

North Yorkshire County Council
Business and Environmental Services

Executive Members

23 April 2021

Rural Grass Cutting Trials

Report of the Assistant Director – Highways and Transportation

1.0 Purpose Of Report

- 1.1 To seek authorisation for 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. Whilst at the same time ensuring that highway safety remains of paramount importance.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 After the successful review of the grass cutting standards in 2015, which altered the level of service provided in order to achieve costs savings whilst maintaining highway safety, there have been various points raised by members of the public, local and national stakeholders in relation to our rural grass cutting policy.
- 2.2 The points raised are in relation to the impact of our grass cutting policy on the biodiversity of roadside verges with specific reference to the frequency and extent of our rural grass cuts. Whilst the current policy has led to a reduction in the amount of rural grass cut, specific concerns have been raised by some stakeholders about the potential biodiversity impacts of our policy particularly the 2.4m swathe cut on category 2, 3a and 3b roads.
- 2.3 There are potential options we could adopt to change our grass cutting policy, which would help to enhance biodiversity. These options would require further investigation to understand their effectiveness and impact on highway safety concerns. It is proposed to carry out a series of trials across the County to assess the effectiveness and impact of alternate grass cutting standards, before making any formal changes to our grass cutting policy.
- 2.4 Officers have met with representatives from Plantlife who are a wild plant conservation charity, to identify ways in which biodiversity within our verges could be enhanced. This has helped to understand what options are available and to learn from the experiences of some other local highway authorities.

3.0 Current policy

- 3.1 The 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 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, equivalent 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. The concerns about the impact on bio-diversity have focussed on the rural element of the grass cutting policy and therefore the trials will be solely carried out on routes that are classed as rural under the grass cutting policy and not on any urban routes.

4.0 Proposed Rural Grass Cutting trials

- 4.1 Several options have been proposed to enhance the biodiversity of rural roadside verges, they are outlined below:
Option 1 - Reduce cut frequency
Option 2 - Change cut timings
Option 3 - Reduce width of swathe cut
Option 4 - Introduce new plant life
Option 5 - Removal of cuttings
Option 6 – More unique management
- 4.2 An initial appraisal of the options has been completed to help determine which rural trial treatments are taken forward. Key findings from this appraisal are summarised in appendix A.
- 4.3 Given ongoing pressures on County Council revenue budgets, it is proposed that at this point in time, only trials that are cost neutral or are likely to generate a cost saving are carried out. Should funding from external sources become available trials of other options may be considered in the future.

- 4.4 The table below identifies what trial treatments are proposed to be carried out in 2021/22 and which would potentially start in future years subject to additional external funding and / or support.

Option	Proposed Trial	Proposal start data
1	Reduce cut frequency	Commence Trials in 2021/22
2	Change cut timings	Commence Trials in 2022/23
3	Reduce width of swathe cut	Commence Trials in 2021/22
4	Introduce new plant life	Not taken forward – would require additional funding or support
5	Removal of cuttings	Not taken forward – would require additional funding and / or support
6	More unique management	Commence trials in 2021/22 subject to identifying specific locations and external stakeholder input.

- 4.5 The trials would involve changing the grass cutting treatment on specific sections of the rural Cat 2,3a and 3b rural network, to assess the impact on highway safety, visibility, biodiversity and cost.
- 4.6 Trial locations are being identified by local highway area teams, and it is proposed to have multiple sites and treatments trialled in each highways area to reflect the varying growing and climatic conditions experienced across the County. Highway safety considerations will be fully considered when selecting trial locations. As a result trials will take place on straight sections of carriageway, so as not to affect visibility at junctions or bends. Additionally no trials will undertaken on or close to the crests of hills or inclines. Information signs will be deployed at the start of trial locations to make road users aware.
- 4.7 Given the transition towards the establishment of North Yorkshire Highways as our highways delivery partner, starting in June 2021, some rural cuts will be carried out through our existing contract with Ringway during May 2021. As such a small number of trial locations will be selected to commence in May 2021, with more sites added to commence in Summer 2021, with further sites added in 2022/23.

5.0 Trial duration and establishing success of the trials

- 5.1 It is proposed that the trials are monitored over an initial three-year period, with the potential to extend this duration if needed.
- 5.2 We would seek to work with the biodiversity team from NYCC alongside representatives from key stakeholders including the National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are other local stakeholder groups that we would seek to involve in the monitoring of biodiversity impacts.
- 5.3 We will continue to monitor road user feedback from the trial locations and also monitor growth rates as part of regular highway safety inspections, with any additional cuts carried out for safety purposes recorded to understand any additional costs incurred.
- 5.4 Updates on the effectiveness of the trials will be provided to future meetings of the Corporate Director BES and Executive Members. Subject to the success of the trials, future changes may be proposed to the rural grass cutting policy.

6.0 Financial Implications

- 6.1 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.

7.0 Equalities Implications

- 7.1 Consideration has been given to the potential for any adverse equality impacts arising from the recommendations. Officers consider that there are no adverse impacts arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 7.2 A copy of the 'Record of Decision that Equality Impact Assessment is not required' form is attached as Appendix B.

8.0 Legal Implications

- 8.1 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.
- 8.2 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.

9.0 Climate Change Implications

- 9.1 A climate change impact assessment has been carried out, see Appendix C. As a result of these trials we anticipate a positive impact on the biodiversity and character of our rural areas.

10.0 Recommendation(S)

- 10.1 It is recommended that the Corporate Director BES in consultation with the BES Executive Members'
- i. Authorise commencement of trial options identified in section 4.4
 - ii. Approve the duration of the trials for three years and that updates on the effectiveness of the trials will be provided to future meetings of the Corporate Director BES and BES Executive Members
 - iii. Authorise officers to identify suitable trial locations in line with the points identified in section 4.6

BARRIE MASON
Assistant Director Highways and Transportation

Authors of Report; Heather Yendall and James Gilroy

Background Documents: None

Initial Summary of Rural Grass Cutting Options

Option	Option 1 - Reduce cut frequency
Summary	<p>Currently the cut frequency of verges in rural areas is 2 cuts per annum, however reducing this to a single cut would reduce expenditure and could promote an increase in biodiversity.</p> <p>Instead of following the existing model of an early and late seasonal cut, this would be replaced by a singular cut between August and September. Plantlife's recommended best code of practise for cutting is below;</p> <p>Start cutting as late as possible in the season, and cut the roads at lower altitude first, finishing with the roads verges on the higher land.</p> <p>Outside settlements cut vegetation within one swathe width of the carriageway edge along straight stretches. NB Neatness is not a priority – the verge that is left is a valuable habitat for wildlife and a valuable seed source.</p> <p>Where possible do not cut flowering plants, and plants which have yet to flower.</p>
Advantages	<p>Could reduce expenditure on facilitating and organising verge cutting.</p> <p>The biodiversity benefits include providing more time for plants to flower and seeds to settle. This will increase the diversity and quantity of wildlife.</p>
Disadvantages	<p>Verge height may become too great, which will greatly effect visibility distance on the highways.</p> <p>Could prevent pedestrians having a walkway where footways do not exist, and reduce the possibility for safe run off areas.</p>
Financial Impact	<p>Likely to be cost neutral or provide a reduction in costs.</p> <p>Normal cutting regime would continue for visibility and safety cuts, so areas where 1 cut implemented may need a separate cut out of sync with existing cutting regime.</p>

Option	Option 2 - Change cut timings
Summary	<p>The timings of verge cutting could be altered in an attempt to promote biodiversity. This includes either pushing back the first cut of the year to allow plant life to flower, or bringing it forward before plants flower.</p>
Advantages	<p>By altering the cut timings, it is possible to improve the biodiversity growth, by improving the amount of open soil for plant growth. In</p>

	<p>addition, the earlier cut would not disturb natural habitats such as nesting birds.</p>
Disadvantages	<p>There are significant difficulties that prevent changing the cutting periods. Mainly by cutting too early or late in the season, wetness can prevent cutting functionality. By October, the weather has most likely turned to a point where verges can't be cut as easily.</p> <p>Furthermore, bringing the first cut forward may be counterproductive, as the verge growth will be insignificant, therefore the cut will achieve very little.</p> <p>It also may have detrimental effects towards improved plant life, as the delayed second cut would allow a 'thatch' of dead vegetation to form over the soil preventing further growth. In fact, it just promotes more vigorous plant species that do not require open soil to grow, creating denser verge patterns.</p> <p>Grass verges are very sensitive to changes in management, therefore continuing to target the mid-July to September cutting window provides the best opportunity for a maximum diversity in species.</p>
Financial Impact	<p>Likely to be cost neutral or slight increase in costs.</p> <p>Potential increase in ad hoc cuts to manage excessive growth between cuts</p>

Option	Option 3 - Reduce width of swathe cut
Summary	<p>The current swathe cuts performed on category 2, 3a and 3b roads are between 2.4 and 3 meters. This cut width could be reduced down to 1 metre, especially on straighter, flatter extents.</p> <p>This could be a partial step, for example, the first cut could be 1 meter and the later cut in the year remain at 2.4 – 3 meters.</p>
Advantages	<p>The reduction of swathe width cut provides a happy medium, whereby visibility is still prioritised and a run off area is kept available for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders, however biodiversity is maintained. Around 45% of natural flora are found on road verges, so reducing the extent of cuts will allow this wildlife and natural habitats to be preserved.</p> <p>Moreover, this step does not increase expenditure on verge cutting and will continue to keep the verge appearing well maintained, reducing levels of potential complaints.</p>
Disadvantages	<p>The main drawback to reduction in swathe cut width is the lack of run off area left for road users. People walking or riding alongside or on the carriageway may not be left with adequate room between them and the</p>

	<p>live traffic. Likewise, room for run off during breakdowns would be drastically limited. However, the width still cut should be adequate.</p> <p>In addition, the potential reduction in visibility caused to road users is a drawback. Reducing the width down to 1 meter would still provide adequate viewing distance for users in most areas, however for safety reasons the existing width should remain around junctions, tighter bends and other areas of significance.</p> <p>Moreover, by not cutting the verge further back the same negative effects to biodiversity could be caused as previously discussed in the document. Plantlife which doesn't need open soil to grow will flourish which may degrade the possibility of diverse plant life growing further back in the verge.</p>
Financial Impact	Cost Neutral

Option	Option 4 - Introduce new plant life
Summary	The introduction of new plant life into verges could help reduce growth rate of more invasive, fast growing grass species. Mainly the introduction of 'yellow rattle' is shown to have many positive effects. Also, the introduction of wild flowers can increase the biodiversity of a verge.
Advantages	<p>By planting 'yellow rattle' within the verge environments, it could result in a long-term reduction in need for verge management. This wild flower has three major benefits; it reduces grass growth by 60% meaning verge ways don't need to be cut as early or often, it opens up the grass sward allowing more room for other wild flowers to grow and it reduces the amount of cuttings for removal, if a cuttings removal strategy is implemented. There is a direct correlation between yellow rattle plant numbers and diversity of other flowers in grasslands.</p> <p>This plant has the potential to cause long-term benefits on verge management, moreover it could cause a positive influence on the other prospective strategies discussed.</p> <p>The addition of wild flowers is also a highly positive step for greatly improving the biodiversity of a verge, moreover it improves the aesthetic nature and suitability for living species.</p>
Disadvantages	A drawback is the unknown risks of what the introduction of a new wild flower could have on the existing environment. The introduction of any species has the potential to change an environment in a positive or negative way; any trials of introducing this species need to be conducted carefully.

	After consulting the ecology team at NYCC, a main drawback they believe is the difficulty of causing a new species to successfully implement itself into a new environment without fully stripping back the existing verge. The existing plant life in the verge will resist the addition of new species. This may increase difficulty of providing additional species to the environment.
Financial Impact	Additional costs to for planting and one off costs for verge clearance

Option	Option 5 - Removal of cuttings
Summary	This strategy option involves collecting the arising after verges are cut, hence allowing the reduction in growth rates of vegetation and allowing more diverse plant life the opportunity to grow.
Advantages	Decreasing soil fertility is a major strategy for the reduction of verge growth rates. By removing grass cuttings this fertility is greatly curbed, allowing the verges to be more easily managed. The removal of cuttings stops 'thatching' occurring, whereby open soil is covered preventing plant life germination. This practice would greatly increase the diversity of plant wildlife on the verges.
Disadvantages	The drawback that prevents the simple implementation of this method is cost. The necessary costing to remove vegetation after cutting could be 3-5 times the cost of cutting alone. Therefore, unless there is a functional way of carrying out this task without the additional cost, it will be very hard to implement, especially on a large scale.
Financial Impact	Significant cost increase

Option	Option 6 – More unique management
Summary	The introduction of more individual, specific approaches to verge management would act as a viable method to improve the biodiversity of verges, while also improving efficiency. By targeting different areas with different approaches, based on inspections and analysis, the most appropriate line of attack can be selected. Not all verges are equal, so should be treated in less general terms. Whilst this method would require an increase in resources to facilitate, it may improve the overall proficiency of measures carried out.
Advantages	By surveying the verges, a more in-depth knowledge of treatment methods can be gained. Depending on the grass type, climate conditions and soil type the way a verge grows and reacts to different management measures can be unique. This also allows verges that contain specialist species to be singled out, to prevent rarer wildlife being managed inappropriately. For example, the

APPENDIX A

	ecology team could identify these areas of special interest and could get them marked out on the sites.
Disadvantages	The main drawback for following this option is the increased level of surveying and analysis that would have to occur. This additional work may be difficult to produce in an efficient time span or at a reasonable cost.
Financial Impact	Dependent upon measures taken forward. May be possible to not cut specific areas and work with other stakeholders (National Parks, environmental groups, etc to implement alternate treatments)

Equality Impact Assessment Screening Form

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.			
Directorate	BES		
Service area	H&T		
Proposal being screened	Rural Grass Cutting Trials		
Officer(s) carrying out screening	James Gilroy		
What are you proposing to do?	To seek authorisation for a series of rural 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.		
Why are you proposing this? What are the desired outcomes?	To establish if changing rural grass cutting treatments can enhance biodiversity in highway verges and potentially reduce grass cutting costs.		
Does the proposal involve a significant commitment or removal of resources? Please give details.	No		
Is there likely to be an adverse impact on people with any of the following protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010, or NYCC's additional agreed characteristics?			
As part of this assessment, please consider the following questions:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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.			
Protected characteristic	Yes	No	Don't know/No info available
Age		✓	
Disability		✓	
Sex (Gender)		✓	
Race		✓	
Sexual orientation		✓	
Gender reassignment		✓	
Religion or belief		✓	

Pregnancy or maternity		✓	
Marriage or civil partnership		✓	
NYCC additional characteristic			
People in rural areas		✓	
People on a low income		✓	
Carer (unpaid family or friend)		✓	
Does the proposal relate to an area where there are known inequalities/probable impacts (e.g. disabled people's access to public transport)? Please give details.	No		
Will the proposal have a significant effect on how other organisations operate? (e.g. partners, funding criteria, etc.). Do any of these organisations support people with protected characteristics? Please explain why you have reached this conclusion.	No.		
Decision (Please tick one option)	EIA not relevant or proportionate:	✓	Continue to full EIA:
Reason for decision	<p>The proposal seeks to establish the effectiveness of varying rural 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>		
Signed (Assistant Director or equivalent)	Barrie Mason		
Date	14/04/21		

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

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 for advice.

Title of proposal	Rural Grass Cutting Trials
Brief description of proposal	To seek authorisation for a series of rural 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
Directorate	BES
Service area	Highways and Transportation
Lead officer	James Gilroy
Names and roles of other people involved in carrying out the impact assessment	
Date impact assessment started	07.04.2021

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

How will this proposal impact on the environment?		Positive impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)	No impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)	Negative impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)	Explain why will it have this effect and over what timescale? Where possible/relevant please include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes over and above business as usual • Evidence or measurement of effect • Figures for CO₂e • Links to relevant documents 	Explain how you plan to mitigate any negative impacts.	Explain how you plan to improve any positive outcomes as far as possible.
Minimise greenhouse gas emissions e.g. reducing emissions from travel, increasing energy efficiencies etc.	Emissions from travel		x				
	Emissions from construction		x				
	Emissions from		x				

APPENDIX C

<p>How will this proposal impact on the environment?</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Positive impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)</p>	<p>No impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)</p>	<p>Negative impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)</p>	<p>Explain why will it have this effect and over what timescale?</p> <p>Where possible/relevant please include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes over and above business as usual • Evidence or measurement of effect • Figures for CO₂e • Links to relevant documents 	<p>Explain how you plan to mitigate any negative impacts.</p>	<p>Explain how you plan to improve any positive outcomes as far as possible.</p>	
	running of buildings						
	Other		x				
<p>Minimise waste: Reduce, reuse, recycle and compost e.g. reducing use of single use plastic</p>		x					
<p>Reduce water consumption</p>		x					
<p>Minimise pollution (including air, land, water, light and noise)</p>		x					
<p>Ensure resilience to the effects of climate change e.g. reducing flood risk, mitigating effects of drier, hotter summers</p>		x					

APPENDIX C

<p>How will this proposal impact on the environment?</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Positive impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)</p>	<p>No impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)</p>	<p>Negative impact (Place a X in the box below where relevant)</p>	<p>Explain why will it have this effect and over what timescale?</p> <p>Where possible/relevant please include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes over and above business as usual • Evidence or measurement of effect • Figures for CO₂e • Links to relevant documents 	<p>Explain how you plan to mitigate any negative impacts.</p>	<p>Explain how you plan to improve any positive outcomes as far as possible.</p>
<p>Enhance conservation and wildlife</p>	x			<p>Help to improve the biodiversity of highway verges in North Yorkshire</p>		<p>Feedback from the trials will help to inform the future wider grass cutting policy in North Yorkshire</p>
<p>Safeguard the distinctive characteristics, features and special qualities of North Yorkshire's landscape</p>	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>		<p>Feedback from the trials will help to inform the future wider grass cutting policy in North Yorkshire</p>
<p>Other (please state below)</p>		x				

Are there any recognised good practice environmental standards in relation to this proposal? If so, please detail how this proposal meets those standards.

The trial treatments are based on guidance form Plantlife.

--

Summary 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.

We anticipate a positive impact on biodiversity and character of the local area as a result of the grass cutting trials.

Sign off section

This climate change impact assessment was completed by:

Name	James Gilroy
Job title	Team Leader Highway Asset Management
Service area	Highways and Transport
Directorate	BES
Signature	J Gilroy
Completion date	07.04.2021

Authorised by relevant Assistant Director (signature): Barrie Mason

Date: 14/04/21