# Reconnecting North Marston with Nature

# A proposal to re-wild our verges and hedgerows

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## Summary

North Marston Parish Council currently spends £4,675 per year on the maintenance of the village verges and hedgerows. This paper presents an alternative approach where we work to re-wild our verges and hedgerows to encourage native wild plant species to grow and provide a home for endangered species including the hedgehog, who’s numbers have declined by as much as 40% in some areas of the UK, over the past 10 years. The proposed approach will not only provide opportunities for wildlife to thrive, but also help reduce costs to the village – a win – win.

Current cutting practices have moved to earlier and earlier cutting in spring, meaning that we’re effectively erasing summer from our verges. Only plants that flower early have a chance to set seed before the mowers arrive. As a result, some spring flowers are thriving and spreading, but summer flowering plants are disappearing. This isn’t just bad news for flowers, its bad news for the bees, beetles, butterflies and birds that rely on plants for food. In addition, vigorous perennial plants and some invasive introductions such as ragwort and Japanese knotweed, are better at surviving the tough roadside conditions that we’ve created, so these are increasing at the expense of more delicate species.

## Roadside verge management

According to Plantlife[[1]](#footnote-1) and as practised in the Cotswolds[[2]](#footnote-2), the principle aim in verge management is to delay the first cutting date of lowland grassy verges from early spring until late summer. The **first cut should be undertaken around mid to end of July**. Early cutting reduces floral diversity over time, depriving plants the opportunity to seed and encouraging vigorous growth of robust, long-lived species that are more likely to spread vegetatively. However, late cutting also reduces floral diversity over time, as this encourages the build-up of a thick ‘thatch’ of dead and dying vegetation forming a mat over the soil, encouraging again the growth of vigorous species. Even worse is no cutting at all, as if left uncut for just one year the composition begins to change and species begin to decline, so we are not suggesting no cutting but more greater management of when the verges are cut and a reduction in the number of cuts.

Plants need to complete their full life cycle and be allowed to grow, flower and set seed. Generally most flowers take roughly 6-8 weeks from flowering to successfully shedding viable seed. Cutting plants down in full flower deprives invertebrates of nectar and pollen and stops plants reproducing from seed.

There are two management prescriptions. A basic and an Enhanced road verge management practice. Our proposal here is to roll out the basic prescription, as outlined below and assess the success before investing too much time in mapping out a more in depth enhanced management practice. Basic road verge management is aimed at all enclosed grassy verges in the lowlands, regardless of current condition.

## Basic road verge management for enclosed, grassy verges[[3]](#footnote-3)

The following should be undertaken on all enclosed grassy road verges in the village (apart from those areas, such as junctions, where safety is a priority – see safety section below)

1. **If only one cut is possible:** Cut the full width of the verge once a year, between mid-July and the end of September. This allows plants to flower and, importantly, gives time for seed to be set.
2. **If more cuts are required,** do **one** of the following:
   1. Cut the full width of the verge between mid-July and the end of September. Then cut, the full swathe, once more before Christmas. **This is the ideal and preferred option to conserve and enhance wildflowers**, as it mimics the pattern of traditional meadow management.
   2. Cut the full width of the verge as early as possible, during February and March. This is before most verge plants flower and it won’t disturb ground-nesting birds. Cut the full verge again during September and October. This slightly later date for the second cut allows plants that were cut earlier in the year sufficient time to flower and set seed.
3. **In some areas in the village it may not be practical or desirable to cut the whole width of the verge:** 
   1. On large verges, cut a 1 metre strip at the edge of the verge as early as possible – during February and March. This allows grass at the back of the verge to grow longer, providing a diversity of habitat that is especially important for invertebrates.
   2. On small verges of less than 1 metre, leave some sections uncut, for example 100-metre sections every 200 metres. In both these cases, cut the full width of the verge during September and October.

**Collection of clippings:** On all grassy verges of wildlife importance, it is extremely important that all grass cuttings are gathered and removed, either by hand or by use of suitable cut-and- collect machinery. This will reduce the build-up of organic material (a thatch of cut grass), keep nutrient levels low, and ensure plenty of bare ground for plants to regenerate from seed. Studies have shown this to be a major factor in maintaining verge biodiversity. Cuttings from wildflower-rich verges can be used as green hay to benefit other local verges, meadows or grasslands.

## Road Safety

As referred to above, there will be some locations in the village where it will not be safe to carry out the above prescriptions. These will be where sightlines are required or at junctions; in front of signs and visibility splays and any routes where pedestrian or cycling safety / horse-riding is an issue. In these areas the verges will need to be cut regularly.

## Hedgerow management

Currently, all village hedges are cut annually, which is potentially having a detrimental impact on our local wildlife. According to RSPB[[4]](#footnote-4), good hedgerow management will support and abundance of insects, provide habitat for a range of birds and mammals, including hedgehogs, and provide a rich supply of food for some species throughout the year. However, to achieve this we would need to change our current practices. The basic principles of good hedge trimming are as follows:

* Trim in January or February to avoid the destruction of birds’ nests (present from March to August) and to allow any berry crop to be used by wintering birds (September to December).
* **Trim on a two- or three-year rotation**, rather than annually, to ensure that thick nesting cover is available somewhere every year, and to boost the berry crop that generally develops on second-year growth.
* Avoid trimming all hedges in the same year.

## Current management practices

Currently all of the village verges are cut six times per year and our hedges annually. Recognising that in some instances where road safety is paramount we will need to maintain this practise, for all other verges, we propose that we move to a bi-annual cutting regime (late Summer and Christmas).

## Upsides

- Reduction in the number of verge cuts saves time and money

- Rotational hedge trimming saves time and money

- Benefits for wildlife, insects, birds and small mammals

- Attractive flowers for the whole village to enjoy

- A diverse range of attractive native pants are encouraged

## Downsides

- Verges and hedges perceived by some to be untidy and un-kept

- Plants may not recover immediately in some areas, giving the impression of overgrown areas.

**Concluding remarks**

We should be managing our verges for wildlife as a matter of course, by restoring and expanding flower-rich habitats along the village’s roads and ensuring hedgerows are managed appropriately. This will ensure the survival and natural spread of both common and rare species, for their own sake, for the sake of the wildlife they support and environmental benefits they bring and to enhance the contact with nature experiences of the local community.

## Taking this proposal forward

To ensure we have community buy in to this new management approach, it is suggested that this proposal is shared with the village through the village magazine and on the Parish council notice board, inviting people to come and vote at the next Parish Council meeting in March, so that we can implement these practices this year.

Assuming village is in agreement, the next step would be to map out the village verges and agree one of the described prescriptions for each of the verges.

1. , 3 The good verge guide. A different approach to managing our waysides and verges. Plantlife 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Costwolds Conservation Board, Position statement. The management of roadside verges. Adopted October 2015* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Farming for wildlife in wales, Hedgerow Management. RSPB [↑](#footnote-ref-4)