

ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

Date of Meeting	Tuesday, 7 th March 2023
Report Subject	Grass Cutting Policy Review: Managing Road Verges and Amenity Grasslands to Support Biodiversity
Cabinet Member	Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Regional Transport Strategy
Report Author	Chief Officer, Streetscene and Transportation
Type of Report	Strategic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to a request from the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee, an all-member workshop was held on Tuesday, 24th January 2023 to learn more about the management of road verges and amenity grasslands, wildflowers and biodiversity. In particular, members sought to find out about the use of pesticides and gain an understanding of existing policies, the action taken to date and opportunities available to us as a local authority. The workshop was a joint portfolio event, which was facilitated by officers from both the Planning, Environment & Economy (PE&E) portfolio and Streetscene & Transportation (S&T) portfolio.

Under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, public authorities must maintain and enhance biodiversity. Sympathetic mowing of road verges and amenity grasslands can help meet this duty.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the work undertaken to date and consider the opportunities for policy review in the future.

In addition, as a portfolio, Streetscene & Transportation routinely reports on the annual performance of the grass cutting service to the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee for assurance purposes. This report therefore also includes an update on the performance of the service during 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Scrutiny supports the work undertaken to date and considers the opportunities to increase biodiversity in managing our road verges and amenity grasslands.
2.	That Scrutiny supports the proposed changes to the grass cutting policy and supports the targeted reduction in the use of pesticides.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW OF HOW THE LOCAL AUTHORITY MANAGES ROAD VERGES AND AMENITY GRASSLANDS TO SUPPORT BIODIVERSITY
1.01	<p>In response to a request from the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee, an all-member workshop was held on Tuesday, 24th January 2023 to learn more about the management of road verges and amenity grasslands, wildflowers and biodiversity. In particular, members sought to find out about the use of pesticides and gain an understanding of existing policies, the action taken to date and opportunities available to us as a local authority. The workshop was a joint portfolio event, which was facilitated by officers from both the Planning, Environment & Economy (PE&E) portfolio and Streetscene & Transportation (S&T) portfolio.</p>
1.02	<p>Under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, public authorities must maintain and enhance biodiversity. Sympathetic mowing of road verges and amenity grasslands can help meet this duty. The Act states that all public authorities are required, when undertaking their functions in Wales, to seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity wherever possible within the proper exercise of their functions. In doing so, public authorities must also seek to promote the resilience of ecosystems.</p>
1.03	<p>In 2019, Welsh Government declared a climate emergency, and in 2021, the Senedd declared a 'nature emergency' in recognition of human induced declines in biodiversity. The 2019 State of Nature Report highlights that 17% of 3,902 species assessed in Wales are threatened with extinction.</p>
1.04	<p>As a Council, we support the declarations made by Welsh Government and, in December 2019, elected members approved a motion to develop a clear Climate Change Strategy, which set key aims and actions for creating a carbon neutral organisation. Some of the ongoing work and projects that we have undertaken include the publication of our "Supporting nature in Flintshire" biodiversity duty plan and we are continuing to work to support biodiversity protection and increase the proportion of Council land managed for biodiversity in Flintshire. This includes increasing the areas with reduced mowing regimes to enhance biodiversity and increase carbon storage.</p>
1.05	<p>The Well-being of Future Generations Act requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of decisions and is all about working with local communities, taking a more joined up approach, looking to prevent persistent problems in order improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales and impact of our actions on future generations.</p> <p>The goal of a Resilient Wales is to reverse the decline of our biodiverse natural environment, develop a better awareness of our impacts as individuals and organisations, ensure we are ecologically resilient, with healthy ecosystems, and to support community wellbeing.</p>
1.06	<p>As outlined, an all-member workshop was delivered jointly by S&T and PE&E officers to present the need for change to a more biodiverse focus on our grassland management regimes and explore the options in each area of grass management.</p>

1.07	<p>The workshop addressed the following issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The nature emergency and importance of local biodiversity • Grassland habitat requirements • Nature isn't Neat: addressing key concerns • Use of Pesticides • Flintshire action to date: our support for changes • Overview of the existing grass cutting policy and opportunities: road verges and amenity grasslands <p>The workshop was well attended with approximately 30 members showing broad support for the reduction/cessation of the use of pesticides by the authority and its contractors, along with the options being presented for change of grass cutting policy standards.</p>
1.08	<p>The grass cutting policy options and opportunities to increase biodiversity are outlined in Appendix 2, which we intend to take to the Environment & Economy Overview Scrutiny Committee in March 2023; however, this does mean that the 2023 grass cutting season will commence prior to any changes being adopted.</p> <p>Safety will remain the priority for grass cutting and there will be limited opportunities for certain areas, such as rural road verges and visibility splays. However, there are opportunities to collect cuttings when we cut on flat verges, which could reduce the number of cuts required.</p> <p>The main changes proposed to the policy include reduced mowing on all suitable verges (avoiding visibility splays and banks), allowing the grass/wildflowers to grow in certain areas and increasing the number of areas included in reduced mow or wildflower management to improve the biodiversity.</p>
1.09	<p>As a portfolio, Streetscene & Transportation routinely reports on the annual performance of the grass cutting service to the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee for assurance purposes. This section provides an update on the performance of the service during 2022, which helps us to plan next season's operations, as well as inform the policy review and changes to practices.</p> <p><u>Grass Cutting Season – Performance Overview (March 2022 – October 2022)</u></p> <p>The 2022 season began on 1st March 2022 with reduced crews in light of COVID risk assessments at that time, which limited the number of operatives working together. Five crews were able to carry out grass cutting on 28th March 2022, including the cemetery grounds management team.</p> <p>Crew availability was also affected by the winter maintenance schedule, as many operatives from the grounds team were being regularly employed for road gritting operations.</p> <p>Full scale grass cutting operations were realised from 1st April 2022 with all crews undertaking the rounds as per the planned grass cutting schedule. Due to the adversely hot weather in July 2022, the teams were 'stood down' between 18/07/22 and 31/07/22 and no cuts took place during that period.</p>

1.10	<p>Performance status on 31st October as follows:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="288 192 903 506"> <thead> <tr> <th>Area</th> <th>Cuts Completed</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4/5</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>6</td> <td>9</td> </tr> <tr> <td>7</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>8</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Cemeteries</td> <td>9</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Appendix 1 provides further details of the performance in relation to the schedule of the grass cutting rounds for the 2022 season.</p>	Area	Cuts Completed	1	8	2	8	3	8	4/5	8	6	9	7	8	8	8	Cemeteries	9
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1.11	<p>Opportunities The management team is currently exploring avenues to deliver a more efficient service for the 2023 season. These include changes to working patterns, adoption of new working practices and delivering additional work streams in-house such as tenants' gardens and hedge cutting.</p>																		
1.12	<p>The acquisition of a new tractor flail arm via Welsh Government grant funding will also help to increase productivity and reduce HAVS exposure. Biodiversity sites are due to increase, which will allow resources to be redirected to other areas of the business and increase the flexibility of the workforce. Partnerships with Countryside Services are in development to facilitate more collaborative working and shared resources, and we are also exploring the opportunities available through social enterprise.</p>																		
1.13	<p>At the member workshop in January 2023, members expressed a level of concern around the use of pesticides, particularly around the harmful effects on human health, wildlife and animals, and the carcinogenic properties of such chemicals. There was broad support by members for targeted reduction of pesticides and the use of alternatives, such as mechanical removal of weeds or organic sprays or opt-out schemes.</p> <p>Targeted reduction would involve stopping the use of chemical herbicides within town centres, school grounds and green spaces, for example in parks or recreational areas, along with excluding the use of chemical herbicides in contracted services, such as the schools' grounds maintenance contract, and using alternative weed control methods instead (E.g. heat-based methods, organic sprays, manual/mechanical removal methods).</p>																		
1.14	<p>Grant funding has been made available by the Welsh Government for Local Places for Nature (LPfN) and a grant funding has already been received for the purchase of new plant and equipment for wildflower and weed control in 2022-2023. A further bid is being prepared for 2023-2024.</p> <p>The aim of Local Places for Nature (LPfN) is to restore and enhance natural capital assets across Wales. Local Places for Nature intends to create Nature on Your Doorstep, where people live, work and access public services. LPfN contributes to wider biodiversity aims, but at a local level rather than landscape scale, creating nature in the 'everyday places'.</p>																		

	<p>LPfN is a bottom up programme and focuses on areas of deprivation, urban and peri-urban areas or those with little or no access to nature. The ethos is fundamentally about behavioural change and, if people engage with nature, they value nature and will take steps to restore and enhance nature.</p>
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2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
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2.01	<p>Flintshire County Council is committed to sustainability in its own operations, as well as across the county more widely through climate change and carbon reduction.</p> <p>Revenue: The portfolio is currently carrying an in-year revenue pressure of £43k, over and above the £30k revenue budget available for the weed spraying contract, which came about following the recommendation of the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee to split the contract into separate areas to ensure more resilience in the supply market. This has been included as an additional cost pressure in the budget for 2023-2024.</p> <p>Any further changes to the policy will need to take into account the impact on future revenue budgets. The current national and local financial position is under increasing pressure and there is little prospect of the portfolio being able to allocate any substantial increase in revenue funding to this non-statutory service provision; consequently, the ongoing impacts of budget reductions will continue to impose a downward pressure on revenue budgets. Any options supported and recommended by the Scrutiny Committee will need to be costed and will need to be deliverable within current budgets. Any future MTFS budget solutions to settle a balance budget that reduce grass cutting standards will need to be addressed and may not align to the biodiversity workshop options supported by the Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>Capital: There may be implications for the approved capital programme for 2023-2024 and future financial years for the procurement of plant and equipment. Any capital or revenue commitment will need to be supported through a business case approach, taking account of full costs and possible income sources.</p> <p>Staff / Recruitment: The grounds management team appointed three newly promoted charge hands in 2022, who all performed well, adapting to their new roles and adding value to the operation as a whole. Many of the agency staff employed to supplement the teams for the summer season have subsequently been appointed into permanent roles further reducing the cost of the operation.</p> <p>Plant and Equipment: The McConnell RC28 Robo Cutter, which is the mower used to cut grass on slopes and steep banks, was subject to a recall due to reliability issues and, as such, the team are now trialling the larger RC56 model, which is more suited to steep inclines and bank maintenance. The replacement tractor has performed well with very little down time for repairs and a higher level of quality and performance. The teams have also trialled battery mowers, trimmers and chainsaws, with a view to replacing petrol equipment and reducing the carbon cost of the operation. The battery tools also dramatically reduce staff exposure to HAVS. The intention is to replace all petrol equipment with battery powered units over the next 3 years.</p>
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3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT										
3.01	<p>A full integrated impact assessment will be required as part of the review of the grass cutting policy. This strategy and the outcome of the review is expected to have a positive differential impact on all protected characteristics.</p> <p>Ways of Working (Sustainable Development) Principles Impact</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="288 383 1420 2107"> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="288 383 528 786">Long-term</td> <td data-bbox="528 383 1420 786">Positive impact - the proposed changes to the policy will enhance the local environment by creating habitat for wildlife, insects and pollinators etc. Areas where wildflowers have been allowed to develop and flourish will enhance the visual aesthetics of roadside verges and amenity areas and provide residents and visitors with a ‘feel good’ factor. This in turn will contribute to the reduction of our carbon footprint and create a more sustainable environment for residents now and for future generations. 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Well-being Goals Impact

The review of the grass cutting policy will need to have due regard for the Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The policy review and inclusion of biodiversity helps to achieve all seven of the well-being goals as set out below.

Prosperous Wales	Positive impact - the proposed changes to the policy will enhance the local environment by creating habitat for wildlife, insects and pollinators etc. Areas where wildflowers have been allowed to develop and flourish will enhance the visual aesthetics of roadside verges and amenity areas and provide residents and visitors with a 'feel good' factor. This in turn will contribute to the reduction of our carbon footprint and create a more sustainable environment for residents now and for future generations. Additionally, Biodiversity and resilient ecosystems provide important opportunities for economic activity and attracting more tourism to the area, which can often involve the promotion of our natural resources, such as parks and gardens.
Resilient Wales	Positive impact – The alternative grassland management regime proposed in the policy review will not only support the council's biodiversity duty and climate change strategy, but it will also assist with reducing our carbon footprint.
Healthier Wales	The proposals aim to create a more resilient and healthier environment across all communities. Accessible natural spaces can provide direct health benefits, such as encouraging more physical activity (e.g. cycling, walking) and improved mental health and well-being. For example, as well as supporting wildlife, people enjoy seeing wildflowers.
More equal Wales	Equal access to natural spaces would contribute to equality and will have a positive impact on all local communities, enhancing their local environments irrespective of background and circumstances.
Cohesive Wales	More biodiverse green spaces will enhance the local environment and make them more attractive for residents, visitors and wildlife. Communities engaging in the management of their local open spaces has been demonstrated to contribute to an increase in social cohesion and a reduction in Anti-social behaviour.
Vibrant Wales	The proposed changes to the policy will promote and protect the culture, heritage and the Welsh language, by encouraging people to participate in the arts, sports and recreation in the outdoors and experiencing nature.
Globally responsible Wales	Sustainable management of amenity grasslands will help to reduce the carbon footprint and ensure that grass cutting operations do not have an environmental impact.

	<p>Flintshire County Council together with its partners will support the health and well-being of both the current and future generations through the following strategic objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protecting people from poverty by supporting them to meet their basic needs • Housing in Flintshire meeting the needs of our residents and supporting safer communities • Limiting the impact of the Council's services on the natural environment and supporting the wider communities of Flintshire to reduce their own carbon footprint • Enabling a sustainable economic recovery and growth • Supporting people in need to live as well as they can • Enabling and Supporting Learning Communities
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4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	With the Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Regional Transport Strategy
4.02	An all-member workshop was held on 24 th January 2023. A copy of the workshop presentations is shown in Appendix 3 and feedback from the session will be shared with the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet members.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – Grass Cutting Performance 2022 Appendix 2 – Grass Cutting Policy Review & Biodiversity Opportunities Appendix 3 – Biodiversity & Grass Cutting Member Workshop Slides

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	<p>Welsh Government's policy and strategy for managing road verges and amenity grassland to support biodiversity:</p> <p>https://www.gov.wales/road-verges-and-amenity-grasslands-supporting-wildlife</p>
6.02	<p>Biodiversity and resilience of ecosystems duty (section 6): guidance for public authorities:</p> <p>https://www.gov.wales/biodiversity-and-resilience-ecosystems-duty-section-6-guidance-public-authorities</p>

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: Barry Wilkinson, Highway Network Manager Telephone: 01352 704656 E-mail: barry.wilkinson@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>Biodiversity ('biological diversity') = The variety of plant and animal life in the world or in a particular habitat.</p> <p>Ecosystem = A functioning unit made up of living organisms (plants / animals / micro-organisms) within their non-living environment (air / water / minerals / soil) and all the diverse and complex interactions that take place between them.</p> <p>Resilience of ecosystems = A resilient ecosystem has the ability to respond to disturbance by resisting damage and recovering quickly.</p>