

Report to: Lead Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment

Date of meeting: 19 December 2022

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Rural Verges as Wildlife Corridors - Trial of Early Season Reduction in Rural Grass Cutting

Purpose: To agree the next steps to the rural grass cutting trial.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Lead Member is recommended:

- (1) To agree to offer reduced rural cuts to all Parish and Town Councils for the grass cutting season of 2023 to determine the total demand and review further feedback.**
 - (2) To agree that single track lanes will be excluded in any reduced rural grass cutting due to safety concerns along narrow roads.**
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1. Background Information

1.1. East Sussex is a rural county with a large rural network of verged roads which provide important connections for local communities.

1.2. East Sussex County Council (ESCC) has received an increased level of Member and resident contact regarding rural verge cutting since May 2020. Most notably an increase in requests to stop cutting rural verges or change the schedule in line with wild plant cycles. This has been partly driven by the charity Plantlife's Road Verge Campaign, and a number of articles in the press and social media highlighting the benefit of road verges as wildlife corridors.

1.3 ESCC has also set targets for carbon reduction of which increased biodiversity plays an important part.

2. Supporting Information

Current Situation

2.1 The standard rural grass cut is carried out as a 1metre wide swath undertaken along the verge length with wider areas cut around junctions and bends to ensure good visibility is maintained. In addition a full cut back of around one quarter of the rural verges is undertaken each year to prevent brambles, invasive weeds and trees from taking-over verges. See Appendix 1 for Current Policy.

The Trial

2.2 A trial reduction in verge cutting has been undertaken over the last two years, 2021 and 2022. Selected Parish and Town Councils who had previously expressed an interest were contacted and invited to take part. See Appendix 2 for Parish and Towns involved and Appendix 3 for the Equality Impact Assessment carried out for the trial.

2.3 The trial reduced the frequency of grass cutting services along rural verges in the selected areas to:

- One visibility cut undertaken around May/June
- A single one metre swathe with visibility cuts in the Autumn

2.4 This change meant that ESCC would not cut rural verges in the trial areas (except for visibility) during the flowering season and when it is the most beneficial time for pollinators so they

can act as wildlife corridors. Flowering plants would then be able to complete their lifecycles and set seed, providing further biodiversity benefits.

2.5 Safety issues remained the priority, with any visibility or access issues being picked up and rectified through the usual process.

Customer Feedback

2.6 An online feedback form was created for the purpose of the trial, which received a largely positive result:

- In 2021 88 responses were received. 56 were in favour of the reduction and would like to see it rolled out across the County.
- In 2022 28 responses were received, 22 were in favour of the reduction and would like to see it rolled out across the County. The level of responses was reduced in the second year compared to the previous year's trial as parishes had largely already commented.
- For both years the main reasons people opposed the trial were safety, aesthetics ('looks messy') and perception that it is money saving by the Council.

2.7 Several complaints related to single track roads and the narrowing of roads caused by overgrown verges and lack of available 'safe' verge for walkers and horse riders.

2.8 Feedback from Councillors has been largely positive, although in the first year they noted that it was a divisive subject. However, in 2022 Councillors have had little negative feedback from residents.

2.9 Feedback from Parish and Town Councils involved in the trial has been positive, highlighting the benefits to biodiversity and an interest in rolling it out further.

Operational Feedback

2.10 The grass cutting season in 2021 saw a significant amount of rainfall compared to 2022 which was a very dry season and therefore the years are not directly comparable, but both have provided some useful data to evaluate.

2.11 The contractor undertaking the verge maintenance noted that the areas of verges that only received one cut were overgrown when they came to cut the verge and it was taking 2-3 passes, rather than a single pass, to achieve a good quality cut.

Defects

2.12 Problems with visibility did increase in the trial areas in both years of the trial but there was also an increase in reports of visibility and other grass problems across all parts of the County during those years. See Appendix 4 for details.

Options for future management

2.13 Consideration has been given to the following options:

2.14 The introduction of a full policy change across the County reducing the rural grass cutting on all rural verges and thereby creating wildlife corridors, except on single track lanes.

- Advantages include promoting biodiversity and local community interests.
- Negatives include a potential increase in brambled verges and increased safety defects leading to ad hoc visits by maintenance teams and increased costs.

2.15 All Parish and Town Councils to be given the opportunity to opt in to reduced rural grass cutting in the 2023 season, except on single track lanes.

- Advantages include offering this service to a wider group of communities and collecting more information on the impact of reduced cutting.
- Negatives include the service becoming more complicated and potentially more confusing for residents.

2.16 No Change, rural verges continue to be cut as outlined in the current policy (2 cuts per season).

- Advantages include avoiding complicating the service and potentially increasing additional safety cuts.
- Negatives include loss of ecological benefits and creation of wildlife corridors and potential reputational damage by ending the trial and removing the option of reduced cuts to those communities who wish to support greater biodiversity in their communities.

3. Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

3.1. Overall, the trial has been well received, however, neither of the trial years was a typical growing season therefore it would be beneficial to roll the trial out further and evaluate the impact of the trial over more grass cutting seasons.

3.2 The Lead Member is recommended to agree to offer reduced rural cuts to all Parish and Town Councils for the grass cutting season of 2023. This will allow further feedback and understanding of the impact of reduced rural verge cutting across the County on both operational and biodiversity impact.

3.3 The Lead Member is recommended to agree that single track lanes will not be included in the reduced rural grass cutting due to concerns raised around safety on these roads for all road users.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None