

Communities, Environment and Highways Select Committee**PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES****4b Public Questions****Question (1) From Amy Coleman:**

The Surrey County Council website acknowledges that with over 3000 miles of rural and urban roads, Surrey has a significant opportunity to increase plant and insect biodiversity through reduced cutting of verges in line with the Blue Campaign principles.

- a. Do you agree that the current grass cutting policy of six cuts a year in urban areas is incongruent with the objective of increasing biodiversity?
- b. Will the county council consider changing the default position to grass cutting such that all urban verges without a house fronting onto them are automatically managed as Blue Heart verges, without the need for an application?

This would quickly lead to significantly more wildlife friendly verges without the need for individual applications processed by the council, saving the council costs in contractor fees and administration of applications with no compelling downside.

ANSWERED BY: Richard Bolton, Assistant Director - Highways Operations & Infrastructure

RESPONSE: Thank you for your question. The council strives to support our greener futures objectives as part of our verge maintenance activities which includes promoting biodiversity. As you highlight, the blue heart initiative gives the opportunity for residents, where it is locally supported, to reduce the number of cuts. We aim to make it as easy as possible for residents to request a blue heart verge and have seen a significant uptake in the last year. We do appreciate your suggestion; however, we must balance this against the needs of road users and the wish of many residents who would like us to cut the verges more frequently. Where there are competing objectives, we need to ensure the approach to verge management is supported by the local community but also enables the safe use of the highway by all road users e.g. cyclists, pedestrians.

The council has other opportunities to support biodiversity such as on our Countryside sites and through our Local Nature Recovery Strategy. More information about on this can be found here [Managing nature - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/management-and-operations/roads-and-transport/blue-heart-veges) and [Local Nature Recovery Strategy \(LNRS\) - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/management-and-operations/roads-and-transport/local-nature-recovery-strategy).

Question (2) From Councillor Catherine Baart

It is important to ensure we get a “good deal” in agreeing with the bus companies which routes require subsidising by the county council. How do we know that the arrangement we come to with operators in funding routes is fair to the Council? Is there a national formula or is it simply down to a commercial negotiation?

ANSWERED BY: Paul Millin, Assistant Director, Strategic Transport

RESPONSE: Following the deregulation of local bus services as part of the Transport Act 1985, determining which bus routes are provided commercially is essentially a decision for local bus operators to take. This will include consideration of the costs, income and profitability of individual routes and groups of routes, alongside consideration a bus operator’s overall business and operating area. Like many other Local Transport Authorities, this council works proactively with all our bus operators to maximise commercial operations and encourage partnership investment and improvement.

The tendered local bus network is subject to open tender via a Dynamic Purchasing System. This gives all local bus operators the opportunity to bid for all tendered bus routes right across Surrey, thus creating a competitive market. Tenders are awarded on the basis of the best overall value for the Council and our residents.

If we believe tender prices are too high for a particular contract, we can and do award a short-term contract, then retendering it to secure better value for the Council. We did this in 2023 for a local bus contract in Spelthorne, with a retender and long-term contract award made earlier this year that has delivered significantly better value.

For commercially provided bus routes, the council may buy supplementary journeys that are not commercially viable if we believe they are required locally and offer added value for residents. Examples include, funding extra school journeys, or late evening journeys. Prices for supplementary journeys are negotiated with the commercial operator using our professional knowledge and experience of local bus prices and costs. This approach offers best value, as the commercial operator has limited additional costs; essentially driver time/wages and fuel. Continuity of route operation by one provider means simpler ticketing and information, compared to, for example, a second operator running only the last few late evening journeys on a route that runs all day.