

Report to: Lead Member for Transport and Economy

Date of meeting: 21 May 2018

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Grass Cutting and Vegetation Service Management Policy Change

Purpose: To advise Lead Member on the changes to the grass cutting and vegetation management services and seek Lead Member approval of a revised policy

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Lead Member is recommended to:

- (1) Note the proposals set out in the report to provide grass cutting and vegetation management services following changes to funding from 2018/19; and**
 - (2) Approve the changes to the updated Highway Verge and Vegetation Management Policy and the rescission of Chapter 2, Section 1a of the Transport and Asset Management Plan.**
-

1 Background Information

1.1. There is no specific statutory requirement to cut grass on verges alongside the public highway however, historically local authorities, including East Sussex County Council, 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 towns and village centres aesthetics, public realm and tourism are also important considerations for local communities. In managing grass verges and other vegetation the Council must comply with all relevant environmental and wildlife requirements.

1.2. The Council's current grass cutting policy for verges in towns and village centres is for five cuts per annum (urban verges are defined in the updated policy at Appendix 1). However, the current integrated highway maintenance contract provides a minimum of six cuts per season based on an output specification that requires the contractor to maintain urban grass at a maximum height during the growing season. The policy for verges on rural lanes outside village centres is two cuts per season.

1.3. Following a decision at the Full Council meeting in February 2018, a reduction of £400,000 in the verge cutting services budget from the 2018/19 financial year was approved. This would require a reduction in the current number of urban grass cuts from six to two urban cuts per season. The cutting of rural verges would remain unchanged at two cuts per season.

1.4. To enable this change the current policy of a minimum of five cuts per season for urban verges would need to be amended to reflect this change in service.

1.5. A review of the existing policy (Appendix 6) and related vegetation management policies along with the new service requirements has been undertaken with key internal stakeholders. This has included relevant officers including legal and our highway services contract provider to ensure the proposed change in service will continue to support requirements for safety, serviceability, sustainability of the network and users and to meet the authority's statutory obligations.

1.6. An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and a summary of findings can be found in Appendix 4. The analysis and evidence demonstrates that although there may be a low risk to users with protected characteristics, the mitigation measures will reduce this to an acceptable level

and that all appropriate opportunities to advance equality and foster good relations between groups have been taken.

1.7. To manage the implementation of the required change in service a number of options were offered to those affected parish, town, district and borough councils. This report sets out the results and requirements following feedback from those local councils and the recommendations to changes in policy required to enable the revised service to be applied.

2 Results from Consultation with local Councils

2.1. A total of 106 local councils were consulted about the grass cutting changes, 19 of which only have rural grass in their area (ie only in the lanes around their villages) and therefore will see no change in their service, but were included in the consultation to inform them of potential changes affecting other neighbouring local councils.

2.2. The 87 parish councils with urban grass verges (ie grass verges within their village centres) in their area were offered the following three options:

- To receive the equivalent monetary value of the standard two cuts per season provided by the County Council to enable them to undertake their own urban grass cutting service i.e. self-deliver the service; or
- To pay the county council for four cuts to reinstate six cuts per season; or
- To receive the two cuts only per season to be provided by the County Council;

2.3. The consultation finished on the 31 March 2018 and the results are summarised below. A full breakdown of each Parish, District, Borough and Town Council and their chosen option is listed in Appendix 2 and illustrated in the map included at Appendix 3. A full copy of all consultation correspondence is available in the Member's Room.

Grass Cutting Service Option	Number of Parish, District, Borough or Town Council responses
Receive a contribution from ESCC and manage the grass cutting service in their area directly	16 (including the 8 Parish Councils and Eastbourne Borough Council with historical agreements).
Agreed to pay ESCC for an additional four cuts in 18/19	36 (of which 24 are parish/town councils in Rother District area where the District Council has agreed to fund the additional four cuts on behalf of the local councils for 2018/19 only). Lewes District Council is paying for an additional two cuts rather than four.
Receive two cuts only by ESCC	35 Includes 12 Parish Councils with whom the County Council is continuing to work to determine their final requirements for the service. In the meantime these twelve Parishes will receive two cuts only until any other requirements are agreed

3 Risks

3.1 In considering these Policy changes Lead Member should be aware of the outcome of the EqlA described in Appendix 4 and the proposed mitigation.

3.2 One of the main reasons the Council cuts grass verges is for safety of the public using the highway. In reducing from six cuts to two, the highways contractor will pay particular attention to those key junctions where visibility is a known problem, and where necessary additional cuts will be provided for safety purposes. It will however be impractical and prohibitively expensive to attend to visibility issues adjacent to private driveways and accesses.

3.3 Reducing the number of urban cuts from six to two cuts will inevitably attract criticism from members of the public, motorists, landowners and equestrian groups. In particular, when cutting long grass it is difficult to leave the verges neat and tidy and will undoubtedly draw public complaint.

3.4 The biggest change arising from this policy change will be seen in the large urban centres such as Hastings where residents have become used to seeing the verges outside their properties cut at least six times a year. (For the 2018/19 Eastbourne, Lewes and Bexhill will receive additional cuts funded by the local Borough / District Council). Whilst some residents will take it upon themselves to cut those verges themselves where it is safe to do so, others will see this as a County Council responsibility and will seek to complain to the Council.

3.5 The Highway Stewards will monitor the effects of this Policy change on edges of carriageway and highway drainage as they go about their routine inspections. Where appropriate additional maintenance will be put in place and a full cut back of rural vegetation to the highway boundary is anticipated every four years.

4 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

4.1 The results and changes to the service set out above along with other proposed reductions in vegetation management services would provide the budget savings required and enable the County Council to meet its obligations for maintaining the highway.

4.2 The reduced budget and subsequent change to the service required to achieve the saving will require a change to the existing grass cutting policy to reduce the requirement from 5 urban cuts per season to two cuts per season.

4.3 Lead Member is therefore recommended to approve the revised policy detailed in Appendix 5 to ensure that East Sussex County Council has a clear, consistent and up to date policy with respect to managing highway verges and vegetation services across the county and that meets the revised financial requirements for the service.

RUPERT CLUBB

Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Contact Officer: Dale Poore

Tel. No. 01323 464991

Email: dale.poore@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBERS

ALL

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

[Economy, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee Paper 20 September 2017](#)
[Full Council Meeting, 6 February 2018](#)

