

Budget Proposals 2016-17: Rural Highways Grass Cutting

Summary of Feedback Received and Key Findings

Why we consulted?

Over the last four years we have had to make savings of £23m because we've received less money from central government. We have done this by becoming more efficient at what we do, by reducing some of our administrative functions and increasing our income. Throughout this period we have done our best to protect front line services.

We now have to find another £20m over the next four years, with almost £11m to be found in 2016/17. Much of this will come from further efficiencies within the council, but £4.6m will have to come from services that will impact the public.

In order to inform the budget setting process for 2016/17 we published a list of those proposals which would likely have a direct impact on service users, and sought the views from those affected and interested:

- to understand the likely impact
- to identify any measures to reduce their impact
- to explore any possible alternatives

Approach

All the proposals were published on the council's website on 3 November 2015 with feedback requested by 14 December 2015. Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), with a video message from the Chief Executive outlining the background to the exercise.

Information relating to this proposal was linked directly from this index page. This contained more detailed information on what was specifically proposed, information on what we thought the impact might be, as well as what else we had considered in developing and arriving at this proposal. Feedback was then invited through an online form and through a dedicated email address.

Each individual budget proposal was placed on our [Consultation Portal](#) which automatically notified those registered that an exercise had been launched. Members of the West Berkshire community panel (around 800 people) and local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations were also emailed directly, notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions.

Heads of Service made direct contact with those organisations affected by any of the budget proposals prior to them being made publically available.

A press release was issued on the same date, as well as publicised through Facebook and Twitter.

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Background

The council has just over 1,000 miles of rural grass verge and sightline cutting routes that receive treatment every year. Rural routes are currently cut three times a year. Depending on the extent of the seasonal growth some sightlines are cut more often. In addition to the programmed cutting, we undertake some reactive cutting where inspections indicate that safety is being compromised.

The rural highways grass cutting will be reduced to 2 cuts a year with a saving of £10,000.

Summary of Key Points

There were 22 responses in total; 12 from residents, seven from town / parish councils, two from the Green Party, one from the Council's Transport Team. The following Parish Councils responded: Mortimer, Pangbourne, Enborne, Tilehurst, Lambourn, Burghfield and Cold Ash.

Overall there was concern about the impacts of this cut on road safety. Particularly on bends, sightlines and junctions, however some respondents, including those from the parishes (some but not all), were accepting of the reduction in verge maintenance subject to attention to some priority locations.

- Overgrown vegetation on bends and sightlines is dangerous to road users.
- Reduce the cut but make sure emergency and statutory works would be carried out, especially with regard to sight lines at road junctions in order to maintain road safety.
- There is far too much cutting of verges in the district, to the detriment of wildlife. In many if not most cases, this is nothing to do with road safety, which of course we agree should be paramount, but more about keeping things "neat and tidy". If the council is really concerned about road safety, it should be reducing speed limits and working to make sure they are properly enforced, maintaining rather than cutting school crossing patrols, improving rather than cutting public transport, making cycling more attractive, and many similar measures.
- The cost of just one serious accident could be significantly more than the modest savings proposed.
- This will impact negatively on walkers and horse riders if it is not carefully managed, because they will be put at risk of injury through collision with traffic if they use the road but at risk of injury through unseen pits and bumps in the verge if they walk or ride off the road.
- Where a busy road forms a link between popular public rights of way, there should be more cuts. However elsewhere, the vast majority of the network, there should be a positive environmental impact. Less grass cutting means more wild flowers can set seed and wildlife generally will thrive.
- There might be a negative economic impact on owners of livestock in the longer term because ragwort will thrive in uncut road verges.
- Cut verges less so the flowers have a chance to grow. Clearly if there are places where it is dangerous because of poor visibility then those locations need to be cut.
- Use local knowledge to set a priority system on when the work is undertaken.
- Priority for cuttings should be based on road safety rather than cosmetic appearance.
- Concern that in rural areas this will have a particularly bad impact on walkers & horse riders.
- It may affect water drainage off the highway.

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- This will result in tatty towns and villages and unsafe cycle and walking routes, which is not environmentally friendly.
- A reduction in maintenance may make bus waiting facilities unsafe, and could impact on availability of safe walking routes to schools, which would lead to a greater cost to the Council in putting on dedicated vehicles.
- Parish councillors (Lambourn) feel that the parishioners overall did not appreciate the consequences of overgrown road verges and the possibility of reduced litter picking. While there is little objection to the broad principle of the reduced cutting of verges, exceptions should be made where visibility might be significantly impaired on bends and corners for safety reasons.
- In general, reducing verge cutting should not be a problem. In particular, obstructed sight lines at junctions and foliage obscuring road signs due to inadequate cutting are a serious road safety problem. Maintenance of these areas must be kept at present levels, or even enhanced.
- The priority for these route assessments should be changed so there is a greater emphasis on safety rather than cosmetic appearance. Visibility splays, visibility of signage and safety of those who find themselves on verge areas should be the overriding priority. Where remedial cutting is required this should be done severely to make a real difference rather than minor trimming.

1. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how this proposal might impact people?

The overriding concern was the impact on road safety, there was a particular concern relating to sightlines on junctions and bends but also about road signage being obscured. In rural areas this could have a significant impact on walkers, horseriders and cyclists. An interesting point was raised about the impact on road drainage as long vegetations falls into the road.

There were a number of comments in support of the proposal subject to some priority areas being subject to a greater cut frequency. They considered that the verges could be left without any negative impacts and perhaps some positive impacts for wildlife.

2. Do you feel that this proposal will affect particular individuals more than others, and if so, how do you think we might help with this?

Road users in general but those identified as being most at risk are the walkers, horse riders and cycle commuters.

3. Do you have any suggestions as to how this service might be delivered in a different way? If so, please provide details.

The main theme which came through the responses was that the scheduling of verge cutting elsewhere could be amended to allow the impacts of the reduction to be mitigated.

One respondent stated they would be prepared to pay more Council Tax to pay for the existing cutting regime to be maintained.

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4. **Is there any way that you, or your organisation, can contribute in helping to alleviate the impact of this proposal? If so, please provide details of how you can help.**

No responses.

5. **Any further comments?**

None.

Conclusion

The reduction in verge maintenance from three to two cuts is unlikely to have a significant impact on road safety. In exceptional growing years there may have to be additional cuts at priority sightlines and around roadside signage so there may be an impact on budgets in those years to accommodate increased reactive maintenance however overall it is possible to accommodate the saving.

***Please note:** In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.

All the responses have been provided verbatim as an appendix to this report. Whilst this summary seeks to distil the key, substantive points made, it should also be read in conjunction with the more detailed verbatim comments to ensure a full, rounded perspective of the views and comments are considered.

Gary Lugg
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