

Overview and Scrutiny

22 June 2022

Briefing Note - Highway Verge Management Policy

Key Messages:

- County Highways have developed a new policy which considers a sustainable County wide approach to verge maintenance and wildflower planting, whilst still ensuring the over-riding importance of road safety is maintained.
- To encourage biodiversity and to create wildlife corridors, selected **rural** roadside verges will be cut in a different manner.
- Following a strong level of public interest surrounding the sustainable management of grass verges a Community Engagement Scheme is proposed for **non-rural** verges.
- The policy will support the Warwickshire County Council (WCC) Council Plan 2022-27 by promoting biodiversity and safeguarding natural species and habitats, supporting people to make behavioural changes and invest in our biodiversity.

1 Background

This note is intended to outline the principal activities, procedures and benefits which form part of the new Highway Verge Management Policy.

The release of a best practice guidance document by Plantlife and the national discussions around climate change have brought the topic of sustainable verge maintenance in to focus. Plantlife are a wildflower conservation charity who campaign for local authorities to consider the wider issues of biodiversity, environmental impact and sustainability when managing their roadside verges.

The Plantlife guidance document has been picked up by much of the mainstream media which has prompted a noticeable increase in related enquiries and in response County Highways carried out a review of their existing verge maintenance practices.

A new policy document has been written to raise the awareness of the biodiversity value of roadside verges in Warwickshire, setting out how verges can be managed to maintain their high value, whilst recognising the over-riding importance of road safety.

2 Existing Policy

County Highways separate highway verge maintenance into two programmes; rural and non-rural and there are various contractors engaged in this work, on their behalf, around the County.

For rural mowing, those verges outside of towns and villages that typically have speed limits in excess of 40mph, County Highways carry out the mowing on a 'safety basis', by cutting a one-metre width swathe plus additional areas at junctions and on bends, for visibility purposes, three times a year.

For non-rural mowing, those highway verges situated within towns and villages that typically have a speed limit of 40mph or less, these are generally cut by the relevant District or Borough Council on

WCC's behalf, to an 'amenity' standard, The cutting frequency is determined by the individual District or Borough Council and in some instances can take place up to 15 times per year.

3 The New Policy

Rural Verges

To encourage biodiversity and to create wildlife corridors selected roadside verges in rural areas will be cut in a different way by County Highways. Highway verges considered to have good biodiversity value will be cut once a year only, between August and September, with the grass cuttings removed. This will allow for the growth, flowering and seeding of wildflowers, as well as preventing the verges from being dominated by more aggressive plant species.

Sites will be selected for inclusion in the programme using data collected by the WCC Ecology Team. Only those verges that are identified as having good biodiversity value will be considered for inclusion in the programme.

County Highways understand that this project is a step change and so it is intended that they will, initially, only identify sites that can be managed effectively with their existing resource to ensure a real impact can be achieved. It is however intended that site inclusion can be upscaled over the coming years as knowledge and understanding of the network and green infrastructure improves.

Non-rural Verges

Due to the strong level of public interest surrounding the sustainable management of highway verges the policy looks to introduce a Community Engagement scheme.

The Community Engagement Scheme will give Local Interest Groups, Parish, Town, District or Borough Councils the opportunity to explore the possibility of reducing the level of cuts on 'non-rural' verges in order to promote the existing flora and fauna to flourish or to sow wildflower areas.

The Community Engagement Scheme will be reserved for those sites where the speed limit, of the adjacent road, is 40mph or less and therefore will cover most areas within towns and villages. The proposed sites will need to be approved by an officer from County Highways in line with the criteria set out in the policy, and if approved County Highways will liaise with the relevant District or Borough Council so that the site can be removed from their amenity mowing schedule.

County Highways will only enter discussions about a change in the mowing regime with Parish, Town, District or Borough councils, and therefore Local Interest Groups will need to work with their relevant elected body to make an application to County Highways. This process will ensure buy in from all, including residents which may be affected by the alterations, which is key, as the decision on whether to cut verges or not can be divisive.

4 Benefits of the new Policy

- The policy will allow County Highways to establish a regime of verge maintenance that will not only ensure road safety is upheld but will enable verges to be maintained in a manner that promotes biodiversity by conserving, wherever possible, special wildlife habitats and wildflowers.

- The policy will contribute to the wider corporate ambitions detailed in the WCC Council Plan specifically around the promotion of biodiversity and the provision of pleasant green spaces. The policy will allow County Highways to encourage biodiversity and the safeguarding of natural species and habitats.
- The Community Engagement Scheme will allow County Highways to support people to make behavioural changes and invest in biodiversity, creating opportunities for communities to engage with the Council, on a matter that has proven to be of high importance to them.
- Previously County Highways have seen a number of pilot schemes working across the council, delivered by various stakeholders, groups and organisations and the new policy will formalise these arrangements.
- Details of the highway verges, in relation to this project, will be uploaded on to the County Highways strategic asset management system, creating a visual map of the locations, that will help with the targeting of future sites and help establish a network of interconnected wildlife corridors across the County.