

Decision Maker: PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR SUSTAINABILITY, GREEN SERVICES AND OPEN SPACES

For Pre-Decision Scrutiny at

ENVIRONMENT & COMMUNITY SERVICES POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: 22nd November 2022

Decision Type: Non-Urgent Non-Executive Non-Key

Title: NATURE FRIENDLY VERGES TRIAL

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Chief Officer: Colin Brand, Director of Environment and Public Protection

Ward: Beckenham & Copers Cope, Bromley Town, Farnborough & Crofton, Hayes & Coney Hall, Orpington, Penge & Cator, Plaistow, St Mary Cray, Shortlands & Park Langley, West Wickham

1. REASON FOR REPORT

- 1.1 At their meeting on 6th September 2022, the Environment & Community Services Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee agreed to form a Working Group to consider options for the management of grass verges within the London Borough of Bromley.
- 1.2 This report sets out the findings of that member Working Group following their meeting on 26th October 2022 and recommends that the council undertakes a two year Nature Friendly Verges Trial at 11 sites in the borough, with additional information on these sites provided at **Appendix 1**.
- 1.3 It is recommended that following the end of the trial, the Working Group review the response to the public engagement activities to determine recommendations to the Portfolio Holder about the future management of verges, which may include:
 - Extending the trial to additional verges

- Stopping the trial and reverting to the contracted management regime
 - Recommending a permanent change to the way that some or all grass verges are managed.
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2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 Members of the Environment & Community Services PDS are asked to review the recommendations in the report and provide their comments to the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability, Green Services and Open Spaces.
- 2.2 The Portfolio Holder for Sustainability, Green Services and Open Spaces is asked to approve the trial for Nature Friendly Verges in accordance with the management regime and public engagement proposals set out in this report, at the following sites:
- Addington Road (West Wickham/Hayes & Coney Hall)
 - Beadon Road (Bromley Town)
 - Copers Cope Road (Beckenham Town & Copers Cope)
 - Court Road (Orpington)
 - Downs Hill/Ravensbourne Avenue (Shortlands and Park Langley/Bromley Town/Beckenham & Copers Cope)
 - Northfield Road (St Mary Cray)
 - Ormonde Avenue (Farnborough and Crofton)
 - Pickhurst Lane and Pickhurst Mead (West Wickham/Hayes and Coney Hall)
 - Rangefield Road Footpath (Plaistow)
 - River Pool Walk (Penge and Cator)
 - Warren Road (Chelsfield)

Impact on Vulnerable Adults and Children

1. Summary of Impact: It is unlikely that the proposed trial will have any direct and specific impact on vulnerable adults or children.
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Transformation Policy

1. Policy Status: Existing Policy: Open Space Strategy 2021-2031
2. Making Bromley Even Better:

(4) For residents to live responsibly and prosper in a safe, clean and green environment great for today and a sustainable future.

(5) To manage our resources well, providing value for money, and efficient and effective services for Bromley's residents.

Financial

1. Cost of proposal: £5k for signage and public engagement activities.
 2. Ongoing costs: Non-Recurring Cost:
 3. Budget head/performance centre: Parks Management & Greenspace
 4. Total current budget for this head: £6.214m
 5. Source of funding: Existing controllable revenue budget
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Personnel

1. Number of staff (current and additional): N/A
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours:
-

Legal

1. Legal Requirement: None
 2. Call-in: Applicable:
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Procurement

1. Summary of Procurement Implications: N/A
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Property

1. Summary of Property Implications: N/A
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Carbon Reduction and Social Value

1. Summary of Carbon Reduction/Sustainability Implications: A nature friendly management regime for verges produces benefits such as increased carbon sequestration and better resilience against changing climate.
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Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users or customers (current and projected): N/A
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Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? Yes
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments:

Beckenham Town & Copers Cope:

Cllr Connolly supported the recommendations, noting that 'supporting biodiversity is key to us all playing our part in tackling the climate crisis, supporting our wildlife, and protecting ecosystems.'

Cllr Ross expressed support for the initiative, stating that as a resident of Copers Cope Road she was aware that 'a few years ago neighbours and I began to stop mowing a large patch of grass between the blocks of flats from late April to end Sept / early Oct annually. Beautiful wildflowers grow every year and attract bees and butterflies.' Cllr Ross asked if consideration had been given to more frequent mowing in winter months to keep the area looking tidy.

Chelsfield

Ward councillors support the initiative in principle but have requested more information on the specific locations of the verges on Warren Road as both raised concerns about the potential impact on road safety, depending on the locations of verges.

Farnborough and Crofton

Cllr Marlow supported the proposals in this ward.

Hayes and Coney Hall

Cllr Michael did not support the proposed trial for Nature Friendly Verges adjacent to Hayes and Coney Hall, citing the size and prominence of the verges, and stating that 'nothing looks worse than over-grown and unkempt grass verges for whatever reason they are left unmown. They bring any area down. Weeds will invariably spring up, especially in periods of wet weather. Long unmown grass may encourage dog owners not to clear up after their animal, thus leading to an increase in dog faeces and potential harm to human health, particularly for children.'

Cllr Michael supported wildflower meadows as a management regime in the right locations, but not on municipal grass verges, and suggested that additional managed flower beds would be a better way to create more pollinator habitat. Cllr Michael also expressed concern that the trial would add to the 'proliferation of signage on the roads.'

Cllr Michael concluded:

'My concern is that Nature-Friendly i.e. overgrown verges could become more widespread in the Borough in future, especially given the current financial constraints. The report clearly states that, following the two-year trial, there could be a permanent change to the way some or even all of the Borough's grass verges are managed. I believe that grass verge should continue to be mown and this is what the Borough's residents pay their Council Tax for. The Council's current contracted management scheme should continue.'

Cllr Turrell expressed support for the trial: 'I welcome this trial and the efforts to improve Biodiversity and grow new wildflowers. I welcome the measured approach to achieving this with suitable trial period and clear communication of the plans for residents. The consultation also ensures residents are in control.'

Shortlands and Park Langley

Cllr Cuthbert noted that the Park Langley Residents Association had expressed support for the trial and enquired about the possibility of including a site in this part of the ward.

St Mary Cray:

Cllr Bear and Cllr Slator raised no objection to the trial in principle but noted that the trial should be well publicised to avoid a perception of neglect. Specifically, Cllr Bear notes that the trial in her ward was adjacent to a primary school and suggested linking up with schools as part of the communications proposals.

West Wickham:

Cllr Bennett and Cllr Brock did not object to the proposals, so long as signs are duly erected to explain the purpose of the Nature Friendly Verges. Cllrs asked that the trial be modified or abandoned on verges if road safety concerns arose, or if residents complained in significant numbers.

3. COMMENTARY

Background

- 3.1 The council manages 1,160,649m² of roadside verge, including roundabouts. Verges have potential to have significant ecological value; this is due to their proximity to large areas of habitat (parks, woodlands and meadows) and because they could act as potential wildlife corridors between these spaces.
- 3.2 Management of grass verges is an issue about which some residents feel strongly; some support the existing management regime whilst others advocate for different regimes based on improved biodiversity and better carbon impacts. As part of their remit, the Countryside Consultative Panel asked the Portfolio Holder to review their recommendation for an alternative management regime for these reasons.
- 3.3 At their meeting on 6th September 2022, the Environment & Community Services Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee agreed to form a Working Group to consider the future management of grass verges in the borough. The working group is made up of members of the Committee: Cllr Rowlands (Chair), Cllr Fawthrop, Cllr Grant, Cllr Igoe, Cllr Ireland and Cllr Stammers and Cllr Stranger. The Working Group met on 26th October 2022 to review the existing arrangements for verge management and to consider options to trial an alternative management regime.

Existing arrangements

- 3.4 Currently, the council contracts the management of grass verges to its parks management and grounds maintenance contractor, idverde. Highway verge maintenance is covered by section GM4 and GM10 of the specification, which requires (in summary):
- That highway verges are kept neat and tidy
 - Mowing takes place over the whole site up to paving, edging, fences or boundaries, with grass cut as close to possible to obstacles.
 - There is an annual programme to cut and trim edges so that all verges are cut and trimmed in an eight year cycle.
 - Grass should never be shorter than 25mm or longer than 75mm with the frequency of grass cutting being determined by idverde to meet this output.
 - Where there are naturalised bulbs in verges, mowing regimes must be adapted to avoid damaging growing bulbs
- 3.5 The cost of maintaining highway verges to this standard is £583,038 per annum, with costs increasing annually in line with the contractual indexation adjustment.
- 3.6 There are some small areas of verge that are managed differently:
- There are a small minority of verge areas which include floral bedding which are box mowed, with the permitted grass heights between 20-50mm.
 - There is 27,620m² of verge which is managed as a rough grass area where the acceptable length for grass is 50-70mm.
- 3.7 idverde have additional duties to maintain these verges which include:
- Cyclical cleaning of rural verges
 - Weed control

The case for an alternative management regime

- 3.8 Roadside verges are one of the least valued habitat types and can be resource heavy to manage. Consequently, there is an increasing trend to implement alternative management regimes, with 70% of English councils choosing to do so to improve road verges for wildflowers and pollinators.
- 3.9 The UK has lost over 97% of its wildflower meadows, and roadside verges have seen a 20% reduction in floristic diversity. 45% of native UK wildflower species are known to occur on roadside verges, with the taxa and flora being of particularly high value to pollinators in floristically deprived landscape such as those in urban areas. Studies suggest that some species are now completely dependent on road verges in otherwise unsuitable landscapes.
- 3.10 Additionally, road verges have the potential to be dynamic habitats; it is estimated that well managed road verges can produce 10 times the mass of sugar (nectar) per hectare than arable farmland.
- 3.11 Some cutting of vegetation has been shown to benefit plants, flowers and local pollinator diversity and abundance. Most studies demonstrate that between one and two early summer cuts and collects on an annual basis are best for pollinator groups, with a late summer/early autumn cut benefiting wildflowers.

Nature friendly verges

3.12 A nature friendly approach to verge management is based on three principles:

- (i) Lowering soil fertility to reduce grass growth through removal of cuttings
- (ii) Reduction in frequency of cutting
- (iii) Community engagement to manage expectations.

3.13 The benefits of a nature friendly approach to verge management are:

- Reduction in carbon produced by use of machinery
- Increase in carbon storage through large verges
- Creation of wildlife corridors, connecting larger habitats
- Improved air quality
- Improved buffer of noise and pollution
- Increased floral diversity
- Increased in pollinator habitat
- Moisture retention during drier periods

3.14 There are some risks associated with nature friendly verge management:

- Negative public perception
- Potential to act as litter traps

Trial of Nature Friendly Verges in the borough

3.15 Having reviewed the above business case for an alternative management regime, the Working Group have unanimously approved a trial for of nature friendly verges in the borough with the purpose of assessing the perception of Bromley residents: to seek feedback on the alternative management approach during the trial and to assess the level of support for it in the long-term, and for wider use in the borough.

- 3.16 A sample of roadside verges and roundabouts in the borough were identified by idverde to represent a geographical spread and where implementation of nature friendly management is not considered to create health and safety concerns for road users or pedestrians, and to avoid areas which may be particularly sensitive (e.g. cemeteries). Verges managed for bulb growing have been included in the sample.
- 3.17 Having reviewed the sample, and feedback from the Biodiversity Partnership, the Working Group are recommending that the alternative management regime is trialled at the following 11 sites in the borough, with additional information on these sites included at **Appendix 1**:
- Addington Road (West Wickham/Hayes and Coney Hall border)
 - Beadon Road (Bromley Town)
 - Copers Cope Road (Beckenham Town & Copers Cope)
 - Court Road (Orpington)
 - Downs Hill/Ravensbourne Avenue (Shortlands and Park Langley/Bromley Town/Beckenham & Copers Cope)
 - Northfield Road (St Mary Cray)
 - Ormonde Avenue (Farnborough and Crofton)
 - Pickhurst Lane and Pickhurst Mead (West Wickham/Hayes and Coney Hall border)
 - Rangefield Road Footpath (Plaistow)
 - River Pool Walk (Penge and Cator)
 - Warren Road (Chelsfield)
- 3.18 The Working Group selected a management methodology for the trial which includes one cut and collect operation annually, in August or September depending on the weather. This permits plants to flower and set seed. Where appropriate the areas will be framed with regular mowing.
- 3.19 The trial of the new management regime for 11 sites will be a cost neutral exercise. This is because the scale and temporary nature of the proposed trial. If a larger trial or permanent change were to be agreed, it is likely that there would be modest cost saving to the contract price, subject to negotiation.
- 3.20 The key purpose of the trial is to gather feedback from residents on the alternative management regime. Therefore, public engagement is a critical part of these proposals. Engagement would commence prior to the onset of the growing season, with communications focused on explaining the rationale behind the trial of nature friendly verges, the chosen management regime and its benefits, and to provide opportunities for question and answers. A communications plan will be developed, with specific feedback collected through:
- An online questionnaire
 - Fix My Street (FMS) enquiries
 - Engagement meetings during the trial period
- 3.21 The trial will be publicised as 'nature friendly verges', and signage will be erected on the relevant verges to identify them as such, and signpost to relevant information on the purpose of the trial. Semi-permanent corex board signage shall be mounted every 200m and/or at

either end of the verge. It is estimated that publication and signage costs would not exceed £5k.

Trial Programme

3.22 The Working Group requested that the trial is delivered during the 2023 and 2024 growing seasons (February 2023 – September 2024). A two year trial period is preferred because it will take at least two growing seasons for the wildflowers in the verges to start to establish.

3.23 The table below sets out the programme for delivery of the trial:

Stage 1: Winter 2022/3	<p>Project launch to raise awareness of planned trial and begin to disseminate key communication messages, to manage expectations in the coming Spring.</p> <p>Communications to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dedicated webpage with key information - Press release - Social media posts - Launch event(s) with a mix of in person and online presentations and Q&As hosted by idverde. - Engagement with key community stakeholders - Appropriate advertisements
Stage 2: Spring 2023	<p>Implement new management regime on chosen verges.</p> <p>Erect signage on affected verges</p> <p>Publish online survey</p> <p>Article in Environment Matters</p>
Stage 3: Autumn 2023	<p>Review feedback on Year 1 and report results.</p> <p>Review trial approach and make any changes required.</p>
Stage 4: Winter/Spring 2024	<p>Produce communications to launch second year of the trial, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Press release - Social media posts - Re-launch event - Engagement with key community stakeholders - Appropriate advertisements
Stage 5: Autumn 2024	<p>Review all feedback on the trial.</p> <p>Decisions to be made on next steps.</p>

Next Steps

3.24 Following completion of the trial, the Working Group will review the feedback from the public engagement to determine their recommendations to the committee on the future management of verges, which may include:

- Extending the trial to additional verges
- Stopping the trial and reverting to the contracted management regime
- Recommending a permanent change to the way that some or all grass verges are managed.

4. SOCIAL VALUE, CARBON REDUCTION AND LOCAL / NATIONAL PRIORITIES

4.1 Naturalised road verges can provide many benefits the ecosystem services. From a direct carbon saving perspective, increasing vegetation growth results in higher carbon sequestration rates. In some cases, grassland can sequester more carbon than woodland by area.

4.2 Urban roadsides have some of the greatest stocks of black carbon which not only capture warming emissions but also polluting particles that affect air quality. As summer seasons continue to experience high temperatures, studies have shown that naturalised grass verges can help to regulate the urban heat island effect. Naturalised grass verges also contribute to reduced flood risk and erosion control by absorbing run-off and intercepting rainfall, providing a further element of climate resiliency.

5. TRANSFORMATION/POLICY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The proposal for a Nature Friendly Verges trial supports the Council's Corporate Strategy: Making Bromley Even Better, specifically in relation to ambition 4: For residents to live responsibly and prosper in a safe, clean and green environment great for today and a sustainable future. It supports our objectives for a clean and green environment and a carbon neutral environment.

6. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 It is estimated that a trial for Nature Friendly Verges will not have a financial impact on the contract with idverde for parks management and grounds maintenance. Up to £5k may be required to publicise the trial and produce relevant signage; this can be met from existing service budgets.

Non-Applicable Headings:	Legal Implications, Procurement Considerations, IT and GDPR Considerations, Personnel Considerations; Impact on Vulnerable Adults and Children
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	Appendix 1: Recommended Trial Sites