

ACTION PLAN MONITORING REPORT

TASK AND FINISH ACTION REVIEW 2017/18 – A Review of the Maintenance Provision of Highway Hedgerows and Verges

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 The Environmental & Public Protection Scrutiny Committee of 17th November 2017, agreed to establish a task and finish group to review the current maintenance provision of highway hedgerows and verges.
- 1.2 It was agreed that the main objective for the review would be to:

To review the current provision for the maintenance of highway hedgerows and verges and if appropriate make recommendations for service change.
- 1.3 The group was chaired by Cllr. John James and had a politically balanced Elected Member representation of 6 County Councillors
- 1.4 A total of 8 meetings were held (January 2018-November 2018).

2. Scope and Objectives of the Group's work

- 2.1 The Committee agreed the scope, aims and objectives for the work as set out below:

Scope:

'To review the current provision for the maintenance of highway hedgerows and verges and if appropriate make recommendations for service change.'

2.2 Objectives:

- Review the number of staff carrying out the service.
- Review the number of times roadside hedges and verges are cut with particular focus on hedges around Junctions.
- Review the requests for services process in relation to hedge cutting demands from the public.
- Environmental impact including biodiversity

2.3 Corporate objectives and well-being objectives

The review would contribute towards achieving the following corporate objectives and well-being objectives :-

- County Council's Corporate Strategy 2015-20
- Well-being objectives:-
 - In a Healthy & Safe Environment:-
 - Objective 12 -
Looking after the environment now and for the future
 - Objective 13 -
Improving the highway and transport infrastructure and connectivity

2.4 Main aims of the review

- To review the current maintenance provision and programme for County roads. Including the nature, timing and equipment used for cuts.
- Consider the current maintenance provision and programme for Trunk roads.
- To review the balance between in house and external services and procurement of those services.
- To review the number of staff carrying out the service. (e.g. has there been a detrimental impact in service due to the reduction of staff (based on previous years)).
- To review the number of times roadside hedges and verges are cut with particular focus on hedges around junctions.
- To review how much contact demand the Council receives about this issue and the request for services process for hedge cutting demands from the public. To include both requests to cut and not to cut.
- To review the budget allocation and the impact of any changes to the provision.
- Consider landowner responsibilities and enforcement powers of the Council.
- Consider the environmental impact including biodiversity.
- To formulate recommendations for consideration by the Executive Board.

3. Methodology

Throughout the review the Group considered evidence and information from a variety of sources. Each session was designed to provide the Group with the relevant information, context and background to the topic. Officers from Highways, Conservation and Waste and Environmental Services provided specialist advice and support during the Group's review

Furthermore, as part of the research, the task group interviewed the local contractors to ascertain their views on their experience of being a local contractor and the tendering process.

4. Report Conclusions

Following the review, the Task and Finish Group trusted that the Council undertook a thorough and effective job in ensuring that highways were kept safe for those who use them. The Group concluded that there was a general public perception that all roadside hedges were the Council's responsibility.

In order to alleviate some of the issues experienced by both the Council and the Contractor, the Group suggested that:

- There is a clear rationale to the current regime for maintaining rural highway verges but needs greater flexibility to facilitate further environmental enhancement for biodiversity.
- There are common misconceptions regarding duties and responsibilities for hedges, verges, ditches and grips which would benefit from clarification, potentially through the publication of an information brochure.
- There are opportunities to be investigated to encourage local farmers and contractors to tender for contract work.
- Greater availability of guidance and support for local farmers and contractors in relation to bid for works would be beneficial to the local economy and encourage a greater consistency of cutting throughout the County.
- The verge maintenance regime should consider greater flexibility to allow the early cutting of lower class roads in instances where the safety of higher class roads is not compromised.
- Opportunities to work collaboratively with Town and Community Councils should be investigated further, particularly with respect to urban highway verges and amenity grass cutting.
- Whilst litter remains a challenge, the Council could promote a clear message to drivers to take their litter home.

5. Report recommendations

The research undertaken by the Task and Finish group during the review on the current maintenance provision for highway verges resulted the following recommendations:-

Recommendation One

That the County Council's Environment Directorate should largely continue with its current provision for maintaining rural highway verges but considers adopting greater flexibility to:

- a) Facilitate further environmental enhancement for biodiversity, such as late or biennial cutting of selected areas, or other appropriate management provision;
- b) Consider the early cutting of minor roads in instances where the safety of main roads is not compromised.

Recommendation Two

That the County Council's Environment Directorate raise public understanding of highway verges as important areas for care, maintenance and habitat by:

- a) Providing a Carmarthenshire County Council guide to highlight the roles and responsibilities of the highway authority and adjacent landowners.
- b) Programming targeted campaigns to discourage the littering of verges and promote public awareness of highway verges and hedges as valuable natural habitat.
- c) Including clear information on the Council website with specific regard to the conservation and management of roadside verges.

Recommendation Three

That the County Council seeks to safeguard the highway maintenance budget as far as possible to ensure the safety of the travelling public, reduce future liability and protect key habitats.

Recommendation Four

That the County Council's Environment Directorate promotes opportunities to encourage local farmers/contractors to tender for work and engage with potential bidders to explain the tendering process.

Recommendation Five

That the County Council's Environment Directorate work collaboratively with Town and Community Councils to promote a more proactive role in managing and maintaining verges, hedges and landscaped areas, equally in both urban and rural areas.

Progress against the actions is set out in the following table - Action progress

Recommendation One	Progress to Date (February 2020)
<p>That the County Council's Environment Directorate should largely continue with its current provision for maintaining rural highway verges but considers adopting greater flexibility to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Facilitate further environmental enhancement for biodiversity, such as late or biennial cutting of selected areas, or other appropriate management provision. b. Consider the early cutting of minor roads in instances where the safety of main roads is not compromised 	<p>Additional flexibility is being taken forward in a number of areas, particularly with regarding to protecting the environment and encouraging biodiversity. This includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The Conservation Team are identifying a number of upland areas for biennial mowing. These areas will be considered for implementation within the 2020/21 verge mowing programme as a pilot study with a view to further areas being identified in future years. <p>In woodland areas where vegetation helps stabilise steep embankments selected areas may not be cut if there is no overriding highway safety or encroachment concerns. This will promote slope stability and to allow the natural vegetation of the bank.</p> <p>Late cut verge areas are currently identified within our mowing programme with routes reviewed by the Conservation Team when resources permit to include additional late cut verge areas where appropriate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. Start of season reviews are held annually with Highway Inspectors and Contractors to agree programmes for verge mowing. The flexibility to carry out the early cutting of minor roads will be incorporated where safety and effective verge maintenance is not compromised.

Recommendation Two	Progress to Date (February 2020)
<p>That the County Council's Environment Directorate raise public understanding of highway verges as important areas for care, maintenance and habitat by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Providing a Carmarthenshire County Council guide to highlight the roles and responsibilities of the highway authority and adjacent landowners. b. Programming targeted campaigns to discourage the littering of verges and promote public awareness of highway verges and hedges as valuable natural habitat. c. Including clear information on the Council website with specific regard to the conservation and management of roadside verges. 	<p>Public awareness and understanding of the management of highway verges has been taken forward through the following actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A brochure entitled <i>Adjacent Landowners and the Public Highway: A guide to roles and responsibilities</i> has been published and is available on Carmarthenshire County Council website. The brochure has also been publicised to Town & Community Councils. The brochure can be accessed at: https://www.carmarthenshire.gov.wales/home/council-services/travel-roads-parking/ b. The Council's approach to litter has been set out within our new Litter Management Plan and a number of initiatives are underway to raise public awareness of both littering and the recognition of highway verges as a valuable habitat. Projects such as '<i>Pride in your Patch</i>', have been publicised on Radio Carmarthenshire which bring together volunteers and key partners including Town and Community Councils, fast food outlets, major employers and schools to promote anti-litter campaigns and undertake clearance works. c. Information has been updated on the County Council's website and includes <i>Ecological Advice Note 11: Managing Road Verges for Safety and Biodiversity</i>. <p>In addition, information regarding the important role of pollinators which references highway verges which can be accessed at: https://www.carmarthenshire.gov.wales/home/council-services/planning/biodiversity/pollinators/#.Xhcae-S7Kul</p>

Recommendation Three	Progress to Date (February 2020)
That the County Council seeks to safeguard the highway maintenance budget as far as possible to ensure the safety of the travelling public, reduce future liability and protect key habitats.	<p>The first Highway Asset Management Plan Annual Report was presented to Environment Scrutiny Committee in September, 2019 setting out the condition of the highway asset and explaining the impacts of various funding scenarios.</p> <p>Further reports will be presented annually in the Autumn period ahead of budget setting.</p>

Recommendation Four:	Progress to Date (February 2020)
That the County Council's Environment Directorate promotes opportunities to encourage local farmers/contractors to tender for work and engage with potential bidders to explain the tendering process.	<p>There is an existing commercial contract in place to mow rural highway verges but in the lead-in to the retendering of the contract the opportunities for local farmers and contractors will be publicised through conduits such as the National Farmers Union Cymru, the Countryside Landowners Association and Farmers Union of Wales. The next retendering exercise is planned to be undertaken ahead of the 2021/2022 mowing season.</p>

Recommendation Five:	Progress to Date (February 2020)
That the County Council's Environment Directorate work collaboratively with Town and Community Councils to promote a more proactive role in managing and maintaining verges, hedges and landscaped areas, equally in both urban and rural areas.	<p>A dialog has been started with Carmarthenshire Town Council regarding the maintenance of verge areas as a pilot to establish the viability of Town and Community Councils maintaining areas of highway verge and to provide a potential model for future use.</p>

6. Conclusions

The Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Group provided confirmation of the current service actions and identified areas to further improve service delivery and public awareness. As recognised by the Group, collaborative working will remain a focus for the Department with key partners and Town and Community Councils. The service will continue to develop these areas to provide a legacy to the Task and Finish Group's valuable work.