

### Leicestershire Local Access Forum: Verges Group Meeting with County Ecologist Friday 11 September 2015. 2.30pm in County Hall

**Present:** Vicky Allen (Group Chair) Sue Timms, County Ecologist  
Heather Brown Alex Pyper (arrived late due to heavy traffic)

The remit of Local Access Forums was explained and that Leics LAF had identified highway verges as an available means of getting to and between the fragmented PRoW network. Verges were particularly important for walkers and horse-riders both for travelling along and as a safety refuge. They also provided a safety refuge for cyclists.

A lot of work had been done with Mike Sheldrake of the Highways Dept about their approach to verges.

During the meeting AP pointed out that many country lanes are now too narrow to take anything other than the very large items of agricultural machinery, so walkers, horse riders and cyclists may have to squeeze to the back of the verge in order to allow these machines through. This is difficult if the verge is full of tall nettles etc or hidden rubbish. The situation is not helped by the time pressures on contractors doing this work and their need - in some cases - to take the harvest to drying facilities on another farm.

ST suggested that specific verges might be identified for extra mowing.

Although some verges could be identified as providing a safe means of getting between relatively close PRoWs, in many cases it was also the need to reach the PRoW from the varied starting points of varied users, nearby villages being the most obvious of these. So it was not enough just to identify inter-PRoW links for special mowing.

VA thought that, in the end, the most efficient and cost-effective method was wider and reasonably frequent mowing of *all* verges as the mowing machines would have to travel, in any case, between the prioritised verges.

In some cases the issues are with outgrowing hedges or trees that obliterate the verge and these are properly the responsibility of the adjacent landowner.

Occasionally the problem has been created by over-enthusiastic planting-up of the verge, ignoring its status as part of the highway needed for the non-motorised traveller.

In many instances, such as on hills, the highway is 'sunken' and there is no verge.

VA asked ST about "nature reserve" verges set up largely in the 1980s. They are scattered in small lengths around the county; there is no digital map of them nor an extant management plan. Any marking on site is not maintained. Unfortunately her dept is no longer resourced to do the mapping or create management plans but she offered to sort out maps of such verges if required.

ST thought walking or riding on these verges would not be sufficient to damage their nature value.

In Northamptonshire VA had encountered marked verge 'reserves' and, rightly or wrongly, locals had acquired a "keep off the grass" mentality about them, which might not have been what the verge actually needed. So there were two sides to marking these verges on site.

VA cited a newspaper report from 1965 which indicated that the county council then felt that verge management was the responsibility mainly of the adjoining landowners, who formerly had used verges for stock grazing.

Grass verges were a remnant of the widespread grazing ecology that was vanishing with the less labour-intensive switch to arable farming. As such, grass verges were a valuable ecology in their own right. VA had been told, for instance, that Queniborough parish used to be all grass but for one field of oats in, probably, the 1960s; now almost the reverse.

AP said that grazing farmers were likely to mow verges as they did not want weeds growing and seeding into their fields, which would then have to be eradicated chemically. Mowing was less trouble and helped farms to approach Organic status.

It was agreed that where farmers provided verge mowing and hedge trimming this was much appreciated, but that this was not sufficiently continuous to provide the safety margin.

It was agreed that mowing was the nearest modern practical alternative to grazing. Without mowing or grazing Leicestershire verges were likely to develop nettles, thistles and brambles and allow sucker growth from, in particular, blackthorn. Blackthorn developed into dense areas of bush unless mown down in its first year whilst tender. The next development was trees. On lighter, chalky or sandy, soils this might not happen but this is the usual development on Midland Clays.

VA pointed out that it used to be forbidden to plant trees within a certain distance from any highway. The Charnwood Forest Enclosure Act and Award from the first quarter of the 19th cent, forbade any tree within *fifty yards* of the replacement highways that were laid out in the Award. As this is an unrepealed Act of Parliament, vast areas of trees on the Forest are illegal. She said various theories had been put forward for this (apparently widespread) practice. So as not to provide cover for highwaymen was one. Her own preference was to allow wind and sun to dry out surfaces which might, by early 19cent, be 'macadamed' i.e. skilfully stoned, but not 'tarmacadamed' i.e. sealed.

It was agreed that it was too late to do anything about the established trees, but it did give a justification for asking for the verges to be kept clear of 'outgrowth'.

ST indicated that her department was rarely, if ever, consulted by Highways on issues of verge management. She was asked if, for instance, her department held a list of trees suitable for planting in verges. The answer was negative.

VA said that, if walkers and horse riders were to be able to use the verge instead of the asphalt, there were issues of the height of the lower branches, not just at maturity but during the later part of the growing period as branch spread and length increased.

Many villages still have wide verges that allow horses in particular to avoid weaving through parked cars and generally delaying traffic, but it is important that lower branches of any trees are c.3metres from ground level to allow this. Unfortunately the species of choice are often ornamental ones which barely allow for walking underneath them.

AP produced a newspaper photograph of an overgrown verge at Skeffington that was causing dangers for emerging traffic. It was agreed that this was not really the concern of *this* meeting but that the Verges Group could cite road safety in general as a reason for wider and possibly more frequent verge mowing.

ST commented (after the meeting) that this year's changes in cutting regimes are benefiting some species, as tall herbs and wildflowers are being allowed to flower. But, she said, this is not sustainable as the verges will deteriorate over time unless they are cut and cuttings removed.

**In conclusion**, it was agreed that ST's department had no active involvement in verges but might be able to advise and check records in specific cases or might wish to be involved if a more robust and widespread management plan for the county could be developed. In the view of the current resource crisis this seemed unlikely in the near future.

It was felt that the best approach for the Verges Group and LLAF was to influence and educate county, district and parish councils to take verges more seriously as part of the working highway network.

The meeting closed with thanks to Sue Timms for her time and help.