

MEETING	Communities Scrutiny Committee
DATE	20 March 2025
TITLE	Grass cutting and maintaining county road verges
REASON FOR SCRUTINY	Follow-up following scrutiny at the 22 February 2024 meeting
AUTHOR	Steffan Jones, Head of Highways, Engineering and YGC
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor June Jones

1. Why does it need to be scrutinized?

- 1.1 A progress report in relation to a review of county road verge maintenance was scrutinised at the Committee's meeting on 22 February 2024.
- 1.2 The report included an update on the cutting and collection trials taking place in selected areas within the County to promote wildlife and biodiversity needs. It was noted that the trials were in line with the duty of public authorities to make biodiversity a natural and integral part of their policies and processes in accordance with Section 6, Environment (Wales) Act 2016.
- 1.3 The report also included details of the new rural road cutting contract as well as the Department's aims and objectives going forward.
- 1.4 It was decided to accept the report and the Department was asked to submit an update in a year's time.

2. What exactly needs to be scrutinised?

- How successful are the trials?
- Are the new mowing arrangements promoting/improving biodiversity?
- Has further work been undertaken to look into the possibility of the Grounds Maintenance Service offering their services to authorities or other organisations wishing to carry out similar work in order to improve their roads and lands for the benefit of nature?

3. Summary and Key Issues

- 3.1 Gwynedd's road verge management has historically focused on road safety considerations rather than any wider benefits such as supporting biodiversity.
- 3.2 Keen to make a difference, and meet legislative duties as well as the Council's strategic requirements, a plan was developed jointly with the Environment Department in 2023/24 to trial a cut-and-collect regime at selected sites on the A499 and A497 in Dwyfor.
- 3.3 The initial trials received positive comments; so much so that it has spurred the Department to continue with the existing trial sites and establish new trial sites in Meirionnydd this financial year.

- 3.4 In addition, the Department amended the specification of its new rural mowing agreement to limit the amount of grass cut annually and thereby increase the area on road verges available for wildflower growth.
- 3.5 To this end, the Department seeks the Committee's support for its intention to extend the trials to Arfon during the next financial year in order to create more biodiversity corridors and assist in supporting the recovery of threatened species.

4. Background / Context

4.1 Rural Grass Cutting Contract

- 4.1.1 The verges of rural roads, which are the county roads outside towns and villages, are cut mainly for safety reasons i.e. to maintain good visibility at junctions, bends etc. so as to ensure that drivers, cyclists and pedestrians can see ahead unobstructed.
- 4.1.2 The Department tends to enter into a new contract for rural grass cutting services (on a cut and leave basis) every two years, with an option to extend it annually up to a maximum of two years.
- 4.1.3 The cutting work is divided into seventeen sub-areas within the county with contractors able to bid for more than one sub-area up to a maximum of eight. The tenders are scored on the basis of commercial/cost element (70%) and quality/technical element (30%). All cutting work must begin on a date specified by the relevant Area Engineer and be completed within a period of 6 weeks.
- 4.1.4 The contract used to state that the rural road verges were to be cut twice a year (between May and June and between September and October) with little regard for anything other than road safety. However, these arrangements have now been amended to ensure that biodiversity is given at least equal importance to road safety.
- 4.1.5 The benefits of managing roadsides to promote biodiversity are highlighted in 4.3 below.
- 4.1.6 The Department went out to tender for its latest mowing contract in 2023/24. The specification was changed to limit the amount of grass to be cut so as to increase the area available for wildflower growth. As a result, in the spring, only a 1 metre wide swathe is cut on the verges of Class 1 and 2 roads with the verges of Class 3 and Unclassified roads left uncut. Also, in autumn, the full width of the verges of Class 1 and 2 roads are cut, as well as a 1 metre wide swathe on Class 3 and Unclassified roads.
- 4.1.7 It is hoped to be able to prepare the next grass cutting contract based on the results of the cut and collect trials, i.e. that the grass on many more county road rural verges is cut and collected rather than cut and left on the surface.

4.2 Legislative and strategic context in relation to biodiversity

- 4.2.1 Public authorities in Wales must meet many statutory 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.

4.2.2 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.

4.3 Road verge management for pollinators

4.3.1 Pollinators are subject to global decline, mainly due to habitat loss and fragmentation. With proper management, road verges have a particularly high potential to support pollinators because they incorporate a variety of habitat types including grassland, wetlands, hedgerows and scrub.

4.3.2 Historically, the edges of Gwynedd's roads may have been cut too often, at the wrong times with grass left on the surface after cutting. However, this type of control is not ideal to support pollinators.

4.3.3 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 rather than a cut and leave regime. Collecting the grass after cutting is important because:

- it prevents the accumulation of dead vegetation that suffocates other plants such as wildflowers.
- it leaves more open ground to allow seeds to grow.
- it reduces soil fertility and therefore aids in slowing the growth of some of the grass varieties that choke wildflowers.

4.3.4 In addition, there is a need to reduce the number 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.

4.3.5 The ideal mowing regime for supporting biodiversity is illustrated in **Appendix 1**.

4.4 Cut-and-collect trials

- 4.4.1 In collaboration with the Environment Department's Biodiversity Service, a plan has been developed to set aside sites on the county highway network to trial a grass cutting and collecting regime in order to create more appealing habitats for pollinators. As a result of this collaboration, the Department has also been able to secure funding through the Gwynedd Nature Partnership to purchase specialist equipment such as a tractor, collection machine and a baler so that the Grounds Maintenance Service can carry out this type of work itself in the future and gain expertise in the field.
- 4.4.2 The first trials were located at selected sites on the A499 and A497 in Dwyfor. These sites were chosen because they were straight, wide and long and therefore large enough to provide meaningful data that could ultimately be used to justify changing the Department's historic mowing arrangements.
- 4.4.3 The locations of the sites in Dwyfor, along with other similar sites developed by the Biodiversity Service, can be seen in **Appendix 2**:
- 4.4.4 Road verges left uncut during the spring and summer can be considered untidy by the public and road users. As a result, it was vital that the Department managed the public's perception of the trials and informed them of its ambition to extend the cut and collect scheme in the future. Therefore, all 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 cutting grass for the benefit of nature, were posted at each site.
- 4.4.5 Details of the 'It's for Them' signs can be found in **Appendix 3**.

4.5 Continuation of the trials

- 4.5.1 The results on the ground, and the positive comments received about the initial trials, spurred the Department not only to continue the existing trials but to extend them to other roads within the County. As a result, the trials were extended to the Meirionnydd area this financial year.
- 4.5.2 In partnership with the Biodiversity Service, a local ecologist was commissioned to identify and inspect sites suitable for implementing the trials. Further specialist equipment was purchased, again through the Gwynedd Nature Partnership, to enable the Department to continue with the trials and realise its future aims and objectives.
- 4.5.3 By following parameters similar to those set out in 4.4.2 above, the ecologist identified approximately seven main sites on the network suitable to conduct the trials. However, due to a lack of funding, only two sites were developed this financial year, namely at the junction of the A496 with the A487 near Maentwrog, and the western approach on the A493 into Aberdyfi.
- 4.5.4 The locations of the sites in Meirionnydd can be found in **Appendix 4**.

4.5.5 Similar to the trials in Dwyfor, an assessment of the biodiversity value of each site was carried out before preparation. The grass was subsequently cut and collected and the surface scarified to remove unsuitable vegetation. 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.

4.5.6 Photos of the work that took place on the sites can be seen at **Appendix 5**.

5. Consultation

5.1 Local Members and relevant Community Councils were contacted before undertaking work on the sites, and public awareness of the scheme was raised through social media.

5.2 The original trials in Dwyfor were promoted on the Council's stand at the Llyn and Eifionydd Eisteddfod ground. This ran concurrently with the Environment Department's campaign to promote their Gwynedd Wildflower Meadows scheme for all primary schools in the Eisteddfod catchment area.

6. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

6.1 This legislation places a duty on local authorities to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales.

6.2 Relevant local communities were notified of the intention to hold the trials in their areas and Welsh Government designed 'It's for Them' signs were erected at each site to inform residents and visitors of the trials and the reasons for holding them. This helped reduce any complaints or negative comments about the appearance of the sites over the spring and summer.

6.3 The Department has worked closely with the Biodiversity Service on all of the trials to date and is currently working together to extend the trials to other parts of the county highway network.

6.4 Aware of the Grounds Maintenance Service's developing expertise in this area, a number of town and community councils have contacted the officers to seek advice and carry out similar work in their areas on their behalf.

7. Impact on Equality Characteristics, Welsh and Socio-Economic Duty

7.1 The Department has already recognised the need for impact assessments. As a result, assessments will be developed in due course.

8. Next Steps

- 8.1 The Department is keen to expand the trials into the next financial year and research into identifying suitable locations within the Arfon area has already begun. Once again, the Department is working with the Biodiversity Service to develop the sites and its strategy going forward.
- 8.2 As well as working on road verges, Grounds Maintenance Service officers have started conducting cut and collect trials themselves on some of the lands they are responsible for maintaining. One example is the work being carried out at the Cerrig yr Orsedd site in Caernarfon where the flowers and grass have been harvested so that the seeds can be collected and sown at other sites low in native plant species. This technique is considered superior to sowing commercial wildflower seeds or planting plug-plants. The Department is keen to encourage and further the Service's aspirations to continue to develop its expertise in this area.
- 8.3 Details of these trials can be found in **Appendix 6**.
- 8.4 As noted in last year's report, it will take time to move away from the traditional way of maintaining the County's road verges so that they benefit nature in the future. However, now that the work has started, the sooner the Department's efforts can make a difference. It is hoped that the trials currently taking place, and will take place in the future, will ultimately make a difference by helping to create biodiversity corridors to support the recovery of threatened species and the recovery of abundant populations of insects that are essential for crop and wildflower pollination.

9. Background Information

- 9.1 Further information on the benefits of roadside management to promote biodiversity can be found in the following document from Plantlife, a charity which aims to protect and restore as well as connect people to nature:
<https://www.plantlife.org.uk/learning-resource/road-verge-green-space-management-best-practice/>

10. Appendices

- **Appendix 1:** Ideal grass cutting regime for supporting biodiversity
- **Appendix 2:** Locations of trial sites at Dwyfor
- **Appendix 3:** Details of 'It's for Them' signs from the Welsh Government
- **Appendix 4:** Locations of trial sites in Meirionnydd
- **Appendix 5:** Photographs of the work on Meirionnydd sites
- **Appendix 6:** Details of the Grounds Maintenance Service's trials