

Divisions Affected – ALL

PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

– 24 September 2025

Verge and Vegetation Management

Report by the Director of Environment and Highways

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Committee is RECOMMENDED to

Review the information from the officers' report and use as a basis for further discussion within the Scrutiny session planned for 24 September 2025.

Executive Summary

2. The purpose of this report is to outline how verges and vegetation are managed across the county, considering the maintenance and management of both highway verges and other roadside vegetation. The report will consider the council's commitments to biodiversity and the enhanced management of selected Roadside Verge Nature Reserves (RVNRs) in line with the council's priorities, including access to green spaces and prioritising the health and well being of residents.

Background

3. The council's highway verge asset consists of approximately 4.8 million square metres of Urban Grass and approximately 3.25 million linear metres across the highway network. This falls into several categories,
- (a) That is managed by OCC
 - (b) That managed by District, Town and Parish Councils under agency agreement
 - (c) That which is designate Roadside Verge Nature Reserve (currently numbering 52 equating to 192000m²) and
 - (d) That under local community management

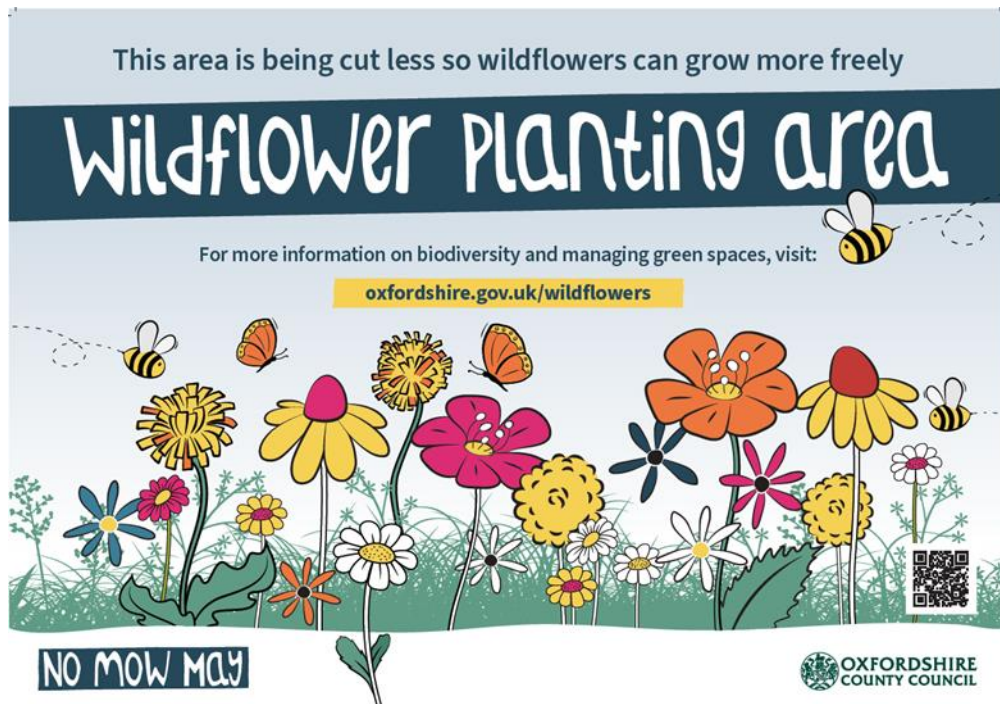
To expand on point b above, currently there are one hundred and thirty-seven S101 agency agreements in place under which the District, Town and Parish Council have devolved responsibility for cutting the highway verges, this equates to approximately 1.4 million sq m of urban highway verge.

Current Maintenance Strategy for Highway Verges

4. In February 2023, Oxfordshire County Council updated its highway verge and vegetation maintenance plan. It now includes improved references to managing roadside nature reserves and support for areas of biodiversity maintained by local communities.
5. Management of roadside verges prioritises the promotion of biodiversity where possible, and uses guidance from Plantlife (www.plantlife.org.uk) and Oxford University (<https://www.biodiversity.ox.ac.uk/project/hero/>) to ensure best practice is followed.
6. All roadside verges in both rural and urban areas are managed on a cyclical basis, this means in practice:
 - One cut per year on visibility splays – adopted grass verges at locations where roads connect – dependant on growth. It should be noted that the level of growth and the commencement of the annual growing season may be earlier than in previous years which means that some of the cutting timings may need to be adjusted on an annual basis. It may also be necessary for safety reasons to undertake a second cut depending on growth.
 - One cut per year, utilising a 1-metre-wide strip to the rear of the footway/cycleway/shared use facility and a full width cut between the footway/cycleway/shared use facility and the carriageway. In addition, this year funding has been increased to include further cuts to ensure the promoted routes are accessible. (This tends to be required mainly on the cycleway/footway network).
 - One cut per year for fully adopted highway urban verge areas
 - One cut per year, utilising a 1-metre-wide swathe cut along the roadside edge in rural verge areas
 - One cut per year on roads with a speed limit of 50mph or more (including all dual carriageways). Minimum standard is a 1-metre swathe cut.
 - One cut per year, at the end of the growing season or such time to maintain their habitat value, on Road Verge Nature Reserves – there has been an increase the number of RVNRs that are receiving a formal maintenance regime, i.e. ‘Cut and Collect’ or ‘Cut and Pile’ with a commitment to increase this number each year, (it should be noted that this approach cannot be taken for the whole of the network due to the cost and resource required to undertake this activity at a network level).
 - Full width cutbacks on a cyclical basis of half of the adopted verges in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) every year at the end of the growing season.

- Wildlife refuges 1-metre wide at the rear of verges 3 metres or more, to be cleared in rotation every five years.

7. In addition to the maintenance and management of highway verges by the council, there has been also further interest from some Town and Parish Councils and Parish Community groups in respect of the management of areas of highway verge to promote areas of wildflower planting. With this in mind we are working with our colleagues in the Landscape and Nature Recovery (biodiversity) team to deal with the requests as they are submitted. Currently there are 15 such locations across the county, these are all identified using the following signage.



8. Although the council tries to adhere to the 'No Mow May' guidance, dependant of growth rate the maintenance cutting schedule will generally commence with the junctions and visibility splays during May on the grounds of road safety. Early June will be the first cut of the more frequently used cycleways. Then over the summer months the main single cuts of the urban grass not under Agency agreement will be programmed. Cuts to the RVNRS will be undertaken at the appropriate time as outline in the RVNR report.
9. Currently there are 52 RVNRs countywide with the majority being cut as referred to in paragraph 6, however, there are currently 6 sites of the 52 that are under a positive management regime, 3 of these being managed as 'cut and collect' and 3 being managed as 'cut and pile'. It is intended that a further 6 be treated in a similar manner for 2025/26, however this will add further budgetary pressures to the verge management budget, (in addition to this there are 4 which are privately maintained by community groups)
10. The 6 sites currently under positive management are

Cut and Collect
A4074 Ipsden,
Lewknor Hill Road
A420 Cumnor

Cut and Pile
Ascott Under Wychwood – Coldwell Bridge
Burford – Whitehill Farm
Aston Rowant – A40/B4009 Junction

Roadside Vegetation

11. Trees and hedges are important parts of our rural landscape. They are also vital habitats for wildlife, provide valuable windbreaks in open countryside, and, in the case of ditches, help prevent flooding.
12. As a rule, trees, hedges (including trees growing in the hedgerow), are owned by the adjoining (riparian) landowner. They are seldom the County Council's responsibility.
13. Trees growing in the highway verge that don't represent or have been the actual boundary to private land, as well as undergrowth on the verge, are under the council's management and care.
14. We do not automatically clear undergrowth on verges, except where public highway use is affected. Undergrowth provides cover for wildlife and offers a varied and natural landscape.
15. The council does have a responsibility to ensure that the use of the public highway by all users is not compromised, and this can include by vegetation overgrowth. Where it is confirmed that the offending vegetation is the responsibility of the council, arrangements will be put in place to have the vegetation to be cut back.
16. Where the vegetation is privately owned, the council needs to follow the guidance taken from S154 of Highways Act 1980 which relates to obstructions on the highway. This process gives notice to the adjacent landowner of the concern and a request that work is undertaken to rectify the situation within a certain timescale. Two follow up notifications, if necessary, can be given if no action has taken place. The council then has a legitimacy to undertake the work utilising its own contractors.
17. Trimming hedges during the bird nesting season should be avoided unless hedges prevent passage or affect the safety of highway users, including cyclists and pedestrians. The most active period of bird nesting season is from 1 March to 31 July but can extend from February to August, so it is important to check

that there are no active nests before trimming. Birds and their nests are protected by law. More information on this can be obtained from Natural England

- [The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act \(2006\) \(The NERC Act\)](#) Strengthened by [The Environment Act 2021](#) places a duty on all public authorities to consider biodiversity in their work. Requires government departments to have regard to the Convention on Biological Diversity and to produce a list of Species and Habitats of Principal Importance for the Conservation of Biodiversity in England and to take or promote steps to further their conservation. The following legislation has also been considered in the development of the policy; The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017
 - (The Habitat Regulations), Protection of Badgers Act 1992 and The Hedgerow Regulations 1997
 - [The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) provides protection for sites of at least national importance and varying levels of protection for species in need of conservation action, or other protection, in the UK. Protection may include prohibition of some or all killing, injuring, disturbing, taking, sale/barter or possession of species and protection of breeding and sheltering places.
18. With the above in mind 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. Further protocols and procedure references along with relevant training are currently being produced to assist with this.
19. From April 2023 through to March 2025 the council undertook work to enhance the usability of the more popular cycleway and footway networks, these works have included siding out – (a process to recover the full available width of the surface) and cutting back of the vertical vegetation to assist with the issue of overgrowth. This was funded from the Transport @Infrastructure (New Investments Reserve) 2023/24 - £1.0m and 2024/25 - £0.5 m respectively. This funding was not funded beyond these periods.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

20. For further details readers of this report should refer to the refer to the [Verge and Vegetation Management Policy](#) attached to this report (Annex1) and to the [RVNR report](#) (Annex 2)

Financial Implications

21. Budgets are managed from those which have been identified and agreed through the annual budget setting process.
22. The cost of maintenance is dependant upon the annual variances in weather, as with wet and warm weather there is a greater need to cut back additional locations due to maintaining safety and accessibility to the networks
23. Verge and vegetation management is funded from the Highway Operations revenue budget. The available budget for 2025/26 is £1.062m, this includes for verge cutting, Payments for Agency agreements and general vegetation management.

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Legal Implications

24. Verge and vegetation maintenance is undertaken in compliance with the council's duty to maintain the highway set out in section 41 of the Highways Act 1980
25. There is no change to the policy and as this paper is brought to Scrutiny for awareness, and there are no new proposals other than those that were dealt with in the 2023 policy update.

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Staff Implications

26. This work has been managed within existing staffing resources from both the Highway Operations Team and the wider Countryside and Waste Team.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

27. The content of this report is not considered to discriminate or disadvantage any individuals or groups within the community.

Sustainability Implications

28. The methods of verge and vegetation maintenance have a positive impact on biodiversity and climate action. This is achieved as the verge and vegetation management regime helps promote improved habitats for wildlife, supporting many species of wildlife and species of plant life.

Paul Fermer
Director of Environment and Highways

Annex: [Verge and Vegetation Policy 2023](#)
[Roadside Verge Nature Reserve Report](#)

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