

Divisions Affected – N/A

CABINET
21 February 2023

Highway Verge & Vegetation Management

Report by Corporate Director for Environment & Place

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to**
 - (a) Approve the updated interim Highway Verge and Vegetation Management Policy and Service Aims at Annex 1.
 - (b) Support use of guidance produced by www.plantlife.org.uk and [HERO](#) (Healthy Ecosystem Restoration Oxfordshire), including approach at Annex 4, to help further develop an incremental approach to the County Council's management of highway grass and vegetation assets.

Executive Summary

2. The County Council has had a long-standing verge maintenance policy setting out the key elements of highway verge maintenance, however, to improve alignment with the current Council's key priorities, it is necessary to amend the policy to include improved references to the management of roadside nature reserves and support for areas of local community managed biodiversity.

Background

3. Environment and Place has been reviewing its operational policies to ensure they are in line with the recently adopted Local Transport Plan, Climate Policies and Corporate Priorities.
4. It was identified that the policies related to vegetation and verges required updating, and a new policy is proposed. To note vegetation was originally within the council's Tree Policy but it was removed from this following in recent update to that policy.
5. Best practice carried out by other local authorities and evidence-based recommendations from local expert groups such as www.plantlife.org.uk &

[HERO](#) (Healthy Ecosystem Restoration Oxfordshire) have been used to help shape a new policy. An experiment was also undertaken to help further our understanding and is documented in Annex 2.

6. Further work on management and biodiversity information on our verges and vegetation is needed to provide full confidence they are being managed in an effective and efficient way from both a highway and environmental perspective. If this further work enables / identifies opportunities to further enhance the proposed policy, then this will be updated at the appropriate time.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

7. The proposed updated and refocussed policy better aligns with the current Strategic Plan and supports the delivery of action to ameliorate the Climate and biodiversity Emergency and sustainable transport network in particular.
8. The Local Transport and Connectivity Plan was recently adopted, and this updated policy will support the ambition and commitments made in respect of active travel by ensuring footpaths and cycle paths are kept accessible and not restricted by grass and vegetation growth.
9. It will also contribute to the value of Green Infrastructure by protecting and enhancing green areas of the highway.
10. The new Climate and Natural Environment Policy Statement (the Policy Statement) supports and strengthens the ambition to include a policy focus on environmental resilience and nature recovery, by working in partnership to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier County.

Financial Implications

11. The policy does seek a change in approach which will potentially have cost implications, however, it recognises the cost challenges and some operational constraints and is sensitive to this.
12. Use of data intelligence to bring in management efficiencies and a reduction in frequency and areas cut is planned to cover initial additional costs in new practices undertaken.
13. Improvements in management of verges will be incremental and practices scaled to ensure activity is managed within the available budget.
14. Existing staff and highway asset management system will be used to improve the asset information on verges and vegetation with no additional cost. Any additional work will be absorbed within the existing Revenue budget, the current year value being £787k (2022/23).

Comments checked by:

Rob Finlayson, Finance Business Partner, rob.finlayson@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Legal Implications

15. The county council has powers and obligations under the Highways Act 1980 and Traffic Management Act 2004 to ensure the safe operation and expeditious movement along the highway network.
16. The policy proposed continues to meet these obligations by ensuring that visibility splays, which are required to ensure safety, and paths are accessible.
17. Our powers include managing the impact on the highway from vegetation on third party land but which it is the responsibility of those third party landowners to maintain.

Comments checked by:

Jennifer Crouch, Principal Solicitor Environmental
Legal Services, jennifer.crouch@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Staff Implications

18. The commitments of the recommendations within this report are to be managed within the existing staff resource.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

19. The policy is not considered to discriminate or disadvantage any individuals or groups within the community. Refer to Annex 3 – Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA).

Sustainability Implications

20. The proposals have a positive impact climate action as amending the verge and vegetation management regime with help promote improved habitats for wildlife, supporting many species and is good for biodiversity.

Consultations

21. No formal consultation has been undertaken on the proposed Policy, but engagement and input during its development has taken place with some

members, local interest groups and research bodies such as university of Oxford and Plantlife.

BILL COTTON
Corporate Director Environment & Place

Annexes:

- Annex 1- Proposed Highway Verge and Vegetation Management Policy & Service Aims
- Annex 2 – Hendreds Experiment Summary
- Annex 3 – Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)
- Annex 4 – Climate Impact Assessment (CIA)
- Annex 5 - Urban Meadow and Verge Guidelines Poster from “HERO”

Background papers:
No Additional background papers are required

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