

I am sorry to hear about the concerns you have about our approach to cutting highway verges in your wards.

Our approach to asset management has been developed and approved by Members and is published on our website on the following link:

<https://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/strategies-and-policies/transport-and-highways-policies/managing-highway-infrastructure>

On rural roads we carry out road safety swathe and visibility splay cuts to clear vegetation obstruction at road junctions, dangerous bends and along roads to help stop encroachment, road edge obstruction and provide a refuge for pedestrians. We carry out swathe cuts in June and July and visibility cutting three times per annum in May, July and September. A swathe cut is a 900mm wide cut of verge soft vegetation. The work is carefully timed to keep the vegetation growth in check, when it is at its most vigorous, and help keep the highway safe for all users.

On urban roads, we cut highway verges six times per annum from mid-March to the end of October. A cut about every 5 to 6 weeks. The clippings are not collected and are blown back onto the verge, and we aim to leave the verge in a tidy condition when completed.

We also manage this cutting in line with Kent's Plan Bee and more details can be found on this link:

<https://www.kent.gov.uk/environment-waste-and-planning/nature-and-biodiversity/pollinators/kents-plan-bee-pollinator-action-plan>.

As part of Kent's Plan Bee, we have been working with KWT (Kent Wildlife Trust), BBCT (Bumblebee Conservation Trust) and Buzz for the Coast, to concentrate our efforts on known rural and urban verges with high pollinator value. These high value verges already cover an area in excess of half a million metre square and we continue to assess how we can change and expand our verge management to benefit pollinators, while also achieving our statutory duty to maintain a safe highway free from vegetation obstruction and hazards.

I understand that the rural swathe cutting has been carried out in Swale during June. As part of the Soft Landscape Team's quality monitoring, and in response to enquiries and emails from County Member Mr Rich Lehman, made on behalf of local residents and the Parish Council, they have checked roads in the areas you mentioned as well as the Swale District as a whole. Overall, the team found the quality of the swathe cutting is to a satisfactory standard and it is good to note a compliment was received via Mr Lehman about this year's cut. Verge scalping was noted in some areas, but where this had occurred it also appears that the verges may have been re-cut, possibly by local landowners. The team rarely find scalping on any of the swathe quality monitoring carried out across the county. Therefore, it is not clear when, how and by whom this occurred, however verge growth is expected to quickly regrow and cover the scalped areas.

I am sorry to hear about the disturbed bird's nest. It is unusual for birds to be ground nesting next to the road edge. The swathe cut is 900mm wide and does not include hedge cutting. If a nest is hidden within long grass or vegetation next to the road edge, it won't be seen by the tractor flail operative. A photo of the nest provided by Mr Lehman shows it is intact and, therefore, has not been flail cut. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure what caused the birds to abandon the nest, however we will remind operatives to be aware of the possibility of nesting birds.

Thank you for letting me know about the damaged road bollards. These have been reported to our local Highway Operations Team, who will investigate and determine if a replacement is required.

Overall the warm and wet weather we experienced in May and June resulted in a significant growth of grass between the urban cuts which caused a number of difficulties and delays to the grass cutting teams across the County on our third cut. Longer, thicker grass takes more time to cut, sometimes needing 2, 3 or 4 passes to cut a verge. It also resulted in a dramatic increase of machine downtime, as parts wear out quicker needing higher maintenance. And, of course, it also meant there was a large amount of clippings remaining on the verges, so they were not in the tidy condition which local residents, the Soft Landscape Team and Members would like. The fourth cut is underway and progressing well, and this will help improve the appearance of these verges.

I have asked that our Soft Landscape Team reassess the verge on Monica Close and Selling Road. The verge is on our maintenance programme for six urban cuts per annum. I am sorry, but on investigation it seems the Cultivation License had been issued in error and without consultation with the Soft Landscape Team. The verge forms part of the visibility splay for Monica Close, when turning out onto Selling Road, and as such needs frequent cutting to keep the visibility splay clear of obstruction and the junction safe for road users. It is likely that the terms of the licence will need to be amended or withdrawn to reflect safety concerns with the visibility splay. There may be opportunity on another verge close by for local community involvement and a different Cultivation License. The team will communicate directly with the applicant about the possibilities.

Finally, I would welcome your support in recommending to local residents that they report faults to us themselves via our website. Whilst we regularly inspect our roads we are always pleased that residents report faults to us and the best way to do this is via our website www.kent.gov.uk/highwayfaults as this will indicate whether the road or footway is maintained by the County Council and we will provide a unique reference number to enable tracking of our progress. It is also the quickest way to ensure faults are directed to the appropriate team for investigation and action. However, we ask residents to ring us on 03000 418181 if they spot a problem on the highway that could cause an accident.

I trust that you find this information useful.
David Brazier
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport
Kent County Council