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FLOODING: DITCH CLEARANCE



Northamptonshire
County Council
Flood Toolkit

Ditches are a type of drainage system which collect rainfall from areas of land. Rainwater washes off the land, into a ditch, which then carries the water to lower ground or to a river. This helps to stop surface water flowing off areas of land and into people's property.

It is important that ditches are maintained so that they can continue to collect and carry rainwater to safe areas, helping to minimise flood risk.

Ditches and hedgerows are important habitats for wildlife, including protected species such as the water vole.

Ownership

It is important that you establish which ditches you own, and know how they should be looked after. You may be held liable for flooding if it is shown that water is not able to flow naturally through your ditches.

Many roads drain into ditches, but this does not mean they are owned by the Highway Authority. Usually the Highway Authority only maintain the road and footway next to the ditch.

Most ditches are the responsibility of the adjoining landowner for maintenance (riparian ownership). If your field or garden is next to a ditch you need to prepare a maintenance programme to determine when and how to clean and look after your ditch.

Some ditches flow into a pipe, or culvert, underneath a driveway for example. The section of pipe is still considered part of the ditch and is under the same ownership of the adjoining landowner.

Develop a Maintenance Programme

Most ditches will require annual maintenance. It is important to plan when and how you will do this. Aspects you need to consider include:

OPEN WATERCOURSE DITCHES - How much vegetation will you cut back?
When will you remove silt from the bottom of the ditch and how much?

PIPED OR CULVERTED SECTIONS - How often will you inspect them for signs of blockage or collapse? Will you need to employ a company with specialist inspection and blockage clearing equipment?

STRUCTURES (WALLS, GRILLES ETC.) - How often will you inspect and clear structures to ensure they continue to do their job?

Consider the Environment

It is important to consider any impact on wildlife when maintaining ditches. Try not to carry out this work during the breeding season of March to mid July.

The best time of year is late September/October, before heavy winter storms and when vegetation has naturally died back. It is better to carry out 'little and often' maintenance – this avoids having to carry out major destructive works which could completely strip a ditch of all vegetation.

Use appropriate tools which are less damaging to habitats - hand tools where possible. If heavy machinery is used to clear large stretches of ditch consider trimming alternate banks, or different sections of ditch each year, so there is always a healthy area to which the wildlife can move.

When mowing/trimming, try to leave a fringe of vegetation to maintain some habitat. Remove any cuttings to prevent blockages in the ditch.

De-silting

Try to maintain the original profile of the ditch when de-silting, so that the overall gradient and flow patterns are not changed. This avoids adding to flood risk upstream or downstream.

You must also consider impacts on wildlife. Silt that is dug out of the ditch should be left on top of the bank for a short time, to allow small organisms to migrate back into the ditch. The silt and associated vegetation should then be removed to prevent it washing back in or blocking the flow of water in the ditch.

Health & Safety

There are many risks associated with ditches including disease, falling into them and using machinery, amongst others. Landowners must assess their works to ensure they can be undertaken without putting themselves or others at any kind of risk. This assessment should be carried out on a case by case basis as all ditches are different.

Warning should be given to vehicle users when carrying out works to ditches next to roads. Appropriate signage and work practices should be employed, dependent on the location.

Legal Aspects

It is against the law to adversely affect species protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

If you wish to go beyond general maintenance and alter a ditch, or build within nine metres of it, you are likely to need permission from the relevant authority – more details on this are in leaflet 15 in this series on 'Riparian Responsibilities'.

Many farmers take part in Countryside Stewardship Schemes with rules for maintenance of watercourses, including ditches. If they do not follow the rules they may be penalised.

Further Information & Contacts

The booklet “Living on the Edge” contains information for riparian owners:
<http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/riverside-ownership-rights-and-responsibilities>

Further information on maintenance issues:

<http://www.gov.uk/river-maintenance-and-drainage-charges-farmers-and-landowners>

Northamptonshire County Council Guide “Riparian Ownership and Flood Risk”:

<https://www.floodtoolkit.com/guides/15-riparian-ownership-flood-risk/>

Northamptonshire County Council advice on consenting for works in or near watercourses:

<https://www.floodtoolkit.com/guides/16-flood-defence-consenting/>

Natural England and Association of Drainage Authorities’ report “The Drainage Channel Biodiversity Manual” provides detailed advice on protecting wildlife during maintenance:

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/81062>

This leaflet is an abridged version of Northamptonshire County Councils ‘Ditch Clearance Guidelines’:

http://www.floodtoolkit.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Ditch-Clearance-Guidelines_March2013.pdf



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