

Report of the Task Group on:

Highways trees and verges



Sustainable Development
Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Background

Lancashire County Council has a statutory duty as a highways authority to maintain the vast majority of its highways for public use, in so doing fulfilling a key corporate aim to make Lancashire a place where people can "travel easily and safely". The County Council also has legal requirements placed upon it regarding the natural environment which relate to another key corporate aim to make Lancashire a place where people can "enjoy a high quality environment".

The County Council cooperates to varying degrees with its district and other partners in seeking to fulfil these duties and aims. This is reflected in "Ambition Lancashire", an integrated strategy for all public

providers in Lancashire to deliver their services in a coordinated and complementary way. This strategy has been developed by the Lancashire Partnership (for which the County Council is the accountable body), in consultation with the people of Lancashire and key partner agencies. At the very top of its Vision Tree, "Ambition Lancashire" seeks:

"To position Lancashire by 2025 as an area of outstanding opportunity, combining a world class economy with a breathtaking environment and exceptional communities

Lancashire's towns, cities and rural areas maintain their separate identities, but inter-dependence is

strengthened through strong economic, social and environmental connections"

Trees, grass verges and landscaping on the County Council's highways are relevant to the both safe travel and a high quality environment. However, continual budget pressures have led to concerns that public duties in this respect may currently be competing and perhaps even in conflict.

It is a big challenge for local government and governance in Lancashire to meet, or even better exceed, the various obligations and aspirations around both the development and maintenance of a safe highways network and the protection and

enhancement of our natural environment in the face of:

- continual pressure on public budget;
- the current fight against economic recession: and
- the rising spectre of global warming.

At its meeting on 3 December, the Sustainable Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee resolved to request the establishment of a task group to examine current County Council policies regarding trees and verges on Lancashire's highways, including footways along the carriageways.

The establishment of the task group was approved by the O&S Management Committee at its meeting on 5th December 2008. The task group was asked to report back to the Sustainable Development O&S Committee at its meeting on 8 April 2009

Membership of the task group

- **CC Frank De Molfetta (Chair)**
- **CC Tim Ashton**
- **CC Tony Jones**
- **CC Francis Williams**
- **CC Fred Heyworth**

Scope of the Scrutiny review

The objectives of the task group were to examine:

- the issues arising from the existence of trees, verges and landscaped areas on highways
- the County Council's current policy on trees, verges and landscaped areas on highways for which it has maintenance responsibility

And to make recommendations for future policy

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Methodology

Witnesses

The task group spoke to the following witnesses:

- **Brian Eagle** – Highways Maintenance Manager Lancashire County Council
- **Jane Morwood** – Landscape Architect – Highway Authority, Lancashire County Council
- **Ian Welsby** – Environment Projects, Planning and Implementation Group Leader, Lancashire County Council
- **Steve Brereton** – Specialist Advisor – Landscape, Lancashire County Council
- **Dave Brackley** – Specialist Advisor – Forestry and Arboriculture
- **Andrew Richardson** – Parks and Open Spaces Manager South Ribble

- **Mark Billington** – Parks and Open Spaces manager Wyre Borough Council
- **Matthew Tomlinson** – Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development

Key Documents

1. Report to O&S 3 December 2009 – "Highway Maintenance, Verges and Trees" by Brian Eagle and Jane Morwood, Lancashire County Council" 2008/9 Highway Maintenance Plan (March 2008)
2. "Well Maintained Highways" – Code of Practice for highway maintenance management" (national guidelines)
3. Trees and Sustainable Urban Air Quality: using trees to Improve Air Quality in Cities", Lancaster University Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (Nov 2008)

4. Using Grass, Hedges and Trees to protect Soil
5. Lancashire Woodland Vision 2006-2015
6. Ambition Lancashire
7. Landscape and Heritage Supplementary Planning Guidance 2006 (Lancashire County Council)
8. A Landscape Strategy for Lancashire 2000 (Lancashire County Council)

Site Visits

The task group conducted a roving tour of the Preston, Wyre and South Ribble districts to observe first hand some of the issues – positive and negative - arising from green infrastructure on the highway

Research

The task group contacted a wide range of other UK local authorities – both county and unitary - to compare their policies and standards with those of Lancashire County Council.

Findings

Context

As our urban landscape and supporting infrastructure have expanded, the issue of so called "green infrastructure" has become an increasingly more complex matter. Rapid growth of our towns and cities since the Industrial Revolution has had major impact on Lancashire's natural landscape. The development of motorised transport, and with it our highways network, has added enormously to this.

Adapting to this impact is a continuous learning curve, as we come to understand more fully the various and important factors involved: economic and financial; ecological, health, sociological, aesthetic, and perhaps even spiritual.

The benefits that come from developing and maintaining a safe and efficient highways network must somehow be reconciled with the benefits that come from

maintaining and enhancing a sustainable natural environment and heritage. And this means that decisions now must be made about balance. Indeed, we are often making decisions about whether and how to insert more nature into the built environment and our rural landscape, as well how to preserve and protect what we've got left. More and more we appreciate the significance of actions we take now for our future generations and need to factor this in to our planning and development policies.

Green infrastructure

Lancashire's vehicular highway corridors are a major asset to its people. They are vital to the county's economic development and well-being, providing facility for various forms of transport in the form of roads, pavements and cycletracks, and space for public utilities equipment.

But the green or "soft" part of these highways is also very

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important as an environmental asset, forming a surprisingly large proportion of the county's overall natural heritage, landscape and ecology. Highways trees and soft verges provide a county and indeed country-wide matrix of wildlife and landscape "corridors" that must be conserved and protected. Furthermore, and perhaps even because of their "corridor" nature, they offer excellent opportunity to promote and enhance:

- a green amenity for the people of Lancashire and the many health, well-being and social benefits that brings;
- the county's unique landscape character;
- its biodiversity and ecology; and
- our capacity to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change

Landscape Amenity: For some centuries now, we have recognised the psychological benefit of retaining a green element to our built environment and our landscape, including in our highways. When we walk or drive along a road and can see trees, shrubs, grasses or flowers – whether that be in the highway or in land adjacent to it - very clear and positive messages come to our mind: sense of calm; stability; just feel better; motivated; proud. No-one can deny the fantastic visual amenity that the large, mature woodland-style trees planted by the Victorians offer us (even though we now know that these trees are unsuitable for roadside planting). Research even shows that people behave and interact better with greenery around them, and that businesses are more likely to invest in such areas.

In Sheffield and Liverpool EU funding has been made available for "greening the streets" for precisely these reasons.

In contrast, when we enter an area without green amenities, it is quite likely that clear negative messages come to our minds: neglect; poverty; danger; hostility. So a lack of green amenity can even contribute to the decline of an area or community.

The large areas of green space within Lancashire's highways make a significant contribution to the quality, character and tranquillity of our landscape and the ways that we perceive and value it. For example, much of the Ribble Valley's characteristic well-wooded appearance is due to the thousands of predominantly native trees, shrubs and hundreds of miles of hedgerows that lie

within or adjacent to the highway verges.

The green amenity to our local infrastructure, including our highways, is recognised formally in the policies and commitments of national government and the County and district councils relating to the:

- health and well-being of individuals, communities and societies.

Ecology, Heritage and

Sustainability: In recent decades, we have increasingly recognised how modern human activity can impact negatively on the capacity of the natural environment to sustain us. Furthermore, ill-planned development can lead to permanent losses in our natural landscape heritage. These factors have led to our respect for the natural environment and heritage being renewed afresh. And this is translated into the development of national and international policies designed to protect and enhance

our natural environment at all levels. At the level of local governance, this respect amounts to:

- a developing framework of statutory requirements, performance indicator targets and local aspirations, relating to:
 - ecology and biodiversity,
 - landscape character preservation and enhancement
 - climate change mitigation and adaptation

These strands of public policy are perhaps less tangible than more traditional matters such as housing, economic development, and transport infrastructure, but as we develop our understanding of their significance to us, so they become an increasingly important element of our public service provision and make increasing demands on our public purse. Indeed, later this year the Lancashire Economic Partnership, in which the County Council plays a major role, is required to

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produce a "Green Infrastructure Strategy" for Lancashire.

Keeping the Highways

Safe: Highways trees, soft verges and landscaping are subject to more than the so-called "Green Agenda". They are also captured by the policies and statutory requirements surrounding the development and maintenance of our highways transport network.

Essentially - and quite rightly - our vehicular highways and their cycletracks and footways must be maintained to a standard that keeps them as safe and efficient as possible for those who must use them: cars, lorries, cycles and pedestrians. Both the "black" and the "green" bits need attention. On the green bits (or "soft" estate), sightlines must be kept clear, space for safe

pedestrian access and utilities equipment made available, the carriageway kept clean of debris, and road signs clearly visible.

This is done in accordance with The Highways Act 1980. In carrying out its duties, and insofar as budgets permit, the County Council refers to the Department for Transport's (DfT's) Code of Practice for Highways Maintenance Management. However, in addition to guidance on maintaining highway safety standards of the carriageway and verge, this Code includes guidance on maintaining the "soft" estate of the highways in accordance with the requirements and principles of responsible environmental management.

If followed to the letter, this Code of Practice would fulfil the Vision of "Ambition

Lancashire" and the corporate commitments County Council to "safe travel" and a "high quality environment".

Budgets and Resourcing:

Under current budgetary arrangements, work conducted by the County Council with regards the protection, preservation and enhancement of highways trees, verges and landscaping comes from the overall Highways Maintenance budget. This budget is necessarily big, but so is the scale of the work that is carried out and there is a constant pressure in maintaining good safety and efficiency standards that match public expectations within resource constraints. These constraints have been even tougher since 2004, when the entire landscape maintenance budget – albeit a small budget which

had been introduced to tackle the safety issues presented by highway tree planting of the 1980s and 90s - was cut as part of the County Council's Decision Conferencing process. The reasons why this cut was taken are not clear from the audit trail available to the task group, although it was tabled as an option. Discussions with some representatives of the Environment Directorate suggest that, in hindsight, the adverse impacts of this cut were underestimated.

Adding to this pressure is the legal requirement for all new highways schemes developed by the

County Council – such as the proposed Heysham-M6 link or schemes connected to the ELEVATE regeneration programme in East Lancashire - to mitigate their ecological and landscape impact, whether by retaining existing natural features or planting new, replacement features in the highways. However, there is currently no mechanism in place to secure long term revenue funding necessary for the proper maintenance of this landscaping, which means that resources have to be found from the existing highways maintenance budget, already under great strain.



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In addition, new developments funded by private enterprise, such as housing estates, have in the past included substantial planting and landscaping in the highway. However, the mechanism in place for managing the commuted sums supplied from the developer for landscape maintenance once the associated roads have been adopted does not ensure that they are available in the Highways Maintenance budget when needed. As a consequence, it is current practice of the County Council to discourage highway landscaping on new developments unless a third party, such as a district council, agrees to manage its maintenance.

Under such financial pressure, allocation of resources to environmental conservation, management

and enhancement on the “soft” estate of the highways results in an effective budget cut for highways safety and maintenance work, including work on the carriageway itself. Furthermore, final decisions about whether and how much resources to allocate to this work is made by Highways Maintenance budget holders, who have an engineering expertise and focus, and not by Environmental Management budget holders, who have an ecological, arboricultural or landscaping expertise and focus.

It is the view of this task group that there is a tendency for Highways Maintenance budget holders to lean towards “safe travel” at the expense of “a high quality environment”, especially in the face of budget pressure. Changes in the mechanism

for allocation of resources for highways verge maintenance would go some way to address this bias.

Grass verges – benefits and costs

There are nearly 625 hectares of urban vehicular highway grass and 1100 hectares of rural vehicular highway grass in Lancashire. While it costs money and man-hours to cut and maintain, grass verge performs a number of useful public functions in accordance with both County and district council duties and aims

In rural areas, it provides:

- extra space in the highway for utility equipment
- safety area for pedestrians and maintenance operatives

- an important part of our natural environment, providing:
- visual amenity
- habitat corridor for wildlife
- opportunity to preserve and promote biodiversity and Lancashire's landscape character.

In urban and semi-urban areas, it provides:

- primarily a visual amenity
- habitat corridor for wildlife
- opportunity to preserve and promote biodiversity and Lancashire's landscape character

Public preference in urban areas is for shorter, well-clipped grass, which has less capacity than longer grass to offer ecological benefits but which evokes a sense of a safe, well-maintained environment where people want to live. In addition, for highways safety reasons, urban grass must be kept at a shorter length than that in rural verges.

As the local highways authority, the County Council is obliged to ensure that maintenance of the highways grass verges complies with at least its statutory duties. In addition to achieving good safety standards, the DfT's Code of Practice states that

"...verges should be managed with specialist advice, in accordance with the principles of a Biodiversity Action Plan to meet legal obligations, support conservation and add landscape value."

The legal obligations referred to here are the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC) 2006, which places a duty on all public authorities to have regard to biodiversity. In addition, the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) 2008, requires all public authorities to ensure that there is No Net Loss to its landscape assets. Both these apply to district councils as well as the County Council.

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Current County Council policy is to ensure that grass verges are cut at least to highways safety standards, and with reference to the Council's biodiversity duty. There is no aesthetic element to this policy. The current standard for urban grass verge amounts to around 5 cuts per annum. The standard for rural verges is broken down into zones. The 1m safety strip next to the carriageway must be cut 2 or 3 times per annum. The next metre width is cut once each year in the summer and this allows many wild flowers to thrive. And the outer zone is left untouched and undisturbed, apart from occasional winter thinning and coppicing.

District councils have corporate commitments to the protection and promotion of their "green"

environment and infrastructure, whether for wildlife protection, visual amenity or landscape character preservation. This means that they often have standards for grass cutting in their district public space which are higher than those of the County Council, but which reflect their own local conditions. Some Parish Councils have also set their own grass cutting standards.

In the early 1990s, the County Council commissioned the Lancashire Wildlife Trust to conduct a survey of its roadside verges. This survey identified 168 grass verges as having special status because of their ecology and contribution to biodiversity. In addition, a further wildlife survey in 2007 identified 40 of those as special Biological Heritage

Sites. All special verges require special management plans and those for Biological Heritage Sites will be assessed by an LAA performance target. Special management plans may not correspond to the general grass cutting regime for the surrounding area, so time and effort will be required to inform local people of the special value of these sites. So far, only a proportion of these sites are being actively managed in accordance with their special management plan, so there is still some way to go before the performance targets connected to the LAA and "Ambition Lancashire" in this regard will be reached.

Lancashire's Highways grass and soft verge is managed and maintained by varying degrees of input from:

- Lancashire County Council –
 - Highways Maintenance
 - Projects Planning and Implementation Group of the Environment Directorate, who ensure that the built and natural environment of Lancashire is protected and continually improved. This group works with and on behalf of other interested agencies, such as The Wildlife Trust

- District Councils –
 - Parks and Open Spaces Management
 - Streetscene Management.

- The Highways Agency (for trunk roads and motorways)

Under the Lancashire Highways Partnership (LHP), which ended in 2006, both urban and rural grass cutting was carried out by each local highways engineering group. It encompassed the standards of both county and individual districts regarding the various functions of

grass verges. Funding came from the County and district councils according to their respective standards. Since the dissolution of the LHP, a variety of arrangements have been made and continue to evolve between the County and each district council in the form of Residual Highways Agreements (RHAs). In most cases, district councils are supplied by funding from the County Council's Highways Maintenance budget sufficient for 5 cuts pa in urban areas. Using their own equipment, expertise and efficiencies, district councils may choose to "top up" those cuts to suit their own local standards for parks and open spaces. Top ups range from around 8 to 14, according to budgets and local preference.

The County Council cuts all rural grass on vehicular highways throughout the county using its own contractor, Lancashire Engineering Services. District councils are not currently involved in rural grass cutting, but some

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Parish Councils choose to "top up" the County Council's standard.

Lancashire's RHAs are due for renewal in July 2009 and, at this stage, it looks as though grass cutting arrangements will stay the same, indicating that both tiers of local government believe that the current arrangement offers satisfactory value for money for the public they serve. In many cases, districts are able to make the County's funding for urban verges stretch beyond 5 cuts per annum, in effect providing an enhanced level of service. There are three district councils that do not cut their urban grass verges. LES provide this service and cut just 5 times per annum. Both these districts are mainly rural. Indications to the task group are that there is a noticeable difference between public

open space grass in their urban areas, which are cut more often and by district grass cutters, and the road verges.

There are some districts that disagree in principle with the current arrangements. They would prefer to see urban grass cutting standards set locally, but delivered out of County Council budgets. The problem with this is that it does not offer opportunity for an enhanced level of service and is, therefore, likely to be a less efficient use of public money.

Research into what other two-tier authorities are doing shows that current policies and practices in Lancashire are broadly in line with what is happening elsewhere.

Under the banner of a recent policy initiative called Team Lancashire, a pilot project with South Ribble

Borough council is underway to enhance public service delivery of streetscene related functions, including grass cutting. The funding for Team Lancashire comes from the Lancashire Sub-Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership and the aim of it is to create an environment within Lancashire whereby joined up local government working is seen to be the way to do business. The arrangements for grass cutting under this pilot project is for the district council to carry out all grass cutting in the area for the same money but providing a higher standard of service than previously.

Input into highways grass verge management and maintenance by the County's ecologist expertise is low when considered against the:

- size of the grass verge asset county-wide and the opportunities it presents
- legal requirements and policy commitments relating to a “high quality environment”.

The task group believes that the main reason for this is because of the way budgets are allocated and a possible bias towards “safe travel”. In addition, the green agenda” is still relatively new and it is taking time for the required change in organisational culture to become embedded satisfactorily into how we value the natural asset of our highways corridors. This is being addressed to an extent by some new funding this year from the Local Area Agreement (LAA) to increase progress in the identification and maintenance of roadside verges designated as requiring special management in order to meet LAA performance targets in this regard.

Highways trees – benefits and costs

Benefits

Trees are perhaps the most significant element to any green infrastructure, urban and rural. Something about trees penetrates deep into the human psyche and impacts positively on our attitudes and behaviour, sometimes in a way that may be difficult for a public authority to quantify but hugely important nevertheless. Of course, trees also perform a number of essential ecological and practical functions.

The many benefits of trees in our environment, urban and rural, include:

- tranquillity, sometimes a sense of antiquity, colour to the landscape
- improved mental health and emotional well-being of individuals and communities – with the many spin-offs this brings

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- biodiversity preservation and opportunity for enhancement
- added value to the attractiveness and appeal of an area – increased property prices, business more likely to invest
- cultural and historical significance
- noise attenuation, interception of pollution and light, and carbon absorption
- shade and local temperature reduction (can reduce urban temperatures by 4C)
- reduction of soil erosion and water run-off, resulting in less flooding

In the UK, where overall tree coverage rates are comparatively low – 12% for the UK national average - highways trees form a significant proportion of our overall canopy.

Unfortunately, statistics for this are not available, which itself is a troubling gap in our national knowledge and our strategies for sustainability.

In Lancashire, this proportion is higher than average: our overall tree coverage is just 4.6% and we have a comparatively dense highways network, often in rural areas trees. It is fair to say that highways trees are one of Lancashire's most important woodland assets and one of our key landscaping features.

It is also disappointing that there seems to be no clear knowledge of exactly how big that stock is, figures made available to the task group ranged from 130 000 to 260 000, and it was not clear what those figures were based on.

Highways trees have a unique and valuable role in our urban and rural environment and provide public authorities opportunity to promote corporate objectives relating to amenity and biodiversity..

Benefits specific to highways trees include:

- helping to integrate roads into the landscape character of the surrounding area.
- screening traffic from adjacent people
- replacing lost landscape features and provide interest to the road user, pedestrian and vehicular
- providing wildlife "corridor" to link disparate woodland habitats, thereby retaining and promoting biodiversity

It is the view of this task group that highways trees are an important natural

asset and offer important opportunity. As such, they should be fully included in woodland strategies and visions. This is not currently the case at national level, where the Forestry Commission has no strategic input into this category of our national woodland. And research of the task group indicates that it is rarely the case at the local government level, especially in two tier systems. Certainly in Lancashire this is not happening.

Costs and Risks

As well as providing specific benefits, the existence of highways trees bring a number of costs and risks that require substantial local public expenditure and resources to manage. These costs are not always fully understood by the public, often creating tensions, especially in urban settings:

- dead, dying and ageing trees can be a serious safety hazard for highways users particularly in windy weather. Public

authorities have a duty to manage the risk from falling trees and are required to identify trees that represent a hazard. However, it is also the case that the risk from falling trees is over-stated because of public perceptions rather than realities. The inspection and management regime required to accompany this duty is expensive.

- growing trees can become an obstruction especially on sight-lines, hindering the reasonable use of the highway. Under current arrangements, often the only cost-effective method available for managing this is regular flail cutting, which can be unsightly and horticulturally unsuitable
- fallen leaves (not specific to highway trees) that block gullies and create a slippery surface
- tree roots can cause road surfaces to lift and crack, and this is especially expensive to repair

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- roots can also damage essential underground utilities equipment and adjacent private property
- reduce effectiveness of street lighting
- nuisance to the public – loss of light to private property, sticky residue on parked cars

As with grass verges, it is the duty of the County Council as the local highways authority to ensure the maintenance of the highways trees to comply with statutory duties. In addition, it has duties and commitments with regards biodiversity and in accordance with NERC 2006 and the Regional Spatial Strategy 2008, requiring public authorities to ensure that there is No Net Loss of their landscape assets.

There is a huge variety in the age, size and species of Lancashire's highways trees. Whilst many trees have been planted, a large number are self-seeded, especially in rural areas. A lot of the planting that has taken place in the past has not been appropriate and has led to large and costly problems of the kinds described above and high ongoing management costs. There is sufficient expertise lying within the County Council and the districts to advise on what species to plant where and how to do so responsibly, but currently this expertise is not coordinated nor sufficiently accessible to those who should be using it. There is scope for the development of an agreed guide to be adopted for use throughout the county and which would help to ensure

that future tree planting is done in a way that can be managed financially.

Current County Council policy regarding highways trees does recognise that they have a visual and environmental value, although this task group believes not to an extent compatible with current corporate commitments and legal duties relating to a "high quality environment". As with verges, trees are managed and maintained with varying degrees of input from a range of County and district council departments and the Highways Agency.

Again as with verges, budgetary arrangements are that tree maintenance resources come exclusively from the Highways Maintenance budget, with

the tendencies and problems that this produces. Again, there are competing demands on this budget and unanticipated tree work – which often happens since we do not yet have a decent inventory of our highways tree stock and the state it is in - amounts effectively to a budget cut on other road maintenance work.

There was a policy in the 1980s and 90s to plant lots of trees on our highways – many of them prolific growers - but the budget for their maintenance was cut in 2004, just as the trees matured and began requiring substantial maintenance.

Under this pressure, current policy is restricted to reactive maintenance work rather than planned, in response to service requests, or as a result of ad hoc inspections. There is no aesthetic element to the County Council's highway tree budget allocation and limited regard to our biodiversity

duties: reaching required safety standards is challenging enough for the County Council in such a tight financial climate

Tree maintenance work throughout the County lies with the County Council's Lancashire Engineering Services (LES), although their access to arboricultural expertise is weak and there are concerns that poor decisions are sometimes made either about maintenance or tree removal. For historical reasons, substantially more arboricultural expertise lies in districts, but current arrangements do not make it easy to access this. There is scope for more cooperation between the county and district councils in making responsible decisions about highways trees.

Again because of budget limitations, current policy does not permit for the planting of trees and other landscape planting, unless it is in relation to a new road scheme or major improvement scheme in

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order to mitigate the adverse effects of the works. If a highway tree is removed for safety reasons, it will not be replaced at County Council expense. If a district council wishes, it may install a replacement tree at its own expense and the County Council will assume maintenance costs once the tree is properly established (usually after 5 years). If a district council wishes to plant new trees in the highway for aesthetic or environmental reasons, it may seek a licence from the County Council to do so at its own expense, both for installation and maintenance.

In theory, this policy allows for trees to continue to be planted in our highways. However, the task group assesses that in practice very little street planting is happening because neither

the County Council nor the districts feel they can cover the costs involved and each believes that responsibility should lie with the other for amenity and ecological commitments, as described in "Ambition Lancashire" and reflected in corporate commitments. In fact, responsibilities in this regard lie with both tiers of local government.

Again, as with grass verges, input into highways tree management and maintenance by the County's ecologist, forestry and landscape character expertise is low when considered against the:

- size of the asset county-wide and the opportunities it presents
- legal requirements and policy commitments relating to a "high quality environment".

The task group anticipates that, under current county-wide policies and practices with regards to Highways trees, the County Council is likely to fail in complying with the RSS to ensure that there is No Net Loss of this landscape asset.

Technicalities aside, current arrangements are difficult to defend against public concern that in the long term, loss of tree coverage on the highways will become apparent, especially as the many mature trees begin to die. Such loss will have a serious negative impact on our natural environment and landscape character and all that goes with it for our future generations.

Research by the task group indicates that similar highway trees budget problems are faced by authorities throughout

the UK. But there are some models of good practice out there and the County Council would do well to look at what others are doing to reconcile their commitments to safe travel and a high quality environment, looking especially perhaps at unitary authorities. Sheffield City Council, for example, is proud of its green heritage and treescape and recognises that it is a key element to attracting tourists and business to the city area. It is preparing a strategic tree policy that includes a mapped and planned approach to highway tree maintenance and planting. Furthermore, budgets for maintenance of the “black” element of the highway are separated from budgets for managing the “green” bits.

Conclusions

The County Council does a good job in ensuring that our highways are kept safe for those who use

them. However, the green element to the highways performs a number of valuable functions that are not being accorded the importance they deserve. Our commitments and obligations to achieve “safe travel” and a “high quality environment” are to some degree in conflict, with the balance lying too heavily towards the former.

As a result, the aspirations of “Ambition Lancashire” and the County Council’s corporate commitments are not being met as well as they might. This is because of budgetary and organisational limitations of the current arrangements.

It is also possible that Lancashire will not meet the requirement of the Regional Spatial Strategy in ensuring “No Net Loss” of our landscape assets. And the Lancashire public is concerned that loss of tree coverage in particular will have a serious and permanent impact on our natural

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environment for our future generations.

There is some good environmental management work going on, including by district councils, and some new funding coming on stream through both "Team Lancashire" and the LAA. However, there is scope for doing things substantially better than simply managing the highways green asset at minimal cost. There should be more decision-making input into the management of it by ecologist, arboricultural and landscape planning expertise and with more effective cooperation with district partners.

There should be a more planned approach to management. As far as possible, the asset should be quantified and analysed, and budgets separated as much as possible from

maintenance of the highways hard asset. In addition, the County Council must develop a mechanism to secure long term revenue funding for the responsible and proper maintenance of the existing asset and for future planting schemes that are part of new road or urban developments carried out under capital expenditure or private financing.

Current standards and arrangements with district partners for grass cutting are acceptable and represent efficiency. The "Team Lancashire" pilot project being undertaken with South Ribble offers a useful lead for others in how current levels of service could be enhanced and efficiencies made. And there is scope for more attention to be paid to our biodiversity duty in this regard.

When it comes to highways trees, the County Council is yet to recognise properly their full and unique value, and indeed the Council's duties and aspirations in this regard. The current policy regarding tree planting is understandable given the budgetary arrangements and pressures, but it is not acceptable in the long term. Better facility must be made for planting new trees in the highway in a responsible way. Currently, there is an effective stand-off, which in the long term will result in a significant loss of coverage.

Highways trees are one of Lancashire's most important woodland assets and one of its key landscaping features. Furthermore, they offer excellent opportunity to promote and enhance the county's green infrastructure and its biodiversity. As such, they should be more fully

integrated into our Woodland Vision and should be an important element in any future tree strategies that might be developed.

Recommendations

1. The County Council's Environment Directorate should make changes that allow it to follow more closely the DfT's Code of Practice for maintaining the highways in an environmentally responsible way. In particular, it should allow for greater input from and sharing of information with the ecological, arboricultural and landscaping expertise that exists in Lancashire. And it should seek to adopt more sympathetic maintenance techniques within resource constraints.

2. The County Council should continue with its current arrangements for grass cutting, but should look to the Team

Lancashire initiative in South Ribble for how future service enhancements and efficiencies can be made.

3. The County Council should reverse its current policies of (1) not replacing or planting trees in the highway except if required to do so for new schemes or refurbishments; (2) discouraging private developers from landscaping on new roads that will become adopted by the County Council in the future. This reversal must happen only with an accompanying change in current funding and budgetary arrangements and must not result in an effective budget cut for other highways maintenance works.

4. The Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development should submit a request to the Cabinet of the County Council for the reinstatement of the landscape maintenance budget that was cut in 2004

Highways, trees and verges

5. The Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development should develop a reliable mechanism in the budget process to ensure that sufficient revenue funding is made available for the proper and responsible maintenance of the existing highways natural asset, in order to ensure that his responsibilities for "safe travel" and a "high quality environment" can both be met.

6. The County Council should rule that any new schemes involving highways landscaping – funded through capital expenditure or private financing – must have long term maintenance costs factored into the revenue budget.

7. Working together with its district partners and other agencies, the County Council should:

- undertake a survey, analysis and assessment of highways verges to provide an evidence base for the development of strategies for planting, management and enhancing biodiversity
- develop an authoritative Guide for responsible and appropriate tree planting
- develop a county-wide tree strategy that includes highways trees as an important element to it and allows for greater consideration to be made for possible alternatives for highways trees, such as schemes to encourage private residents to plant trees in their front gardens.
- Improve access for those that need it to arboricultural expertise and advice

8. The County Council should seek additional funding for planting highways trees from the "Woodland from Waste" initiative which is part of the new Waste Management Strategy. In addition, the County Council should consider the possibility of securing capital funding for the removal of dangerous trees and planting replacements.

9. The Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development should lobby the Forestry Commission to include the surveillance of highways trees in their regular national inventory and make this data available to the County Council.

