



Item: 7

Development and Infrastructure Committee: 10 September 2024.

Verge Maintenance Plan.

Report by Corporate Director for Neighbourhood Services and Infrastructure.

1. Overview

- 1.1. The verge maintenance plan contains the specification for verge cutting and weed control and is currently reviewed on an annual basis. Due to the limited changes year on year, it is proposed to amend this to a 5-year document.
- 1.2. It is proposed to reduce the frequency of verge cuts from two cuts to one cut. This would be carried out at the end the growing season, September/ October.
- 1.3. Visibility splays on the A-road network will still be cut in May, with additional safety cuts undertaken on all roads, as required, throughout the season.
- 1.4. This would reduce costs by approximately 40% and free up substantial staff time to focus on other higher priority works.
- 1.5. Cutting verges at least once a year will prevent weeds and long grasses from taking hold. Alternative methods, including the introduction of Yellow Rattle, are being considered to suppress grass growth.
- 1.6. The Neighbourhood Services Consultative Group met on 7 June 2024 and discussed the proposal to change the current Plan. The attached Verge Maintenance Plan 2025-2030 sets out the outcomes from that meeting.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. It is recommended that members of the Committee:
 - i. Note the proposal that the annual Verge Maintenance Plan be replaced by a 5-year plan.
 - ii. Note that annual consultation will continue and will focus on areas of safety concern and injurious weeds.
 - iii. Note that Yellow Rattle is being explored to suppressing grass growth.
 - iv. Note that safety cuts will still be undertaken where required.

- v. Approve the Verge Maintenance Plan 2025-2030, attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

3. Background

- 3.1. The Council is responsible for approximately 1730km of grass verge. About 5% of the network is designated as conservation verges which are cut once at the end of the summer allowing wildflowers to seed, grow and provide vital habitat to wildlife.
- 3.2. The overall verges budget for 2023/24 was £131,800. This budget covers verge cutting, ground maintenance contribution, weed control and verge damage repairs. In 2023-24 the cost for verge cutting against this budget was in the region of £109k, approximately £60k over the available budget allocated to verge cutting.

4. Well Managed Highway Infrastructure, A Code of Practice 2016

- 4.1. In 2016, Well Managed Highway Infrastructure, A Code of Practice (CoP) introduced the risk-based approach to road maintenance. The CoP encourages Local Authorities to review how assets are maintained to ensure that resources are implemented effectively across the entire network to focus on what is most likely to be pose risk to road users.
- 4.2. The attached plan applies these principles and accepts that not all verges need to be maintained to the same standard. Straight sections of road with no junctions do not pose the same risk as a section with an approach to a major junction.
- 4.3. By maintaining assets in this way, it is possible to improve the effectiveness of existing resources. This is more vital than ever given the acceptance that roads will deteriorate significantly in the long-term. The Roads Service simply must adapt.

5. Biodiversity

- 5.1. There are substantial biodiversity benefits to this proposed change. National Planning Framework 4 and the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy require local authorities to develop and strengthen nature networks as a mechanism for protecting and enhancing biodiversity. As verges cover an area of approximately 2.6km² and provide vital habitat for wildlife and flowers, the proposed change would form a significant nature network benefiting the whole of Orkney.

- 5.2. This Plan also directly supports the Species on the Edge project which is highlighting declining wildlife populations in 7 project areas across Scotland. Orkney has been chosen as one of the project areas to highlight the threat to the Great Yellow Bumblebee. The Species on the Edge project aims to protect and enhance the environment that these rare species call home.
- 5.3. Yellow Rattle is a partially parasitic plant which can be used to reduce the vigour of grass. In some cases, it has been found to inhibit grass growth by as much as 60%. This benefits other wildflowers greatly by allowing more space to flourish and spread.
- 5.4. Local trials have indicated that it is possible to successfully grow Yellow Rattle with minimal preparation of existing grassed areas.
- 5.5. Therefore, Yellow Rattle is being explored to reduce grass growth across the network, with trial areas being undertaken in 2025. It is expected that funding will be provided from the Nature Restoration Fund for the seeds used in this trial.

6. Other Benefits

- 6.1. Reduced resources, both financial and staffing, impact on the response times for all road defects. The Roads Asset Management Plan 2023-28 accepts that the network will undergo significant deterioration year on year so the ability to react to these defects will only worsen. Therefore, it is imperative that services are delivered differently to suit changing circumstances and focus resources where road users are at most risk.
- 6.2. Approximately 1700 hours was spent maintaining the road verges in 2023-24. The average pothole takes two members of staff 1 hour to repair, therefore even a modest reduction in verge maintenance would free up staff to address higher priority works, such as repairing defects.
- 6.3. Over 50% of visitors in the 2019 VisitScotland survey undertook activities involving nature during their visit. As one of the most focal assets of the Council, the benefits span every Parish and Island.
- 6.4. The Plan would reduce the distance travelled by around 1500km, an annual saving of approximately 350 litres of fuel.

7. Options Appraisal

7.1. Other options were considered but none of these provided the needed cost reduction to meet existing budget allocation. The options presented to the Consultative Group on 7 June 2024 were as follows:

Option.	First Cut.	Second Cut.	Approximate Cost.
1.	A-Roads visibility splays of junctions/bends. B/C/U roads not cut.	All verges cut.	£68k.
2.	All verges on A-Roads cut. B/C/U roads not cut.	All verges cut.	£78k.
3.	All verges cut except existing conservation verges (5% of the network).	All verges cut.	£126k.

7.2. The attached Verge Maintenance Plan 2025-2030 is based on Option 1.

8. Consultation

- 8.1. Elected Members and Community Councils are consulted on the Verge Maintenance Plan on an annual basis.
- 8.2. In 2023 the Orkney Verge Working Group was formed to bring together representatives from the Council, RSPB, Species on the Edge, North Isles Landscape Partnership Scheme and the Orkney Field Club, with the aim of increasing biodiversity across Orkney.
- 8.3. The Orkney Verge Working Group was added to the list of consultees for the 2024 Verge Maintenance Plan. They submitted a letter as part of this consultation strongly in favour of reducing cuts wherever possible and only undertake cutting where safety concerns are present.
- 8.4. It is proposed that annual consultation will continue with Elected Members, Community Councils and the Orkney Verge Working Group however consideration will not be given to amending the Plan during its 5-year term. Consultation will instead be focused on highlighting areas of safety concern and injurious weeds.

For Further Information please contact:

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Implications of Report

1. Financial –

The proposals are anticipated to bring costs associated with verge cutting down, and bring the overall costs associated with verges closer to the allocated budget.

2. Legal -

- i.** Approving the recommendations in this report will assist the Council in discharging its statutory duty to secure best value.
- ii.** Section 1(1) of the Roads Scotland Act 1984 states that: “a local roads authority shall manage and maintain all such roads in their area as are for the time being entered in a list (in this act referred to as their “list of public roads”) prepared and kept by them under this section. The Council also has power to reconstruct, alter, widen, improve or renew any such road or to determine the means by which the public right of passage over it, or over any part of it, may be exercised. Adopting the Plan will assist the Council in discharging its duty to maintain all roads in its area.”
- iii.** Section 1 (1) of the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 states that “It is the duty of every public body and office-holder, in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions.”

3. Corporate Governance – None.

4. Human Resources – None.

5. Equalities –

An Equality Impact Assessment is not required.

6. Island Communities Impact –

An Island Communities Impact Assessment is not required.

7. Links to Council Plan –

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Council Plan strategic priorities:

- Growing our economy.
- Strengthening our Communities.
- Developing our Infrastructure.
- Transforming our Council.

8. Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan –

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities:

- Cost of Living.
- Sustainable Development.
- Local Equality.

9. Environmental and Climate Risk –

The proposal directly supports the Species on the Edge project which is highlighting declining wildlife populations in 7 project areas across Scotland.

The proposals will also lead to less carbon emissions due to less vehicle miles being travelled.

10. Risk

This proposal applies the risk-based approach to verge maintenance which focuses resources on verge areas most likely to pose risk to road users.

By reallocating resources in this way, the service is able to focus on other works which pose greater risk to road users, such as defects on the carriageway surface.

11. Procurement – None.

12. Health and Safety –

Visibility splays on the A-Road network will continue to be cut with safety cuts undertaken elsewhere on the network where required. Therefore, no negative impacts to health and safety are anticipated.

13. Property and Assets – None.

14. Information Technology – None.

15. Cost of Living – None.

List of Background Papers

None.

Appendix

Appendix 1 - Verge Maintenance Plan 2025-2030.



Verge Maintenance Plan 2025-2030

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Document Control and Council Approval

Version Number/Date.	V1/July 2024.
Next Update Due.	July 2030.

1. Objectives

Orkney Islands Council as Roads Authority has a duty to maintain the public roads and ensure as far as possible that they are safe for road users, this includes the roadside verge.

Vegetation on either the roadside verge or private land should not restrict visibility at junctions, access points or bends. In addition, sightlines and minimum stopping distances should be kept clear and signs, lights, and marker posts clearly visible.

The Roads Management and Maintenance Plan 2023-2028 which is based on the good practice contained within the Code of Practice entitled “Well-managed Highway Infrastructure”, recognises that the cutting of verges is done primarily for road safety, however the Council also has a duty under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

The Verge Maintenance Plan recognises these aims and will contribute to the wider corporate objectives by managing the maintenance of the roadside verges in such a way as to provide a safe environment for all road users and enhance biodiversity.

The primary objectives of the verge cutting regime will be:

- To maintain safety.
- To prevent obstruction of sight lines, road traffic signs, barriers, and other structures.
- To inhibit the growth of injurious weeds (in accordance with the Weeds Act 1959).
- To prevent encroachment of vegetation onto the carriageway.
- To manage the roadside verges in a manner that promotes biodiversity by conserving, wherever possible, special wildlife habitats and wildflowers.

2. Specification for Annual Roadside Verge Cutting

2.1. Verge Cuts

All verges outside the 30mph limits will be cut.

The first swathe (up to 1.2m wide) from the edge of the carriageway will be cut.

Where an open ditch lies adjacent to the carriageway the area up to the ditch only will be cut.

Verges adjacent to open heathland or moorland will not be cut unless vegetation obstructs visibility.

Verges in dune areas will be carefully cut to ensure that erosion does not occur.

2.2. Frequency

All roads will be cut once per year in September/October. In addition to this, visibility splays at junctions and bends will be cut on all A-roads in May/June.

2.3. Safety Cuts

These cuts are primarily to maintain sight lines at road junctions and bends. All vegetation will be cut for a safe distance applicable to the character of the road and will include vegetation growing alongside adjacent walls and fences which may obstruct visibility. Vegetation unable to be cut by machine mounted mower will be strimmed by hand. Safety cuts will be undertaken throughout the season as required.

2.4. Strimming

Brig parapet walls, safety railings, verge markers and chevron signage will be strimmed as required throughout the season, normally once around mid-summer. This is done to maintain visibility of these assets. If these assets are highlighted by other means, for example by brig warning signage, this work will not be required.

3. Dealing with Injurious Weeds

3.1. Responsibility

The control of injurious weeds is a statutory responsibility under The Weeds Act 1959. We will continue to work in accordance with this Act and with adjacent landowners to control and prevent the spread of injurious weeds.

3.2. Prescribed Weeds

The prescribed weeds in the Act are:

- Ragwort.
- Broad leaved dock.
- Curled dock.
- Creeping or field thistle.
- Spear thistle.

3.3. Action

Action will be taken to reduce/remove these weeds, either by hand by the end of June, or by spraying prior to the end of September.

Areas requiring treatment will be compiled from various sources, including routine safety inspections and public reports, throughout the year.