

Information note on Public Rights of Way and Summer Vegetation Clearance (SVC)

The Countryside Access Team (CAT) of Oxfordshire County Council acts as the highway authority for most unsurfaced public rights of way (PRoW) – footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways and byways. The County Council has the statutory duty to assert and protect PRoWs and keep them reasonably convenient for public users.

An important part of the Council's maintenance work occurs during the main summer walking and riding season. This is undertaking summer or 'soft' vegetation clearance (SVC), normally between May and September. This soft vegetation is the non-woody undergrowth that can usually be cleared by a small team of CAT officers, approved contractors and some volunteer groups using mowers and grass trimmers. In undertaking this clearance work the council also has to give due consideration to the protection of wildlife and habitats and do what work that can be done with very limited budgets. This SVC work focuses on trying to ensure that routes are not obstructed by the more aggressive vegetation such as nettles and above knee height, rather than establishing and maintaining a close-mown grass pathway.

The amount of summer vegetation clearance is limited by available resources and the accessibility of the route. Some routes can be cleared by tractor mower, some by pedestrian mower and some can only be cleared using handheld grass trimmers – depending on the path's access points, width and terrain. The rate of clearance depends on this accessibility. This work also has to fit alongside other priority demands in the team such as obstruction resolution, emergency repairs and maintenance, bridge installations and supporting community and volunteer works on the ground.

Oxfordshire County Council's basic standard for this work, as outlined in the adopted [Rights of Way Management Plan 2015-2025](#) is to ensure that rights are not obstructed and routes are maintained in a reasonable condition.

LIMITED RESOURCES MEAN THAT THIS WORK HAS TO BE PLANNED AND PRIORITISED

The intention is that a yearly programmed approach for those key routes known to need clearance will form the framework for the best use of resources. In order to provide a guide to operations the following points set out how the team will normally undertake this work.

- 1) SVC work will take the form of the SVC Programme (SVCP). The SVCP is planned and categorised into priority 1 and 2 routes that will have action that year. It will be taken from a list of routes marked as needing priority SVC in the Countryside Access Management System. This is a database maintained by CAT officers and the SVC priority routes are based on inspections and internal/external reports as well as previous works.
- 2) Priority 1 routes will have their first cut at the end of May and normally these routes will then have a second cut in mid-July. The intention is that priority 2 routes will start to have their one cut between June and July, following an area-based approach that enables best use of resources by focusing on priority routes in that area. This will mean that some routes will not receive a cut until July. It also means that some routes may not be cut at all.
- 3) Other paths that are not a SVC priority may be cut. This will usually happen if there is a nearby SVCP cut, if resources allow, and if the opportunity arises.

- 4) The programme will normally be reviewed by CAT officers between January and February each year so that the season's planned work is agreed.
- 5) When considering the inclusion of routes on the SVCP, CAT officers will normally assess the route for:
 - a. type of route (e.g. commuting, school or local shop route)
 - b. the amount of obstruction and inconvenience
 - c. the type of vegetation growth (e.g. nettles)
 - d. the amount of resource available
- 6) Reactive works outside of SVCP may be undertaken but it has to be understood that resources that are available to the team are severely limited so these will normally only be considered if the route is considered impassable – and evidence such as digital photos will be requested in order to aid the decision to undertake remedial work on the ground.
- 7) Parish Councils, Town Councils and other public bodies may take the decision that they wish to undertake additional vegetation clearance work in their areas so the paths are a higher standard or may undertake any such work on their own land – subject to competent operators and appropriate insurance cover. Many councils do this already with staff, contractors or volunteers and the CAT is very grateful to them for their assistance. NB. Limited resources can be better deployed if information about paths that are further maintained by local councils is shared with the CAT, thus avoiding duplication of effort on the ground.
- 8) Members of the public should not undertake clearance work on public rights of way using power tools or other machinery. However, the removal of some vegetation by the use of secateurs or loppers is usually permissible as part of using a path. These routes are public highways and there is a strong likelihood of liability for damage to people and/or property if machinery is used inappropriately without authorisation or suitable insurance.
- 9) Some volunteer groups like the Chiltern Society, the Cotswolds Wardens, the Ramblers Work Groups and the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trail Volunteers add value to the work that the authority does by clearing routes that are important in their area. This work is much appreciated but this work on a public highway is normally sanctioned by the CAT and covered under that organisation's liability insurance. For more details about any of these groups please contact the CAT using the details below.
- 10) Many farmers and landowners clear routes as part of their regular farming operations – and the CAT is very grateful for this unpaid contribution to helping keep paths accessible

Check out our handy 'how to' paths guide path at
<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/environment-and-planning/countryside/countryside-access/improving-countryside-access-oxfordshire/communities-and-paths>

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