

A photograph of a road verge. In the foreground, there is a lush field of tall grasses, yellow wildflowers, and purple thistles. In the middle ground, a paved road curves to the left, with a circular speed limit sign showing the number '40'. The background features a green field, a line of trees, and some houses under a cloudy sky.

Wilder Road Verges Toolkit

A guide to getting started
managing road verges for
wildlife in Buckinghamshire
and Milton Keynes



Wilder Road Verges Toolkit

This toolkit has been developed as part of the Wilder Road Verges project, by the Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership in partnership with Buckinghamshire Council, Butterfly Conservation, and the Chilterns Conservation Board.

Contents

Using this toolkit

This toolkit is aimed at Town and Parish Councils. If you are a resident or represent a community group, speak to your local council before attempting any management on your local road verges. If you are based outside of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, some of the advice may not be applicable to you.

While this toolkit focuses on road verges, the guidance can be applied to any grassland or green space you wish to manage positively for wildlife, including parks and school playing field margins.

British conservation charity Plantlife has published thorough guidance on managing road verges and other green spaces for nature. This guide refers to Plantlife's guidance, specifically two main publications:

- **Good Verge Guide** is an accessible and practical guide to all things road verge for amateurs and professionals alike.
- **Managing Grassland Road Verges** is a more technical best practice guide for those engaged with verge management.

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Why go wilder?



Marbled white butterfly. Photo: Julia Carey, courtesy of BMERC.

The benefits of managing for wildlife

Wildflowers provide a vital source of nectar for butterflies, bees and other pollinating insects, but wildflower habitats have declined significantly in the UK. Insects and animals can find shelter in the long grass, while both the flowers and the insects provide a food source for birds and other wildlife. Changing the management of local green space has numerous benefits, not just for wildlife but also for the community. Plant growth can absorb stormwater, decrease erosion, and also trap carbon: all excellent benefits for our planet and our communities. And managing green space for wildlife and the environment doesn't have to be difficult or costly!

Cutting costs, not flowers

Depending on your current management, you can significantly reduce your spending by reducing the frequency of cutting. Further details on costs can be found in **Section 5: Case Studies**. Wilder road verges doesn't necessarily mean long grass either; even areas that require more frequent mowing can allow wildflowers to flourish, if you are collecting the cut grass.

Advice and resources for identifying and recording wildlife can be found in **Section 4: What comes next?**

Community engagement

More than 132,000 people have signed Plantlife's petition for Wild Road Verges, which demonstrates how perceptions are changing. Many people want to do their bit to help insects and wildlife. Access to nature and green space has also been shown to benefit our mental health. For many road users, road verges are their main (or even only!) exposure to nature on a daily basis. A community wildlife area can provide a space for people to interact with nature, explore their local environment, and learn about the plants, insects, birds and other wildlife they will encounter.

Further reading

Anderson, P. (2021) *Carbon and Ecosystems: Restoration and Creation to Capture Carbon*. Action 2030 Resources series, CIEEM. [Available here](#).

Lovell R., et al (2018) *Health and the natural environment: A review of evidence, policy, practice and opportunities for the future*. Defra Fellowship BE0109. [Available here](#).



Photo: Wendy Tobitt, courtesy of BBOWT.

Where to start?

Who is the landowner or manager?

Determining who owns the land will be key in changing the management of your road verges. You will need the landowner's permission before making changes.

In Buckinghamshire, your road verges will either be managed by Buckinghamshire Council and Transport for Bucks (TfB), or the Town or Parish Council will have devolved services and undertaken the management.

In Milton Keynes, the verges are managed by Milton Keynes Council, who are undertaking a programme of wildflower verge creation on the grid roads and reduced rural cutting where possible. As these principles apply equally to gardens, parks and open spaces, visit the Council's website to contact your local parks organisation: [mapping.milton-keynes.gov.uk](https://www.mapping.milton-keynes.gov.uk)

The Strategic Road Network (motorways and major A roads) is managed by National Highways. You will not be able to trial wilder verge management on these roads.



Photo: Rhiannon Flemming.

If your verges are managed by Buckinghamshire Council and TfB:

Contact your Local Area Technician (LAT). There may be a need for consultation between Members and the Parish Council before the changes can be confirmed, and your LAT can assist with starting this process. Buckinghamshire Council will review your proposal with TfB and build a programme for the following year.

If your services in Buckinghamshire are devolved:

As the town or parish council, you have full responsibility over all maintenance and you can make the decision on how to undertake cuts, as long as the safety of the highway and footpaths is maintained. The local council can proceed without further consultation with Buckinghamshire Council or TfB.

Safety

Road safety remains the number one priority, but it isn't compromised by managing verges for wildlife. For many verges, a regular cut and removal of clippings in late summer will keep the verge safe, open, and also thriving with wildflowers and buzzing with pollinating insects. A regular swathe or safety cut may be necessary on the first 1-2 metres of certain verges to maintain sight lines at junctions or roundabouts.

In urban areas we have got used to multiple cuts of verges each year; nationally, this varies between 4 and 20 times, with 6 to 10 being common. Such frequency of cutting is not a matter of safety but has become the norm for other reasons, such as tidiness.

Disposal of cuttings

This guidance advocates the use of the cut-and-collect method. When using this method, it is very important that the cut grass (referred to as cuttings, clippings or arisings) is removed from the site. When selecting your wilder verge locations, it can be helpful to consider how and where you will be disposing of cuttings from the start. More guidance on cuttings can be found in **Section 3: How to get wilder**.



Case Study

Dorset

In Dorset, a major change in the road verge management strategy started in 2014 and continues to be rolled out across the county. Significant changes were made to protect, conserve and enhance the verges in Dorset for biodiversity, with an emphasis on cut-and-collect mowing. Some verges are also being managed for conservation, including creating verges which have been designated Sites of Nature Conservation Interest.

[Click here to read more on the Dorset Council website.](#)

Assessing your current verges

You've determined who currently manages your verges and narrowed down locations. Now is an opportunity to determine what you already have growing in your verge. This can help identify the broad habitat types, soil type, and ensure future management is appropriate.

Assessment methods include botanical surveys, drive-by surveys, or remote/desk-based analysis. This can be an opportunity to make use of local knowledge, as residents may have specialist knowledge and experience

- Check **the NEP's Conservation Directory** for local conversation or natural history groups
- **The Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Record Centre** can provide records for your area and may also be able to put you in touch with local volunteers
- In the Chilterns, contact **Tracking the Impact**.
- The **Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust** may also be able to assist.



Bee orchids appeared on one of the trial verges.

Photo: Jenny Pearson, courtesy of Chesham Town Council.

Case Study

Chesham

In 2017, Chesham Town Council began a trial on 6 sites (including verges and town council owned open spaces) to see how changing the mowing regime from regular cuts to once per year could help their local insects. The key management change was the removal of grass cuttings after the annual cut. After the success of the trial, the council decided to permanently manage these sites for wildlife and expand the trial. There are now over a dozen sites in Chesham managed for wildlife.

Chesham Town Council worked in partnership with a local group, Chesham & District Natural History Society, to assess and monitor sites.

[Click here to read more on the Chesham Town Council website.](#)

How to get wilder

Low fertility principle

If we can reduce the amount that the grass grows in the first place, we will have less to cut. If there is less to cut, this should cost less. Reducing the cuts is the first step, but the key is to lower soil fertility by removing the cut grass to prevent its nutrients from returning back into the soil.

It can take two or three seasons to get on top of soil fertility, but the results are usually good with grass that is likely to require half the number of cuts compared with the historical pattern, and with common wildflowers becoming increasingly abundant. The longer the time between cuts, the more wildflowers can flower and provide nectar for pollinators.

Reducing the number of cuts and changing the timing of the cuts is only the start; as stated above, collecting the grass cuttings (also called clippings or arisings) is key to achieving significant and long-lasting results.



This section gives you an overview of management for wildlife. For detailed guidance, refer to Plantlife's **Good Verge Guide**.

Cut and collect

Cutting and removing the vegetation during the growing season removes fertility drawn up from the soil and converted into leaves, flowers and seeds, and prevents it from being returned to the soil. Allowing the grass to grow long before cutting and removing, then repeating the operation two or three times in the season, effectively removes nutrients. The result is that the following year, coarse grasses are in decline, and fine grasses and wildflowers start to appear. Collecting cuttings will also help with public perception: cut-and-collect leaves a neat and tidy finish to grasslands, which is important for visual amenity.

Cut-and-collect is often seen as a challenge due to budget, time or equipment constraints, but it also comes with rewards. If you do decide to invest in equipment, costs can be recouped in the short to medium term.

On the smaller scale, however, an active community or volunteer programme might be all you need. The simplest way to collect cuttings is to rake them up using a grass-rake or hay-rake, and then either place them in small piles out of the way at the back of the verge, or remove them from site.



This urban area is mown every four to six weeks, but because it is on a cut-and-collect regime, common wildflowers can flourish. The site looks lovely, well-kept and provides nectar for pollinating insects.

Photo: Phil Sterling

By adopting the low fertility principle and using the cut-and-collect method, we can keep verges looking reasonably tidy, increase their wildlife value, and save money.

The alternative is to simply to reduce the number of cuts without removing the cut grass, which allows the grass to grow much longer between cuts, makes the grass more difficult to cut when needed, and increases the chance of cuttings spreading onto the footways and roads where it can enter drains.

Disposal of cuttings

Once you have decided to cut-and-collect, you will now have to dispose of the cuttings. Finding a suitable site can be tricky. Once removed from the site, the cuttings will be considered waste and must be disposed of properly. Locating an area on site where you can discretely dispose of the cuttings is often recommended, as this avoids any travel or haulage costs.



Some further considerations and advice:

- Dispose of your cuttings on the same land classification, i.e. cuttings from a road verge should remain on a road verge, while cuttings from a park should be left in that park.
- Leaving the cuttings on site, in small heaps towards the back or sides of the verge; small heaps are preferable to one large pile, as these will break down quicker with minimal impact on the overall soil fertility of the verge.
- Similarly, small heaps can be made under nearby hedges, shrubs, or copses, ensuring you have the landowner's permission.
- Cuttings can form habitat piles, which is good resting habitat for reptiles and insects.
- Some local waste facilities accept green waste, although it may come with a fee.
- Cuttings must not be put into a water course, as this can cause pollution.



Case Study

Bug Buddies Seed Collecting

With the help of Bucks Buzzing and BMERC, students from the Olney Infant Academy learned about plants and collected wildflower seeds (with permission) from a Local Wildlife Site. The seeds were propagated at the school and planted around the grounds. Local moth experts from the Milton Keynes Natural History Society also joined in to teach the students about insects.

[Click here to read more on the Bucks Buzzing website.](#)

To seed or not to seed

It can be very tempting to rush in with planting or seeding to ensure you have a bright beautiful display of flowers straight away. However, planting a wildflower seed mix is not always the best choice from a conservation perspective and can threaten the distinctiveness of your local flora. Seed mixes of annual flowers can also be expensive and labour-intensive to maintain; you may need to prepare the bed and re-sow each year.

Instead, follow the Plantlife guidance to cut less and later in the year. This will give your native wildflowers the opportunity to flower and set seed. Verges generally don't need much encouragement and will soon be full of life.

If your verges are very devoid of flowers, it can be beneficial to sow a native perennial wildflower seed mix after the last autumn cut-and-collect. The resulting increase in wildflower abundance will be seen about 18 months later.

If you do choose to seed, locally sourced seed is preferable where possible. Avoid annual and non-native seed mixes and opt instead for native, perennial flowers or even locally sourced green hay.



Photo: Alexandru Ionas-Salagean.

Yellow Rattle is nature's lawn mower because it draws nutrients out of the soil. Sowing or planting it in your verge can help kick-start other wildflowers. See page 17 of Plantlife's **Managing Grassland Road Verges** guide for further advice.

Plug plants (young plants which are ready for planting) can also be used to introduce greater diversity as an alternative to seeding. Transplanting plug plants can be time-consuming, but may also reduce costs required to prepare the ground for seeding. Planting in autumn is preferable to spring, at a rate of 6-10 plugs/m², depending on the species.

Not all wildflower seed mixes are created equal! Grow Wild UK has written a helpful guide on choosing the right mix:
www.growwilduk.com/where-get-uk-native-wildflower-seeds-plants

Leaving pathways

For larger areas of grass, leaving a pathway or "framing" (mowing only a strip around the edges) can be a helpful way to indicate to residents that this area of grass has not been ignored, but left to grow long intentionally.

Signposting

Providing onsite information to residents and passersby can also be helpful. As part of the NEP's pollinator campaign Bucks Buzzing, we have created signs that you are welcome to download and use:

- **Click to visit the Bucks Buzzing website**

Plantlife also has printable signs available:

- **Click to visit the Plantlife website**

What comes next?



Photo courtesy of BMERC.

Involving your community

Hopefully your residents will be interested and onboard with the decision to manage your verges for wildlife. This can be an opportunity for education and engagement with the local community.

As mentioned in Section 3, if you have an active and engaged local community, volunteers can be used to rake grass cuttings by hand and compost nearby, particularly if there is also a local allotment group willing to help compost them. In some situations, volunteer verge groups have grown plug plants from locally collected seed to plant on their local verges.

Organising a community litter pick before the road verges are mown can make the mowing easier and help engage local residents.

Once your wildflowers are established, local community groups or schools can even help to collect the seeds (provided the location is safe to do so) and propagate your wildflowers to other local green spaces.

Case Study

Urban mini-meadows

With the help of local residents and volunteers, Chiltern Rangers partnered with Wycombe Almshouses to transform their neighbourhood into an urban wildlife paradise. Volunteers helped to make mini-meadows by raking out the thatch and planting pollinator-friendly plants. Signs helped explain the changes, alongside inspirational paintings by a local artist.

Bird and bat boxes, as well as some native hedgerow planting, rounded out this project, creating a beautiful and resilient natural environment for both wildlife and residents.

[Click here to read more on the Chiltern Rangers website.](#)



Left: Signs help keep residents informed.

Below: Pyramidal orchids have sprung up in the new mini-meadows.

Photos courtesy of Chiltern Rangers.



Monitoring and surveys

As soil fertility reduces and flowers begin to flourish, you may want to monitor the changes in your verge. More than 700 species of wildflower can be found in road verges in Britain and through monitoring, you can find out how many are in yours! Road verges also provide important habitat for pollinating insects, so you may wish to monitor these species as well.

However, it is very important to keep safety in mind at all times before starting a survey. Some road verges may not be suitable, particularly along highways or other busy roads. The Tarka Trust (Case Study, right) has some excellent resources regarding safety on and around road verges.



Case Study

Life on the Verge

In 2016, the Tarka Country Trust set up the **Life on the Verge** project to work with communities in the Biosphere Reserves area of Devon to identify, adopt and manage roadside verges for the benefit of both wildlife and people. They have produced a useful "Getting Started" guide, as well as guides for surveys, risk assessments, and safety information to consider. It is specific to Devon, but can be adapted to suit the needs of your community.

[Click here to read more on the Life on the Verge website.](#)



Case Study

Shropshire

The **Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project** is a great example of a project starting local and gaining momentum. This project is a partnership set up by local people, the National Trust, Plantlife and Caring for God's Acre, with the aim of creating wildflower-rich meadows on road verges. Community volunteers undertake the cutting of the verges by scythe, then rake and dispose of arisings locally.

Click the links below to learn more:

- [The project's Facebook page](#)
- [Shropshire Wildlife Trust website](#)
- [Verge Guidance, Wildlife Trust website](#)

As discussed in Section 2, drawing on local expertise can contribute significantly to monitoring and surveying on your road verges. If you would like more information or advice on monitoring, you can **contact the NEP** or visit the following websites:

Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre (BMERC): bucksmkerc.org.uk

BMERC can provide advice and local wildlife data, as well as loan equipment.

Bucks Buzzing: bucksmknep.co.uk/bucks-buzzing

Advice and resources for communities, schools, and gardening heroes to provide habitat for insects.

Butterfly Conservation: butterfly-conservation.org

Resources to ID butterflies, choose butterfly-friendly plants, and your community can also get involved in the annual **Big Butterfly Count**

Field Studies Council: field-studies-council.org

The FSC provides training in surveying and identification, and produces user-friendly wildlife guides.

iRecord: brc.ac.uk/irecord/

Available through the website or as an app, iRecord is for managing and sharing wildlife records. It also includes dynamic maps and graphs of your data.

Pollinator Monitoring Scheme: ukpoms.org.uk

A great way for beginners to get started surveying and help monitor the health of UK pollinators

Resources

All of our **Wilder Road Verge** advice can be found by visiting: bucks.mknep.co.uk/wilder

Plantlife Guidance

Good Verge Guide: your go-to guide for transforming local verges into wildlife havens

Available here: www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/our-work/publications/good-verge-guide-different-approach-managing-our-waysides-and-verges

Managing Grassland Road Verges: A best practice guide

Available here: www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/our-work/publications/road-verge-management-guide

Other useful Plantlife Resources

plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/roadvergecampaign/management-guidelines

Please note we are not responsible for the content of external sites. Links correct at time of publishing (October 2021).

Further Reading

Grassland and carbon storage:

Anderson, P. (2021) *Carbon and Ecosystems: Restoration and Creation to Capture Carbon*. Action 2030 Resources series, CIEEM. Available here: cieem.net/resource/carbon-and-ecosystems-restoration-and-creation-to-capture-carbon/

Well-being benefits of nature:

Lovell R., et al (2018) *Health and the natural environment: A review of evidence, policy, practice and opportunities for the future*. Defra Fellowship BE0109. Available here: sciencesearch.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=19511

Butterfly Conservation, Road Verge

Symposium: butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/conservation-projects/building-sites-for-butterflies/road-verge-symposium-presentations

National Highways (formerly Highways England) Strategy: www.gov.uk/government/news/breaking-new-ground-with-eco-drive-to-bring-the-countrys-verges-to-life

Case Studies

Chesham Town Council:

www.chesham.gov.uk/Environment/WF.aspx

Chiltern Rangers:

chilternrangers.co.uk/almshouses-high-wycombe-2019-2021/

Dorset Council:

www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/countryside-coast-parks/countryside-management/verge-cutting/verge-cutting-information-dorset

Life on the Verge:

tarkacountrytrust.org.uk/love-b-883968.html

Olney Infant Academy:

bucksmknep.co.uk/case-study/bug-buddies-seed-collecting/

Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project:

www.facebook.com/ShropsVerge/shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/roadside-verges

If you are managing your road verges or local green spaces for wildlife, the NEP would love to hear from you! Please email:

nep@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

Useful Links

Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre (BMERC):

bucksmkerc.org.uk

Bucks Buzzing:

bucksmknep.co.uk/bucks-buzzing

Butterfly Conservation:

butterfly-conservation.org

Don't Mow, Let It Grow - Online Toolkit:

dontmowletitgrow.com

Field Studies Council:

field-studies-council.org

Grow Wild UK, Choosing the right seed mix:

growwilduk.com/where-get-uk-native-wildflower-seeds-plants

iRecord:

brc.ac.uk/iRecord

Milton Keynes Parks Trust:

theparkstrust.com

Pollinator Monitoring Scheme:

ukpoms.org.uk

Tracking the Impact, Chilterns Conservation Board:

chilternsaonb.org/tracking-the-impact.html



About Us

We are the Local Nature Partnership for Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes. We bring together local authorities and organisations from across the public, private, health and education sectors, as well as conservation and community organisations.

We encourage environmental protection and improvement for multiple benefits: for the environment, businesses and the economy, and the health and wellbeing of communities across Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes.

For more information on the NEP and our activities, visit our website: bucksmknep.co.uk

If you have any feedback on this toolkit or suggestions for additional information you'd like to see included in the future, please contact us: nep@buckinghamshire.gov.uk
We can also provide you with a plain text version of this guide.

Thank you to the following organisations for assisting with the creation of this toolkit:

Buckinghamshire Council
Bucks & Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre
Butterfly Conservation
Chilterns Conservation Board
Transport for Buckinghamshire