

Subject:	Proposal for CTC to take more active role in managing OCC verges
From:	Frances Mortimer
Date:	21 June 2024
For decision	
Summary of decisions or actions requested (including timing):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To take a more active role in managing OCC verges within Charlbury, specifically those on The Slade, Sturt Road, Fiveways and Nine Acres Lane: managing these for appearance and biodiversity through 3x/year mowing, removing cut vegetation, and regular (monthly) mowing of borders. To decide whether to accept OCC grant tied to S101 agreement for maintaining all OCC verges within the town. 	
Financial implications: [please explain any costs associated with decisions or actions, and whether these have already been budgeted for]	
<p>Option 1 – additional management in prominent areas Annual cost £900</p> <p>Option 2 – additional management in prominent areas plus responsibility for all OCC verges Income: £842.50 grant Cost: £1500 Net annual cost: £657.50</p>	
Communications:	
<p>Web/Chronicle article</p> <p>Signs – costed proposal to be developed if needed</p>	

Background

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) manages a large number of verges in Charlbury (see maps), although many residents are not aware of this and assume that they are under Town Council management. In recent years, the County has adopted a schedule of once-yearly mowing, plus additional cuts at road junctions to maintain visibility (in Charlbury this applies where Fawler Road meets the Fiveways junction).

The problem:

1. The current once-yearly mowing results in fairly tall vegetation on verges throughout the town, which at times can look uncared-for and, flopping over, may effectively narrow the pavements. After the annual mow, OCC leaves the cut vegetation to rot down, which again can be untidy and smelly.
2. Charlbury Town Council has made an important commitment to “encourage the management of road verges in and around Charlbury to promote wildflowers and

biodiversity” (see Appendix). The OCC mowing pattern is actually not ideal for promoting biodiversity: a greater diversity of wildflowers can generally be achieved by mowing in early/mid April (to reduce the vigorous grasses), then allowing plants to flower and set seed before mowing again in July/August and (if growing conditions have been good) again in late Autumn. It is also preferable to remove cut vegetation after mowing.

OCC has offered town and parish councils to take over management of OCC verges under an S101 agreement, requiring at least two cuts per year in return for an annual grant. Based on the total area of verges involved, for Charlbury this grant would be £842.50. The Town Council has previously considered this, but had decided against taking on the long term responsibility for the OCC verges which are dispersed throughout the town. In Autumn 2023, we agreed, however, to budget for the Town Council contractor to carry out an additional Summer cut of the verges along the Slade, Sturt Road and Fiveways, in addition to the yearly OCC mowing (which often takes place in the Autumn).

Proposal:

Given the importance of verges to both the appearance and the wildlife of Charlbury, I would like to propose that the Town Council revisit this issue and take a more active role in managing OCC verges, especially those in the most prominent positions: along the Slade, Sturt Road, Fiveways and Nine Acres Lane. While still allowing plants to flower and set seed in the summer months, we could improve the appearance of these areas by moving to thrice-yearly mowing, and by maintaining a mown strip along the edge to avoid vegetation flopping over the footpaths and show that they are being cared for.

Option 1: OCC retains responsibility for management but TC arranges additional management of most prominent verges

- Verges on Sturt Road, the Slade, Fiveways and corner of Nine Acres Lane, cut only x1 (April), cut-and-collect x2 (July & October): £650 per year
- Monthly mowing the strips along the edges of the verges on Sturt Road, the Slade and Fiveways: £250 per year (based on May to September).

Total cost: £900

Option 2: TC takes over management from OCC under S101 agreement

- Verges on Sturt Road, the Slade, Fiveways and corner of Nine Acres Lane, cut only x1 (April) cut-and-collect x2 (July & October): £650 per year
- Monthly mowing the strips along the edges of the verges on Sturt Road, the Slade and Fiveways: £250 per year (based on May to September) - to include the splays by Fawler Road junction
- Verges rest of town twice per year: £600

Income: £842.50 grant

Cost: £1500

Net cost: £657.50

Communication

Communicating the arrangement to residents is important so that they understand where responsibilities lie and the rationale behind the verge management practices.

Suggested media:

- Web / Chronicle article
- Consider signs placed in wildflower areas – previously the Scouts have made signs for this.

Appendix - Town Council's commitment to promoting biodiversity through verge management

Town and parish councils have a statutory duty to protect biodiversity, and one of their areas of influence is the management of road verges. Different verge management practices can have a big impact on either reducing or enhancing biodiversity: supporting wildflowers and invertebrates (and therefore also hedgehogs, bats, swifts, etc) and acting as mini wildlife corridors.

Having declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency in 2019, in June 2021, Charlbury Town Council passed a motion to “encourage the management of road verges in and around Charlbury to promote wildflowers and biodiversity, drawing on guidance in the “Good Verge Guide” published by Plantlife in January 2021 and "Managing Grassland Road Verges: a best practice guide" (Plantlife, 2019)”.

The actions agreed were to

- write to Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) to ask what they are doing to improve verge management for biodiversity across the County and explore how OCC can work with CTC to support this in the Charlbury area;
- write to main local stakeholders responsible for the management of verges in and around Charlbury, to make them aware of the Plantlife guidance and invite them to work with CTC to support biodiversity;
- with the support of the Environment Working Group (Land and Nature Team), draw up a detailed management plan for the verges in and around Charlbury;
- provide information to the public (through the town website, and the Charlbury Chronicle) on the importance of verges to wildlife and what we can do to support this.