

Committee	Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date	22 February 2024
Title	Grass Cutting and Maintaining County Road Verges
Cabinet Member	Councillor Berwyn Parry Jones
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Purpose	Review of the County's roadside maintenance arrangements

1. Presentation

- 1.1 The Department submitted a report to the Communities Scrutiny Committee in January 2023 to update it on the cut-and-collect trials that were taking place in selected areas within the County to promote wildlife and biodiversity needs, and to raise awareness about the current grass cutting arrangements on our county roads.
- 1.2 It was reported at the time that Gwynedd's road verge management had historically focused on safety considerations rather than any wider benefits such as supporting biodiversity. As a result, the Department partnered with the Environment Department to attract grant funding in order to carry out cut-and-collect trials in an effort to promote the needs of the environment.
- 1.3 It was also reported that the Department was due to enter into a new contract for rural road verge grass cutting services to commence in the 2023/24 financial year.
- 1.4 The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the progress of the trials and the new road verge grass cutting contract, and to raise awareness about the Department's aims and objectives going forward.

2. Cut-and-collect trials

2.1 Legislative and strategic context

Public authorities in Wales must fulfil many duties to maintain and enhance biodiversity and to boost ecosystem resilience, including the following:

- **COP15 - United Nations diversity framework to address the global loss of diversity and restore natural ecosystems 2022.**
Protect 30% of terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine areas by 2030.
- **Environment (Wales) Act 2016 - Section 6.**
Public authorities have a duty to make biodiversity a natural and integral part of their policies and processes.
- **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.**
Local authorities have a duty to improve the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales.
- **The Action Plan for Pollinators in Wales 2013.**
The Welsh Government's plan for co-ordinated policies and governance, and better and more connected habitats, to tackle the decline in pollinators in Wales.

2.1.1 Council officers are also required to comply with the following:

- **Gwynedd Biodiversity Duty Plan 2019**
The Council's plan for greeting its Section 6 duty in relation to maintaining and enhancing biodiversity and promoting resilience.
- **Climate and Nature Emergency Plan 2022**
The Council's plan to reach its ambition to become a net zero council by 2030.

2.2 Road verge management for pollinators

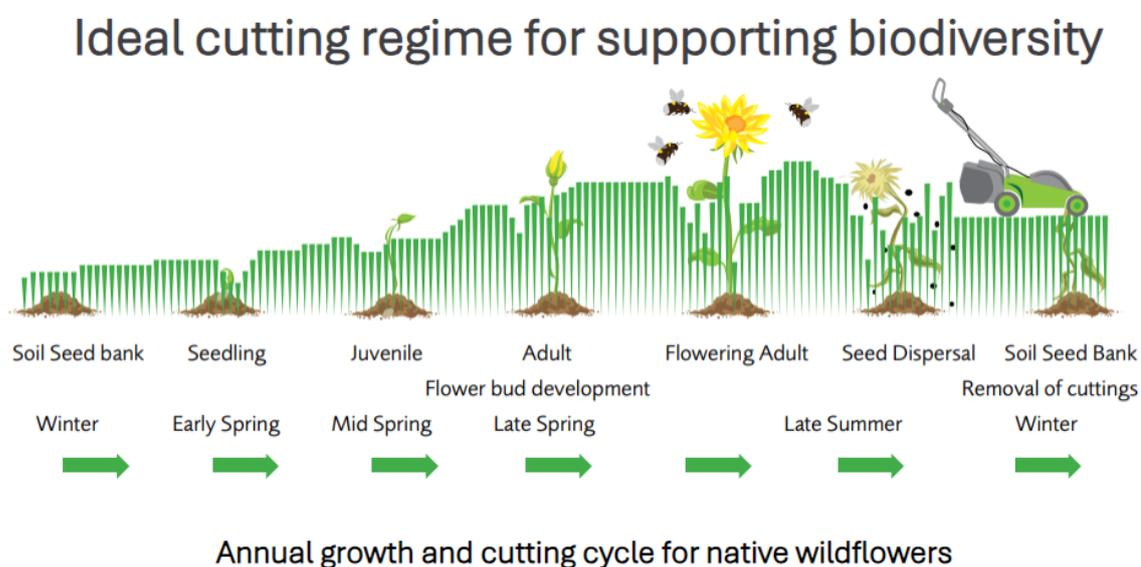
2.2.1 Pollinators have experienced global decline and this is mainly due to habitat loss and fragmentation. In order to maintain pollinators, it is necessary to increase the quality and quantity of habitats that provide food (flowers, nectar, and pollen), shade, and nesting sites. Road verges can be suitable as they incorporate a variety of habitat types including grassland, wetlands, hedgerows, and scrub. Therefore, with proper management, they have a particularly high potential to support pollinators.

2.2.2 Historically, Gwynedd's road verge management has tended to focus on safety considerations. As a result, our verges may have been cut too often, at the wrong times, with grass left on site after cutting. However, this type of management is not ideal to support pollinators.

2.2.3 It is recognised that the best way to assist in supporting pollinators, not only on road verges but other areas of grassland, is by adopting a cut-and-collect regime. Collecting the grass after mowing is important because:

- it prevents the accumulation of dead vegetation which can suffocate plants such as wildflowers.
- it leaves more open ground to allow seeds to grow.
- it reduces soil fertility therefore helping to slow the growth of some grass varieties that choke wildflowers.

2.2.4 In addition, there is a need to reduce the frequency of cuts to give wildflowers a chance to grow and thrive. Ideally, the verges should only be cut and collected once a year, around September. However, additional cuts may also be required later in the year, or early in the following year, depending on the circumstances. The ideal regime for cutting and collecting is shown below:



2.3 Implementation of the trials

- 2.3.1 Keen to make a difference and meet the Council's legislative and strategic duties and requirements, a plan was developed to pilot a cut and collect regime on some of the County's roads.
- 2.3.2 The Department was glad to be able to partner with the Biodiversity Service in the Environment Department to implement the scheme. As well as assisting in the development of the scheme, the Service secured funding through the Gwynedd Nature Partnership to carry out the trials.
- 2.3.3 Different locations were assessed; however, it was ultimately decided to locate the trials at sites on the A499 and A497 in Dwyfor. 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 mowing order. These roads were also chosen because they are designated as B-Lines, i.e. linear corridors of flower-rich habitats along which wildlife can be migrated or dispersed (see **Appendix A** for more information about B-Lines). It was a bonus that they were also on two of the main roads leading to Eisteddfod Llyn ac Eifionydd and therefore offered an opportunity to promote the trials to a much wider audience. The trial sites, along with other comparable sites developed by the Biodiversity Service, are shown below:



- 2.3.4 The biodiversity value of each site was assessed before work began so that a comparison can be made once the trial period ends in 2025. Site preparation, i.e. cutting and collecting grass and scarifying the surface to remove unsuitable vegetation, began in October 2022. The sites were then sown with native wildflower seeds such as yellow rattle; a flower that is often used to create or restore wildflower meadows since it can help prevent the growth of grasses that choke wildflowers and also recycles soil nutrients. Below are photos of a site near Clynnog Fawr on the A499 after preparing it for seeding:



2.3.5 The sites flourished during spring 2023. However, as expected, they did not produce an abundance of colourful wildflowers in the first year. However, the results in each of the sites were extremely promising and an early indicator that the trials were successful. It is expected that the flower display will be significantly improved next year, and over the following years, as the new management regime for these sites develops. The following photos were taken in June last year:



2.3.5 These sites were exempt from the normal rural verge cutting program (first cut during the spring) to allow the wildflowers to thrive. However, as per their management plan, they were cut and collected by specialist equipment during September.

2.4 Promoting the trials

2.4.1 Road verges left uncut during the spring can be considered untidy by the public and road users. As a result, it was vital that we controlled public perception of the trials as well as furthering our ambition to extend the cut-and-collect scheme in the future.

2.4.2 Therefore, all of the Local Members and Community Councils where the sites were located were notified of the trials and 'It's For Them' signs (a Welsh Government campaign to try and change people's mindsets in relation to mowing for the benefit of nature) were posted at each individual site (see **Appendix B** for details of the signs).



2.4.3 Public awareness about the scheme was also raised through social media:



- 2.4.4 More excitingly, the trials were promoted on the Council's stand at the Llyn ac Eifionydd Eisteddfod ground. This ran concurrently with the Environment Department's campaign to promote their Gwynedd Wildflower Meadows scheme for all Eisteddfod catchment primary schools to establish a network of wildflower habitats.



- 2.4.5 All the good work by the Biodiversity Service and this Department was used by Welsh Government's Minister for Environment as an example of how local authorities have incorporated and promoted the principles of 'It's For Them' and she particularly praised how the Council has embraced the objectives of the Local Nature Partnership.
- 2.4.6 An article about the trials was published in the 2022 issue of Dolydd Llyn (see **Appendix C** - page 8).
- 2.4.7 The Council is currently producing videos/animations to promote good roadside grass cutting practices which should be available for distribution soon.
- 2.5 Next steps**
- 2.5.1 The results on the ground, and the positive comments received to date regarding the trials and our desire to improve road verges and public open space for the benefit of nature, have prompted the Department not only to continue the current trials but to extend them to other B-Lines roads within the County during the next financial year. To this end, discussions have commenced with the Biodiversity Service and Area Offices to produce a plan.
- 2.5.2 The majority of work on the sites to date has been conducted by a local specialist contractor. However, the Department is keen to undertake this type of work itself and gain expertise in the field. With this in mind, another great benefit of working in partnership with the Biodiversity Service is that they have been able to procure specialist equipment, including a tractor, grass collector, baler, etc. again through the Gwynedd Nature Partnership, for us to be able to make this a reality. A summary of the equipment procured so far is included in **Appendix D**. The Department's Grounds Maintenance Service has already commenced using the equipment to undertake projects on behalf of the Biodiversity Service and it is intended that they continue with the management plan for the existing trial sites as well as preparing any future roadside trial sites.
- 2.5.3 As they gain experience on the Council's roads and grounds, there is the potential for them to eventually be able to offer their services to other authorities and organisations who wish to undertake similar work in order to improve their roads and grounds for the benefit of nature.

3. New rural grass cutting services contract

- 3.1 In line with the Council's Highway Asset Management Plan - 2010, the Department used to cut verges on all county rural roads twice a year (between May and June and between September and October) with little regard for biodiversity.
- 3.2 The Department went out to contract for new rural road verge grass cutting services at the start of this financial year. However, now more aware of how our cutting regime can affect biodiversity, we still cut our verges twice a year but have limited the amount of grass we cut. As a result, we now cut a 1-meter-wide swathe on our Class 1 and 2 roads only in the spring and cut a 1-meter-wide swathe on our Class 3 and Unclassified roads, and the full width of all of the verges on our Class 1 and 2 roads, in the autumn.
- 3.3 This contract will expire at the end of the 2024/25 financial year with an option to extend it annually for two years thereafter. It is hoped that we will have prepared a new rural grass cutting policy based on the results of the cut-and-collect trials within this period and that any new regime will be reflected in preparations for the next contract.

4. Further considerations

- 4.1 Concerns were raised at previous meetings of the Scrutiny Committee about the potential impacts on the health and safety of our road users as a result of verges being left uncut to promote biodiversity. However, we can confirm that health and safety will always be prioritised and no site will be considered if there is the potential for it to affect the wellbeing of users.
- 4.2 Concerns were also raised about the possibility that some verges within our towns and villages would remain uncut as a result of the trials and this could have an impact on their appearance. However, while we aim to extend any new arrangements to urban areas so that a real difference can be made, the areas will be carefully chosen so that they complement the existing landscape and ensure that they do not have an undue impact on the appearance of village and town centres. We will ensure that the Local Member and the relevant community/town council participate in any decision when we include any location within towns and villages.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 It will take time to move away from the traditional way of maintaining our road verges so that they benefit nature in the future. However, the sooner we start, the sooner we can start making a difference. It is hoped that the trials we are currently undertaking, and will conduct in the future, will ultimately make a difference by helping to create biodiversity corridors, or 'insect superhighways' as they are often called, to support the recovery of threatened species and the recovery of abundant populations of insects that are vital for pollinating our crops and wildflowers.