

Cabinet Report

13 September 2023

Report title: Grass Verge Maintenance

Relevant Portfolio Holder		Councillor Whittaker	
Portfolio Holder Consulted		Yes	
Relevant Head of Service		Guy Revans	
Report Author: Matthew Austin	Job Title: Contact matthew.austin@bromsgroveandredditch.gov.uk Contact Tel: 01527 548206	Environmental Services Manager	email:
Wards Affected		Variance to existing maintenance on sites across the District.	
Ward Councillor(s) consulted		No	
Relevant Strategic Purpose(s)		Communities which are safe, well maintained & green	
Key Decision			
If you have any questions about this report, please contact the report author in advance of the meeting.			
This report contains exempt information as defined in Paragraph(s) of Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, as amended			

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 The Cabinet Agree to either accept the proposal, or to maintain the existing maintenance arrangements.

1.2 If Agreed, for the Capital and Revenue Budgets to be adjusted for the identified financial years as set out in section 5 of this report.

2. Context:

2.1 A Motion was proposed at Full Council on 20 July 2022 to manage verges differently during 2022. After discussion this Motion was passed as per the below:

2.2 *"This Council changes its grass verge grass cutting and mowing regime to allow wildflowers to remain in bloom during the height of the season when bees, butterflies and general small wildlife rely on the pollen from wildflowers to flourish. This will not be a one size fits all approach. Council will work with local residents and Councillors to find an approach that works for each community."*

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3. Background:

- 3.1 There are no statutory duties for Bromsgrove District Council to maintain grass areas in a specific way, and arrangements are largely made based on a combination of aesthetics, cost and any corporate policies or priorities, with consideration of what the land is intended to be used for.
- 3.2 Highway Verges are the responsibility of Worcestershire County Council, and they have statutory responsibilities to maintain visibility for road users, which they meet by carrying out 2-3 cuts a year on their verges – typically as a 1mtr cut from the kerb edge outside of settlements.
- 3.3 Bromsgrove District Council carries out this work on behalf of WCC on verges within speed restricted settlements to a higher standard of maintenance than they would for aesthetic purposes.
- 3.4 WCC provide us with the funds they would have used to maintain them for highway safety, and we support this with additional investment from our funds to support a higher standard of maintenance of between 7 and 9 cuts a year (subject to seasonal variation and ground conditions).
- 3.5 The funding received from WCC is currently under review as part of a “Fair Funding” review with Worcestershire County Council and the other Worcestershire LA’s.
- 3.6 The Place Teams identified a number of grass verges across the District in 2020 and 2021 that could be left uncut to support wildlife and pollinators without causing concern for highway safety. The main aim of this exercise was to see if we could encourage wildlife corridors connecting existing habitats within residential areas to encourage wildlife to feel able to travel between existing habitats better and encourage pollinators such as bees to travel further and expand their abilities to help wildflowers and other plants increase thrive.
- 3.7 We managed this by way of regular mowing on the perimeters to ensure growth did not infringe on highway safety or inhibit drivers and pedestrians’ lines of sight on a road. and in some places even cut pathways through to support dog walking and residents’ enjoyment of larger areas.

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- 3.8 We do not have a Biodiversity Action Plan for Bromsgrove District Council to support ecological planning across our assets, but we have used signage as per below to explain what is being done in sites where we have left areas wild.



- 3.9 Many Councils have subscribed to schemes such as “No Mow May”, and “Jungle June” to support natural areas as adjustments to their normal maintenance arrangements, as May is a key month for plants, insects and other wildlife. Warmer soils encourage grass and other plants to start shooting up. Letting wildflowers and weeds bloom provides an important food source for pollinating insects needing nourishment in the early part of the season to expand their populations.
- 3.10 Natural areas arising from delayed grass cutting supports existing local vegetation such as buttercups, yarrow, dandelion, flatweed and cow parsley. These also support local wildlife and with improved habitat to live and move within as green corridors.
- 3.11 Whilst this provides short term benefits to local wildlife and pollinators, the follow up maintenance to cut down the thicker vegetation has a significant impact on mowing equipment, and leaves a considerable amount of vegetation on grass areas after cutting.
- 3.12 This has had mixed responses from the public, with a strong public perception that grass should be maintained for aesthetics in residential areas, and this has resulted in a number of these

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sites reverting to aesthetic maintenance rather than to support local habitat and plant life during 2021 and 2022.

- 3.13 The Worcestershire County Council Highways Team have attempted to make changes to their grass cutting arrangements to support naturalisation of verges where safe to do so, but have no policies in place to support what they are doing at this time, and Officers in the County Highways Team are currently exploring options to support a decision on how this will be managed across their areas of responsibility whilst also meeting their statutory duties.
- 3.14 Our current maintenance arrangements for grass verges equate to a yearly cost of approximately £189,000 in staff time, equipment, and operating costs.
- 3.15 This is based predominantly on the use of rotary mowers, which are able to maintain a good standard of cut on a cutting cycle of 4-5 weeks, supported by a single flail mower that is designed to support a proportion of our grass areas with longer vegetation and/or uneven ground where the rotary mowers would cause damage to the ground.

4. Proposals:

- 4.1 In order to meet the requirements set out by Full Council in 2022, it is estimated that we would need to maintain a cyclical mowing regime on approximately 70% of highway verges and Open Spaces, with up to 30% of our grass areas potentially supporting wildlife that relies on pollen from wildflowers.
- 4.2 These areas would be identified through engagement with Local Members, Parish Councils and residents to identify and agree areas that can be left to grow naturally during May, June, and July in order to benefit local pollinators and wildlife, before then resuming cyclical maintenance from August until the end of the growing season in order to ensure a maintained appearance throughout the Winter.
- 4.3 The longer vegetation on these areas will require Capital investment in new flail mowers in the short term in order to cope with the volume of vegetation to be cut at the end of the flowering season, but this will be partially offset by a reduction in our existing rotary mower fleet over the next 5 years as existing equipment will not need to be replaced.

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- 4.4 In order to support engagement with Members and Communities as required under the Notice of Motion, it is proposed to engage a short-term administrative role to support the Place Team in identifying appropriate locations across the District and consulting with local residents, Parish Councils, and the County Council in order to ensure that identified locations are supported, and don't impact on visibility on the public highway. This is proposed for a four-month period in the first two cutting year's, which will impact on the 2023/24 Financial Year, the 2024/25 financial year, and the 2025/26 Financial Year.
- 4.5 Further to this, it is proposed that an Ecologist be engaged to assess the areas identified for naturalisation in the first and third year of the project in order to document the plant species and wildlife being supported by this initiative in order to support future planning and public communication of the benefits.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The investment required to support this initiative would be as follows:

5.2

Capital Investment Required	
Two flail deck mowers	£60,000
Three Brush Cutter Strimmers	£2,100
These would support a reduction in the existing mowing fleet of two rotary mowers at an estimated saving of £34,000 on the Capital replacement budget over the next three years.	

- 5.3 Additional Capital Investment of £62,100 in 2023/24 financial year to support the purchase of this additional equipment prior to the start of the cutting season in 2024/25.

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5.4

	Revenue Investment Required	
	Administrative Support (Jan - April)	Ecologist Support
2023/24	£6,000	£0
2024/25	£8,000	£6,000
2025/26	£2,000	£0
2026/27	£0	£6,000

5.5 Total Additional Revenue expenditure of £28,000 over the current and next three financial years.

5.6 Once implemented, it is estimated that the on-going yearly cost of grass cutting would reduce to £175,000 in staff time, capital loan repayments on equipment, and operating costs on mowers.

5.7 Although this is nominally a £14,000 saving, this would primarily be in staff time allocated to grass cutting during the early summer period of reduced mowing. This would not support a staff reduction on the Place Team over the course of a full year, and this increased capacity would support the resilience of the grass cutting staffing and wider cleansing maintenance across the District.

6. Environmental/Climate Change Implications

6.1 Allowing plants on our grass areas to flower provides vital nectar (food) sources for insects and increases the pollination of plants in our area.

6.2 Naturalised grass areas provide a variety of habitats and wildlife corridors to support and enhance biodiversity within our settlements, and can also absorb pollution and help improve air quality.

6.3 Naturalised areas with a larger surface area of grass and other plants can help to cool temperatures during periods of hot weather through the process of evapotranspiration, and are also able to capture carbon emissions from the atmosphere and lock up carbon in the soil.

6.4 A reduction in mowing frequencies will reduce the use of petroleum powered mowers, reducing our carbon footprint.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Under the Environment Act of 2021 the Government aims to clean up the country's air, restore natural habitats, increase biodiversity, reduce waste and make better use of our resources. The provisions of the act will "halt the decline in species by 2030 and require new developments to improve or create habitats for nature"

7.1.1 This legislation places a strengthened "Biodiversity Duty"¹ on Public authorities in England to consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity in England. Local authorities (excluding parish councils) and local planning authorities must publish a biodiversity report to document the policies and actions carried out to comply with our "biodiversity duty".

7.1.2 Measures to support biodiversity in our maintenance arrangements will support compliance with our biodiversity duty.

7.2 If highway verges are not maintained to preserve visibility and safety on the highway, the County Council will be in breach of its responsibilities under the Highways Act 1980, and hold us accountable for any issues that arise from that on areas that we have agreed to maintain on their behalf and for which we receive a financial contribution towards each year.

8. OTHER - IMPLICATIONS

Relevant Strategic Purpose - Communities which are safe, well maintained & green

8.1 This will support the local environment for the benefit of local flora and fauna, which by extension will benefit our residents through increased wildlife and habitat within our settlements and support native pollinators at a time when nationally these are under threat due to the loss of habitat.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/complying-with-the-biodiversity-duty#actions-you-could-take>

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Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 8.2 By working with Local Members and residents, we will ensure that the review process for proposed naturalised areas will not impede members of the public with or without protected characteristics.

9. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 9.1 There is a risk of negatively impacting on highway safety as a result of vegetation being allowed to grow taller. This will be managed in coordination with the Worcestershire County Council Highways Team to mitigate this risk.
- 9.2 There is a risk of potential complaints from residents regarding the frequency of mowing on areas identified for naturalisation. This will be mitigated by close working with Ward Members and Parish Councils to identify appropriate sites, and support resident engagement.
- 9.3 There is a risk that this project will not deliver measurable benefits for local biodiversity and pollinators. This will be monitored through engagement of an ecologist to assess the sites being maintained in this way.
- 9.4 A reduction in mowing frequency may be perceived as a conflict with the maintenance aspirations of our Strategic Purpose: Communities which are safe, well maintained & green. This will be mitigated by maintaining clearly defined edges to identified areas, and pathways cut through any larger areas to support resident engagement with them as an area maintained for nature.
- 9.5 There is a political and financial risk if significant changes are made to grass maintenance without appropriate education and engagement with residents regarding what is being done. This will be mitigated by working with Local Members and Parish Councils to engage with local residents regarding areas identified for naturalisation.
- 9.6 The scale of the proposal meets the requirement of the motion passed by Full Council, but will produce limited environmental benefits due to the limited scale of this initiative. For this reason, it is recommended that the current proposal be considered an interim measure, with a view to further consideration and development in conjunction with Worcestershire County Council and the Parks Team (who lead on Biodiversity for Bromsgrove

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District Council's green assets). This will support meeting our responsibilities to support our local biodiversity alongside our Climate Emergency aspirations.

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10. REPORT SIGN OFF

Department	Name and Job Title	Date
Portfolio Holder	Cllr Whittaker – Environmental Services Portfolio Holder	17.08.23
Lead Director / Head of Service	Guy Revans – Head of Environmental Services	17.08.23
Financial Services	Circulated to HoS	17.08.23
Legal Services	Circulated to HoS	17.08.23
Policy Team (if equalities implications apply)	N/A	N/A
Climate Change Team (if climate change implications apply)	Consulted with Climate Change Portfolio Holder	17.08.23