. A Town Council verges working group was assisted by Plantlife to explain how that by carrying out just two cuts per year would benefit wildflowers and the wildlife they support.

A group of like-minded people had got together two years before and had decided to do something to stop the loss of wild flowers and the wildlife that depends on them. Wildflower Lewes had been sharing Plantlife’s Good Verge Guide and spreading the word about wildlife-friendly verges with the local public. Over 300 people signed the group’s petition asking for only two verge cuts per year, and visitors to the town commented that verges full of wild flowers would fit with the eco-tourism that the town is promoting.

The two cuts per year regime was agreed in 2019. The council will be ensuring that clear sightlines are still maintained at junctions where neat edges will be cut. Wildflower Lewes will be carrying out engagement activities to ensure more people in Lewes are happy with wilder verges. The group hopes that this scheme will help to increase wildlife connections between Lewes and the beautiful South Downs that sit on its doorstep.