

DITCH THE PROBLEM

Help avoid flooding and care for the wildlife in your area!



West Sussex County Council is committed to reducing the risk of flooding across the county.



WHY ARE DITCHES IMPORTANT?

Water needs to flow along ditches – not meet barriers, debris, silt, blocked culverts or buildings. Watercourses are designed to drain surface water away, this helps prevent flooding that puts property, roads and land at risk.

Ditches are pieces of relic wetland and an important habitat for many birds, insects and water voles. They can be attractive natural areas along roadsides and field edges.

The cost of maintaining a watercourse is minor compared to the costs that can arise from flood damage, not to mention the distress and inconvenience caused by property flooding.

WHAT IS A WATERCOURSE?

Every river, stream, brook, ditch, drain, culvert, pipe and any other

passage through which water may flow. A watercourse can be either natural or man-made. Watercourses drain the land, prevent flooding and assist in supporting flora and fauna. Historically, watercourses have taken water runoff from buildings and roads, as well as fields and parks.

WHAT IS A MAIN RIVER?

Usually a larger stream or river. However, locally important smaller watercourses can be designated as Main Rivers.

These are managed by the Environment Agency. The responsibility for their maintenance and repair lies with the Riparian Owner, although the Environment Agency also has powers to maintain and improve them.

WHAT IS AN ORDINARY WATERCOURSE?

Any other river, stream, ditch and culvert not defined as Main River. The responsibility for maintenance of ordinary watercourses lies with anyone who owns land or property adjacent to a watercourse. This is known as Riparian Ownership

It may not always be possible to see a clear physical difference between watercourses designated as either Main River or Ordinary Watercourse. The responsibility for their maintenance and repair lies with the Riparian Owner.

WHAT IS A RIPARIAN OWNER?

A riparian owner is the person, or people, with watercourses on, next to or under their property. Riparian owners have the responsibility for maintenance of these watercourses. Riparian responsibilities usually lie with the person who owns the land or property.

WHAT IS A RIPARIAN OWNER RESPONSIBLE FOR?

- Ensuring water flows without obstruction, pollution or diversion that would affect the rights of others.

- Maintaining the banks and bed of the watercourse (including any trees and shrubs growing on the banks) and any flood defences that exist on it.
- Maintaining any approved structures on their stretch of the watercourse and keep them free of debris. These may include trash screens, culverts, weirs and mill gates.
- Not building new structures (for example a culvert, bridge or board walk) that encroach upon the watercourse, or alter the flow of water or prevent the free passage of fish without first obtaining permission from the Local Authority or Environment Agency.

WHAT ARE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LANDOWNERS?

Landowners have a responsibility to accept the natural flow of water across their land.

This water must not be diverted or obstructed in any way without the permission of the Environment Agency.

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HOW TO MANAGE DITCHES

Large debris can quickly block a ditch or culvert and during high rainfall this may cause flooding of properties or roads upstream.

The cutting down of vegetation on one side of the ditch annually will keep the ditch clear, leave stabilised banks, look attractive and encourage wildlife. Alternating this cut from one bank to another each year will encourage biodiversity especially if some sections are left untouched.

Looking after ditches means reducing the risk of flooding, encouraging diversity of vegetation and wildlife – it is important!



ROADSIDE DITCHES

There are 3 categories of roadside ditch:

- A ditch created by the Highway Authority and owned by them solely for draining the highway, which is the responsibility of the Highway Authority
- A ditch on the road side of fences and hedges taking land drainage as well as highway drainage, which is the responsibility of the Riparian Owner
- A ditch on the field side of a fence or hedge taking land drainage as well as highway drainage, which is a responsibility of the Riparian Owner

The Highway Authority has a right to drain the highway to adjoining roadside ditches. Rural roads rely to a great extent on ditches to remove water and their effectiveness is vital to keeping them in good condition. Common Law imposes a duty on the owner of land adjoining a highway to maintain these ditches that provide natural drainage for both the land and highway. In the majority of cases the responsibility for ditch maintenance rests with the adjacent landowner.

IF YOU NEED MORE ADVICE PLEASE CONTACT

West Sussex County Council | Lead local flood authority
www.westsussex.gov.uk/ditchtheproblem

Environment Agency (EA) | Responsible for the management of main rivers
www.gov.uk/guidance/owning-a-watercourse