

Report to: Communities Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 3rd April 2014

Lead Member / Officer: Lead Member for Public Realm/Head of Highways and Environmental Services

Report Author: Risk and Asset Manager

Title: Highway Grass Verge Cutting Policy & Programme 2014/15

1. What is the report about?

To examine the Council's policy and grass cutting programme for the forthcoming season.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

To provide information regarding the preparations for this year's highway grass cutting programme including an assessment of the consultation that has taken place with stakeholders since autumn 2013.

3. What are the Recommendations?

That Members agree that preparations for the 2014 season are in place and that concerns over the biodiversity elements of the cutting regime have been assessed and incorporated as appropriate.

4. Report details

4.1 Grass Cutting Regime

4.1.1 Following the departmental restructure in 2013 the delivery of all grass cutting now falls within the remit of the Highways and Environmental Services Department. However, it is important to note that there remains a fundamental difference between the approach made to urban and rural verge management regimes. This report covers the rural area responsibilities only. Whilst the cutting of rural verges is driven by safety considerations this has been the subject of much discussion over recent years. Legislative changes brought in by the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 requires the Authority to consider biodiversity and therefore look to cut as little as possible. The perception of a sizeable part of the public is that we should cut all verges. Trying to balance these opposing views has proven difficult.

4.1.2 As a result, after much debate, it was decided that a regime would be adopted whereby:-

On the first cut there would be a reduced treatment on rural roads within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) such that a satisfactory level of safety would be ensured.

Elsewhere we would cut a uniform 1 metre wide swathe with wider treatment in other areas (junctions, visibility splays etc.) so as to ensure that visibility wasn't compromised.

- 4.1.3 Over the Autumn/Winter period a number of consultations have taken place including a meeting between the Head of Highways and Environmental Services, the Lead Member for Public Realm and representatives of local biodiversity groups. In addition a letter was sent out to all Town and Community Councils in January seeking their views on how we may amend the regime in their areas to fit with local requirements. The responses that were received to this consultation are shown in Appendix A. Wherever possible these requests have been incorporated into the contract.
- 4.1.4 The council's biodiversity officers and highways team are working together to develop a more coordinated approach to this issue. One outcome of this that will be seen this summer is the re-establishment of a number of the areas of special interest across the whole of the network (not just within the AONB). These localised areas will be pegged out and will receive a different management regime more in tune with the specific requirements of the flora they are designed to protect.
- 4.2 Contractual and Departmental arrangements for 2014
 - 4.2.1 We undertake two cuts in the season, one commencing in mid-May which we aim to complete by mid-July and the second commences in early August for completion in October. The specific dates of the cut are yet to be determined as they are dependent on weather conditions over the next few weeks but the 'early' cut issues that were evident in 2013 will be avoided
 - 4.2.2 This year is the final year of a three year contract and a meeting is scheduled with the contractor on 21st March 2014 to finalise the arrangements. Verbal feedback on the outcome of this can be given at the Scrutiny meeting. It is also worth noting that we have amended some of the schedules to reflect the need for smaller machines and, where appropriate, strimming so that the utilisation of plant is more appropriate to the location. Many of these changes are the direct result of comments made by the contractor last.
 - 4.2.3 Day to day control of the work will be the responsibility of the Streetscene Coordinators and close liaison between them and the operatives in their area should result in many of the problematical issues of the past being avoided. Whilst communication with the contractor has been good regarding daily whereabouts this will also be improved.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

- 5.1 It is a Council priority that residents and visitors to Denbighshire will have access to a safe and well managed road network and verge grass cutting is a fundamental aspect.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

- 6.1 The costs of changes to the programme will be contained within the existing budget.
- 6.2 The service has been working very closely with the Biodiversity Officer in preparing the programme and developing processes to ensure they are implemented.

7. What are the main conclusions of the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) undertaken on the decision? The completed EqIA template should be attached as an appendix to the report.

Following consultation changes will be made to the verge cutting programme but these will not have a disproportionate effect on any of the protected characteristics.

8. What consultations have been carried out?

- 8.1 Feedback from customers and Customer Services regarding the volume and type of complaints has been useful in developing changes to the programme.
- 8.2 Consultation with Members and the Town and Community Councils has enabled a full evaluation of the cutting regime although it remains fundamentally unchanged in terms of the extent and timing of the two cuts.
- 8.3 Discussion and liaison with interested parties including Countryside Services is continuing.

9. Power to make the Decision

Highways Act 1980

Article 6.3.1(c) outlines scrutiny's powers with respect to this matter.

Contact Officer:

Risk and Asset Manager

Tel: 01824 706875