

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

LOCAL COMMITTEE (TANDRIDGE)

DATE: 20 September 2019

SUBJECT: Public Question: Roadside verges

DIVISION: Caterham Valley



Background

Whyteleafe Village Council has noted an apparent increase across local Councils to 're-wild' roadside verges. Although we recognise the potential benefits e.g. greater biodiversity, improved appearance and fewer regular cuts (less carbon dioxide), we do not have any details of the cost (installation, planting and ongoing maintenance).

Question:

Whyteleafe Village Council would like to know:

- a) Does Surrey County Council have a strategy to 're-wild' some of its roadside verges. If plans exist to create 'pictorial meadows' or add wildflowers to verges, Whyteleafe Village Council would like to know how the Parish can get involved?
- b) If no strategy exists, would Surrey County Council undertake a feasibility study, in partnership with others (such as neighbouring County Councils, Surrey Wildlife Trust) to see whether 're-wilding' is a viable option for some of the County's roadside verges?

Response:

Surrey County Council does not currently have a formal strategy to 're-wild' some of its roadside verges, preferring to ensure that where suitable highway grass verges are maintained with a sympathetic approach to flora and fauna. Wildflowers flourish best where the soil is poor, which means in order to encourage wildflowers, the ideal solution is to cut the grass and collect the arisings. Unfortunately, that is costly, and Surrey County Council has no additional funds to do this.

Surrey County Council is very keen to work with our Districts, Boroughs and Parishes to manage, where it is safe to do so, highway verges with a different approach. Footways, and edge of carriageways will still require a 1m swathe to be cut, to ensure that the carriageway edge does not become overgrown and prevent water run off, and that footways are still clear for people to walk along them. Safety is always the priority for a highway authority, and not all verges will be suitable to nurture wild flowers.

The Principal Engineer for grass cutting, has been on two events with various Wildlife trusts, and organisations looking into this issue, and developing knowledge from other Highway Authorities.

Surrey County Council is keen to encourage wild flowers along road side verges where sight lines do not need to be maintained. Currently, where individuals or Parish's approach Surrey County Council with suggested areas, each area of verge is risk assessed before a plan is agreed. There are opportunities to plant Birds-foot trefoil and Yellow Rattle, which are both green and can cover grass verges relatively quickly, whilst only growing 20cm high. However, the verges need scarifying or at the very least the last few grass cuts require the arisings to be removed to reduce the nutrients in the soil, if this has any success. Currently, Surrey County Council's grass cutting contractors does not have the equipment to remove the arisings, and paying individuals to rake up the arisings will be too costly within our existing budgets.

Grass verges should always be cut at least annually – as without this cut the area will quickly become overgrown in undesirable woody species, shrubs and tree saplings. Hence, areas should not be allowed to become 'wild', but should be nurtured and maintained in a more sympathetic way to support flora and fauna where safe to do so.

Contact Officer: Helen Currie, Principal Maintenance Engineer- Environmental Works
highways@surreycc.gov.uk