

Report to: Lead Member for Transport and Environment

Date of meeting: 11 December 2023

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 way forward following the rural grass cutting trial

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Lead Member is recommended to:

- (1) Agree to offer a reduced number of cuts for grass verges in rural areas;**
 - (2) Agree, subject to recommendation 1 above, the proposed updates to the Highway Verges and Vegetation Policy; and**
 - (3) Agree that single track lanes, with the exception of wildlife verges, will continue to be excluded in any reduced rural grass cutting because of safety concerns along narrow roads.**
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1. Background Information

1.1 East Sussex is a largely 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 a 1.0 metre wide swathe undertaken along the verge length with wider areas cut around junctions and bends to ensure good visibility is maintained. This is carried out twice a year. In addition, a full cut back to the highway is carried out on approximately a quarter of rural verges each year to prevent brambles, invasive weeds and trees from taking-over verges. See Appendix 1 for the current Highway Verges and Vegetation Policy (the Policy).

The Trial

2.2 A trial reduction in verge cutting has been undertaken over the last three years, since 2021. Initially Borough, Parish and Town Councils who had previously expressed an interest were invited to take part in the trial. In 2023 all Borough, Parish and Town Councils were given the option to receive reduced cuts, with 27 electing to take part. See Appendix 2 for Borough, 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 or June, and 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 the verges 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 reporting and reactive process.

Customer Feedback

2.6 Feedback was collected throughout the trial, which received a largely positive result:

- In 2021, 88 responses were received. 56 (63%) were in favour of the reduction.
- In 2022, 28 responses were received, 22 (78%) were in favour of the reduction.
- In 2023 so far, 45 responses were received, 35 (77%) were in favour of the reduction.
- For all years the main reasons people opposed the trial were safety, aesthetics ('looks messy') and the perception that it was a money saving exercise by the Council.

2.7 Feedback from Councillors has been mixed. Some are in favour of the reduction, whilst other have concerns about the combination of highway deterioration and unkempt grass, potentially coupled with changes in weed maintenance. Councillors have noted similar negative feedback from residents who had contacted them.

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

Operational Feedback

2.9 The grass cutting season in 2021 saw a significant amount of rainfall compared to 2022 which was a very dry season and therefore it is difficult to draw comparisons between the two years. The 2023 season was variable, creating perfect conditions for grass growth.

2.10 The contractor undertaking the verge maintenance noted that the verges that only received one cut don't look as tidy due to the length of grass and the amount of laying grass. They advised that areas with only one cut can take longer to cut and could potentially damage equipment as the operatives are unable to see debris in the verges. Potential impact is that those verges that only receive one cut a year, may take longer to cut in subsequent years.

Defects

2.11 There was an increase in reported visibility problems in the trial areas for all years. Grass visibility defect details can be found at Appendix 4.

Future management

2.12 The trial has been largely successful and well received by those taking part.

2.13 It is therefore recommended that the Council formally adopts this as Policy, so that it is available to all Parish and Town Councils to opt in to. For those areas that do not opt into this approach, the current grass cutting regime will continue. See Appendix 5 for proposed updates to the current Policy, indicated in red.

2.14 A proposed update to the urban grass cutting service has also been included in the draft Policy in line with current practice and service agreed by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment in May 2018.

2.15 If agreed, all Borough, Parish and Town Councils will be contacted in January 2024 and given the opportunity to opt into a reduced cut and enhanced biodiversity service. This will then be the default service for that area, unless the Borough, Parish or Town Council advises ESCC otherwise.

2.16 Safety concerns would remain a priority, with any reported visibility or access issues being picked up and rectified through the usual process.

3. Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

3.1 Overall, the trial has been well received, with feedback each year being taken onboard, and appropriate changes made, such as the exclusion of single-track lanes.

3.2 The trial has successfully included 618 miles (out of a total of 1,790 miles) of rural verges managed for biodiversity reasons.

3.3 The Lead Member is recommended to agree to offer reduced rural cuts to all Borough, Parish and Town Councils for rural grass cutting as standard practice.

3.4 The Lead Member is recommended, subject to the above recommendation, to agree the proposed updates to the Highway Verges and Vegetation Policy in accordance with the above option.

3.5 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 about visibility and safety on these roads, with the exception of wildlife verge applications which will be reviewed individually.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None