

Committee	Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date	19 January, 2023
Title	Grass Cutting and Grounds Maintenance
Cabinet Member	Councillor Berwyn Parry Jones
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Purpose	Review of the County roadside maintenance arrangements

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The main purpose of roadside verges is to ensure clear visibility for traffic as well as providing safe places for pedestrians to walk in areas where there are no footpaths. As a result, verges must be managed to protect all road users.
- 1.2 However, verges are also important biodiversity habitats for the benefit of species such as bees and other pollinators, for flowers and wildlife that are rapidly disappearing in the countryside, and as vital wildlife corridors linking habitats together. Consequently, we aim to review our current mowing arrangements and address the above in a realistic and economical manner.
- 1.3 This report is presented before the Communities Scrutiny Committee in order to update the members on progress regarding preparing roadside maintenance policy which will include grass cutting and collection and how this can have a positive effect on biodiversity.

2. Background and Current Situation

- 2.1 A report was presented to the Scrutiny Committee in January last year outlining the proposed grass cutting procedure for discussion. Briefly, it was explained that the verges on our highway network are cut twice a year based on time.
- 2.2 It was also explained that we are working towards a policy of cutting and collecting grass where possible and when resources allow. The purpose of this will be to promote the needs of biodiversity and wildlife (although implementing a long-term cut and collect plan can also result in financial savings since some sites will no longer be cut during the spring).
- 2.3 The Department is glad to report that, in partnership with the Environment Department, we have managed to secure funding through the Welsh Government's Local Nature Partnership scheme to carry out a review of our grass cutting procedures in order to find out if we can better control of our current arrangements in order to promote the benefits of biodiversity. The review will run concurrently with projects that the Department of Environment has to invest in some of the Council's public open spaces in order to connect our residents with nature.

3. Grass Cutting and Collection Trials

- 3.1 Historically, the management of road verges in Gwynedd has focused on safety considerations rather than any wider benefits. As a result, our grass verges have possibly been cut too often, at the wrong times with the grass being left in place after cutting. Unfortunately, this type of verge management does not support biodiversity.
- 3.2 It is recognized that leaving grass on land after cutting leads to increased soil fertility which encourages vigorous grasses, nettles etc. to thrive at the expense of native wildflowers. However, collecting grass after cutting leads to soil that is less fertile which consequently produces terrains that are rich in wildflowers and able to support more wildlife.
- 3.3 As part of the review of the Department's grass cutting arrangements, Ecoscope, a specialist company from Conwy, was commissioned to produce a plan for conducting cutting and collection trials on our rural highway network. Their remit included assessing the value of existing flowers and wildlife on different sites, proposing a cut and collect specification for the sites, managing the trials and monitoring the sites over time. The plan they have produced for us follows the principles in the good practice guide 'Managing Grassland Road Verges' by Plantlife, the wild plant conservation charity.
- 3.4 With input from the Department's engineers, they identified eight suitable locations on the A497 and A499 in Dwyfor to hold the trials. As well as being relatively safe, the sites were chosen because they were straight, wide and long and therefore large enough to provide meaningful data that could be used to justify a change in the mowing regime.
- 3.5 The implementation work (cutting and collecting the grass, scarifying the surface and sowing wild flower seeds on each of the sites) was carried out last October by the Kehoe company from Tregarth.
- 3.6 Ecoscope will carry out a detailed assessment of the value of the biodiversity on the sites from April onwards to see if the trials have been successful. If it becomes clear that the trials have been successful, then the data and experiences gained will be a catalyst for the Department to apply for further grant money in order to extend the trials to Arfon and Dwyfor.
- 3.7 It should be noted that the grant money from the Local Nature Partnership has also enabled the Department to buy specialist grass cutting and collecting equipment which will enable us to undertake the operational work from now on.
- 3.8 Road verges that are left uncut during the spring can be perceived as being untidy by the public and road users. As a result, it is vital that we manage public perception of the trials as well as our ambition to extend the cut and collect scheme in the future. To this end, every Local Member and Community Council where the trial sites are located has been informed about the work and it is intended to place signs on each site which include a link to inform the public about the plan. There is also an intention to raise awareness about the scheme through social media etc. as the wild flowers start to bloom in the spring.
- 3.9 More excitingly, it is planned to promote the trials on the Council's stand on the Maes of the Llyn and Eifionydd Eisteddfod. This will coincide with the Environment Department's promotion of their Gwynedd Wildflower Meadows scheme for all primary schools in the Eisteddfod catchment area in order to establish a network of wild flower habitats. All of the trial sites are located on the main roads that lead to the Eisteddfod. As a result, it is hoped that they will flourish by the time the Eisteddfod takes place so that they present a warm, colorful and natural welcome to visitors.

4. Further Considerations

- 4.1 Concerns were expressed in last January's Scrutiny Committee meeting regarding the possible effects on the health and safety of our road users as a result of verges being left uncut in order to promote biodiversity. However, it should be made clear that health and safety will always take priority and no site will be considered if it has the potential to affect this aspect.
- 4.2 Concerns were also expressed about the potential for some verges within our towns and villages not to be cut as a result of the trials. Nevertheless, it should be confirmed that there is no intention to include urban verges in the trials. However, if we were thinking of including locations within towns and villages in the future, then we would include the Local Member and the relevant community/town council in the discussions before coming to a decision.
- 4.3 It was mentioned in the same meeting about the joint project with the charity Social Farms and Gardens which also involves cutting and collecting arrangements but on small plots of land. However, although the aims of this project are similar to those for road verges, it focuses more on supporting local communities and organizations to protect, manage and increase pollinator-friendly habitats. This project ends this year and the results will be produced by the charity shortly afterwards.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The Department will go out to contract this year for rural road verge grass cutting services. It is recognized that a new mowing policy will not be drawn up until the findings of the cutting and collection trials are available. However, there are provisions included in the contract documents which will allow it to be varied when the new policy has been decided. The new contract will be effective this spring.