

REPORT TO SUSTAINABILTY COMMITTEE – 23 FEBRUARY 2023

ROAD VERGE MANAGEMENT

1 Executive Summary/Recommendations

1.1 This report provides background on the current Policy and outlines planned work to review and expand the policy scope.

1.2 The Committee is recommended to:

1.2.1 Note the existing Policy statement and provide comments, particularly in relation to the Aberdeenshire Council Pollinator Action Plan 2022 - 2027.

2 Decision Making Route

2.1 At the Sustainability Committee meeting on 15 June 2022 (Item 10) the Committee discussed the Aberdeenshire Council Pollinator Action Plan 2022 - 2027. In addition to approving that Plan the Committee also instructed officers to bring back a report on road verge maintenance.

2.2 Reference is made to the decision of Full Council 25 November 2010 (Item 4, Revenue Budget 2011 - 2013), where the current verge management regime was approved.

3 Discussion

3.1 The Council, as Roads Authority, has a statutory duty under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 to maintain roadside verges. Although roadside trees and hedges are the responsibility of the landowner, the Act also allows the Authority to serve notice on the landowner to cut these back where obstruction may be caused, and to ensure the safety of the road user.

3.2 The road verge is an important part of road infrastructure and fulfils many functions. It is a place of refuge for pedestrians, allowing them to step off the carriageway. It is a space where Statutory Undertakers, such as Telecoms companies, can install their apparatus. It also provides a “visibility envelope” for forward visibility along the road and also at junctions.

3.3 The objective of Aberdeenshire Council's verge management policy is firstly to fulfil its statutory duty to maintain the function of the verge effectively and efficiently.

3.4 However, it is also clear that the verge also provides the opportunity to function as a part of a “nature network”. Aberdeenshire Council has for some time recognised that verge management practices can, in appropriate locations, influence the opportunity for native flora and fauna.

- 3.5 It is also important to note that The Weeds Act 1959 requires control of the spread of certain “injurious” weed (i.e. harmful to livestock or invasive in pasture), namely common ragwort, broad leaved dock, curled dock, creeping thistle and spear thistle. The use of herbicides does not form part of the management policy.

Verge Maintenance Regime

- 3.6 Following a comprehensive review of service delivery, a proposal to alter the existing verge maintenance regime was approved at the Full Council meeting on 25 November 2010.
- 3.7 The new regime was intended to reduce the quantity of cutting, without compromising road safety. It was also recognised that there would be an additional benefit of supporting our ongoing commitment to increase maintenance regimes that improve biodiversity.
- 3.8 The current regime therefore consists of a single swath cut of the entire network. In this case a “swath” will be a minimum of 1m and a maximum of 1.2m wide from the edge of the carriageway. That cut will reduce the height of the grass to approximately 75mm.
- 3.9 In addition to this general cut, a single cut will also be carried out on verges on the inside of bends and sight lines. This is carried out to provide the appropriate visibility for the particular road. In practical terms this will mean that verges are cut back to around 3m, or to the fence line if less.
- 3.10 It is also important that verges are cut back to ensure that appropriate visibility is available at junctions. Visibility cutting will be required at all public road junctions (excluding private roads) where there is a grass verge along the edge of the major road adjoining the minor road. Tapered visibility cutting shall be carried out for a distance of 100 metres on either side of the junction for either the full width of the verge or 4.5 metres, whichever is the lesser.
- 3.11 The above regime commences in early June and is scheduled to be complete by the end of July. The works are carried out primarily by external contractors through a contract let by Aberdeenshire Council.
- 3.12 In some locations, particularly at junctions, it may be necessary to carry out a further cut, to maintain the required visibility splays. Where required, additional cutting will be instructed in August/September.

Creation of New Verges

- 3.13 With regard to biodiversity, ancient roadside verges form remnants of the type of grassland and heathland habitat created by the low intensity agricultural methods used prior to World War 2. More recently created verges can reflect these habitats, due to broad similarities between the extensive management regimes of grazing and annual cutting of meadow grassland, and the annual

cutting cycles implemented by the Council through its management regime. The success of this, however, depends on factors including the substrate, soil fertility etc.

- 3.14 Management of these transitional semi-natural habitats is essential to ensure their continuation. The Scottish Wildlife Trust in a report stated that “Without management grassland and heathland habitats will soon succumb to scrub invasion” and noted that whilst scrub does have a value in terms of wildlife habitats, its “ecological importance is unlikely to match that of a long established semi-natural grassland or heathland”.
- 3.15 New verges have in the past been sown with vigorous agricultural-type grasses and fertilised for quick effect. This has often resulted in coarse grasses and an environment not ideal for the colonisation by native plants and wildflowers. Tussocky coarse grasses may provide refuge for small mammals and birds, but do not encourage floral species diversity. The change in specification resulting from the earlier reviews tries to redress this trend.
- 3.16 Wildflower seeding is often advocated, but care and advice must be taken. If the seed is not perfectly matched to the growing conditions in that locality, the diversity soon declines. Where possible, the Roads Service has attempted to provide favourable conditions for natural colonisation of species from windblown and nearby seed banks. This has proved to be successful, and the seed is capable of travelling surprising distances, although patience is required as full cover may take some years to establish.
- 3.17 Several factors affect the development of a species rich grassland/moorland in such area, including altitude, substrate, soil fertility, the surrounding land use and the availability of nearby seed.
- 3.18 Whilst little can be done to influence altitude and the underlying substrate, the fertility of the soil can be altered. Wildflowers tend to flourish in poor, nutritionally depleted soils where competition from vigorous grasses is curtailed. For this reason, the Service promoted a policy of:
 - a) Specifying low-growing grasses for new seeding.
 - b) Not applying fertiliser.
 - c) When exposed, leaving sub-soil surfaces free of topsoil where appropriate, and using the minimum thickness of topsoil where it has to be applied.
 - d) Not importing topsoil - where this cannot be avoided advice should be taken to ensure that the topsoil is from a location with similar characteristics.
 - e) Restricting the amount of aggressive leguminous plants (e.g. clover) in seed mixes to prevent soil fertility increasing.
 - f) Reducing compaction on the new verge to a minimum.

- 3.19 Ideally each verge, depending on its width, would contain a range of different habitats. Some plants can only survive on the low cut metre strip, and others in longer grass at the rear of the verge. NatureScot in its report on verges in Highland Region describe 3 zones – Zone A being that metre closest to the road subject to most frequent cutting, Zone B being adjacent metre strip which would ideally be cut less often, perhaps once a year after the beginning of August, and Zone C at the rear of the verge with longer vegetation of wildlife interest and cut every 2 to 3 years in late August. Zones B and C may be absent on narrow verges.
- 3.20 In Aberdeenshire, most of the verges wide enough to allow such diversity lie in areas cleared for visibility reasons and sight lines must not be obscured.
- 3.21 Elsewhere however, in recognition of NatureScot advice, and to control the spread of brushwood, scrub and noxious weeds, consideration should be given to introducing a policy of cutting the entire verge width every 5 or 6 years. NatureScot also recommend that scrub clearance is carried out in early autumn to avoid the nesting (and tourist) season.

Trees and Hedges

- 3.22 As previously discussed, the Roads Authority is empowered by the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 to arrange for action to be taken to cut trees and hedges where obstruction may be caused. The cutting of hedges is undertaken using flails, which is the only practicable method. Thicker branches however are pruned by hand.

Special Verges

- 3.23 High level ground in Aberdeenshire was informally recognised as requiring different standards since there is virtually no grass growth in these areas with a preponderance of heaths and heather on verges and embankments.
- 3.24 In addition to this general policy local managers have discretion to vary treatment where required for safety reasons or to meet road standards.

Designations of Surrounding Land

- 3.25 When planning works which may affect verges and adjacent land, engineers must be aware of any landscape or nature conservation designations in the vicinity. When works border a site of Special Scientific Interest, Nature Scot should first be consulted.

Future Policy

- 3.26 There is already a planned piece of work to create a holistic policy which will also incorporate “Planting in the road verge”. The development of this Policy will follow the normal governance route with final approval via the Infrastructure Services Committee. This piece of work is planned to be completed in 2023 - 24.

4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

- 4.1 This report helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Climate Change” within the Pillar “Our Environment” by minimising the impact of our actions on the road infrastructure on the key principle of “climate and sustainability”, whilst ensuring that safety aspects are given appropriate status.

Pillar	Priority
Our People	Learning for Life Health & Wellbeing
Our Environment	Climate Change Resilient Communities
Our Economy	Economic Growth Infrastructure and public assets

- 4.2 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendation is agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial		X	
Staffing		X	
Equalities and Fairer Duty Scotland		X	
Children and Young People’s Rights and Wellbeing		X	
Climate Change and Sustainability		X	
Health and Wellbeing		X	
Town Centre First		X	

- 4.3 There are no additional staffing / financial implications.
- 4.4 The screening section as part of Stage One of the Integrated Impact Assessment process has not identified the requirement for any further detailed assessments to be undertaken.
- 4.5 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level:

- ACORP006 Reputation management (including social media): The Policy review will require to mitigate any impacts on the rural environment of the Aberdeenshire countryside.
- [Corporate Risk Register](#)

The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Strategic Level:

- ISR005 Open spaces that encourage active, healthy lifestyles: The Policy will require to mitigate the impacts in line with the Open Space challenges Strategy

by implementing initiatives such as the Greenspaces project to increase biodiversity across the public owned spaces in Aberdeenshire.

[Link to risk register page on website](#)

5 Scheme of Governance

- 5.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and their comments are incorporated within the report and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.
- 5.2 The Committee is able to consider this item in terms of Section R.1.1.c of the [List of Committee Powers in Part 2A](#) of the Scheme of Governance as it relates to the promotion of awareness of the need for sustainability within the Council and the wider community of Aberdeenshire. Approval, review and monitoring of the Council's work in respect of sustainable development and climate change in order to ensure compliance with relevant statutory duties, with particular reference to the Climate Change Action Plan.

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