

Report to:	Economy, Transport and Environment (ETE) Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting:	20 September 2017
By:	Director of Communities, Economy and Transport
Title:	The County Council's Grass Cutting Service and Management of Roadside Vegetation
Purpose:	To advise Scrutiny Committee on the County Council's policy on grass cutting and management of vegetation, and the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPP&R) savings target for this service

RECOMMENDATIONS: The ETE Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- (1) Note the current approach to highway grass cutting and management of highway vegetation; and**
 - (2) Note the savings target for the grass cutting service; and**
 - (3) Scrutiny Committee is further invited to consider opportunities for savings from the grass cutting service to inform our proposals which will be considered by cabinet for consultation**
-

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 In 2016/17 the cost of cutting grass verges and managing vegetation on the public highway totalled £1,146,764. This is funded from the Highways Core Service Budget (for grass cutting and weed control) of £637,194 which is a fixed price element in the Highways contract. The balance is funded from the Highways Minor Works and Reactive Maintenance budgets.

1.2 The core service budget provides a minimum of six cuts of verges in urban areas per year, a minimum of two cuts of verges in rural areas per year, and a single weed (spray) treatment of footways and gutters across the county.

1.3 In addition to the core service budget, the County Council pays £58,139 to eight Parish Councils and £91,532 to Eastbourne Borough Council to manage the urban grass cutting services on its behalf. A budget of £149,055 is also paid to Eastbourne and Hastings Borough Councils for weed control and tree maintenance in the two boroughs.

1.4 Other services, outside the core service, are provided on a reactive basis to manage highway vegetation such as trees, full cut back of rural verges (over and above the standard one metre swathe), hedge cutting and wildlife verges. A full breakdown of grass cutting and vegetation management services and costs undertaken in 2016/17 is set out in Appendix 1.

2. Supporting information

2.1 There are approximately 191 hectares of rural grass and 149 hectares of urban grass in the County.

2.2 The management of grass cutting generates many comments and complaints from the public, ranging from why don't we cut it more frequently to why do we cut it so frequently. Between May 2016 and July 2017 the Highways Contact Centre received 2068 queries relating to the grass cutting service and grass cutting remains one of the top ten services that the public contact us about.

2.3 There is no statutory requirement to cut grass verges alongside the public highway however, over time local authorities, including East Sussex County Council (ESCC), have developed standards in line with the code of practice and local policy requirements to ensure safety, serviceability and sustainability needs. Visibility at junctions, the safety of road users and the effect of vegetation on highway drainage

and footways are the main reasons for controlling grass verges, whilst in urban areas aesthetics, public realm and tourism are also important considerations.

2.4 In 2016 the “Well Managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice” stated that highway verges should be managed with regard to “their nature conservation value and biodiversity principles as well as whole life costing, highways safety and serviceability.” This reflects the requirements of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, for Local Authorities to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity when exercising its functions.

2.5 The County Council’s current level of service reflects latest policy and code of practice with regard to serviceability and in part conservation and biodiversity requirements through well established and specifically managed wildlife verges.

2.6 To continue to apply the principles of conservation and biodiversity, ESCC is continuing to develop the Wildlife and Meadow Verge Projects in conjunction with town and parish councils across the County. There are now 199 designated wildlife verges with a further 30 candidate wildlife verges currently being trialled in 2017/18.

2.7 ESCC is working with Battle Town Council and Lewes Town Council to introduce meadow verges in their respective towns. The expansion of meadow verge projects will reduce the frequency of grass cutting required in these areas. However, there is divided public opinion on this approach and working with local communities will be important in expanding these projects.

3. Future Budget Savings

3.1 At its meeting on the 24 January 2017, Cabinet agreed to defer the RPP&R savings target of £400,000 from grass cutting services until the 2018/19 financial year to enable consultation with town and parish councils

3.2 Officers in CET are currently developing options to achieve the savings target, for consultation with town and parish councils, along with mitigation to reduce the impact on all road users and maintain the Authority’s obligations to maintain a safe and usable road network. When the options appraisal is complete it is anticipated a Cabinet report will be prepared seeking agreement to consult on the proposals. No final decision of the future of grass cutting would be made until a consultation has taken place, the results considered and a final report will be prepared for Cabinet.

4. Comments / Appraisal

4.1 In June 2014 Scrutiny considered a report on the impact of a revised programme of grass cutting for rural areas by reducing the rural swathe cut (Appendix 2). The analysis and conclusions set out in the report, although relating to the rural swathe cut, are equally applicable and more valid when considering the levels of reduction in funding required for 2018/19. The potential impacts of this approach were set out in the 2014 report are further expanded below:

- Reduced public satisfaction and an increase in the amount of complaints leading to reputational damage;
- Grass will be left to grow to higher levels leading to an increase in complaints about the condition post cutting and as such will require careful management which may mean an increase to operational costs;
- Possible damage to ESCC’s relationships with other local authorities, in particular those authorities who presently undertake the grass cutting in their own Parishes and Towns because it will be necessary to significantly reduce the offer of future contributions to those other local authorities who manage the grass cutting services in their areas, including Eastbourne Borough Council; and in order to achieve a saving of £400,000, the service would move away from the more structured / planned approach to grass cutting to a more reactive one focusing on safety. This approach would be more susceptible to increased demand due to weather and is more difficult to manage due to the reactive nature and may, in the long term, prove more costly. As such it may become necessary to fund in year demand for the service from other budgets, potentially having a negative impact on the management of other highway assets such as footways and lining;

- The impact of long grass and vegetation on highway drainage, and drainage ditches in particular will need careful consideration to avoid flooding and to avoid reducing the impact of recent additional investment in drainage; and
- The cutting of visibility splays at junctions would probably need to be retained, to ensure public safety and may dilute the overall opportunity for savings.

5. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

5.1 Achieving the RPP&R savings target of £400,000 from highway grass cutting will require careful planning to ensure highway safety is maintained and to avoid any detrimental impact on highway drainage and footway integrity.

5.2 Scrutiny Committee is invited to consider options and mitigating measures to achieve the RPP&R savings target for grass cutting, and to explore alternative arrangements for the future management of grass verges and highway vegetation.

5.3 Scrutiny Committee is invited make recommendations to Cabinet prior to any decision in relation to public consultation of proposals.

RUPERT CLUBB

Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Contact Officer: Dale Poore

Tel. No. 01273 481916

Email: dale.poore@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBER

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None