

# Cornish hedge management

For hedges adjacent to highways



A best practice guide  
to your responsibilities



If you have a hedge on your property which is adjacent to a public road or right of way (a highway) this leaflet tells you how best to look after it and fulfil your legal obligations

## **Owners and occupiers of land with highway hedges...**

... are responsible for maintaining these hedges so that growth does not impair the safety of highway users nor impede their access. This covers any hedge that directly abuts a public highway and includes:

- trimming roadside hedges to maintain visibility, particularly at junctions, on the inside of bends and at passing places.
- removing dead or decaying trees and other growth likely to fall across or on to the highway.
- removing branches and other growth that may prevent the passage of highway users including, where appropriate, high-sided vehicles.
- removing branches and other growth that may obstruct light from a public street light or visibility of a traffic sign.

Contractors working for Cornwall Council or the local council are required to clear the surface growth. Side growth remains the responsibility of the land owner.

# Warning

At locations where highway hedge growth has become a problem, the highway authority is likely to serve notice on the owner/occupier requiring the necessary work to be completed within a stated period. Failure to comply with the conditions of this notice may result in the highway authority undertaking the works and recovering the costs from the owner/occupier.



# Hedges

Under the Highways Act 1980, the highway authority has the legal duty to prevent, as far as is reasonably possible, the obstruction of the highway. This includes ensuring that land owners and occupiers properly manage the growth on their hedges adjacent to the highway.

There are over 7000 km (4500 miles) of road and 4700 km (3000 miles) of other public rights of way in Cornwall. Most are bounded by hedges which provide a unique landscape, shelter and wildlife habitat. They are usually hundreds, sometimes thousands of years old. On main roads they give a pleasant environment. On narrow lanes the wealth of flowering plants is a joy to behold.

The stone and turf structure of Cornish hedges fosters an especially rich bio-diversity and supports wildlife indefinitely, so long as man's interference is kept to the minimum. They are also important as wildlife corridors. Roadside hedges are often the oldest and richest hedges, less affected by intensive farming practices.

Hedge management regimes affect the balance of plant and animal populations. It is important that management takes account of the life cycles of the plant and animal communities which the hedge supports. For example, allowing plants to flower and produce fruit/seeds allows insects to develop. These in turn provide food for birds, bats and other organisms which may also rely on hedges for shelter and nest sites.

Highway hedges are very susceptible to damage by over-zealous trimming, therefore careful consideration should be given to the type of machinery employed. For example, a finger-bar trimmer or other cutting head can be less damaging to wildlife than a flail mower.

It is important to plan trimming operations so that summer cutting is kept to a minimum as this disrupts nature's breeding and seeding cycles. In order to minimise these effects, trimming should be undertaken during late winter. Summer trimming should be confined to the removal of hedge growth only where it constitutes an actual traffic hazard.

The highway authority is aware of the disruption that summer trimming can cause to the natural cycle of wildlife in hedges. It endeavours to reconcile, as far as possible, any conflicting requirements of highway safety and wildlife.

# Verges

The verge between the highway and the hedge including trees and bushes growing on it is generally part of the highway, and is therefore the responsibility of the highway authority. When cutting verges, the highway authority may also trim part of the roadside hedge. However, this does not relieve the owner/occupier of their responsibilities.

## What is a Cornish hedge?

The typical hedge in Cornwall is a stone-faced earth bank. Others may be faced with turf or have a stone core. On top of the hedge bank there is frequently a shrubby hedgerow, especially in sheltered areas, often containing trees such as oak, ash, sycamore and elm. Verges and ditches are also associated with Cornish roadside hedges. Thus they differ significantly from an 'English Hedgerow'.

It is important to distinguish the separate parts of a hedge when considering the appropriate management regime. Different treatments may be required, especially on narrow roads and those with no verge:

### The hedge face

This generally consists of grass, fern and other soft, herbaceous growth, growing to full height in the summer and dying back in the winter. It is rather like a rich vertical verge and often, and increasingly, where it is cut too close, it can be over-run by ivy.

## The hedgerow on top of the hedge

Where present, it is usually a mix of woody shrubs and trees. Common hedgerow shrubs in Cornwall include hazel, hawthorn, blackthorn, elder, gorse and holly.

## The verge (including ditches)

This is predominantly grassland, often with scrub at the back and frequently with a wealth of wildflowers.

# When to trim roadside hedges

The trimming of hedges should be done, wherever possible, in the winter months. Woody hedge growth should be trimmed in the winter and cut back sufficiently to allow for the next season's growth. Soft herbaceous growth on the hedge face may need to be trimmed in the summer as set out below.

## Winter trimming

### All roads and other public rights of way

Trim hedges faces where necessary once in December, January or February, leaving 300-500mm of growth. Trim woody hedgerow growth at the same time to ensure that it will not interfere with the highway during the next growing season

# Summer trimming

## All Roads

Only trim passing places, junctions and blind corners once in June or July, leaving 200-300mm of growth.

## Two lane roads

Only trim road hedges to maintain the free flow of traffic (usually a minimum width of 5.5m except where restricted by hard, permanent features)

## Single lane roads

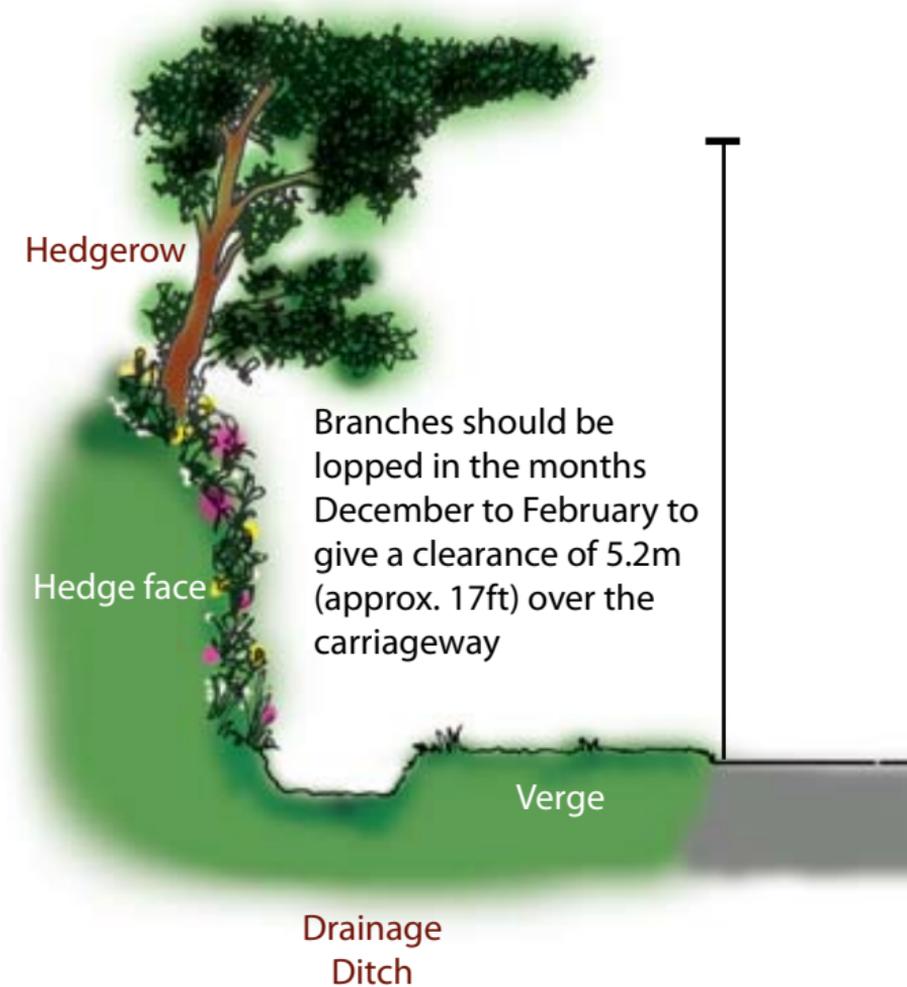
Only trim road hedges to maintain the free flow of traffic (usually a minimum width of 2.75m except where restricted by hard, permanent features)

## Notes

Trimming during March to August is likely to damage or destroy birds' nests. This is an offence under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981. Where trimming is required under Section 154 of The Highways Act 1981 in order to maintain public safety, appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that damage to wildlife and habitats is minimised.

Some hedges in windswept localities grow very slowly and need trimming less often, or not at all.

Where there is a verge, annual hedge trimming is usually only needed at junctions, around signs and blind corners to maintain visibility.



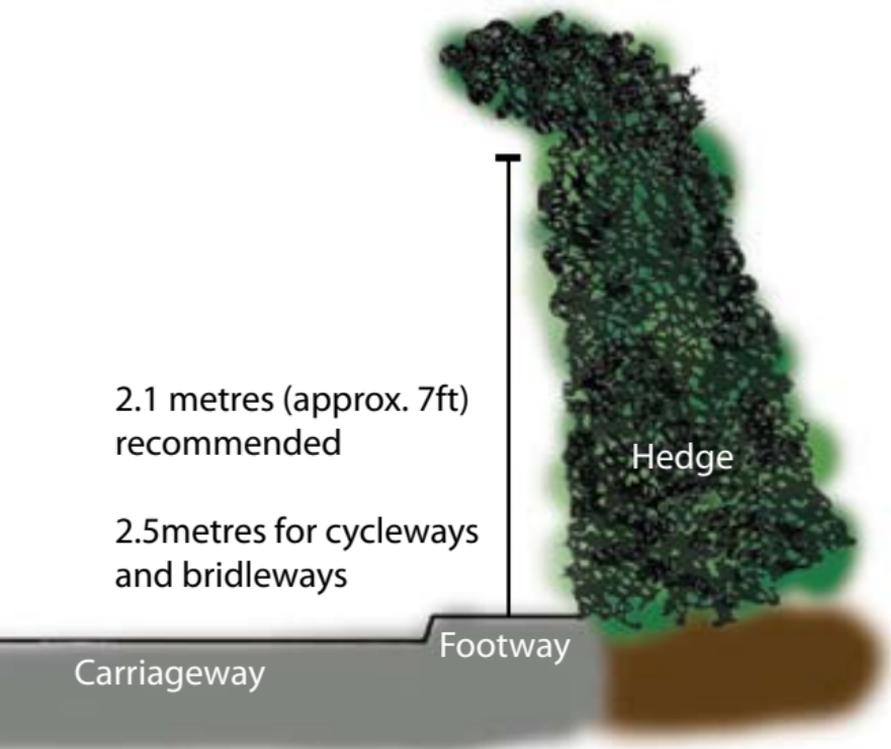
However, a margin of 1.5m should be maintained for pedestrian use where necessary.

Woody growth of hedges along public rights of way should be trimmed in winter, as necessary, to keep the route open and to allow for summer growth.

Additional cutting (mainly of soft growth) to maintain visibility and safe passage of highway users, may be required at other times depending upon local conditions.

Advice can be obtained from the highway authority if you have specific problems.

The field side of hedges should not be cut during the nesting season



## Trees and hedgerows on top of hedges

Traditional hedgerows of thorn and hazel etc can be allowed to grow tall and bushy where this does not compromise highway safety and may be cut or laid every 7-15 years depending on need. These will provide shelter, and greatly improve the wider landscape and biodiversity.

Mature growth and trees, not growing from the verge, which canopy over the highway, must be trimmed to a suitable height for the usage of the highway. (see diagram). This varies from

2.1m over footpaths to 2.5m over bridleways and byways and to 5.2m over roads. This is best done in December, January or February.

Care should be taken to ensure that trees or hedges do not become unstable following trimming and additional measures such as selective coppicing may be required to ensure that trees and hedges remain safe. Advice should be sought on the most suitable course of action where this is likely to be an issue.

Where possible, hedgerow saplings and trees should be left to grow and mature. Such trees, if carefully selected and managed, will provide shelter and greatly improve the wider landscape. Mature trees in hedges are not inherently unstable and can be safely retained provided they are structurally sound and managed appropriately.



Ivy is immensely valuable for wildlife and should be encouraged on healthy trees. However occasionally where trees are weak ivy growth can dominate the crown, suppress the tree and increase the risk of failure. In these rare cases it may be necessary to remove or sever the ivy in the autumn.

## Inspection

Trees that may fall or drop branches into the highway should be inspected regularly by a competent person to ensure that they are safe to retain. Works should be undertaken as necessary to ensure the continued safety of the trees including the removal of low branches likely to interfere with the highway. Note that branches extend lower in the summer and after rain.

Broad-leaved trees may be selectively coppiced and allowed to regrow. As trees grow it may be appropriate to thin them.



When felling, coppicing or pruning trees, consent may be required from the planning authority if the trees are protected by a tree preservation order

or are in a conservation area. Additionally, a tree-felling licence may be needed from the Forestry Commission (01626 890666). Works which may affect the highway should also be notified to Cornwall Council and appropriate traffic management measures put in place before works are carried out.

# Responsibility when trimming

Trimming should be timed to avoid peak daytime traffic flows and carried out during daylight hours in good visibility. The trimmer should be mounted on the left hand side of the tractor so that the tractor can work with the flow of traffic. Warning signs should be displayed at the ends of the section being cut, and at road junctions. Vehicles should display flashing amber lights and rear mounted keep right warning signs whilst working within the highway.



Hedges should not be trimmed closer than 200mm (8") as this can cause stones to fall out of the hedge and endanger other highway users. All trimmings should be cleared from the highway, including from footways and drainage features.

Herbicides should not be used on hedges except for control of certain invasive or noxious species. Further advice on the treatment of species such as Japanese knotweed and ragwort can be obtained from Cornwall Council.



Those responsible for trimming, or their sub-contractor, should have sufficient public liability insurance cover suitable for working in the highway.

Many private householders have a short length of roadside hedge to look after, and they have the same legal responsibilities as other owners and occupiers under the Highways Act 1980. Garden hedges growing over urban highways and footways can be a particular problem.

## **Farmers and growers**

Those farmers and growers who are in receipt of the Single Farm Payment are reminded that they must also adhere to the cross compliance rules as laid out in the current cross compliance handbook.

# The highway authority

Cornwall Council is the relevant highway authority for county roads and public rights of way, and works closely with local councils and other organisations. It encourages hedge owners and land occupiers to act in a responsible way towards users of highways, and is happy to give advice.

The A30 and A38 trunk roads are the responsibility of the **Highways Agency (08459 556575)**.

## Summary

- This leaflet provides information about the maintenance of hedges adjacent to highways, including public rights of way.
- Best timing is winter for dealing with woody material. Soft growth can be dealt with as required, but the nesting season should be avoided and flowering plants allowed to seed if possible.
- The work is necessary to ensure the free passage of people and vehicles, compliance with legal obligations and, where relevant, the Single Payment Scheme.



This leaflet has been produced by Cornwall Council in collaboration with The Cornish Hedge Group, which represents 18 statutory and voluntary organisations concerned with farming, conservation and public interests in Cornwall. Free leaflets on 'Field Hedge Maintenance' and 'Wildlife in Cornish Hedges' are also available.

**If you have any queries please write to:**

Cornwall Council,  
Environment, Planning and Economy,  
County Hall, Truro, TR1 3AY

or telephone us on **0300 1234 222**

(roads, transport and parking)

**0300 1234 151** (planning)

Alternatively e-mail the Council on:

**highways@cornwall.gov.uk** or

**planning@cornwall.gov.uk**

or visit our website at

**www.cornwall.gov.uk**

If you would like this information in  
another format please contact:

**Cornwall Council, County Hall**

**Treyew Road, Truro TR1 3AY**

Telephone: **0300 1234 100**

Email: **enquiries@cornwall.gov.uk**

**www.cornwall.gov.uk**



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