

To: **EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**
4 FEBRUARY 2022

**Verge maintenance to reduce the impact of climate change and enhance the
Borough's natural biodiversity
Executive Director of Delivery**

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To outline how changes to grass verge maintenance could reduce the impact of climate change and further increase biodiversity across Bracknell Forest whilst improving the health of trees growing on verges.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 **Grass is left uncut under trees throughout the growing season, cut once per year at the end of the season and the cuttings left to compost naturally.**
- 2.2 **To adopt Plantlife's recommended approach to managing grassland road verges, this approach is supported by Natural England and Highways England. On large, wide verges, a strip adjacent to the road, cycle path or foot path is cut regularly through the growing season and the rest of the verge is cut just once a year to allow species to grow, flower and seed, encouraging the diversity of the verge to develop naturally.**

3 Reasons for Recommendation

- 3.1 Long grass beneath trees provides natural protection to the base of the tree, the trunk and also to shallow roots.
- 3.2 Grass verges have the potential to provide habitats for a number of different plant and animal species, including important pollinator insects.

Repeated mowing kills some plant species and prevents many from reaching the flowering and seeding stages of their natural growth cycle. Changing the mowing frequency, so that some areas of verge are only cut once a year, increases the number and diversity of plants that are growing, allows natural replenishment of the seed bank and provides a food source for bees, butterflies and other insects. Grass areas managed for biodiversity are important for wildlife and act as habitat corridors. Reduced cutting to support wildflowers contributes towards targets in the Bracknell Forest Biodiversity Action Plan which supports the council's biodiversity duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.

- 3.3 The guidelines compiled by Plantlife; Managing Grassland Road Verges, fulfil a recommendation in the Government's National Pollinator Strategy. Establishing ecological networks to support the recovery of nature is a priority for government.
- 3.4 Improve Bracknell Forest's resilience to climate change impacts by allowing longer grass that retains moisture better, remains cooler and will return carbon to the soil when arisings are left to compost naturally.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 Mow all the grass verges on the same high frequency schedules as they always have been including areas under trees.

5 Supporting Information

- 5.1 Management of long grass beneath trees and long grass for biodiversity should not be confused, they are two separate things. The habitat of long grass beneath trees is shaded, cooler and rich in nutrients meaning when grass is cut here arisings can be left in situ to feed back into the ground. Areas of long grass to increase species diversity are well drained, sunny and low in nutrient. It is important in these areas that when grass is cut arisings are removed in order to keep nutrient levels low.

Areas beneath trees

- 5.2 Leaving grass beneath trees to grow longer gives good ground cover and increases moisture retention, the longer grass prevents rapid evapo-transpiration of ground moisture, which encourages healthier and more diverse soil organisms which help support established trees. It may also allow the development of a better woodland habitat by supporting natural regeneration of the trees and growth of woodland flora.
- 5.3 The longer grass can also deter foot traffic and compaction of the ground beneath trees allowing better passage of oxygen to the roots enabling them to perform better and keep the tree healthier. Longer grass can also help deter residents from parking vehicles on the grass verge areas, which causes loss of grass and soil compaction.
- 5.4 The untreated grass is cut just once per annum, at the end of the summer season, the cut grass is then left on the ground to naturally compost under mature trees. Leaving arisings to compost on site will return carbon and nutrients to the soil, further improving its ability to retain moisture and support biodiversity.
- 5.5 There are some exceptions that will be made across the borough, for example around newly planted and very young trees, veteran trees and also in the Easthampstead conservation area where large areas of longer grass is not in keeping with the requirements for it maintain its 1960 appearance.

Newly planted or young trees should be mulched preferably with woodchip, around their base. This will mean that the grass will not grow beneath the tree and the roots and base of the trunk are protected by the mulch, this is not a new practice across the borough. The exception to this would be mass tree whip planting where mulch is not always put down beneath the trees, for example the Downshire Way Project.

Long grass for biodiversity

- 5.6 Areas of longer grass and plants at the roadside and on roundabouts provide important shelter and food for wildlife including pollinators such as bees and butterflies. Allowing the plants to grow, flower, then go to seed increases the nectar available as a food source and allows plant species to reseed themselves and help maintain biodiversity for the following year. Longer verges can also provide cover and habitat links for birds and small mammals.

Grass verges are a valuable habitat and careful management of them is required to retain some of the wildflowers and plants native to the UK. Over 97 percent of species rich grassland has been lost in the last century and grass verges provide an ideal opportunity to restore this valuable habitat. Up to forty species can be found in a single square metre and grasslands can support declining species of conservation concern.

A diversity of plants encourages a wide variety of insects to feed and shelter within grass verges and these in turn provide food for a range of birds (such as Song Thrush) and mammals.

Just a few examples of native wildflowers from the borough's grass verges include:



Ellesfield Avenue – Orchids



Met office roundabout – Pyramidal Orchid



Downshire Way – Cuckoo Flower



Met Office roundabout – Cow Slips

- 5.7 Leaving some larger areas of verge uncut through the growing season has been a practice that Bracknell Forest Council has had in place for many years (known as Roadside Nature Reserves or Biodiversity Areas), however there is the potential for this strategy to be further developed. Areas such as the verge between Mill Lane and Wildridings Road close to the Twin Bridges roundabout have been successfully managed in this way for a long time, as have many of the larger roundabouts across the borough.

During the 2021 growing season some wider verge areas along Harvest Ride, Warfield were managed in this way, these proved very successful as many plants did progress to the flowering and seeding stages of their natural growth cycle. The Warfield Environment Group has been working alongside the council to establish these areas and they will continue to do so on a voluntary basis in close liaison with the Council's Biodiversity Officer.

Highway safety and overall appearance

- 5.8 The primary reason for verge maintenance is for highway safety and compliance with legislation relating to the adopted highway. That remains the priority and none of the proposed areas of longer grass will encroach on highway sight lines or cause vegetation to overhang the highway.

The edge of a verge or roundabout that is adjacent to the adopted highway will still be cut at a regular frequency, as will walkways where appropriate, in order not to obstruct use of the open space or access for recreational purposes such as dog walking. These cut strips will be at least the width of a ride on mower. This will ensure the overall appearance remains neat. The short mown grass will frame the longer areas, aesthetics can therefore still be maintained alongside helping the natural environment. The three photographs below demonstrate this:



Opladen Way



Farningham



Waitrose (3M) roundabout

Raising awareness

- 5.9 The summer of 2021 was very challenging for the grounds maintenance teams. The grass, shrub and hedge growth were unprecedented because of the favourable weather conditions. Alongside the rapid growth our contractor Continental Landscapes (CLL) struggled to recruit operatives and worked through much of the summer season 20 percent down on staff numbers. The operatives were all working overtime to keep on top of the priority work, this is mainly safety related highway sight lines and overhanging shrubs and trees.

Throughout this period complaints were higher than in previous years and there were assumptions made that a decision had been made not to cut the grass. An update of the information available to the public is planned to be ready for the growing season in 2022 so that it is clearer what is being left uncut deliberately and what is the result of an unplanned delay.

- 5.10 To communicate the changes and the reasons for them a press release, supported by social media posts, can go out at the start of the mowing season in March.

New content will be added to the grounds maintenance webpages to address concerns by myth busting on topics such as increased hay fever, safety concerns and that the new approach will lead to a decline in appearance of verges. The pages will also link with other related pages of the Bracknell Forest website. For example, climate change and those found in the parks and countryside section on biodiversity and roadside nature reserves.

Customer services would be briefed on the new approach, so they are able to answer customer enquiries on the changes. Forest Views and the intranet can also be used to make council staff aware, a large number of people who work for BFC also live locally.

On the verges themselves new 'Blooming biodiversity' signs can be used in high profile locations. Parks and Countryside use temporary site signs, example shown in Appendix 1, about wildflower meadow development at various sites near Crowthorne Road, this is part of the Wild Way project, this is also something that could be considered in locations where providing more information may be useful.

Parks and Countryside have a newsletter with a reach of over 8700 people, the newsletter includes information and progress updates on wildflower meadow development and features on wild orchids being spotted in grassland areas, the recommended changes and their outcomes would also be featured in the newsletter.

Species of wildflower, including orchids could also be highlighted on social media posts throughout the season, this would be a simple and effective way to communicate the benefits of the recommended approach and raise awareness of the variety of plant life that the roadside verges support.

Other pressures

- 5.11 Other pressures on the public realm services have been an issue in recent months, this has meant despite CLL having both of the public realm contracts, grounds maintenance and street cleansing, sharing of operatives from the street cleansing contract has not been an option to help with staffing challenges.

Graffiti is something that has significantly increased over the past 12 months, much of it tagging. CLL react swiftly to remove graffiti, however it is something that takes considerable time and effort, and during peaks of tagging incidents it has become one operative's full-time job. CLL and the Environmental Services team do gather photos and any information they can about incidents and pass it on to Community Safety and the Police to try and assist their work to minimise antisocial behaviour of this type.

- 5.12 The proposed changes to the way the roadside grass verges are maintained will not reduce the pressures or generate financial savings. Although there will be more grass left longer the mowing team will still visit all locations to cut the edge of highway strip, cut around obstacles where necessary and also cut around the outside of trees groupings. Aside from the grass cutting the wider work of the operatives will be restructured to accommodate the new approach. For example, shrub and hedge maintenance will be fitted in around the areas of grass moving to an annual cut. Cutting areas annually is hard work for the machinery and takes a lot longer so other work is subsequently adjusted around this to allow enough time for the annual cuts to take place at the right time of the year.

There will not be a reduction in machinery used, it may be that in time a change to machinery may be needed, particularly if the number of areas requiring cut and collect increase. The cut and collect work also generates cuttings that need to be transported and disposed of at a local composting facility where disposal into alternative vegetation on site is not an option.

6 Consultation and Other Considerations

6.1 Legal Advice

The Council has a legal responsibility for managing the Highway Network in terms of keeping the routes available and safe for the passage of the highway user. It undertakes this duty in its role as the Highway Authority. Grass-cutting takes place on highway verges in areas that are key to maintaining visibility, such as at junctions, laybys, and the inside of bends. The aim of grass-cutting is to keep the highway safe

and to maintain visibility for all road users. The Council can be exposed to third party claims if an incident results in damage or injury where the Council has failed to maintain the highway.

6.2 Financial Advice

There are no financial implications.

Other Consultation Responses

6.3 **Parks and Countryside**

Our service fully supports the reduction in mowing frequency to allow more areas to improve biodiversity and protect trees. Relocating arisings may be necessary on more open grass verges to maintain wildflower diversity and avoid the dominance of tall coarse grasses. We will work with Environmental Services to provide advice on public engagement, website content and habitat management on specific sites.

Highways

The Highways and Transport Service is supportive of this approach. The primary function of maintaining verges to provide public safety on the highway is retained within this proposal. As such, biodiversity can be improved whilst still adhering to requirements outlined in the Highways Act 1980.

Equalities Impact Assessment

6.4 Not applicable

Strategic Risk Management Issues

6.5 Not applicable

Climate Change Implications

6.6 Trees, shrubs, grass and other plants naturally slow down water and help soil to absorb rainfall, this can help minimise the impact of significant weather events such as heavy rainfall. Significant weather events are something that we are increasingly likely to see more of as a result of global climate change.

Trees and other plants absorb carbon dioxide so by managing areas to keep the trees and plants as healthy as possible maximises their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide.

Background Papers:

[Bracknell Forest Biodiversity Action Plan 2018-2023](#)

[Plantlife: Managing Grassland Road Verges](#)

Contacts for further information

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Notice of Wildflower Meadow creation

We are developing this area into a new wildflower meadow for people and wildlife to enjoy.



Did you know?
Yellow rattle is a perennial, parasitic plant species which helps to keep more dominant grasses at bay while the meadow is growing.



What we are doing

We applied a herbicide treatment to this area last summer. This will remove competitive grasses and prepare the soil for wildflowers.

We will be sowing a native wildflower seed mix this autumn 2021. Species will include red campion, salad burnet, common sorrel, self-heal, ox-eye daisy, ragged robin and yellow rattle..

Why we are doing this

Wildflower meadows are ecologically rich habitats that provide a place for wildlife to find food and shelter. They are especially important for our pollinator species, such as bees and butterflies. Pollination leads to the production of fruits we can eat, and seeds that will create more plants. We simply cannot survive without it!

Sadly, in the last 100 years, it is estimated that we have lost over 95 per cent of our wildflower meadows in the UK. Re-establishing our local meadows is therefore of vital importance.

Precautions we are taking

The herbicide used is widely available in most garden centres. It was applied by qualified and trained contractors. The herbicide is considered to be non-persistent in the environment. This means it is inactivated upon contact with the soil, and it is broken down by soil microorganisms. It is safe for dogs and other animals to continue to use the area.

This meadow creation is just one part of a wider project to improve the wildlife habitats along Crowthorne Road (A3095).

Find out more at: www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/parks-and-countryside/a3095-wild-way-project

