

MEETING REPORT

Meeting: Parks & Open Spaces, 13th November 2023
Agenda item: PA23/023
Report subject: Recreation Grounds & Verge Cutting Contract 2024/2025
Report author: K Elliott-Turner, Town Clerk

Verges

Ivybridge has a mix of verge ownership around the town, with Devon County Council owning the majority, South Hams District Council owning some (see attached, but note plan also includes SHDC open spaces/parks), and Ivybridge Town Council owning a very small area with designated sections to improve biodiversity.

Current cutting agreement

Devon County Council has an annual agreement with the Town Council to cut verge visibility splays around the town (DCC owned verges only), which is subsequently contracted out on an annual basis.

The DCC contract requires a minimum of 4 cuts per year (as urban roads), at a height of 40mm. The cutting schedule is in April, June, July and September. The Town Council receives an annual payment as part of the agreement, which supports the council's grass cutting contract.

Current issues

Assessment of various verges across the town, under the DCC agreement, found that the visibility areas which are cut are untidy and unsightly, and because the grass is long when it is cut and is not collected, this results in a form of thatch over the top of the surface – a trip hazard, is unsightly and hinders good new growth. Also, because some areas are cut and the remainder is left uncut, this can also look unsightly.

Focusing on one particular area of the town where concerns have been repeatedly raised regarding safety – Woolcombe Lane and junction with Berkeley Way. At the June meeting of this committee (minute PA23/006), a request was made for an inspection to be made of the junction in relation to the hump in the road (Woolcombe Lane) and adjacent grass verge (not cut as part of the visibility splay cut) resulting in poor visibility when exiting Berkeley Way. After a visit to the site in question by the Neighbourhood Highway Engineer, they concluded that they would not extend the area cut under the DCC visibility splay agreement, but that if the Town Council wished to include it as part of their own contract works, this would be at their expense.

Following agreement by council to carry out a further cut of visibility splays under this contract, together with a full length cut of Woolcombe Lane and Cornwood Road, it was acknowledged, supported by complaints from residents, that x4 cuts per year is not sufficient, with the warmer, wetter weather resulting in the grass cutting season being extended. By cutting Woolcombe Lane above the visibility splay contract requirement, this would address the safety concerns of residents regarding the humped road and uncut humped verge.

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Cutting going forward

The Town Clerk queried whether the DCC agreement could extend to a three-year period, as this would likely produce better value for money quotes. However, it has been confirmed that there is no likelihood of the agreement increasing from yearly to multiple year agreements. This does not mean to say that the Town Council could not take on a multiple year contract, only that there would be a risk that DCC might stop their agreements going forward, resulting in no financial contribution towards our cutting schedule.

Devon County Council has confirmed that they have no objections to the cutting of visibility verges beyond the four subsidised cuts, with extra cuts at the Town Council's expense. They also have no objections to the Town Council undertaking 'aesthetic cuts' of non-visibility verges which fall under DCC ownership, at the Town Council's expense. The only time they would likely intervene is ongoing aesthetic verge maintenance by third parties was if this activity evolved into the addition of street furniture to sites, i.e. benches, shrubberies, tree planting, etc).

Proposed verge cutting schedule for 2024/2025

Options for verge cuts going forward:

Contract period

1. Continue with an annual external contractor to carry out our grass cutting requirements – quotes process
2. Seek a 3-year contract with an external contractor – costs will likely require full tender process

Cutting areas

1. Visibility splays only (as per DCC agreement)
2. Visibility splays and full length of Woolcombe Lane and Cornwood Road
3. Number 2 above, plus all DCC owned verges across the town
4. Number 2 and 3 above, plus SHDC owned verges, if they are agreeable (suggested by District Councillors as a possible option)

Cutting frequency

1. x4 cuts per year (as per current contract)
2. x6 cuts per year
3. x8 cuts per year

It is acknowledged that the reason to leave large sections of verges uncut may have been not only for financial reasons, but also to increase biodiversity. There are clear benefits to wildlife by allowing grass areas to grow, but these are usually on broad verges with meadow grass/flowers such as on main trunk roads. Urban roads and those within housing estates, with more junctions and bends require consideration to be given to vehicle, cyclist and pedestrian safety. It could be argued that there are numerous other areas within the town where consideration could be given to encouraging and improving biodiversity, such as Longtimber Woods, MacAndrews field, etc.

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Resource implications

Annual contribution from Devon County Council is in the region of £5,000.

Indicative costs for options above:

Visibility splays only, x4 per year £5,200

Visibility splays only, x6 per year £7,800

Visibility splays, plus Woolcombe Lane and Cornwood Road, x6 per year £8,300

Visibility splays, plus Woolcombe Lane and Cornwood Road, x8 per year £11,000

Detail of full extent of DCC verge ownership would need to be obtained

Although we have a plan showing location of SHDC verge ownership, the area to be cut (i.e. square metres) is to be determined in order to establish costing

Our Financial Regulations require that where costs are likely to be below £25,000, three quotes should be obtained. Where above £25,000 the tender process is to be followed. As the indicative costing for x8 cuts of visibility splays and Woolcombe Lane and Cornwood Road are suggested to be in the region of £11,000, any further cutting requirements such as full DCC verge cutting and/or SHDC verges, should go through the tender process. To allow sufficient time for the tender process, it would need to be publicised early in the new year to allow

Whilst the Devon County Council agreement remains in place, any costs incurred by the Town Council for additional cuts above the DCC agreement, will be offset by the DCC contribution (currently in region of £5,000).

Parks

It is proposed that no changes are made to the grass cutting schedule for our parks – the current schedule is attached for information. On that basis, an indicative costing for parks grass cutting for 2024/2025 is in the region of £4,500, split across the four budget lines – Barrons Pike/St Peters Way, Filham Park, Victoria Park, MacAndrews Field.

Overview for budgeting purposes

It is recommended that the parks and verges contract is combined, to make the most of economies of scale.

Should committee agree to increased verge cuts (x8 per year, visibility splays and full lengths of Woolcombe Lane and Cornwood Road), and continue with the parks cutting schedule as current, total indicative costing could be in the region of £16,000. This would be off-set by the approx. £5,000 contribution from Devon County Council for visibility splays. Additional funds should be budgeted for, in the event that extra seasonal cuts are required, above contract.

Should committee wish to increase areas of verge cuts, i.e. to include all DCC and/or SHDC verges, the budget for the verges element will need to be increased – unknown cost at this time, but council would need to accept that this additional cost would be met by the precept.

PROPOSAL:

- 1) To consider whether to contract for grass cutting and verge cutting from 2024/2025 financial year on a one year basis, or to seek a three year contract.
- 2) To consider continuing with cutting schedule for parks and recreation grounds.
- 3) To consider whether to increase frequency of cuts for verges; OR
- 4) To consider whether to increase frequency of cuts for verges and areas cut