

Highways Verge Maintenance

To: Highways & Transport Committee

Meeting Date: 9th March 2021

From: Steve Cox – Executive Director, Place and Economy

Electoral division(s): All

Forward Plan ref: N/A

Key decision: No

Outcome: To apprise Members of the new approach to management of highway verges across Cambridgeshire following the launch of updated national guidance

Recommendation: Committee is asked to:

- a) To endorse the approach set out in the report for the management of highway verges across Cambridgeshire.
- b) To approve inclusion of the county's verge management approach in future iterations of the Highway Operational Standards.

Officer contact:

Name: Jonathan Clarke
Post: Highways Maintenance Manager
Email: jonathan.clarke@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Tel: 07775674297

Member contacts:

Names: Councillors Ian Bates & Mark Howell
Post: Chair/Vice-Chair
Email: ian.bates@cambridgeshire.gov.uk, mark.howell@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Tel: 01223 706398

1. Background

- 1.1 Cambridgeshire County Council has committed to bringing all our biodiversity assets into positive conservation management ([Climate Change and Environment Strategy 2020](#)), with the road network identified for better biodiversity management.
- 1.2 A workshop was held on 12th November 2020 to discuss a revised approach, drawing on expertise from a range of organisations. This included a presentation on verge management in Dorset, an area held up as a leader in this field. Workshop attendees were able to ask questions and seek clarification and guidance from the representatives of the organisations present. The outcome of the workshop has been used to inform the approach set out in this report.
- 1.3 Attendees at the workshop included: Plantlife, Butterfly Conservation Trust, On the verge, Chair & Vice Chair of the Highways & Transport Committee, County Councillors Harford and Harrison, Skanska Environmental Managers, Skanska Operation Managers, representatives from the County Council Biodiversity team and the County Council Highways Maintenance Manager.
- 1.4 The management of the road network has the potential to protect and restore the largest area of unimproved grassland in the county, including one City Wildlife Site, 37 County Wildlife Sites & two Sites of Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The verges also provide a valuable resource for animals and a wildlife corridor across a biodiversity poor landscape.

2. Outcome and recommendations

Protected Road Verges (PRVs)

- 2.1 The best examples of verge grassland are managed by the County Council through the PRV scheme, which covers approximately 80 km of verge across 67 locations (appendix 1). For example, the species-rich grassland at Stocking Lane PRV supports Crested Cow-wheat, an important plant restricted to verges of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Essex.
- 2.2 A study of some of Cambridgeshire's PRVs was undertaken in 2020 by Jonathan Shanklin and confirms that verges still make an "essential and valuable contribution to the County's biodiversity". However, the quality of the PRVs has deteriorated due to sub-optimal management, nutrient enrichment and in some cases, neglect. This corroborates the findings of PRV surveys commissioned by CCC that found only 7% in favourable condition, 24% in part favourable / unfavourable condition and 69% in unfavourable condition by 2012. This evidence demonstrates that the current management of PRVs by CCC is not sufficient to conserve their biodiversity value.
- 2.3 Priority must be given to managing the most biodiversity rich verges for their wildlife interest. The wildflowers of the majority of PRVs should recover if appropriate management is implemented.
- 2.4 Currently, the PRVs receive two cuts per year, but grass cuttings are not removed, causing enrichment of the soils and wildflowers become smothered by rough grasses. It is essential that grass cuttings are removed to reduce soil fertility, so that wildflowers can thrive. In

addition, some PRVs are becoming dominated by scrub, which will require more invasive management (e.g. scrub removal and soil stripping). Up-to-date surveys are needed to prescribe the exact management needed for each PRV.

2.5 It is therefore proposed that the following management is implemented on the PRVs:

- Engage the Wildlife Trust to undertake surveys of all the PRVs, this being in keeping with other surveys CCC have had undertaken of the PRVs. The Wildlife Trust are best placed to identify any changes since their last survey work in 2007-2011 and any changes as a result of the proposed new cutting regime. Split the survey over two years, so that we have the baseline data as soon as possible.
- The Wildlife Trust are able to survey potential new CCC PRVs. We have none at this stage but expect there will be some new sites come forward as we develop work with the parishes and the county botanical recorder.
- Installation of any missing PRV way markers to demarcate length of PRV
- Undertake remedial work on any PRVs to restore areas back to grassland (e.g. scrub clearance)
- Implement optimal cutting regime of two cuts per year, with arisings collected.
- Cuts to be undertaken within the following 4-week windows (depending on flowering interest), either:
 - A) 1st cut in April & 2nd cut in mid-September to mid-October; or
 - B) 1st cut in late July & 2nd cut in mid-September to mid-October
- All cuttings to be collected and deposited either at rear of verge or in compost piles, outside of the PRV

2.6 Appendix 1 shows the location of the PRV's in Cambridgeshire. Details of the species in these and the criteria for a verge to be identified as a Protected Road Verge for inclusion in the scheme are contained in the source documents at the end of this report.

Rural Road Verge network

2.7 It is proposed that the wider network of verges is cut twice a year and that both of the cuts are full width of the available verge, thus reducing the build-up of scrub at the back of the verges.

2.8 The March/April cut is perfect for most of the county, apart from areas on the clay, which have different key flowering times. Appendix 2 shows the Highway zones. The timing of the cuts is:

South divisions & North divisions (excluding NE17)

A) March/April & late September/October

B) Priority of completing cutting during the optimal timings should be given to the verges in South Cambridgeshire and East Cambridgeshire (highlighted on the map) because they are more floristically rich than Fenland

West Division & Highways Zone NE17

C) Late July & late Sept/October (optimal)

D) If postponing the first full width cut until late July is not operationally possible, then the next best alternative is cutting in: March/April & late July/August (e.g. no autumn cut)

Urban Road Verge (URV) network

- 2.9 The URV are those urban roads with speed limits under 30mph.
- 2.10 There are a number of different organisations that cut the verges in Cambridgeshire's urban areas on the county council's behalf. These include; Cambridge City Council, Huntingdonshire District Council, Huntingdon Town Council, St. Neots Town Council and 129 parishes (Appendix 3). They are paid what it would cost the county council to cut the grass based on a square metre area for three cuts, although a number of these organisations have asked that the amount paid is reviewed.
- 2.11 The remaining urban area is cut by the county council's Highway Services partner Skanska.
- 2.12 At the workshop, Dr Phil Stirling gave a presentation that included the work carried out at Lanford Forum Dorset, whereby a cut and collect management of the arisings has been introduced. It is proposed that an urban verge cut and collect trial is implemented in a small number of villages following the cutting regime for PRV network.
- 2.13 The proposal consists of
- Treat the trial as a separate programme.
 - The number of parishes/villages included in the trial will depend on the number of cut/collect machines used. To maximise the use of any cut/collect machines it is anticipated that 3-5 parishes would take part in the trial.
 - Parishes would be picked that are supportive of the trial. Although it may be better to focus on one district to minimise travel time/costs.
 - Suggested length of trial is 3 years to see the full benefit. Unlikely to see biodiversity benefits until second year.
 - Engage with parishes prior to starting the trial. It is possible that parishes will help find locations to dispose of arisings close to cutting sites. They may also be increased in monitoring.
 - Monitoring of biodiversity is important – monitor plant diversity throughout the length of the trial. Could use quadrat surveys and local volunteers. A monitoring programme will be developed in conjunction with the county council ecologist.
 - Monitoring of when cuts are needed could also be carried out by local volunteers.
 - First year will likely need the same number of cuts (with the addition of collecting) to reduce nutrients in verges. The aim is to get this to two cuts a year by the end of the trial, subject to monitoring.
 - Arisings are best left on site if possible (in nearby hedges/scrub).

Road Safety

- 2.14 The county council places a very high importance on road safety and any changes to the verge management regime will not compromise safety. Therefore, all vision splays, bends and junctions have been identified, and a specification for the cut at these locations has been designed. Details of this are contained in the source documents at the end of this report.
- 2.15 The higher the speed limit of the road the greater the length of the vision splay required.
- 2.16 It is proposed that these are cut four times a year throughout the season, with an option to

attend to any locations following identification from either routine highway inspections or correspondence from local members and / or the public that there is further requirement to cut the vision splay, bend or junction.

Community Verges

- 2.17 There has been increasing interest from Parish Councils, resident associations and individuals looking at options for managing their own local verges in a more biodiversity friendly management regime.
- 2.18 It is proposed that the county council supports this and work with communities to enable this to happen where appropriate. A page will be created on the county council website for all matters relating to road verges as a source of information for Parishes. This information will include species mix by soil type, volunteering and cutting regimes and frequently asked questions, advice and contacts for further guidance.
- 2.19 Volunteers can use the already existing Highways Volunteering forms and once risk assessments have been completed, enable them to be covered by CCC insurance whilst working on the public highway of which the verge forms part. Details of this are contained in the source documents at the end of this report. Local Highway Officers will be encouraged to promote this scheme through their meetings with Parish Councils, resident associations and individuals.
- 2.20 The current Licence to cultivate Section 142, can be seen as a barrier to communities and individuals and it is proposed that this is not promoted for the purpose of verge management but retained for the planting of shrubs outside an applicant's property. Details of this are contained in the source documents at the end of this report.

Weed treatment

- 2.21 A programme was introduced in 2019 to proactively identify the locations and treat invasive weeds such as Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed and Himalayan Balsam. Any weeds located on the public highway are inspected, risk assessed and then if required treated, this treatment will be twice a year for three years. Invasive Weed Identification workshops for the Highway Inspectors and Local Highway Officers are facilitated by the Biodiversity Team and the Highway Service Contractors supply chain and held every three years.

3. Alignment with corporate priorities

- 3.1 A good quality of life for everyone
The main objectives of the Council's verge management is to maintain and enhance the plant species in Cambridgeshire's verges whilst maintaining safety for road users. This approach will improve wildlife corridors across the county with particular improvement for pollinators such as bees. The proposed approach, which is in line with the national guidance, is intended to reduce the area of verge that is cut during each phase of the cutting programme.

Greater emphasis is based on safety with an increased frequency of cut at vision splays and bends. The Council will also work closely with the City Council, District Councils, Town

Councils and Parishes Councils to promote the Plantlife Good Verge Guide and these changes should benefit everyone.

- 3.2 Thriving places for people to live
Allowing for the growth of wildflowers will provide a more aesthetic environment for people travelling and using the countryside for leisure activities.
- 3.3 The best start for Cambridgeshire's children
There are no significant implications for this priority
- 3.4 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2050
There are no significant implications for this priority

4. Significant Implications

- 4.1 Resource Implications
Overall, the proposed approach is more resource intensive. Whilst the actual cutting of the grass and verges will be undertaken through the County Council's highway services contract, there is likely to be significant involvement required from Highways Officers at the front end, in terms of liaising with external partners, managing local community expectations and educating contractors on the new approach. At this stage it is not possible to quantify the amount of officer time over and above what is spent at present on verge maintenance, however it will be kept under review.
- 4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications
The County Council's highway services contract is the current mechanism for carrying out verge maintenance on public highway. Subject to the arrangements put in place with local Parishes and the desire for them to cut grass work will be required to ensure that appropriate agreements are in place.
- 4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications
There are no significant implications within this category. The biggest risk is associated with the cutting of vision splays and safety implications. However, the proposal recognises the importance of safety and the approach seeks to significantly mitigate the risks with cuts four times per year and flexibility to do more should the need arise.
- 4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.
- 4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications
The change in approach will need to be communicated and understood by local communities, particularly where responsibility rests with partners of the County Council. The Highways Service will work closely with Corporate Comms to develop some clear messaging on the new approach.
- 4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement
There are no significant implications within this category, other than ensuring local members are included in any communication that goes out to local communities.

4.7 Public Health Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.

Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance? Yes
Name of Financial Officer: Sarah Heywood

Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the LGSS Head of Procurement? Yes
Name of Officer: Gus de Silva

Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or LGSS Law? Yes
Name of Legal Officer: Fiona McMillan

Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your Service Contact?
Yes
Name of Officer: Elsa Evans

Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications? Yes
Name of Officer: Sarah Silk

Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes
Name of Officer: Richard Lumley

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health? No
Name of Officer:

Source documents

Plantlife. Good Verge Guide-Managing Grassland Road Verges: a best practice guide, technical guidance for Highway Authorities
https://www.plantlife.org.uk/application/files/3315/7063/5411/Managing_grassland_road_verges_Singles.pdf

Protected road verges
https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/PRV_list.pdf

https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/PRV_selection_criteria.pdf

Vision splay locations & vision splay specification
<\\ccc.cambridgeshire.gov.uk\data\Et Shared\8 Highways\Highways Maintenance\GRASS MAINTENANCE\GRASS CUTTING Verge and Village Maps\Visibility Splays Update drawings 2020\Junctions bends footway cut information>

[\\ccc.cambridgeshire.gov.uk\data\Et Shared\8 Highways\Highways Maintenance\GRASS MAINTENANCE\GRASS CUTTING Verge and Village Maps\VisiBends](https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/data/Et Shared/8 Highways/Highways Maintenance/GRASS MAINTENANCE/GRASS CUTTING Verge and Village Maps/VisiBends)

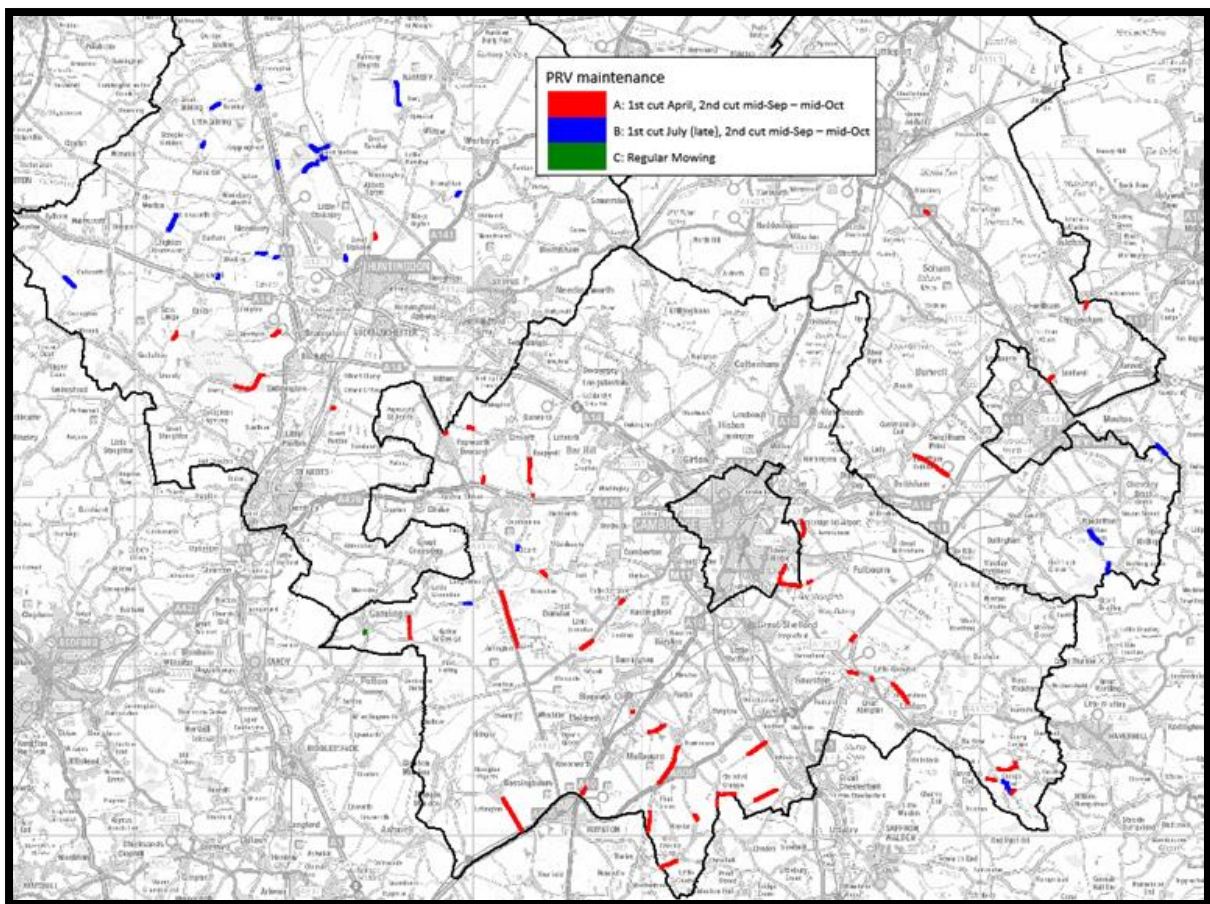
Highway Volunteer scheme

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/Community%20Highways%20Volunteering%20Scheme%20Information%20Pack%20-%20Cambridge%20City....pdf>

Licence to cultivate Section 142 Highway Act 1980

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1980/66/section/142>

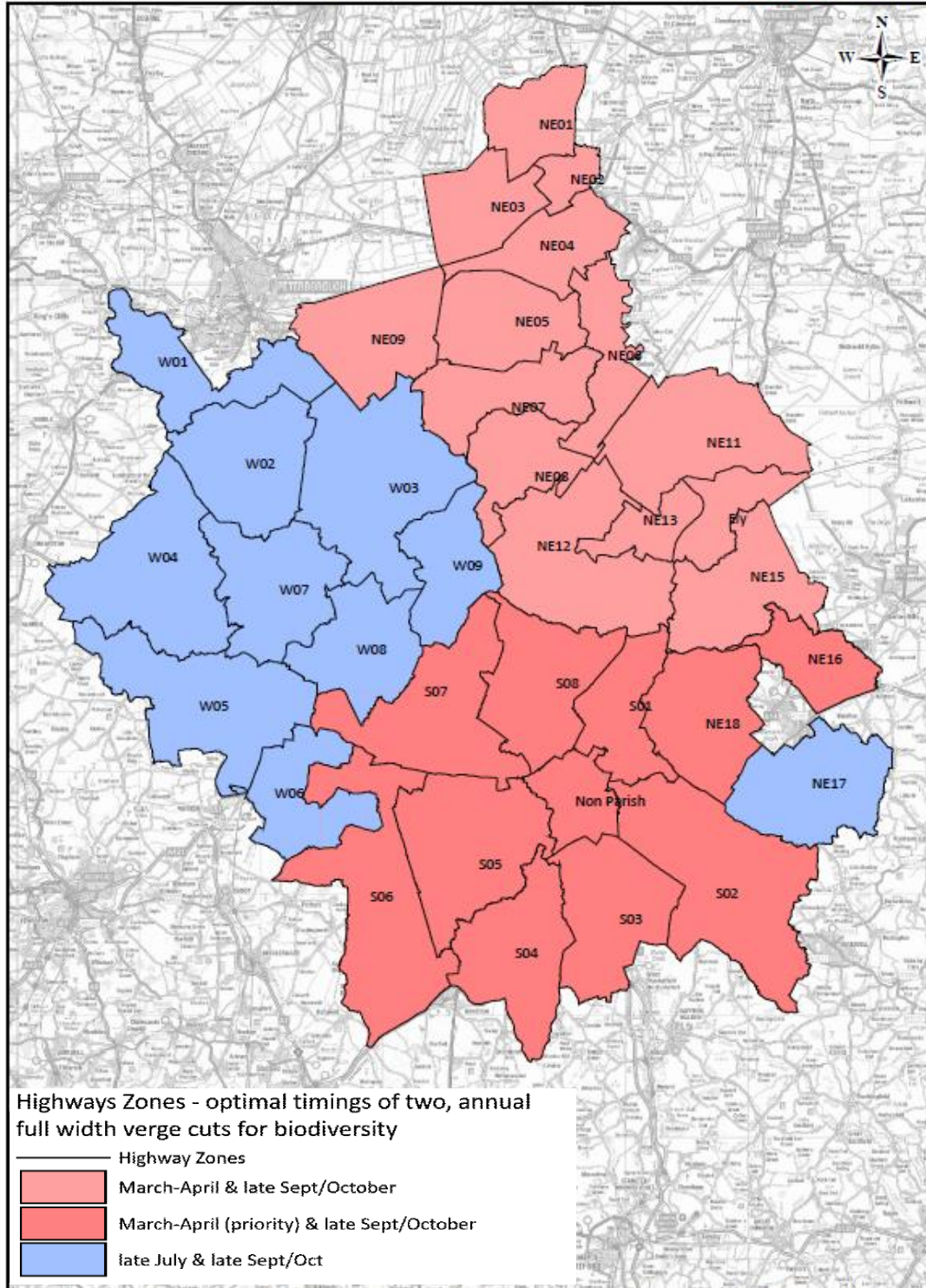
Appendix 1 - Location of Protected Road Verges in Cambridgeshire & prescribed grassland cuts



Shanklin, J. (2020). Cambridgeshire's Protected Road Verges. To be published in Nature in Cambridgeshire 2021 (draft available)

Appendix 2

Highways Zones - optimal timing of full width verge cuts for biodiversity



Scale (at A4): 1:310072 Centred at: 533099,266524 Date: 12/01/2021 © Crown copyright and database rights 2020 OS 100023205

Appendix 3 - List of who cuts verges on CCC behalf.

Abbots Ripton	Ely City	Longstanton	Thriplow
Alconbury	Farcet	Lt Abington	Tilbrook
Alconbury Weston	Fen Ditton	Lt Downham & Pymore	Toft
Alwalton	Fen Drayton	Lt Shelford	Water Newton
Ashley	Fenstanton	Lt Thetford	West Wrating
Balsham	Folksworth	Lt Wilbraham	Weston Colville
Bar Hill	Fordham	Manea	Whaddon
Barrington	Fowlmere	March & Westry	Whittlesford
Barton	Foxtton	Melbourn	Wicken & Upware
Bassingbourn	Fulbourn	Meldreth	Wimblington & Stonea
Benwick	Gamlingay	Mepal	Wimpole
Bluntisham	Girton	Milton	Wisbech St Mary
Bottisham	Grantchester	Newton	Wistow
Bourn	Graveley	Offord Cluny	Witchford
Brampton	Gt Shelford	Offord Darcy	Yaxley
Brinkley	Gt. Paxton	Old Hurst	
Brington & Molesworth	Gt Wilbraham	Pampisford	
Broughton	Guilden Morden	Parson Drove	
Buckden	Haddenham	Perry	
Buckworth	Hail Weston	Prickwillow	
Burwell	Harston	Rampton	
Caldecote	Hauxton	Sawston	
Cambourne	Hildersham	Sawtry	
Carlton	Hinxton	Shepreth	
Catworth	Histon	Snailwell	
Caxton	Holme	Soham	
Cheveley	Huntingdon DC	Somersham	
Chippenham	Ickleton	Spaldwick	
Chishill (Gt & Lt)	Impington	Stapleford	
Colne	Isleham	Steeple Morden	
Comberton	Kennett	Stilton	
Coton	Kimbolton & Stonely	St Neots Town Council	
Croxton	Kingston	Stow Cum Quy	
Doddington	Kirtling & Upend	Stow Longa	
Dry Drayton	Knapwell	Stukeleys	
Duxford	Landbeach	Sutton	
Earith	Leighton Bromswold	Swaffham Bulbeck	
Easton	Linton	Swaffham Prior	
ECDC	Littleport	Swavesey	
Elton Parish & Fotheringay	Litlington	Tadlow	
Elsworth	Lode & Longmeadow	Teversham	

