

Report to: Place Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 20 November 2019

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Review of Grass Cutting and Management of Roadside Vegetation

Purpose: To provide an update on the implementation of changes to the service

RECOMMENDATIONS: Place Scrutiny Committee is recommended to note and comment on the report

1 Background Information

1.1. The East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Management of Vegetation Policy, approved by Lead Member on 21 May 2018, provides for two urban cuts and two rural cuts of grass verges to be carried out every year.

1.2. Urban grass is generally defined as verges in built up areas on roads with a speed limit of 40mph or under. Rural grass is generally defined as verges on roads outside built up areas with a speed limit greater than 40mph.

1.3. This report provides an update on the grass cutting service following the change of policy and the reduction in the number of cuts in urban areas from six cuts to two cuts.

2. Supporting Information

2.1. Following the change of policy, the Highways Service consulted with local councils about them taking on the grass cutting service on behalf of the County Council, or paying for additional cuts.

2.2. A total of 87 local councils who have urban grass verges are contacted on an annual basis and offered the following service options:

- To purchase four additional cuts to 'top up' the standard two cuts provided by the County Council, bringing the total number of cuts to be received back to the previous level of six cuts per season; or
- To receive a financial contribution from the County Council equivalent to the cost to the Council of standard two cuts per season, and to undertake their own urban grass cutting service i.e. self-deliver the service; or
- To receive only the two cuts per season provided by the County Council's maintenance contract.

2.3. The results of the consultation for the 2019/2020 service year compared to 2018/2019 service year are summarised in the table below:

Grass Cutting Service Option	2018/2019 Number of Parish, District, Borough or Town Council responses	2019/2020 Number of Parish, District, Borough or Town Council responses
Agreed to pay ESCC for an additional four cuts in 2019/2020	42 (of which 24 are parishes/towns in Rother District area with the District Council funding the additional four cuts on behalf of the local councils for one year). Hailsham Town Council and Long Man Parish Council paid for one additional cut rather than four. (This option will not be	51 (of which 26 are parishes/towns in Rother District area with the District Council funding the additional four cuts on behalf of the local councils for one year).

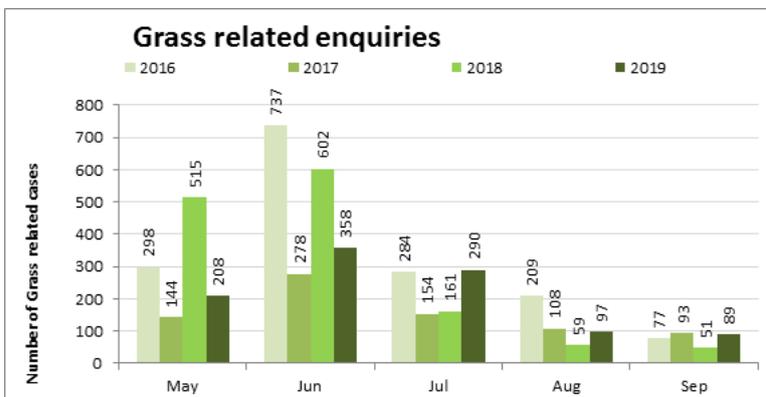
	available for 2019/2020) Lewes Town Council paid for two additional cuts. (This option will not be available for 2019/2020)	
Receive a contribution from ESCC and manage the grass cutting service in their area directly	16 (including the 8 historical agreements with Parishes and Eastbourne Borough Council).	18 (including Eastbourne Borough Council).
Opted for 2 ESCC cuts only	26	18

2.4 In the current financial year only 18 parish / town councils are receiving the basic two cuts of urban grass verges.

3 Grass Cutting Delivery in 2019

3.1. Grass cutting has always attracted a great deal of communication with the public, whether that be about the number of cuts, the quality of those cuts or simply to enquire when a particular verge is to be cut. Following the change of policy and the reduction in number of urban cuts provided the Highways Contact Centre has recorded customer contact.

3.2 The below table shows that there has been a decrease in overall amount of grass cutting enquiries received in 2019 compared to 2018. This is most likely a result of the increase in the number of local councils opting to pay for additional cuts or taking on grass cutting themselves, and therefore residents not detecting any change in the level of service. The reduction also probably reflects a general change of attitude across the country:



3.3 Last year when the level of cuts was reduced, there were a number of unforeseen breakdowns of the grass cutting machinery as a consequence of the longer length of the grass in those areas only receiving two cuts. However, these breakdowns were managed by the grass cutting subcontractor, and had little impact on the grass cutting schedule. This has continued to be the case for 2019, with the cost and impact of breakages being negligible.

3.4 Temperatures were generally high in 2018 which affected the growth rates of grass verges. By comparison, in 2019 the weather has been more variable, and conditions have been better for grass growth. However, there has been a reduction in the number of reported safety / visibility problems this year which suggests the timing of the cuts and operational planning this year has been better managed.

3.5 Feedback from local councils last year was that the timing of the consultation with them came too late for them to make any allowance in their precepts that had already been set. This year local councils were contacted much earlier in the year allowing them time to consider and make provisions in their budget setting.

4 Wildlife Verge Social Media Campaign

4.1 In recent months there has been a targeted and concerted social media campaign to promote designated 'Wildlife' verges across the County and highlight the positive impact these designated areas have on the county's environment, particularly in allowing wildflowers to bloom and the increase in the number of potential habitats.

4.2 The campaign included regular social media posts over the summer months, a video report on the Wildlife verge project and the positive impact a reduction in the grass cutting has had on the environment. Feedback from this campaign is summarised in appendix 1. This information and feedback will be used to help shape future designation of wildlife verges across the County as well as any future changes to policy.

5 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

5.1 There has been a noted decrease in the volume of customer enquiries relating to grass cutting received over the year and a much smaller number of safety / visibility complaints raised.

5.2 The grass cutting service continues to be delivered on time with minimal reported impact or disruption to residents.

5.3 The success of the targeted communication campaign promoting wildlife verges suggests that residents, businesses and local councils support the changes to the service.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

ALL

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

[Lead Member report on Management of Vegetation Policy, 21 May 2018](#)