

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET**

**18 November 2025**

## **Verge and Vegetation Management Report of Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
  - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
  - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

### **REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND**

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on Verge and Vegetation Management at its meeting on 24 September 2025, which set out how verges and vegetation are managed across the county, considering both maintenance and management of highway verges and other roadside vegetation. The report also considered the Council's commitments to biodiversity and the enhanced management of selected Roadside Verge Nature Reserves (RVNRs).
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet member for Transport Management, Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, Sean Rooney, Head of Highways and Road Safety, Paul Wilson, Operational Manager (Operations), Jack Wheeler, Senior Biodiversity Officer, and

Charlottle Knowles, Marketing and Campaigns Manager, for attending the meeting and responding to questions.

## **SUMMARY**

5. The Cabinet member for Transport Management introduced the verge and vegetation management, highlighting that verge management was a specific part of the Committee's remit to be viewed in the context of wider biodiversity and planning policies. The Head of Highway Maintenance and Road Safety explained that the report reviewed current practices across the county, described the established processes and the close collaboration within environment teams.
6. The Committee discussed payments, communications, cycle routes and safety, frequency of cuts, appearance, and biodiversity.
7. The Committee moved five recommendations to Cabinet: one is about payments to town and parish councils; two are about communication and transparency; two are about practical elements regarding verge management.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

8. The Committee discussed at some length the reasoning behind the Council's policy approach to verge and vegetation management. Practically, this means that as a matter of course and subject to some potentially being cut twice, almost every verge will be cut once a year.
9. The Committee noted that "the council has placed more emphasis on habitats and compliance with the various legislation particularly when working in or around water and have had good engagement between highways staff and ecologists" in developing its approach, as the report before it set out.
10. Whilst there were some concerns over the potential for an untidy appearance when managed mowing allows for some growth to remain, the Committee was largely supportive. However, there was an acknowledgement that some residents may not be aware of the principles behind the approach. The Committee was of the view that it was important for the Council to enable residents to understand the ecological benefits that underpinned the policy. It would also be helpful if parish and town councils were fully familiar with the stance taken by the Council and the approach followed.
11. The Committee established that there were communications, including signage, but agreed that it would be beneficial for the Council to increase communications and engagement more generally in this area.

**Recommendation 1: That the Council should increase communications, consultation, and engagement about the benefits for biodiversity of verge and vegetation management to ensure that members and residents, as well as parish and town councils, understand the rationale.**

12. The Council is clearly not the only landowner responsible for all verges in the county or for all vegetation. However, residents are unlikely to be aware of which the Council does own and which, therefore, it should be maintaining. The Committee welcomed hearing that the Council was in the early stages of digitising its records and planning to present them online. The Committee agreed that this would have significant benefits in terms of visibility. This would be of benefit to officers and to members but also to residents. Members would no longer need to contact officers to enquire on residents' behalf about ownership. Instead, residents and members would simply be able to check themselves by logging on to the website.
13. In addition to simply digitising ownership records, the Committee considered that it would be helpful if the 'dashboard' included information such as whether and when something had been or would be, for example, mown.
14. The Committee welcomed assurances that such work was already planned and, indeed, parts of it had begun and looked forward to its realisation. The Committee considered, though, that it was of sufficient importance to move a formal recommendation to Cabinet so that Cabinet itself could be given the opportunity to commit to that work progressing.

**Recommendation 2: That the Council should commit to progressing the digitisation of an online platform setting out the status of verges and vegetation across the county;**

15. The Committee, when discussing the Local Nature Recovery Strategy at its meeting in November 2024<sup>1</sup> had previously discussed the benefits of 'cut and pile' and noted that, of the six actively managed roadside nature reserves, three were being managed using this method. Members were pleased that there was at least some 'cutting and piling' but were disappointed by the low number. Whilst the Committee is aware that there are higher costs associated with it, given that the grass has to be actively piled up if one does not have specialist equipment, the benefits to biodiversity are not in question<sup>2</sup>
16. The Committee notes the report's concern at paragraph 6 that "it should be noted that this approach [either 'cut and collect' or 'cut and pile'] cannot be taken for the whole of the network due to the cost and resource required to undertake this activity at a network level." The Committee recognises that budgetary constraints would make a whole network 'cut and pile' approach untenable but it considers that it would be a good thing were the Council to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=32090>

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/learning-resource/road-verge-green-space-management-best-practice/>

explore the possibility of increasing the number of places where 'cut and pile' is practised.

**Recommendation 3: That the Council should explore the possibility of increasing the number of places where 'cut and pile' is undertaken;**

17. Whilst the Council has an asset of 4.8 million square metres of highway verge, there are 137 section 101 agreements where district, town, or parish councils have devolved responsibility for cutting the highway verges. The Committee established that the amount the Council paid was £0.10 per square metre and that amount had not changed for more than 10 years. The Committee heard that, partly because fewer cuts are needed per year, this was not considered unreasonable.
18. The Committee recognises that the Highways Operations budget, out of which these payments are made, is finite but considers that it would be appropriate to conduct a review to explore whether it would be appropriate to increase the amount paid. Members are aware through discussions at parish councils, for example, that there is some dissatisfaction by some of those maintaining verges and vegetation on the Council's behalf that payment is too low, given the costs involved of doing it, and that it would well behove the Council to consider formally if there is a need to increase it.

**Recommendation 4: That the Council should undertake a review of the amount paid to parish and town councils to assess whether it would be appropriate to increase the amount;**

19. Weather inevitably affects growth on verges and, whilst the Committee noted that there were some cuts that were anticipated to be undertaken twice in a year to ensure safety and accessibility if warranted, members were of the view that a common sense approach should be taken in more circumstances. The Committee was assured that safety was a significant factor in deciding whether to implement a second cut and recognised the legitimacy of this approach. However, the Committee was keen for the Council to take account of weather conditions potentially leading to unexpected growth on verges such that a second cut would be wise. Cutting costs money and the Committee has already set out its awareness of budgetary constraints but members considered it important that the Council should make clear that it would undertake a second cut per year if circumstances warranted it.

**Recommendation 5: That the Council should commit to the possibility of a second cut when weather conditions have resulted in unexpectedly high growth.**

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

20. The Committee does not anticipate revisiting this topic again during this municipal year.

## LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

21. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power:  
'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
22. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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