

HIGHWAY VERGE MAINTENANCE

To: Highways and Transport Committee
Meeting Date: 16th June 2020
From: Steve Cox - Executive Director, Place and Economy
Electoral division(s): "All"
Forward Plan ref: N/A **Key decision:** No

Purpose:
To appraise members of the approach to management of highway verges across Cambridgeshire following the launch of updated national guidance.

Recommendation:

- a) To endorse the approach set out in the report for the management of highway verges across Cambridgeshire.**
- b) To approve inclusion of the County's verge management approach in future iterations of the Highway Operational Standards.**
- c) To amend the current county council tree policy to state that for every tree removed, two trees will be planted.**

<i>Officer contact:</i>	<i>Member contacts:</i>
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1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In September 2019 the organisation Plantlife, launched an updated document for the management of roadside verges, “Managing Grassland Road Verges: a best practice guide”. This publication followed a Plantlife campaign that encouraged authorities to alter mowing practices and promote wildflower management.
- 1.2 Plantlife is a British conservation charity working nationally and internationally to save threatened wild flowers, plants and fungi. The organisation owns nearly 4,500 acres of nature reserve across England, Scotland and Wales. Plantlife was instrumental in the creation of the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation.
- 1.3 According to Plantlife, the UK has lost 97% of its wildflower meadows in less than a century, with roadside verges particularly hard hit. Safety and access considerations along with a desire for “neatness” and the logistics of litter-picking has resulted in local authorities adopting an overzealous approach to keeping verges short. A “cut less, cut later” approach by councils and highways authorities could significantly improve the health of the UK’s verges.
- 1.4 Local councils are responding to these changes in public opinion whilst also considering human resources and economic sustainability, as well as roadside safety. For example, in the summer of 2019, Rotherham was widely praised for its eight-mile “river of flowers” alongside a major route.
- 1.5 This report outlines how Cambridgeshire has reacted to this new guidance and also takes the opportunity to amend the existing tree policy, which forms part of the Highway Operational Standards (HOS). Rather than wait for the annual review of the HOS and comes before committee for approval in February/March each year.

2. MAIN ISSUES

- 2.1 Following publication of the latest Plantlife guidance, officers in conjunction with the chair and vice/chair of the former Highways & Infrastructure Committee reviewed the way verge management and maintenance is undertaken across Cambridgeshire. The review concluded that the approach already in place in Cambridgeshire, outlined below, adheres to the guidance from Plantlife and is in keeping with national best practice, thus protecting our wildflowers and being very much in keeping with the Council’s environmental goals.

Verge management

- 2.2 For highway verges outside of villages, the first full cut starts at the end of April and is completed by the middle of July each year. The cut consists of a one metre swathe, full width cuts at junction visibility splays and bends only, and a one metre swathe cut next to cycleway/footways that run along the verge. After the first cut, a countywide cut of all junction visibility splays and footways is carried out to ensure any safety concerns are met.
- 2.3 The second full and final cut is carried out between September and the mid-November, and is a replication of the first cut with the inclusion of an extra width cut in alternate years on all A and B Roads. This extra width cut is up to a maximum of three metres. This helps us to keep the vegetation off the carriageway and reduces self-sets from becoming a hazard.

This cut is carried out at this time of the season to allow wild flowers to seed, as recommended in the Plant Life document.

- 2.4 Village grass is cut three times a year, either through our Highway Services contract or the Parishes will carry out this function on our behalf. The cuts are typically, late April to June, late July to August and late September to October. Locations of wildflowers or daffodils are identified and these are not cut.
- 2.5 In addition to these points, Cambridgeshire has 67 Protected Road Verges and work on these is carefully programmed with the assistance of Cambridgeshire's Ecology Officer. Further, requests to plant wildflowers and Daffodils in verges are viewed favourably and applicants can apply using a Section 142 licence.
- 2.6 Weed treatment takes place twice a year with the treatment of weeds that are actively showing in the kerb line. Weeds on grass verges are not treated. A programme has been introduced this year to treat invasive weeds such as Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed. Any located on the public highway will be inspected risk assessed and treated, this will be twice a year for three years.

Tree policy

- 2.7 The Council has declared a Climate Emergency and an important part of our action plan is to increase the number of trees across Cambridgeshire. As part of this agenda and to improve air quality it is proposed to update the council's existing tree policy. Currently when a tree is removed, that tree has to be replaced. However, it is proposed that with immediate effect, the one for one replacement is changed to a one for two replacement. Therefore the policy would state that for every one tree on the public highway that is removed two trees are to be planted in its place. It is proposed that the Highways Operational Standards be amended immediately to reflect this.

3. ALIGNMENT WITH CORPORATE PRIORITIES

3.1 A good quality of life for everyone

The main objectives of the Council's verge management is to maintain and enhance the plant species in Cambridgeshire's verges whilst maintaining safety for road users. This approach will improve wildlife corridors across the county with particular improvement for pollinators. The proposed approach, which is in line with the national guidance, is intended to reduce the area of verge that is cut during each phase of the cutting programme.

Greater emphasis is based on safety with an increased frequency of cut at vision splays and bends. The Council will also work closely with the City Council District Councils, Town Councils and Parishes Councils to promote the Plantlife Good Verge Guide and these changes should benefit everyone.

3.2 Thriving places for people to live

Allowing for the growth of wild flowers will provide a more aesthetic environment for people travelling and using the countryside for leisure activities.

3.3 The best start for Cambridgeshire's children

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.4 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2050

The change in the tree policy will contribute towards this goal as trees absorb and store carbon dioxide.

4. SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Resource Implications

The changes noted here are already budgeted for and there will be no additional impacts as a result.

4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.7 Public Health Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

Implications	Officer Clearance
Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance?	Yes Name of Financial Officer: Sarah Heywood
Have the procurement/contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the LGSS Head of Procurement?	Yes Name of Officer: Gus de Silva
Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or LGSS Law?	Yes Name of Legal Officer: Fiona McMillian
Have the equality and diversity	Yes

implications been cleared by your Service Contact?	Name of Officer: Elsa Evans
Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications?	Yes Name of Officer: Sarah Silk
Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact?	Yes Name of Officer: Richard Lumley
Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health	Yes Name of Officer: Iain Green

Source Documents	Location
Plantlife Managing Grassland Road Verges: a best practice guide	https://www.plantlife.org.uk/application/files/3315/7063/5411/Managing_grassland_road_verges_Singles.pdf
Highways Operational Standards – Tree Policy section 41 of Highways Standards and Enforcement Appendix F	https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/asset-library/Highway-Operational-Standards-April-2020.pdf