

### Social Media Campaign: Wildlife Verges and Urban Grass Cutting

Complementing the reduced grass cutting service being delivered across the County, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) have an initiative known as Wildlife Verges. These are designated areas which are cut only once a year, usually around October/November, having been left throughout the summer to bloom.

With a recent increase of support across the Country for these types of initiatives, particularly with the publication of Plantlife's report into grass cutting and Highways England opting to reduce the amounts of grass cuts they deliver, the Place Scrutiny Committee wanted to understand whether residents supported the idea of Wildlife Verges, particularly since the reduction in urban grass cuts in 2018.

As such a targeted social media campaign was delivered in September 2019. During this campaign the Highway's department pushed key messages on Twitter and Facebook about the benefits of Wildlife Verges and a short video was produced by the Council's Marketing and Communications Team and released on the ESCC social media channels. The video was presented by the Chair of the Place Scrutiny Committee and the County Ecologist. A dedicated inbox was also created, where residents were invited to submit their opinions, and ask any questions around the initiative.

Below outlines the response to the video;

- The video has had just over 10,000 views, 124 shares and 42 comments on social media and 17 emails received.
- Feedback received from residents included;
  - *"Let them grow!"*
  - *"I love the wild verges and would like it if we have more."*
  - *"Thank goodness you're cutting the verges less often. Please don't be put off by people wanting them to be more 'tidy'. I recognise that there's a need to cut back at some corners for sightlines, but no more than that."*
  - *"I strongly support a cutting regime that is designed to benefit wildflowers and wildlife, as far as is consistent with safety."*
  - *"I love the meadow flowers that are grown on the verges. It's such a beautiful thing to see. Good to know safety is paramount too. Good work much valued."*
  - *"Less mowing, more flowers, grasses and wildlife please."*

Just over 86% of feedback received was positive and supportive of wildlife verges and the reduction of urban grass cuts. Most responses acknowledged that for safety reasons grass cutting could not be stopped all together, and that they did not want the Council to start cutting the grass for aesthetic purposes.

People were also interested in what more they and their communities could do to support verges for wildlife and improve their diversity.

Some comments did raise concerns regarding the timing of cuts being too early in the season. There was a suggestion that ESCC could do more to improve the biodiversity of verges, and look to remove the grass debris once the cut is complete. There was also support to control some plant species more stringently and explore the option to sow meadow and wildflower seeds on the verges.

### Conclusion

The above suggests that, similar to the rest of the Country, there has definitely been an increase in support for this type of project, and ESCC will look to use the comments received to influence future decisions made in relation to the designation of wildlife verges in the County and any policy changes.

The Highway Department will run another Communications campaign which will continue to promote the wildlife verge initiative and how local communities can support this.

The Council are still required to maintain a safe Highway network, and there is a fine balancing act to be struck between this and the need to develop projects with the aim of protecting our environment.