

Report to	Scrutiny Committee for Economy, Transport and Environment
Date	11 June 2014
Report By	Director of Communities, Economy and Transport
Title of Report	Scrutiny Review for Revised Grass Cutting Programme for Rural Areas.
Purpose of Report	To advise Scrutiny Committee on the County Council's grass cutting programme.

RECOMMENDATION: The Scrutiny Committee is recommended to consider the impact of reducing grass verge cutting in rural areas.

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 The current County Council budget (excluding Eastbourne & Hastings) for cutting 'Highway' grass is £622,386. The breakdown is detailed below:

Area	Cost (£)
Urban Cutting (5 Cuts)	£226,122
Cutting twittens	£ 11,915
General Swathe Cutting (2 Cuts)	£105,304
Visibility Cutting (2 Cuts)	£ 86,800
Full Cut back to boundary of A/B Roads	£ 28,284
Cycleways	£ 10,000
Weed Spraying/Pulling	£ 75,819
Hedge Cutting	£ 14,428
A22 Traffic Management (2 Cuts)	£ 24,000
Ancillary Cutting	£ 35,000
Total	£622,386

1.2 The current grass cutting budget allows for five cuts to urban areas of the County and two cuts to rural areas. Included within these cuts are associated activities such as strimming, and a full cut back to the boundary on all A and B class roads to stop the establishment of vegetation.

1.3 The opportunity for savings from rural grass verge cutting is limited and short-term; halving the general swathe cutting in rural areas, may save £52,652 or removing this entirely would save £105,304. However this would create longer-term maintenance problems associated with other more vulnerable assets such as drainage ditches, grips and gullies and lead to erosion of carriageway edges in the absence of kerbing.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 The 2005 "Well-maintained Highways" Code of Practice states that there is no statutory requirement to cut grass verges alongside the public highway. Instead local standards have been developed (and reduced) over time to ensure safety, serviceability and sustainability needs.

2.2 In general the County Council cuts grass verges for safety reasons; to maintain visibility particularly at junctions and roundabouts; prevent grass overhanging roads and pavements; stop road signs becoming obscured; and to reduce the risk of vegetation taking hold.

2.3 The management of grass attracts a large volume of correspondence and a wealth of differing opinion from members of the public. In 2013, for instance, the Highway Contact Centre dealt with over 3000 grass cutting enquiries at a cost of over £13,500. Whilst this service is not a mandatory one, there is a public expectation that it should be carried out, and to a high standard.

2.4 The maintenance benefits associated with grass cutting should not be underestimated; keeping grass and weed growth under control within the highway boundary is significant and supports the long term asset managed approach. Grass and weeds left unattended for long periods, cause damage to footpaths, drainage ditches, gullies/grips and kerb-line channels. This leads to longer term, higher cost maintenance and increases the risk of claims being made against the Authority.

3. Comments/Appraisal

3.1 The Highways Asset Management team are currently in the process of mapping the county's 'highway' grass which will enable the service be further refined through better use of specific grass cutting programmes.

3.2 Were the service to revise the rural grass cutting programme (where there are no safety requirements), the immediate financial savings are mostly associated with traffic management costs, rather than in the maintenance activity itself.

3.3 However, it is anticipated that reducing grass cutting activities further would have the following impacts:

- reputational damage of the County Council;
- additional costs as a result of handling an increase in customer complaints and enquiries
- higher costs associated with the removal of additional vegetation (such as brambles and saplings)
- increase in ad-hoc and programmed cyclic maintenance to ensure all drainage ditches, gullies/grips and kerb-line channels are not adversely affected by vegetation growth
- cost of potential liability claims accidents from paths and carriageways obstructed by vegetation

4. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendation

4.1 Although there is no statutory obligation for the County Council to cut grass verges we are required to maintain our roads to a safe and serviceable condition. Whilst there may appear to be an opportunity small savings through a further reduction in rural grass cutting, where safety is not an issue, there are risks to abandoning this completely. It is highly likely that any savings would be offset through the cost of increased customer contact and a disproportionate increase in associated maintenance liabilities.

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None