

Hedge Restoration Survey

Introduction

The Devon Hedge group is concerned that the level of hedge restoration being conducted throughout Devon is declining as a direct result of changes in agri-environmental schemes. To establish whether there is evidence to support or disclaim this theory, a survey has been conducted. This work has been undertaken by Devon County Councils Countryside Team on behalf of the Devon Hedge Group.

The objectives of this survey were:

- To establish whether there have been changes in the amount of hedge restoration work being conducted throughout Devon.
- To establish possible causes for changes in hedge restoration
- To establish what proportion of restoration work was being conducted in support of an Agri-environmental scheme.

Methodology

A list of 60 contractors within Devon offering hedge restoration services including laying/steeping, planting, fencing and coppicing was provided for this survey by Natural England and FWAG. The contractors included were subsequently sent a short questionnaire which can be seen in Appendix 1.

As practitioners of traditional management techniques, contractors were targeted for this survey due to their regular contact with Devon's hedges and subsequent informed opinion of their condition. Additionally, they could establish whether the level or type of work which they had been conducting has changed in recent years.

Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, a number of agencies including members of Devon Hedge Group, Natural England, FWAG, and Exmoor National Park Authority were consulted on its content to ensure the survey was not only as useful as possible but to enable alternative interest groups to put forward suggestions on ways in which it could be improved. A number of amendments were made to the questionnaire as a result of this process.

The response rate was reasonable. Eight were returned to sender due to the destination address no longer existing. This narrowed down the recipients to 52, of which 15 replied (29%). The majority of the participants included some valuable additional comments to reinforce the answers given for the questions.

The questionnaire results were subsequently tabulated to enable an analysis of whether there are particular trends or patterns present within Hedge restoration in Devon.

Surveys Findings

Range of hedge services offered

The results show that there are a wide range of hedge services offered throughout Devon. The most widely offered service was hedge bank restoration followed by hedge laying, coppicing and fencing and finally hedge planting. Dry stone walling was also highlighted as a service offered by a number of contractors. A number of additional services that were not listed in the question were also put forward. These

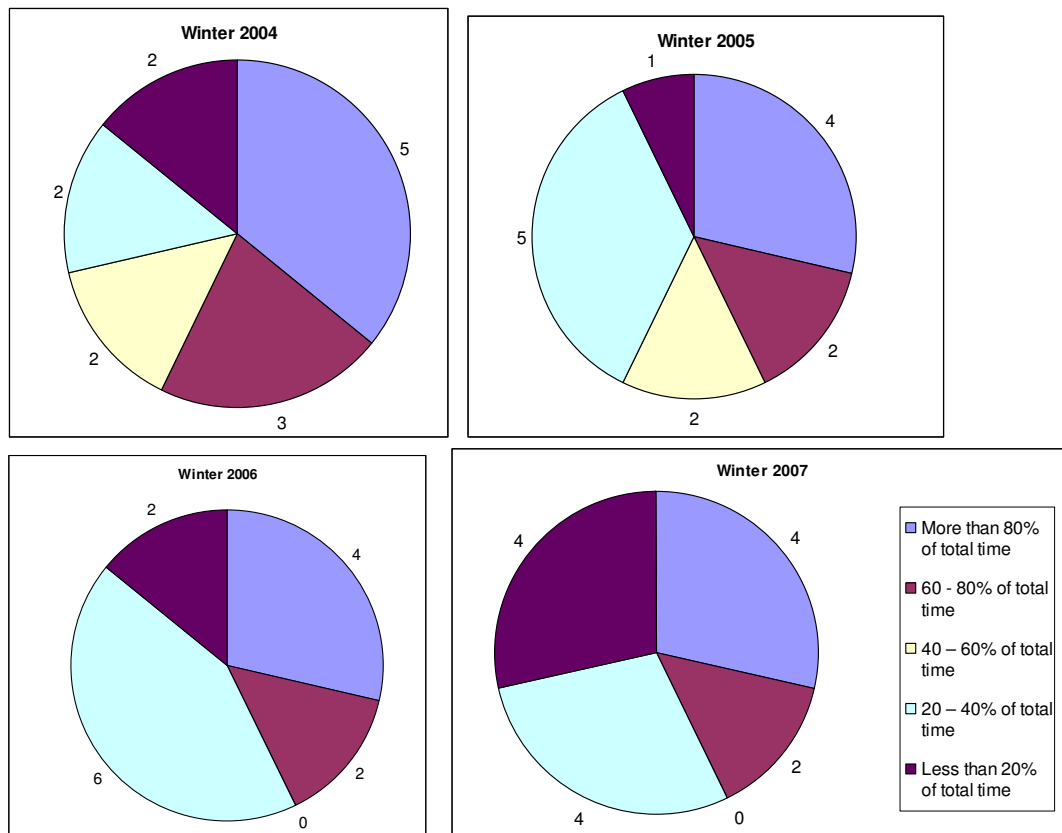
included construction and repair of stone hedge banks, building new hedges, and hedge and bank maintenance on public rights of way.

Although this was a somewhat introductory question, it has provided evidence to support that there are a number of services available for hedges in Devon and therefore any changes in the condition of Devon's hedges cannot be placed upon their being a skill shortage within the county.

Level of Hedge restoration completed

Question 2 requested contractors to indicate the amount of time they dedicated to completing hedge restoration over the previous 4 winters. The aim of this question was to establish whether the amount of work has declined in recent years following the introduction of new criteria under the environmental stewardship schemes.

The four graphs below display the changing proportions of time spent conducting hedge restoration by hedge contractors over the previous four winters. The numbers located within the charts indicate the number of contractors within each category. 14 of the 15 respondents answered this question.

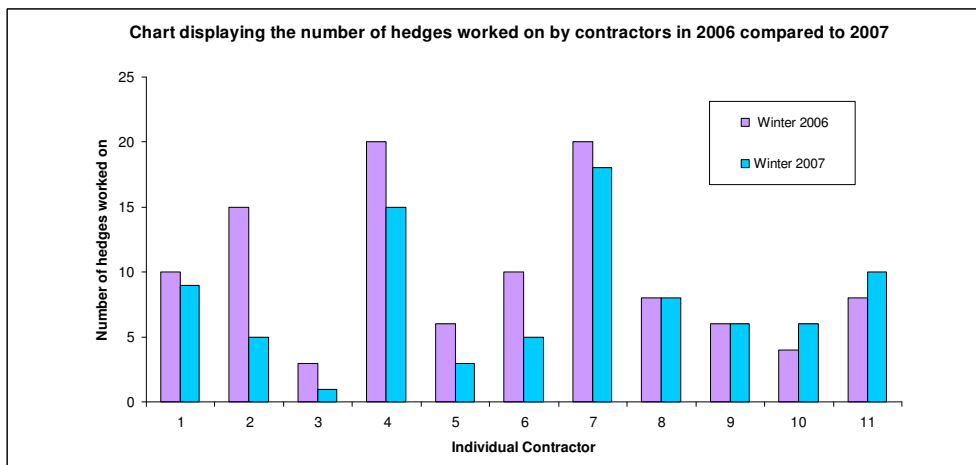


% of total time spent conducting hedge restoration	Number of respondents				Direction of change
	Winter 2004	Winter 2005	Winter 2006	Winter 2007	
More than 80% of total time	5	4	4	4	-1
60 - 80% of total time	3	2	2	2	-1
40 – 60% of total time	2	2	0	0	-2
20 – 40% of total time	2	5	6	4	2
Less than 20% of total time	2	1	2	4	2

In summary, the table and graphs indicate that there has been a decline amongst the highest three categories coupled with a sustained growth in the lowest two categories. This clearly suggests that contractor's time is being shifted away from hedge restoration work and highlights the concern that less and less time is being spent on Devon's hedges each year.

The total number of hedges worked on during the previous two winters

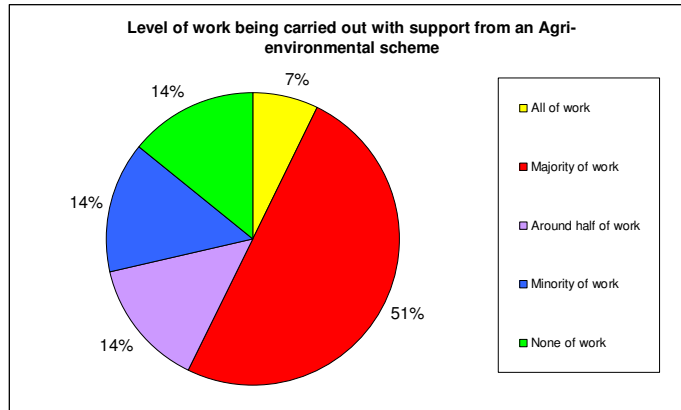
7 of 11 contractors who responded to this question indicated that they had experienced a decline in the number of hedges worked on during the previous two winters, this is indicated in the graph below. Two contractors reported a growth in the number of hedges worked on and two contractors experienced no change.



This indicates that in addition to the declining amount of *time* being spent on hedge restoration (as evidenced in question 2), the *number of hedges* undergoing restoration work is also falling through out Devon.

Level of hedge restoration conducted with support from agri-environmental schemes

Participants were asked to indicate the proportion of restoration work being undertaken by their company which was in support of an environmental scheme. This would establish the extent, to which farmers are paying for the work themselves from an alternative source of income. The pie chart below displays the breakdown of responses;



58% of contractors indicated that either “all of work” or “the majority of work” was being conducted in support of an agri-environmental scheme. When this figure incorporates the “around half” responses (or between 40-100% of work) the figure rises to 72%.

This indicates that currently, only a minority of the restoration work being conducted is *not* in association with a scheme. This suggests that if the landowner or tenant is not in a scheme in which they can gain funding for hedge restoration work, it is less likely to be undertaken. Although currently, the level of work in association with an environmental scheme is high, a number of contractors stated how the level of work conducted in support of agri-environmental schemes is falling. “The amount of work mainly hedge laying booked for next year 2008/2009 has halved mainly because of ESA and Countryside Stewardship schemes coming to an end,” *Yarcombe based contractor*.

General management condition of hedges within Devon

It is widely acknowledged that the general management condition of hedges throughout Devon is declining due to falling levels of maintenance; this belief has been firmly confirmed by the majority of questionnaire responses who offered a number of reasons as to why this was the case. A full list of the comments can be viewed in Appendix 2.

A large proportion of the participants discussed how the quality of work has declined due to a higher number of farmers and land owners, who do not use traditional techniques, conducting the work themselves. Just a few of the comments included;

- “We have found that the quality of work on Hedgerows etc has dropped considerably recently as more people get involved.” (*Chillaton based contractor*).
- “Far too many hedges are being cut off and not traditionally hedge laid” (*Bridstowe based contractor*).
- “Less landowners are employing contractors and doing the work themselves as grants either finished expired or non existent. Farmers have no encouragement from government/Defra for funding.” *Branscombe based contractor*

It was suggested that this may be a direct result of the falling level of funding available to land owners for hedge restoration, leaving land owners no option but to do the work themselves.

The lack of funding available for hedge restoration was a reoccurring theme throughout the responses to this question, indicating that low levels of funding were having a direct impact upon the general condition of hedges throughout Devon;

- “Farmers have no encouragement from government/Defra for funding”
Branscombe based contractor
- “Hedgerows have improved but when grant aid has finished most farmers let the hedges go back” *Dartmoor based contractor*
- “Lack of funding has led to poor quality of work being done by unskilled or inexperienced contractors.” *Princetown based Contractor*

It was also highlighted how the work being carried out is at a greater speed;

- “The push for speed against costing is creating hedges which are now in my opinion just Devon Banks...Fuel costs have escalated and the emphasis is now on speed rather than a true traditional standard” (Bridstowe based contractor).

The increased element of speed appears to have come as a result increasing costs for the contractor, and a decrease in the price farmers are willing to pay for the work to be conducted;

- “The reluctance (in stewardship) of the landowner to pay a fair rate (let alone go above the grants awarded) these days has to be questioned,” (Bridstowe based contractor).

These factors combined are undoubtedly contributing to the falling management condition of Devon’s hedges.

Despite a couple of positive points being put forward, the overall consensus conveyed through the responses suggested that the general management condition of hedges within Devon has changed for the worse in the last 3 years.

Factors which have had an impact upon hedge restoration

Question 5 requested participants to indicate *up to* three main factors from a list of eight which they believed were influencing the amount of hedge restoration work that they were carrying out. In addition to the eight options, the participant also had the option to include an ‘other’ factor which was not listed.

A range of factors were presented to ensure that the question was not leading to one particular answer and subsequently reducing the reliability of the findings. The aim of this question was to establish whether there is a correlation between the level of restoration work and changes within the agri-environmental schemes available.

Factor	Tally			
	1st	2nd	3rd	total
Land owner/farmer completing the work themselves	0	1	1	2
Changes in your business priorities	1	1	1	3
Changing land owner / farmer priorities	1	2	1	4
Increased competition from other contractors.	1	1	1	3
Changes in funding available for hedge restoration through agri-environment schemes	7	1	0	8
Changes in legal obligations under Cross Compliance	2	1	0	3
Concerns over the restoration works impact upon wildlife	0	2	1	3
Increasing labour costs	0	2	5	7
Other (Please state)	0	0	0	0

As the table above displays, the results were reasonably spread over the possible responses with two key influencing factors being mentioned to a greater extent than the others. 7 of the 12 contractors which responded to this question selected “Changes in funding available for hedge restoration through agri-environment schemes” as the factor having the strongest influence upon the amount of hedge restoration being undertaken.

This finding displays that there is a belief amongst hedge contractors that the level of funding available through Agri-environmental schemes is having a direct impact upon the level of work that their companies are carrying out and subsequently an effect upon the condition of hedges throughout Devon. One contractor went on to comment;

“I feel farmers do less because there are fewer grants available that are specifically for hedge management (especially laying). This past season is the first out of ten year’s experience where none of the work I undertook was grant aided.” South Brent based contractor

Increasing labour costs were mentioned on 7 occasions, once again indicating how restoration services are becoming increasingly unaffordable for landowners without the support of an agri-environmental scheme.

Additional comments made by participants

The questionnaire responses included a number of valuable additional comments which have provided an insight into the general feeling amongst contractors of the issues and challenges hedge restoration work faces. A full list of the additional comments offered by respondents can be viewed in Appendix 3. As within the responses to the general management condition of hedges, most contractors used this space to express their concern for the continued management of hedges.

There is clear concern of the poor standard of some work being carried in order to cut costs.

- “As a long established business producing top quality standard of work we are unable to compete on price.” *Chillaton based contractor*
- “There is some very poor hedge work going on, and there are some other contractors who use machines to clear scrub who have very little regard for how they achieve their goal.” *Dartmoor based contractor*
- “Many new contractors taking work away and making a very bad job, most don’t know what or how to do hedge work.

The availability of funding available through agri-environmental schemes was also mentioned on numerous occasions;

- “The amount of work (mainly hedge laying) booked for next year 2008/2009 has halved mainly because of ESA and Countryside Stewardship schemes coming to an end.”
- “In the last 3 years there have been significantly less on stewardship schemes. Far more private individuals/ Estates.” *Bridstowe based contractor*
- “I feel farmers do less because there are fewer grants available that are specifically for hedge management (especially laying). *South Brent based contractor*

Additional Evidence

During a Blackdown AONB partnership meeting on July 2nd, concern was expressed by a representative from the farming community at how currently there are virtually no hedge restoration work or farm conservation plans linked to ESA or HLS agreements in the Blackdown Hills. The information in the tables below reinforces this claim.

Blackdown Hills ESA	Year	Number of Agreements	Length of Hedge (m)
Hedge Laying	2005	16	6,236.00
	2007	15	5,602.00
Hedge Coppicing	2005	3	13,950.00
	2007	3	68.50
Hedge Planting	2005	7	434.00
	2007	5	136.50
Bank Restoration	2005	7	704.50
	2007	5	1,270.50
Hedge Laying Supplement	2005	19	2,177.50
	2007	17	2,090.50

Dartmoor ESA	Year	Number of Agreements	Length of Hedge (m)
Hedge Laying	2005	78	15,437.50
	2007	39	4,926.75
Hedge Coppicing	2005	71	13,465.50
	2007	37	5,351.25
Hedge Planting	2005	73	13,641.50
	2007	31	2,495.00
Bank Restoration	2005	111	34,081.25
	2007	63	8,533.75

Exmoor ESA	Year	Number of Agreements	Length of Hedge (m)
Hedge Laying	2005	24	15,927.50
	2007	35	23,299.50
Hedge Coppicing	2005	No Figures	No Figures
	2007	No Figures	No Figures
Hedge Planting	2005	8	2,219
	2007	7	651.25
Bank Restoration	2005	3	749
	2007	1	25
Hedge Laying Supplement	2005	6	4907.75
	2007	6	4907.75

Source: Natural England 2008

All three areas have experienced a significant fall in not only the number of agreements to include hedge restoration work but perhaps more worryingly a dramatic fall in the length of hedge which the agreements cover.

Furthermore, the recently published Devon Hedgerow Survey Project which was conducted by The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group Ltd (FWAG) found that only 1.5% of the 733 hedges surveyed in the study had received a traditional form of management in the last 2 years, reinforcing the findings from the survey amongst the contractors. Furthermore, the FWAG study links this finding to “the fall in availability of grants for traditional hedgerow management for farmers and landowners”. The study goes on to state:

“Many holdings in the survey area are currently not in a position to apply for HLS (Higher Level Stewardship) which is the only form of grant funding (outside of local area projects). It was noted during the survey process that many farmers who have finished CSS (Countryside Stewardship Scheme) or ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area) agreement would like to continue laying their hedges but are unable to as they will not qualify for HLS. The cost of traditional management is seen as too great without some form of grant funding.”

Furthermore, the FWAG survey found that 31% of surveyed hedges would benefit would benefit from coppicing/laying by reducing gappiness and restoring growth at the base of the hedge and 35% of hedges would benefit from changes in flail practice by increasing the overall size of the hedge.

One of the key points to take forward noted on page 25 of the FWAG study was that the majority of the hedges surveyed were in an unfavourable condition. Only 19% of the hedges were classed as being in a ‘favourable condition’ and ‘size’ and ‘base of canopy’ have been significant contributors to this poor condition.

The FWAG evidence is significant in supporting the findings revealed from the contractor’s questionnaire and reinforces the message that hedges are in a vulnerable condition which needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

It is estimated that there are 53,000 km (33,000 miles) of hedges in the county of Devon reflecting its large size, its pastoral landscape and the favourable management and agricultural systems adopted by local farmers. The findings evidenced from this and other surveys have raised a number of issues which need to be addressed to ensure the continued maintenance and enhancement of hedges throughout Devon.

Firstly, the contractor's survey has provided evidence to support the claim that the level of hedge restoration work throughout Devon is falling. This was confirmed by not only the declining amount of *total time* spent by contractors completing restoration work evidenced in question 2, but also the declining *number of individual hedges* being worked on each year as indicated in question 3. These questions provided comparable statistics across the years; this quantitative data was reinforced by the qualitative answers from question 4, relating to the general management condition of hedges, in which the general consensus put across was that the condition of hedges and indeed the standard of work being carried out is falling as a result of shortages of funding. If this trend is to continue over forthcoming winters, the condition of hedges throughout Devon is likely to fall even further into disrepair and this is an outcome which must be avoided.

Secondly, for restoration work to remain affordable for farmers and land owners, more funding must be made available, ideally through environmental schemes. The study has indicated that only a minority of the work currently being undertaken is not in support of a scheme suggesting that if the farmer is not in a scheme, the work required is unlikely to be undertaken. As ESA agreements come to an end, contractors expect this trend is to increase. The argument put forward is that if the financial support is not available, the much needed work will not be done. This argument is supported in the additional comments put forward by contractors

- "I feel farmers do less because there are fewer grants available that are specifically for hedge management (especially laying). This past season is the first out of ten year's experience where none of the work I undertook was grant aided." *South Brent based contractor*
- "In the last 3 years there have been significantly less on stewardship schemes." *Bridstowe based contractor*
- "The amount of work mainly hedge laying booked for next year 2008/2009 has halved mainly because of ESA and Countryside Stewardship schemes coming to an end," *Yarcombe based contractor*

To ensure that this does not have a dramatic long term impact upon the condition of hedges, this issue must be resolved.

In addition to the above, it is clear from the responses to question six that the two factors having the strongest influence upon the level of hedge restoration work include changes to funding available through agri-environmental schemes and increasing labour costs. This very much links in with other findings revealed by the survey.

In conclusion, Devon's hedges are a valuable asset which must be preserved. Not only do they have a functional use for the biodiversity that feeds from and inhabits them, but they play an important role in characterising the visual landscape within Devon. To ensure their protection and enhancement in the future, a stronger focus must be placed on ensuring finances are available to complete the much needed and beneficial restoration work.

APPENDIX 1
Questionnaire for Hedge Contractors in Devon

Name of Business (Optional):

Name (Optional):

1. Please indicate the range of hedge restoration services you offer (Please tick more than one if relevant)

Service	Please Tick
Hedge Laying	
Coppicing	
Hedge Planting	
Fencing	
Hedge Bank restoration	
Other (Please state)	

2. Please indicate in the table below the estimated proportion of overall time that you/your company have spent carrying out hedge restoration during the previous four winters.

Percentage of overall time conducting Hedge Restoration	Winter 2004	Winter 2005	Winter 2006	Winter 2007

More than 80% of time				
60 - 80% of time				
40 – 60% of time				
20 – 40% of time				
Less than 20% of time				

3. Please quantify the number of hedgerows you completed work on in the winter of 2006 and 2007? This can be an exact or approximate number.

	Number of Hedgerows	Please tick if Approximate or exact number	
Winter 2006		Approx	
Winter 2007		Exact	

4. Do you feel the general management condition of hedges within Devon has changed in the last 3 years? If yes, please explain how you feel they have changed?

5. What proportion of the hedge restoration work that you / your company are completing would you estimate is being undertaken in accordance with / support of an agri-environment scheme agreement? (These schemes include Entry level stewardship (ELS), higher level Stewardship (HLS), Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS), Environmentally Sensitive Area's (ESA's) and Countryside Stewardship (CS).

	Please tick
All of work (i.e. 100%)	
Majority of work (i.e. more than 55%)	
Around Half of the work (i.e. between 45 - 55%)	
Minority of work (i.e. less than 45%)	
None of work (i.e. 0%)	

6. Please indicate the main factors that you feel have had an impact upon the amount of hedge restoration you / your company has undertaken? (Please choose up to 3 factors, 1st having the strongest influence)

Factor	1st	2nd	3rd
Land owner/farmer completing the work themselves			
Changes in your business priorities			
Changing land owner / farmer priorities			
Increased competition from other contractors.			
Changes in funding available for hedge restoration through agri-environmental schemes			
Changes in legal obligations under Cross Compliance			

Concern over the restoration works impact upon wildlife			
Increasing labour costs			
Other (Please state)			

7. If you have any other comments you would like to make about hedge restoration, please feel free to do so on the space provided below.

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

APPENDIX 2

Responses from Question 4 of Hedge Survey Questionnaire

Do you feel the general management condition of hedges within Devon has changed in the last 3 years? If yes please explain how you feel they have changed.

- “Farmers are reducing the amount of management, except for flailing, but small landowners are becoming more aware of hedge management issues – over the years the amount of work I do for farmers is reducing, the amount for people with 1 or 2 fields is increasing.” *South Brent based contractor*
- “There is an increase in Hedge Management within our area (Dartmoor National Park)” *Dartmoor based contractor*
- “Some have been restored really well – others are being allowed to deteriorate by lack of fencing for animals.”
- “Far too many hedges are being cut off and not traditionally hedge laid i.e. Both sides and top creating width, stock proofing and wildlife habitats. The push for speed against costings is creating hedges which are now in my opinion just Devon Banks. Couple this with poor workmanship and the hedge slips out the first shower of rain. Also, constant hedge trimming just ringbanks a hedge.” *Bridstowe based contractor*
- “Less work available as Agri schemes come to an end or cease. Lack of funding has led to poor quality of work being done by unskilled or inexperienced contractors.” *Princetown based Contractor*

- “Less landowners employing contractors and doing the work themselves as grants either finished expired or non existent and landowners. Farmers have no encouragement from government/Defra for funding. If we are supposed to be encouraged to be environmentally aware – These issues need to be strongly stressed to Defra.” *Branscombe based contractor*
- “Trimming alternate years is leaving hedges gappy in the bottom and less dense for small birds. Nesting sites in the years they are cut allowing magpies and hauner harriers to eggs and fledglings”
- “Hedgerows have improved but when grant aid has finished most farmers let the hedges go back. There is nothing to encourage them to keep them up and also the grant on some, as in fencing, doesn’t even cover the cost of materials”. *Dartmoor based contractor*
- “More hedges are now being fenced rather than layed. Some hedges have deteriorated because money has been targeted the wrong way”

APPENDIX 3

Additional comments offered from questionnaire responses

- “I feel farmers do less because there are fewer grants available that are specifically for hedge management (especially laying). This past season is the first out of ten year’s experience where none of the work I undertook was grant aided.” *South Brent based contractor*
- “It is a pity that livestock i.e. cows that have to walk on the highway are allowed to rub away at the hedges and they fall down,”
- “We have found that the quality of work on Hedgerows etc has dropped considerably recently as more people get involved (i.e. one bush laid every 20 metres!) As a long established business producing top quality standard of work we are unable to compete on price.” *Chillaton based contractor*
- “In the last 3 years there have been significantly less on stewardship schemes. Far more private individuals/ Estates.”
 “There is always a huge sense of achievement on completing a laid section of hedge. Traditional practices handed down leave behind a hedge that is a legacy for future generations. There cannot be enough importance placed upon Devon Hedges. Its wildlife, flowers and trees would be worse off without them. The work is very physical and often the reluctance (in stewardship) of the landowner to pay a fair rate (let alone go above the grants awarded) these days has to be questioned. Fuel costs have escalated and the emphasis is now on speed rather than a true traditional standard. But I will continue the work and educate those who have no idea what it is we do!”
Bridstowe based contractor

- “I am currently working on hedge reinstatement following Langage gas pipeline through the South Hams. I was shocked at the quality of work being passed as acceptable. Presumably D.C.C grants planning permission so should have an overseeing role in the reinstatement occurring throughout Devon. I am also surprised at the amount of reinstatement occurring throughout Devon due to utility and civil engineering projects. Should this be monitored more closely to ensure skilled reinstatement of Hedgerows?”
Princetown based contractor
- “On several sites I have been required to lay hedges that would, in my opinion have been better coppiced. My concern is that in every case this has been at the insistence of the field officer involved rather than the client” *Anon*
- “Many new contractors taking work away and making a very bad job, most don’t know what or how to do hedge work, some fencing is dreadful and should never have grant aid.”
“There is some very poor hedge work going on, and there are some other contractors who use machines to clear scrub who have very little regard for how they achieve their goal.” *Dartmoor based contractor*
- “The amount of work mainly hedge laying booked for next year 2008/2009 has halved mainly because of ESA and Countryside Stewardship schemes coming to an end. More targeting of money towards hedge laying and bank restoration instead of fencing and cutting every three years would save Defra money and hedge condition in the long run.” *Yarcombe based contractor*