

**North Yorkshire County Council**  
**Business and Environmental Services**

**Executive Members**

**25 March 2022**

**Update on Highway Grass Cutting**

**Report of the Assistant Director – Highways and Transportation**

<b>1.0 Purpose of Report</b>
1.1 To update the Corporate Director, Business and Environmental Services (BES), and BES Executive Member for Access on the ongoing approach to highway grass cutting and verge management.

**2.0 Background**

2.1 A report was presented to the 23 April 2021 BES Executive Members meeting, where authorisation to carry out trials of alternate rural grass cutting regimes was given. This report will update the Corporate Director BES, and BES Executive Member for Access on the trials and provide information on further measures that are being considered to enhance biodiversity of our roadside verges.

2.2 Work has been ongoing over the past twelve months, to identify ways in which the County Council can help to enhance the biodiversity of highway verges, whilst at the same time ensuring that any amendments to grass cutting regimes and standards do not negatively impact highway safety.

2.3 Grass cutting and verge management continues to be a focus for many members of the public and local and national stakeholder groups.

**3.0 Current policy**

3.1 The highway grass in North Yorkshire which the County Council is responsible for maintaining is split into two categories:

- Urban Grass (subject to a speed limit of 40mph or less)
- Rural Grass (subject to a speed limit of more than 40mph)

3.2 Urban Grass – Roads with a speed limit of 40mph or less. Five cuts per season  
Extents:

- Highway junctions for visibility (all road categories)
- Event/hazard warning signs (as required)
- Remote Footways where it does not fall within a swathe cut. Grass shall be cut to 0.5m on both sides of the footway.

3.3 Following changes to the urban grass cutting standards in 2015, only grass outlined above is cut by NYCC. Parish and Town Councils were given the opportunity to undertake urban grass cutting in their parish, whereby NYCC would pay the parish or town council based on the area of grass within visibility splays in their parish. This allows Parish / Town councils to combine NYCC funded visibility cuts with any cutting of other grass in their parish that they fund (e.g. parks, village green, verges).

3.4 Parish Councils who opted in to the scheme receive a contribution payment from NYCC, comparable to the value that the NYCC grass cutting contractor would have received were they to be carrying out the cut.

3.5 Rural Grass - Roads with a speed limit over 40mph. Two cuts per season  
Extents:

- Highway junctions for visibility (all road categories)
- Forward overtaking sight distance visibility on all road categories as required
- Event/hazard warning signs (as required)
- Longitudinal Swathe along the carriageway edge (cut a minimum of 2.4m to a maximum of 3m) on category 2, 3a and 3b roads.
- Remote footways which do not fall within a swathe cut to a width of 0.5m on both sides of the footway

All rural grass Cutting is fully carried out by North Yorkshire County Council.

#### **4.0 Grass Cutting Trials Carried out in 2021**

4.1 The key focus of the trials was aimed at assessing the impact of reducing the width of the rural swathe cut from 2.4m to 1.2m. Trial sites were selected across the County, so that a wide range of carriageway types were included in the trial. A summary of trial locations is outlined in Appendix 1.

4.2 The trials were only carried out in rural areas (speed limit greater than 40mph) and any designated visibility locations (junctions, bends etc.) were not part of the trial.

4.3 The general feedback on the trial sites from the first year was that the change in grass cutting regime was straightforward to implement and did not appear to have any significant impact on road safety or visibility, as hazard locations (junctions, bends etc.) were not part of trial.

4.4 From a biodiversity perspective the impact of the reduced swathe cut is limited, in that the area that is not cut is allowed to grow relatively uncontrolled. Whilst this can in some instances allow local species to grow, in most locations the areas uncut continue to be dominated by more aggressive species, such as coarse grasses and nettles.

4.5 As outlined in the 23 April 2021 report, the trials will continue through until Autumn 2023. We are looking at the potential of adding further sites in to the reduced swathe trial this summer, to increase our understanding of impacts and effectiveness. On completion of the trials in 2023, a review will be carried out to identify if the grass cutting policy can be amended across the County for non-visibility rural grass cutting.

#### **5.0 Longer Term Objectives – reducing soil fertility**

5.1 The longer term objective to help improve biodiversity and reduce the amount of grass cutting required is to reduce soil fertility. Native plant species and wildflowers prefer less fertile soil to grow in. In contrast, more aggressive species such as coarse grasses, nettles and thistles require more fertile soils.

5.2 At present cut grass is left on the verges to decompose. This decomposition in to the soil increases the fertility of the verge soil, further encouraging the growth of more aggressive species. Removal of cut grass would significantly help to reduce the fertility of the soil, encouraging the growth of more native species and wildflowers which are typically lower in height, thus requiring less frequent cuts.

- 5.3 Removal of grass cutting arisings is significantly more expensive than the current method of leaving arisings on the verge. Logistically it is challenging to identify locations where arisings can be transported to for disposal. At present, we do not have the supply chain in place nor the resources to commence this type of operation.
- 5.4 Given the amount of arisings that would be produced from highway verge cut and collect operations, officers are seeking to establish the viability of using verge arisings in energy generation at anaerobic digestion (AD) sites.
- 5.5 An outline proposal for funding from the County Council's Beyond Carbon programme is being developed by BES officers. Funding would allow the potential for a commercial cut and collect operation to be assessed, alongside identifying any existing market opportunities & challenges and also the wider appetite for verge cutting material from existing AD operators. It is anticipated that the proposal would be submitted to the Beyond Carbon Board in Q1 2022/23 and should it be successful the outcomes of the assessment report would be available in Q3 2022/23
- 5.5 In the interim, officers are seeking to establish small scale cut and collect trials on selected rural Cat 4a and 4b verges across the County. This will help us to further understand the benefits of a cut & collect operation. We are engaging with county council volunteers and other partner organisations to resource these trials.

## **6.0 Urban Grass Cutting**

- 6.1 Whilst the focus of the existing trials has been on rural grass cutting, the Council has been approached by several Town Councils who are seeking to enhance the biodiversity of highway verges in their local communities. This is for areas outside of urban visibility cuts.
- 6.2 Proposals put forward by the Town Councils include, cut and collect of urban highway verges, wildflower planting, reducing cut frequencies and timings to promote wildflower growth. We are supporting this initiative through the provision of best practice guidance and advice to town and parish councils where applicable. It is hoped that through 2022 we will be able to refine and update guidance based on experience gained by towns and parishes, with a view to sharing more widely with parishes as part of information we share with them on grass cutting payments in Q3 2022/23.

## **7.0 Financial Implications**

- 7.1 There are no significant financial implications to the trial process. Locations and revised treatments are being selected to be either cost neutral or provide a financial saving.

## **8.0 Equalities Implications**

- 8.1 The proposal seeks to establish the effectiveness of varying grass cutting options to enable a more informed decision in the future, regarding our highway grass cutting policy. Should a change be proposed to the grass cutting policy following these trials, an EIA will be completed, see Appendix 2..

## **9.0 Legal Implications**

- 9.1 The County Council, in its capacity as the Local Highway Authority, Street Authority and Local Traffic Authority must act in accordance with a wide range of statutory powers and duties imposed by legislation.
- 9.2 The proposed trials have been developed in line with the relevant legislation such as the Highways Act 1980, the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, the Transport Act 2000, the Traffic Management Act 2004 and the Flood and Water Management Act 2010.

## **10.0 Climate Change Impact**

- 10.1 A climate change impact assessment has been carried out, see Appendix 3. This has identified there are benefits to the local habitats and the potential for reduced carbon emissions should a cut and collect operation be commercially viable.

## **11.0 Recommendation**

- 11.1 It is recommended that
- i) the Corporate Director, Business and Environmental Services (BES), and BES Executive Member for Access notes the update provided on highway grass cutting and verge management.

BARRIE MASON  
Assistant Director - Highways and Transportation

Author of Report: James Gilroy

Background Documents: None

**Rural Grass Cutting sites with a reduced swathe cut**

ID	Area	Location	Notes
1	1	A167 – Area 2 boundary (Toll Bar Garage) to Croft-on-Tees	Low ground and the grass on this route tends to grow very quickly
2	1	A6055 - Local Access Road between Leeming and Barton	Low ground – long straights with some sweeping bends near flyovers
3	1	A684 – Bainbridge to Hawes to Moorcock Inn (Cumbria boundary)	Higher ground road
4	1	B6270 Muker to Gunnerside	Mostly narrow verges with dry stone walls
5	2	A684 Bedale and Lemming bypass	This is a new route which is only just coming out of its maintenance period this summer
6	2	B1264 Between A167 and County boundary	
7	2	B1363 Either the whole length or north of Stillington to Area 4 Boundary	
10	3	A169 A3/A4 boundary to Sleights	
11	4	A169 – Malton to Pickering	Flat relatively straight road with few junctions on the Vale of Pickering
12	4	C90 Hovingham to City of York Boundary.	Undulating road with lots of bends in the Howardian Hills AONB
13	4	B1249 East Riding boundary to A64	Includes Staxon Hill (chosen rather than Saltergate or Newgate which are probably a higher risk)
14	5	B6479 – Horton to Selside	
15	5	B6255 – Ribbleshead to Ingleton	
16	5	B6265 – Grassington to Hebden	
17	6	B6265 Ripon to Pateley Bridge	
18	6	A168 Boroughbridge Depot to A59 Allerton Park	
19	6	B1224 Long Marston to County Boundary	
20	7	A63 Selby Bypass	
21	7	A162 Sherburn in Elmet Bypass	
22	7	A1246 Selby Fork to Fairburn	

**Initial equality impact assessment screening form**

(As of October 2015 this form replaces 'Record of decision not to carry out an EIA')

**This form records an equality screening process to determine the relevance of equality to a proposal, and a decision whether or not a full EIA would be appropriate or proportionate.**

<b>Directorate</b>	Business and Environmental Services
<b>Service area</b>	Highways & Transportation
<b>Proposal being screened</b>	Grass Cutting Trials
<b>Officer(s) carrying out screening</b>	<b>James Gilroy</b>
<b>What are you proposing to do?</b>	Continue with a series of grass cutting trials across the County, which differ to the current rural grass cutting policy. This is in the interests of improving biodiversity on highway verges and to potentially achieve further cost savings in the future with reduced cut frequencies and/or extents
<b>Why are you proposing this? What are the desired outcomes?</b>	To establish if changing grass cutting treatments can enhance biodiversity in highway verges and potentially reduce grass cutting costs.
<b>Does the proposal involve a significant commitment or removal of resources? Please give details.</b>	No

**Impact on people with any of the following protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010, or NYCC's additional agreed characteristic**

As part of this assessment, please consider the following questions:

- To what extent is this service used by particular groups of people with protected characteristics?
- Does the proposal relate to functions that previous consultation has identified as important?
- Do different groups have different needs or experiences in the area the proposal relates to?

**If for any characteristic it is considered that there is likely to be a significant adverse impact or you have ticked 'Don't know/no info available', then a full EIA should be carried out where this is proportionate. You are advised to speak to your [Equality rep](#) for advice if you are in any doubt.**

<b>Protected characteristic</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't know/No info available</b>
Age		✓	
Disability		✓	
Sex (Gender)		✓	
Race		✓	
Sexual orientation		✓	
Gender reassignment		✓	
Religion or belief		✓	
Pregnancy or maternity		✓	

Marriage or civil partnership		✓	
<b>NYCC additional characteristic</b>			
People in rural areas		✓	
People on a low income		✓	
Carer (unpaid family or friend)		✓	
<b>Does the proposal relate to an area where there are known inequalities/probable impacts</b> (e.g. disabled people's access to public transport)? Please give details.	<b>No, the proposals do not negatively affect any groups of people.</b>		
<b>Will the proposal have a significant effect on how other organisations operate?</b> (e.g. partners, funding criteria, etc.). <b>Do any of these organisations support people with protected characteristics?</b> Please explain why you have reached this conclusion.	<b>No, the proposal will have no effect on how other organisations work.</b>		
<b>Decision (Please tick one option)</b>	EIA not relevant or proportionate:	✓	Continue to full EIA:
<b>Reason for decision</b>	<p>The proposal seeks to establish the effectiveness of varying grass cutting options to enable a more informed decision in the future, regarding our highway grass cutting policy.</p> <p>Should a change be proposed to the grass cutting policy following these trials, an EIA Screening form will be completed.</p>		
<b>Signed (Assistant Director or equivalent)</b>	Barrie Mason		
<b>Date</b>	15/03/22		



### Appendix 3 Climate change impact assessment

The purpose of this assessment is to help us understand the likely impacts of our decisions on the environment of North Yorkshire and on our aspiration to achieve net carbon neutrality by 2030, or as close to that date as possible. The intention is to mitigate negative effects and identify projects which will have positive effects.

This document should be completed in consultation with the supporting guidance. The final document will be published as part of the decision making process and should be written in Plain English.

If you have any additional queries which are not covered by the guidance please email [climatechange@northyorks.gov.uk](mailto:climatechange@northyorks.gov.uk)

**Please note: You may not need to undertake this assessment if your proposal will be subject to any of the following:**

Planning Permission  
Environmental Impact Assessment  
Strategic Environmental Assessment

However, you will still need to summarise your findings in in the summary section of the form below.

Please contact [climatechange@northyorks.gov.uk](mailto:climatechange@northyorks.gov.uk) for advice.

<b>Title of proposal</b>	<b>Highways Capital Programme 2020/21 – October 2020/21 Update</b>
<b>Brief description of proposal</b>	To continue with a series of grass cutting trials across the County, which differ to the current rural grass cutting policy. This is in the interests of improving biodiversity on highway verges and to potentially achieve further cost savings in the future with reduced cut frequencies and/or extents
<b>Directorate</b>	<b>BES</b>
<b>Service area</b>	<b>Highways and Transportation</b>
<b>Lead officer</b>	<b>James Gilroy</b>
<b>Names and roles of other people involved in carrying out the impact assessment</b>	
<b>Date impact assessment started</b>	<b>10.03.2022</b>



**Options appraisal**

Were any other options considered in trying to achieve the aim of this project? If so, please give brief details and explain why alternative options were not progressed.

The only other option considered was to do nothing retain the existing grass cutting policy

**What impact will this proposal have on council budgets? Will it be cost neutral, have increased cost or reduce costs?**

Please explain briefly why this will be the result, detailing estimated savings or costs where this is possible.

We anticipate that the proposals will be cost neutral or provide a cost saving to the County Council.

How will this proposal impact on the environment?					Explain why will it have this effect and over what timescale?	Explain how you plan to mitigate any negative impacts.	Explain how you plan to improve any positive outcomes as far as possible.
N.B. There may be short term negative impact and longer term positive impact. Please include all potential impacts over the lifetime of a project and provide an explanation.		Positive impact (Place a X in the box below where	No impact (Place a X in the box below where	Negative impact (Place a X in the box below where	Where possible/relevant please include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes over and above business as usual</li> <li>• Evidence or measurement of effect</li> <li>• Figures for CO<sub>2</sub>e</li> <li>• Links to relevant documents</li> </ul>		
Minimise <b>greenhouse gas emissions</b> e.g. reducing emissions from travel, increasing energy efficiencies etc.	Emissions from travel		x				
	Emissions from construction		x				
	Emissions from running of buildings						
	Other	X			Should the use of grass cutting arisings in AD facilities prove to be successful this could reduce the emissions from power generation and reduce carbon usage.		
Minimise <b>waste</b> : Reduce, reuse, recycle and compost e.g. reducing use of single use plastic			x				
Reduce <b>water</b> consumption			x				

How will this proposal impact on the environment?  N.B. There may be short term negative impact and longer term positive impact. Please include all potential impacts over the lifetime of a project and provide an explanation.	Positive impact (Place a X in the box below where)	No impact (Place a X in the box below where)	Negative impact (Place a X in the box below where)	Explain why will it have this effect and over what timescale?  Where possible/relevant please include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes over and above business as usual</li> <li>• Evidence or measurement of effect</li> <li>• Figures for CO<sub>2</sub>e</li> <li>• Links to relevant documents</li> </ul>	Explain how you plan to mitigate any negative impacts.	Explain how you plan to improve any positive outcomes as far as possible.
Minimise <b>pollution</b> (including air, land, water, light and noise)		X				
Ensure <b>resilience</b> to the effects of climate change e.g. reducing flood risk, mitigating effects of drier, hotter summers		X				
Enhance <b>conservation</b> and wildlife	X			Help to improve the biodiversity of highway verges in North Yorkshire		Feedback from the trials will help to inform the future wider grass cutting policy in North Yorkshire
Safeguard the distinctive characteristics, features and special qualities of <b>North Yorkshire's landscape</b>	X			<p>Help to improve the biodiversity of highway verges in North Yorkshire</p> <p>Help to ensure the special quality of some highway verges ins maintained and enhanced.</p> <p>Enhance the local natural environment and characteristics of the or our rural areas.</p>		Feedback from the trials will help to inform the future wider grass cutting policy in North Yorkshire

How will this proposal impact on the environment?  N.B. There may be short term negative impact and longer term positive impact. Please include all potential impacts over the lifetime of a project and provide an explanation.	Positive impact (Place a X in the box below where)	No impact (Place a X in the box below where)	Negative impact (Place a X in the box below where)	Explain why will it have this effect and over what timescale?  Where possible/relevant please include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes over and above business as usual</li> <li>• Evidence or measurement of effect</li> <li>• Figures for CO<sub>2</sub>e</li> <li>• Links to relevant documents</li> </ul>	Explain how you plan to mitigate any negative impacts.	Explain how you plan to improve any positive outcomes as far as possible.
Other (please state below)		x				

<p><b>Are there any recognised good practice environmental standards in relation to this proposal?</b> If so, please detail how this proposal meets those standards.</p>
<p>The trial treatments are based on guidance from Plantlife.</p>

<p><b>Summary</b> Summarise the findings of your impact assessment, including impacts, the recommendation in relation to addressing impacts, including any legal advice, and next steps. This summary should be used as part of the report to the decision maker.</p> <p>We anticipate a positive impact on biodiversity and character of the local area as a result of the grass cutting trials, alongside the potential for developing a sustainable fuel source for AD sites in the future.</p>
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**Sign off section**

This climate change impact assessment was completed by:

<b>Name</b>	<b>James Gilroy</b>
<b>Job title</b>	<b>Team Leader Highway Asset Management</b>
<b>Service area</b>	<b>Highways and Transport</b>
<b>Directorate</b>	<b>BES</b>
<b>Signature</b>	<b>J Gilroy</b>
<b>Completion date</b>	<b>10.03.2022</b>

**Authorised by relevant Assistant Director (signature): Barrie Mason**

**Date: 15/03/22**