

Rural Verges as Wildlife Corridors – A Reduction in Rural Grass Cutting Trial

Project Brief

1. Background to the Project

East Sussex County Council (ESCC) have received an increased level of Member and resident contact regarding the rural roads verge cutting service over the past two years. The correspondence is largely made up of requests to stop cutting rural verges or change the schedule and frequency. This has been driven by the charity Plantlife's Road Verge Campaign, and a number of articles in the press and social media highlighting the benefit of road verges as wildlife corridors. Other local and national initiatives can also be seen to follow this approach, for example, the High Weald AONB work with Natural England on Nature Recovery Networks.

Due to the heightened interest by residents in the ecological value of roadside verges and their contribution to the landscape and character of the County, ESCC are proposing a project to trial the reduction of the rural grass cutting service in selected Towns and Parishes.

Note: the trial would not affect urban grass cutting services

2. Proposed Trial Areas

The following Parish and Town Councils will be contacted to discuss whether they would like to be included in the trial. They have been selected as they have previously shown an interest in reducing the service.

- Alfriston
- Battle
- Beckley
- Crowborough
- Forest Row
- Hastings
- Lewes
- Mountfield
- Wadhurst
- Warbleton
- Westmeston
- Willingdon and Jevington

County Councillors of the selected areas will also be contacted to notify them of the trial.

See Appendix A for Map.

3. Change to Service in Trial Areas

At present rural grass verges receive two cuts per year. The first cut starts in May and the second in Autumn. These are carried out as a 1m wide swathe and visibility splays at junctions and on the inside of bends where sight lines between road users may be obscured by vegetation.

The trial would reduce the rural grass cutting service in the selected areas to:

- One visibility cut undertaken around May/June
- One 1 metre Swathe with Visibility cuts in the Autumn

This change would mean rural verges within the trial areas would not be cut at a time when flowering is often at its peak of attractiveness and the benefits to pollinators at their height, and flowering plants would then be able to complete their lifecycles and set seed, providing further biodiversity benefits. Safety issues would remain a priority, with any visibility or access issues being picked up and rectified through the usual process.

4. Timescale

The trial would be undertaken throughout the rural grass cutting service year in 2021, which runs from May to Autumn.

5. Required Outcome

Feedback from the trial will be collated and reviewed along with any operational issues encountered, costs and an overview of the flora and fauna observed in the verges during the trial. The results will be presented and considered for a full Policy change to the whole rural grass cutting service from 2022/23.

6. Project Justification

The trial would support ESCC's Environment Strategy by protecting and enhancing the natural environment and supporting the natural capacity and support ESCC duties under the 2006 Natural Resources and Rural Communities Act to have regard to biodiversity in all our activities.

In addition, it would support the public interest in seeing flowering plants during the spring and summer whilst also maintaining the authority's duties to maintain a safe network.

7. Other things the project will consider

Priority will continue to be given to the statutory obligations of East Sussex County Council to ensure that the highway network is safe to use.

Consideration will also need to be given to the implications on the current Highway Infrastructure Services Contract.

The cost of the change in service if applied to the whole County where possible cost reductions may be offset by increased reactive cutting.

The impact on the local subcontractors who currently deliver this work such as a possible reduction in workforce etc.

Appendix A – Map of Selected Areas

