

Verge Maintenance Manual for Roads in Rural Areas



Roads and Infrastructure
Infrastructure, Environment and Economy

Approval

Approval	Name	Date
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Document control

Version number	Date	Comments
v1.0	11/07/2023	First version issued
v1.1	16/04/2024	Link to Tree Management Strategy added
v1.2	07/05/2024	Updated header and footer
v1.3	15/08/2025	Updated to meet accessibility compliance

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1. Introduction and scope

- 1.1. The following guidance explains the Highland Council's maintenance regime for adopted rural roadside verges only. The following are not included; ditches, remote foot and cycle paths, cutting of hedges and maintenance of mature trees in verges.
- 1.2. The maintenance of roadside trees, shrubs and hedges, whether planted or self seeded is the responsibility of the landowner or occupier. The Roads Authority may give notice to the landowner or occupier requiring them to cut back trees, shrubs or hedges under the following sections of the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984:
 - Section 91 (1) Where trees, shrubs or hedges overhang the road so as to: obstruct the passage of vehicles or pedestrians: interfere with the road user's visibility: obstruct street lighting or road signs: or cause a build up of drifting snow.
 - Section 91 (2) Where trees, shrubs or hedges are in such a condition that the roads authority consider them in danger of falling onto the road.
- 1.3. Section 141 (4) gives the roads authority to execute the works if the notice is not complied with.
- 1.4. The maintenance of vegetation within the road boundary in settlements and urban areas (those with a speed limit of 40mph or less) is not included.
- 1.5. Health and safety requirements are not included in this guidance.

2. Statutory obligations

- 2.1. The Council as Roads Authority has a statutory duty under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 to maintain roadside verges.
- 2.2. Best Value is a statutory duty for the Council under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. It requires effective management of resources, with a focus on improvement, to deliver the best possible outcomes for the public.
- 2.3. The Weeds Act 1959 requires the Roads Authority to control the spread of "injurious" weeds that are harmful to livestock or invasive in pasture. The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 makes it an offence to plant or otherwise cause to grow any plant in the wild beyond its native range. It is the landowner's responsibility to deal with invasive species but joint action with the Council may be required. In some areas assistance may be available from the Scottish Invasive Species Initiative.
- 2.4. The council has obligations with regards to species and habitats protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the biodiversity duty under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 which includes activities on SSSIs and SACs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Special Area of Conservation). In May 2019 Highland Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency making a commitment to conserve and enhance biodiversity in response to the twin environmental crises. In November 2022 the Council signed the Edinburgh Declaration which reinforced its commitment.

3. Service objectives

- 3.1. The Roads Service is required to provide an effective service whilst recognising financial and resource constraints. The main objectives of the verge maintenance regime are:

- To maintain safety by providing a refuge for pedestrians where there is no footway and by preventing obstruction of sight lines, road traffic signs, vehicle restraint systems (safety barrier) and other structures
- To prevent encroachment of vegetation onto or overhanging the road
- To allow the road drainage systems to function
- To inhibit the growth of injurious weeds and invasive non-native species
- To conserve special wildlife habitats and wild flowers where this is reasonably practicable and does not conflict with the service objectives relating to road safety and road maintenance

4. Guidance for routine verge maintenance on rural roads

4.1. Injurious weeds and invasive non-native species (see Appendix A)

- 4.1.1. Injurious weeds are ragwort, broad leafed dock, curled dock, creeping thistle, and spear thistle. Cutting these species before seeding usually helps to control them. Care is required with ragwort cuttings as they are harmful to livestock.
- 4.1.2. There are four main invasive non-native species. Japanese knotweed should never be cut as this will spread it. The sap of Giant hogweed causes severe burns and it should not be cut where this is a risk. Himalayan balsam can be cut except during July to September when it is in seed. Rhododendron ponticum can be cut, the cuttings are harmful to livestock but are not generally eaten, it will re-grow once cut.
- 4.1.3. These weeds will be reported by the operative to the Roads Officer.
- 4.1.4. The Roads Officer will begin and maintain a list and a map of the Verges with Injurious and Invasive non-native weeds in a permanent file under verge maintenance. (Further advice may be required from the Road Operations Manager or Senior Engineer especially regarding ragwort or non-native invasive species).

4.2. Special verges for biodiversity or conservation

- 4.2.1. Special Verges for biodiversity or conservation may be identified by Naturescot, the Council's Environment Team, local conservation groups and others and will be agreed in writing with the Roads Operation Manager. Special treatment may be agreed for these verges for example the grass may be cut earlier or later in the year to allow special wildflowers to seed.
- 4.2.2. Verges within or adjacent to SACs or SSSIs identified by the Environment Team as requiring approval by NatureScot of scrub cutting operations will be recorded as Special Verges.
- 4.2.3. The Roads Officer will begin and maintain a list and a map of the Special Verge locations identified together with any special treatments agreed in a permanent file under verge maintenance.

4.3. Frequency and programming

- 4.3.1. Rural road verge maintenance is undertaken on a cyclical, routine basis to meet the service objectives. Reactive cutting is not cost-effective and is only carried out when intervention is necessary following consideration of the location by the Roads Authority.
- 4.3.2. Rural verge maintenance is prioritised and instructed locally by each Roads Officer on a route basis. The priority is based on the network hierarchy.

Strategic, regional and sub-regional routes are generally done first followed by link and local access roads with the minor rural roads having the lowest priority. Verges which are known to have high pedestrian use (including routes to school) may receive a higher priority.

- 4.3.3. This guidance recommends the grass is cut once per year by machine mounted flail. The frequency may require adjustment to suit local conditions, in open heather moorland no cut may be required, in agricultural areas a second cut may be required. An annual grass cut controls the growth of scrub. Scrub can disrupt drainage and is more expensive to maintain. A strip of grass alongside scrub may support more biodiversity than scrub alone. Operational and financial constraints may limit frequency below that recommended.
- 4.3.4. Verge grass cutting starts from May and continues during the grass growing season.
- 4.3.5. This guidance recommends that the scrub is cut within the verge once every three years. The frequency will vary with the cut prioritised by each Roads Officer based on the network hierarchy and the service objectives especially safety. A cut every three years controls the growth of scrub and saplings to a size which can usually be cut by machine mounted flail (maximum diameter around 30mm but refer to manufacturers guidance). Operational and financial constraints may limit frequency below that recommended.
- 4.3.6. Routine verge scrub cutting takes place between September and February.
- 4.3.7. Alternative methods will be considered where there are trees with a diameter greater than 80mm and where the branches to be cut have a diameter greater than 30mm or where the verge has a special conservation status. Operational and financial constraints may limit the choice of method and require a departure from best practice to meet the service objectives (as stated in this document). Pruning and lopping are preferable to the use of flails or machine mounted cutting heads: chainsaws can be used. The timing and location of cuts to mature branches may impact on the long term viability of the tree and also on the extent and type of regrowth. Different species have different requirements. The Highland Council Tree Management Strategy can be found on the Council's website. Technical advice can also be sought from the Forestry Team.

4.4. Specification for grass cutting

- 4.4.1. Operatives will inspect the area being cut on a dynamic basis, where reasonably practical, to identify visible hazards, weeds, special plants, or wildlife. Operations will be amended to manage identified hazards, or the area will be avoided, and advice sought from the Roads Officer.
- 4.4.2. The first swathe (nominally 1.0 to 1.2m wide) from the edge of the carriageway will have the grass cut.
- 4.4.3. Additional visibility areas required for road safety will generally have the grass cut, typically at road junctions and on the inside of bends.
- 4.4.4. Where there is a footway or cycleway with verge behind it that can be comfortably reached by the machine from the carriageway, then a single swathe of the verge will be cut to the rear of the footway or cycleway.
- 4.4.5. Where there is a verge between the carriageway and a footway or cycleway that can be comfortably reached by the machine from the carriageway then the full width of the verge will be cut.

- 4.4.6. Where a footway or cycleway is more than 3m from the verge then it is considered as a remote path and is not practical to cut from the carriageway.
- 4.4.7. Where there is a ditch within the verge then the area between the edge of the carriageway and the edge of the ditch which can be comfortably reached from the machine will have the grass cut.
- 4.4.8. It is not practical to collect cuttings, but ditches should be kept clear. Special care will be taken where there is running water in a ditch close to watercourses.

4.5. Specification for scrub cutting

- 4.5.1. Routine scrub cutting will not be undertaken in the bird nesting season (March to August inclusive).
- 4.5.2. Within woodland areas covered by SSSIs and SACs the Roads Officer will agree the scrub cutting programme with NatureScot (advice may be required from the Road Operations Manager or Senior Engineer).
- 4.5.3. Operatives will inspect the area being cut on a dynamic basis, where reasonably practical to identify visible hazards, injurious/invasive non-native weeds, special plants or wildlife. Operations will be amended to manage identified hazards, or the area will be avoided, and advice sought from the Roads Officer.
- 4.5.4. The scrub will be cut in visibility splays and in a single swathe to the rear of the grass cut (nominally 2m from the edge of the carriageway) or to a boundary feature such as a fence or wall, whichever is the nearest. It may be cut for a distance up to 3m from the edge of the carriageway if required for operational reasons such as drainage.
- 4.5.5. It is not practical to collect cuttings, but ditches should be kept clear. Special care will be taken where there is running water in a ditch close to watercourses.

Appendix A: Identification of invasive non-native species and injurious weeds

- Non-native invasive species



Rhododendron ponticum

Giant hogweed



Japanese knotweed

Himalayan balsam



- Injurious weeds

[Identification of injurious weeds - GOV.UK](#)