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Verging on reason?

6 August 2022

Surrey County Council is to take back control of verges and on-street parking enforcement from **Epsom and Ewell Borough Council** and all other County districts. In a bid to streamline services, ensure consistency and improve biodiversity SCC will do the lot.

Surrey County Council is responsible for highway verge cutting and weed control, as well as on-street parking enforcement. It currently has agreements in place with eight of the eleven district and borough councils, including **Epsom and Ewell**, to manage the verges on the county council's behalf, and all on-street parking enforcement is managed by the districts and boroughs.

From April 2023 the county council will manage both of these county-wide to ensure consistent approaches across Surrey.

Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Transport, Infrastructure and Economy, said: "*We appreciate the hard work our district and borough teams have undertaken on our behalf. However, as we continue on our mission for a greener future, now is the right time to take verge cutting and weed control back in-house to enable us to focus our efforts on improving biodiversity consistently across the county. We will continue to regularly cut junctions and sightlines so it's safe for residents.*

"*We also know how important parking is for residents and by managing on-street parking across the county, we can ensure it's fair and consistent. We'll also take a look at options to improve our systems and make processes as easy as possible for all Surrey residents*."

The county council aims to promote biodiversity by promoting wildflowering on appropriate highway verges and will continue to trial more sustainable approaches. Managing parking across the county will ensure a good service is offered throughout the county and offer good value for residents.

Nigel Collin, Chair of **Surrey's Wildflowering Project** said "*I welcome Surrey's commitment to promote biodiversity by promoting wildflowering on appropriate highway verges. The County wide management of verge cutting from next April is also welcomed since this will ensure a uniform approach across all of the County's Districts and Boroughs*."

This was echoed by SWP volunteer **Kim Spickett** who responded "*As a borough, I think we have a good starting point – so many of us enjoy our wildlife! Flowering verges, along with our open spaces, parks and gardens, will be a win for biodiversity. Native plants come in all shapes, sizes and heights – there are examples to beautify every situation. White Clover and her relatives supply the grass with the nitrogen it needs, giving the verge the ability to stay green during dry spells. It looks pretty and suits verges that have to be kept short – and it feeds our insects!*" Kim demonstrates the contribution verges can make to biodiversity with this photograph:



The Brown Hairstreak butterfly next to a busy local "B" road

Residents Association County and Epsom and Ewell Borough Councillor Eber Kington expressed his doubts about the plan: "*I have real concerns about these proposals. Given SCC's track record on service delivery, ensuring "consistent approaches across Surrey" will very likely mean a poorer service for residents and a levelling down rather than an improvement in the quality of service. For example, SCC currently funds just four verge cuts a season across Surrey but the Borough Council, which undertakes the verge maintenance work in Epsom and Ewell, funds between 2 and 4 additional cuts. Unless SCC continues with this current level of service, the grass verges in our residential streets will see a fall in standards and complaints from residents will rise.*

Reducing the established Borough Council service is a pattern of behaviour already established when Surrey Highways took back the maintenance of highway trees from the Borough Council. SCC will now only provide for the maintenance of a tree if it is diseased, dying, or dead. So pruning, clearing telephone wires and other maintenance work is no longer undertaken.
I also have a concern about SCC taking back on-street parking enforcement. In Epsom and Ewell, we have resisted pressure to introduced parking meters across the borough. My concern is that SCC's "fair and consistent approach across Surrey" will be used to populate our streets with these parking charging devices as a way of funding SCC's services and taking more from our residents."

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Cllr **Julie Morris** (LibDem College Ward Epsom) responded to the wider plan: *"This sounds like another power grab , furthering SCC's mission to abolish district and borough councils entirely. Having the county council deal with on street parking enforcement will not work. Centralisation means there is no local knowledge. Our wardens respond really well to complaints, hot spots and are quick to resolve problems when these are reported. As for wildflower planting, I'm happy to reserve judgement on that one as we've tried for a few years to get EEBC to leave verges uncut and introduce a wildflower bloom+cut regime and they've done nothing. "*

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