

WRITTEN QUESTIONS PURSUANT TO STANDING ORDER 44

1. Question by Councillor Lambert to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

The government recently announced a £2.7 million fund for tree planting in local authorities in England and Wales. This will be welcomed by many people, including those in urban areas like Seaford where numbers of streets are now a wasteland of felled and untidy tree stumps.

However, it also raises the following questions:

1. How much of the fund will East Sussex County Council receive?
2. What criteria will the County Council use to decide where the trees can be planted and how the money will be spent?
3. Does the fund cover work to remove existing tree stumps in urban areas to enable new trees to be planted and the surrounding infrastructure to be made good?
4. If not, how much does it cost to remove stumps and to make good?
5. What plans does the County Council have to restore trees to our urban areas where residents are asking for this?

Answer by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

1. ESCC has submitted a bid to the Local Authority Treescapes Fund, which is a competitive fund. The maximum bid that could be submitted was for £300,000.
2. ESCC's proposal is to remove as many stumps in Seaford as possible and to replant. The limiting factor has been the amount of grant that can be applied for.
3. It does, although the cost of removing stumps and making good reduces the value for money, in terms of the number of new trees that will be planted, so may not score well compared with bids from other local authorities.
4. The cost varies by location, depending on whether the tree stump is in the verge or in the pavement. Costs can vary from less than £1,000 to over £5,000
5. The authority does not have currently have a budget set aside for the restoration of urban trees. We are aware of local volunteer groups who are dedicated to increasing the number of trees in their community, and we will support their endeavours where possible

2. Question by Councillor Lambert to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

Potholes are a continuing source of dissatisfaction and complaints from residents all over the county. Central government tells us they have provided additional funding to local authorities to repair potholes and the Lead Member asserted at the County Council meeting on 23rd March that the state of roads in East Sussex has improved over the last five years. She further told us that the vast majority of potholes are repaired satisfactorily and very few have to be repaired again.

Can the Lead Member tell the Council:

1. How many potholes were reported for repair in the last financial year?
2. How many potholes met the County Council's criteria for repair?
3. How many potholes did not meet the criteria for repair?
4. How many potholes had to be repaired again?
5. How much would it have cost to repair all the potholes that were reported in the last financial year as compared with the County Council's budget?

Answer by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

1. In the last financial year 18,798 carriageway potholes that met the Council's intervention criteria were repaired. This included those reported by the public as well as those identified by our Highway Stewards during their inspections of the road network.
2. Of the 10,000 potholes reported by the public in the last financial year, approximately 3,000 did not meet the Council's criteria for repair.
3. All pothole repairs are photographed and from our review of this we believe that approximately 15% of potholes have to be repaired again within the two-year guarantee period. Whilst this number may sound high, officers are working with our contractor to reduce this number. But with some of the wettest winters on record in recent years it is not uncommon for repairs to fail in these conditions. It should be noted that all remedial repairs are recorded and the Council does not pay for repeated repairs.
4. The Council pays a fixed price of £1.5m per year for the repair all safety defects including potholes. Whilst it is difficult to assess the cost of repairing all potholes, regardless of intervention criteria, the Stewards do identify those areas of carriageway that do not meet intervention criteria but that would warrant a patch repair, these are valued at around £4m with an annual programme of repairs of around £500k. However, it should be noted that by far the most cost-effective form of maintenance is planned preventative maintenance and the Council currently invests around £15m a year patching and resurfacing roads which is the best way to prevent potholes forming.

3. Question by Councillor Lambert to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

Residents across the county are concerned about biodiversity and the use of chemical weedkillers including glyphosate. They report use of glyphosate to spray gutters and verges which affects biodiversity as well as impacting on people and domestic pets. Additionally, verges have been mown during May and early June badly affecting wild orchids and other wildflowers. The best time to mow is from July onwards when some seed has set for the following year and insect and bird life has benefited.

Why is East Sussex County Council continuing to use glyphosate? What steps will the County Council take to amend their policies on both the use of chemical weedkillers and the mowing timetable?

Answer by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

Regarding the use of Glyphosate, we carry out one weed spray per year in a controlled manner on channels and footways, limited to only where weeds are found. The product used by our contractor is 95% water mixed with 5% Glyphosate Gallup Bio. Amenity and a small amount of adjuvant of Green Gold oil (which helps the product adhere to the weeds and minimise over spray).

The product is applied by either backpack and hand lance or quad bike and lance along channels and footways. The product is only sprayed where there are weeds. The operatives have over 20 years experience delivering this service, they do not spray in windy conditions or when raining.

The following link includes a paper on subject, in which we consider possible alternatives.

[LMTE 28 September 2020 Use of Glyphosate.pdf \(eastsussex.gov.uk\)](#)

We are currently reviewing the process and looking at possible alternatives to weed control, along with our neighbouring Councils and those within East Sussex, and we in discussion with colleagues at other authorities. At present a possible alternative at a similar cost has not been identified, all alternatives are more expensive and not readily applied to our large network. The option of not spraying at all has also been considered, but there are issues around the acceptability of the appearance of plant growth in hard areas of the highway, safety and possible effects on the highway asset in terms of function (drainage) and damage, particularly from woody plants.

Regarding the mowing timetable, over the last few years we have reduced the number of urban verge cuts down from six to two a year. In order to spread the cuts reasonably so that sight lines and access is preserved, and the contractor can plan for resource needs, the two cuts are typically scheduled around May – July and then September and November. We are continually reviewing our approach, prompted by our duties as a local authority towards biodiversity under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act, and increasing public awareness of the issues around this. This year we have added thirty new wildlife verges with over 146 miles of wildlife verges now managed to promote wildlife of special interest. In addition, we are also delivering a Rural Verge Trial in a number of Parishes across the County where verges will only receive one main cut, in the autumn, and only a cut for sight lines and access in June. If successful, consideration will be given to rolling this approach out wider.

Whilst we understand many people are keen for us to adopt more wildlife verges and to reduce or change the cutting regime to further support biodiversity, equally many people would prefer us to increase the number of cuts per season to promote the appearance of the highway within their communities. In the meantime, we continue to review our cutting regimes and in consultation with Members will make recommendations for changes where appropriate.

4. Question by Councillor Lambert to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

The government's recent announcements about the phasing out of petrol and diesel vehicles will require infrastructure to be in place, principally public charging points. Many people do not have driveways so cannot guarantee that they will be able to park outside their homes and re-charge their cars.

What is the County Council's policy on electric charging points?

Answer by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

The County Council does not currently provide on-street charging points for electric vehicles. However, we recognise that there is a growing level of demand for charging points and that their greater availability is key to increasing the uptake of EVs. We are currently developing our policy to support the increased take up of electric vehicles in East Sussex.

In the meantime, you can find information on where electric vehicles can currently be charged in East Sussex by going to Zap Map (<https://www.zap-map.com/?s=east+sussex>). This provides a comprehensive map of existing charge points.

5. Question by Councillor Lambert to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

It was a surprise for residents of Seaford to hear that the bridge over Exceat, long-promised by the Lewes MP who stated that funding was in place, would not after all be going ahead as the funding had not been obtained.

What has happened to plans for the bridge? What is the reason for this confused messaging between the Conservative cabinet and the Conservative MP for Lewes? What will now happen to the bridge if this second funding bid is as unsuccessful as the first?

Answer by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

A planning application for a new bridge has been submitted to the South Downs National Park and we expect an outcome in August/September.

The Exceat Bridge project started out as a maintenance project to refurbish the existing aging bridge, and a budget allocation was made in the council's capital programme for that. As we started to look at what refurbishment would entail, it became clear that it was probably more cost-effective to replace the bridge and deal with the traffic bottleneck at the same time.

We recognised that it would not be possible to build a new bridge from existing budgets and therefore, since the project's conception we have been looking for external funding for the improvements. In 2017 £2.133m was allocated to the project from the National Productivity Investment Fund (NPIF) and was added to the £0.5m

capital maintenance budget for the project. However, this would not fully fund a new bridge.

A bid was also made to the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) Local Growth Fund which was initially accepted and reached a late stage in the assessment process, but was rejected in 2020 as, like many other projects across SELEP, it could not meet the local Growth Fund timeframes required then by SELEP.

Although full funding was not available, a decision was made by the Project Board at this time to continue to develop the project to the point where a planning application could be submitted while other funding was sort. We hope that our recent Levelling Up Fund application for circa £8m to assist with fully funding the project will be successful, but if not we will continue to look for alternative external funding for the project. If funding is not found the existing bridge will continue to be monitored and repairs undertaken as necessary from maintenance budgets.

6. Question by Councillor Field to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

What supervision is in place to ensure that when grass is cut on verges etc the arisings do not block gutters and/or litter the footways?

Answer by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

There is stringent supervision in place monitoring the grass cutting service being delivered by our contractor. Each crew cutting our verges has a Supervisor who ensures that cuttings are blown back on to the verges clearing footpaths and channels. There are also weekly compliance checks to ensure the quality of work meets expectations and that sites are left as tidy as possible. Any quality issues raised are immediately investigated with the contractor and remedial action taken if needed.

Unlike last year, this season we have seen the perfect growing conditions for grass, and this has meant the cuttings are longer than we would like/expect. However, we are aware of public concerns and doing everything possible to manage these challenging conditions to ensure our communities are impacted as little as possible.

7. Question by Councillor Field to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

There is an urgent need to reduce emissions from private vehicles in order to improve air quality and meet carbon neutrality targets. How is the County Council working to improve bus services and expand bus networks?

Answer by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment

We will be commencing work on a new Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) for the Council during 2021/22 where the reduction of car use and facilitation of alternative modes of transport will be a key priority in the emerging strategy. In addition,

alongside the current LTP3 there has been a focus on the promotion and delivery of active travel programmes throughout the County.

ESCC has worked closely with bus operators to maintain the coverage and quality of the county's bus network. The Council's 2021/22 budget for subsidising bus services is £1.75m, which we use to provide services which are not viable on a commercial basis. This is particularly important for our rural communities, to ensure access to education, employment, health and shopping.

In March 2021 the Government launched "Bus Back Better", a new bus strategy for England. It aims to rejuvenate local bus services, making them attractive for passengers, cheaper, easier to understand and use, faster and more reliable, and greener. The strategy places new requirements on local transport authorities to develop Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) and set up Enhanced Partnerships with their bus operators, with actions on networks and services, fares and ticketing, passenger facilities, and highway bus priority measures.

In her meeting on 21 June, the Lead Member for Transport and Environment approved pursuing an Enhanced Partnership for East Sussex and work has now commenced on the BSIP process. The Lead Member will consider a report on the detail of the Enhanced Partnership and BSIP prior to BSIP submission deadline of 31 October. We understand that the Government will allocate promised additional funding to each authority for bus improvements based on the quality and ambition of their BSIP submission.

To improve the end to end journey for bus passengers, we are already investing the improvements to bus stops across the county with high access kerbs, the introduction of clearways to ensure that buses can pick up and drop off passengers safely and real time passenger information at key stops to provide up to the minute information.

To improve bus journey time reliability and punctuality, we have introduced bus priority measures on the Glyne Gap to Harley Shute Road section of Bexhill Road in Hastings, with further phases being developed, and are finalising designs for bus lanes on the Polegate/Willingdon section of the Hailsham – Polegate – Eastbourne corridor.

As highlighted earlier, an important element of developing and implementing our emerging Bus Service Improvement Plan will be to consider opportunities for further bus priority on our network. The first iteration of the Improvement Plan will set out bus routes where priority measures could potentially be considered subject to further detailed assessment of the viability and benefits.