

Cabinet – 17 July 2019

Grass cutting of large open spaces and grass verges, Tree Maintenance and Weed Treatment

Portfolio: Councillor Oliver Butler, Clean and Green

Related portfolios: None

Service: Clean and Green Services

Wards: All

Key decision: Yes

Forward plan: Yes

1. Aim

1.1 To inform members of:

- The proposals, costs and implications of increasing the frequency of routine grass cutting on a time limited basis to assess benefits, at sites where it was previously reduced via budget saving processes.
- The proposals, costs and implications of introducing additional tree maintenance across the borough on a time-limited basis to assess the benefits.
- The proposals, costs and implications of increasing the frequency of weed control across the borough on a time-limited basis to assess benefits where it was previously reduced via budget saving processes.

1.2 To consider the benefits additional grass cutting, tree maintenance and weed control may bring.

2. Summary

2.1 A review of grass cutting on the twenty six large open spaces and the thirty rural highway verges (where grass cutting was reduced to once per year) and other highway verges across the borough has been requested, with a view to reinstating a three weekly grass cutting regime where appropriate. Alternative management regimes will also be considered such as the establishment of wild flower areas at suitable locations.

- 2.2 It has also been requested to review the provision of arboricultural maintenance and the impact and benefits of the introduction of additional resources to increase planned maintenance and reactive responses to tree problems across the borough.
- 2.3 The review will also include an assessment of the benefits of increasing weed control operations from once per annum to three times per annum and the introduction of an additional resource to treat weed growth on other high profile areas.
- 2.4 Operational savings of £524k were delivered in 2015/16 by reducing grass cutting from fortnightly to three weekly.
- 2.5 Grass cutting frequencies were further reduced, in April 2016 when grass cutting on general highway verges across the borough was reduced from circa three weekly to circa four weekly. In April 2017 it was reduced again from circa four weekly to once per annum on selected rural verges and open spaces, see **Appendix A** for a list of sites. This delivered savings of circa £302k per annum consisting of £225k for general highway verges, £27k for large open spaces and £50k for selected highway verges.
- 2.6 Weed spraying was reduced by £30k in 2016/17 and a further £24k in 2017/18 which effectively reduced highway weed spraying from three times per year to once per year. Minor additional spraying may still be carried out on a reactive basis within limited resources.
- 2.7 The reductions in the grounds maintenance service over previous years have affected the ability to deliver other elements of the service. There is no longer the capacity to deploy grounds maintenance operatives on semi-skilled tree work, such as the removal of epicormic growth which can cause obstruction, resulting in an indirect reduction of the arboricultural service.
- 2.8 The review will be time limited, commencing in September 2019 to prepare for the start of the grass cutting season in March 2020 and continue until March 2021. It will result in one off spends of £21k in 2019/20 and £160k in 2020/21.
- 2.9 The review will be carried out in line with the Proud Programme's New Ways of Thinking framework - Aim, Know, Decide, Respond, and Review to improve service efficiency and performance, identify potential savings to invest in priority services and achieve a better customer experience.
- 2.10 Grounds maintenance work is affected by weather conditions and delivery of grass cutting in line with pre-planned schedules can be affected by either wet or hot and dry conditions.
- 2.11 This is a key decision because the cost of reinstating grass cutting frequencies will require significant additional expenditure and it will have an effect across all council wards.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet acknowledge the contents of this report and approve a review of the impacts and benefits achievable by the redesign of grass cutting, arboricultural and weed control operations.
- 3.2 That Cabinet approve additional one off revenue funding of £21k in 2019/20 for the provision of additional resource to re-design and optimise grass cutting routes and to implement an increased grass cutting regime in March 2020.
- 3.3 That Cabinet approve additional one off revenue funding of £160k for 2020/21 to increase grass cutting, arboricultural and weed control operations on a time limited basis from April 2020 to March 2021 as follows:
 - a) Increase the frequency of grass cutting on general highway verges across the borough to a frequency of circa once every three weeks.
 - b) Re-introduce grass cutting on a circa three weekly basis on the selected highway verges and large open spaces (**Appendix A**) which were previously reduced to once per annum, where there is the requirement to do so.
 - c) Increase the provision of arboricultural work from two operational gangs to three.
 - d) Increase the frequency of weed spraying across the borough from once per annum to three times per annum.
- 3.4 That Cabinet consider a further report in Autumn 2020 considering the effectiveness of the changes and determining the benefits achieved from the investment made compared with other priorities the Council may have.

4. Report detail - know

Context

- 4.1 Grounds and tree maintenance activities are not specifically statutory services, but statute does have an influence on the activities carried out. Below are the identified acts and government guidance relevant to grass cutting, weed control and tree management activities.
 - The Highways Act 1980 - Highway Authorities (County and Unitary Councils) have a duty under this Act to maintain 'any highway that is maintainable at public expense other than trunk roads. This can involve ensuring verges and road sides are maintained to a standard to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered.
 - The 1988 Road Traffic Act, S 39, puts a duty on the local authority to undertake studies into road traffic collisions, and to take steps both to reduce and prevent them.

- Legislation for trees and the duty expected is contained predominantly in the following:
 Occupiers Liability Act 1957/84
 Town and Country Planning Act 1990
 Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
 Management Safety at Work 1999
 Department of Environment Circular 36/78 Trees and Forestry
 The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
 Highways Act 1980
 Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1976
 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
 Environmental Protection Act 1990
- Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) – States all public authorities have a duty under the Act to have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of policy or decision making. Examples could be integrating biodiversity when developing policies and strategies and putting them into practice, or managing our land and buildings (nature reserves, gardens, parks, sports pitches, etc.), waste, wood and plant products.

Current service levels

- 4.2 Grass cutting on general highway verges across the borough is currently undertaken on average every four weeks, with the cuttings not collected.
- 4.3 Grass cutting on the sites identified in **Appendix A** of this report is currently scheduled to be undertaken once per annum during the Autumn, but for operational efficiencies this may be increased to twice per annum on occasion. Where necessary four weekly frequencies are maintained for visibility splays, strategic gateways and to maintain pedestrian access for walking and play.
- 4.4 Currently Clean and Green operate two arboricultural three-man teams undertaking a mix of highly specialised skilled work and more routine semi-skilled tree maintenance activities.
- 4.5 Control of weed growth is by application of an approved herbicide. Highway weed spraying is undertaken once per annum by an external contractor using quad bikes. The contract includes an option to carry out two herbicide treatments per year, at extra cost, if required. Paths in parks, open spaces and similar areas are treated with an approved herbicide by Clean and Green operatives 2-3 times per year within available resources.

Issues and Impacts of amending the frequency of grass cutting and weed control

- 4.6 There are recognised economic benefits associated with clean and well maintained highways, parks and green spaces; these include helping to support economic growth and attract investment. Clean and green towns attract more visitors, whose spending on shopping and leisure generates job opportunities.

- 4.7 Reducing grounds maintenance can have an impact on the appearance of neighbourhoods. Areas may show signs of neglect and appear unkempt with longer grass and weeds encouraging littering, anti-social behaviour and possibly fly tipping.
- 4.8 In order to avoid the borough appearing unkempt maintenance regimes suitable for the locality are required. Naturalised grass areas may be appropriate and supported by residents in some locations, but inappropriate elsewhere.
- 4.9 Reducing highway weed spraying to once per annum has allowed weed growth to flourish. Control of weeds on roads and pavements is linked to street cleansing activities. Regular sweeping removes detritus in which weeds can grow and prevents seedlings from maturing. A separate report concerning the effects of the reduction in street cleansing is due to be considered by Cabinet in September 2019.
- 4.10 When correctly located and managed naturalised grass and wild flower areas can greatly enhance the local environment. Such areas, together with our green spaces, are essential for supporting biodiversity, providing habitats and access to a variety of flora and fauna in an urban environment. They form wildlife corridors that allow the migration of plants and animals, acting as important stepping stone links between urban and rural areas. Green space also has an increasingly important role to play in mitigating the effects of climate change.
- 4.11 Naturalised areas contribute towards the council's Biodiversity Duty, in that all public bodies must have regard to biodiversity in the exercise of their functions. They also contribute towards the objectives of the Birmingham and Black Country Nature Improvement Area in terms of having more, bigger and better wildlife sites.
- 4.12 Arboricultural work is highly skilled and currently trained arborists are undertaking less skilled as well as specialist work. Grounds maintenance operatives could be deployed to carry out semi-skilled arboricultural work, such as the removal of epicormic growth or low hanging branches. However reductions in the service mean there is not currently the resource available to make more flexible use of the workforce.
- 4.13 There has been an increase in both customer demand for services and complaints about service standards. Between 19 March 2017 and 19 July 2017, 1,662 grounds maintenance related calls were handled by the council's Contact Centre resulting in 287 work requests being raised, predominantly relating to grass cutting. During a similar period in 2018, 2,456 calls were received with 361 work requests raised.
- 4.14 There has been no direct impact on partners with the reduction in grass cutting and weed spraying frequencies, however different standards were highlighted. Walsall Housing Group, which undertakes like functions on adjacent land, currently operates a fortnightly cut and collect service on the majority of their sites. This has accentuated differentials in standards across the community and neighbourhoods.

Service review and additional resources

- 4.15 It is proposed to undertake a review of grass cutting, weed spraying and arboricultural work, in line with the principles of the Walsall's Proud Programme 'New Ways of Thinking' framework, with the aim of increasing maintenance schedules, where appropriate, across the borough, increasing efficiency and minimising cost.
- 4.16 We know that between 2015/16 and 2017/18 scheduled grass cutting and weed control activities, were reduced to deliver total operational and policy savings of circa £880K. Innovation and service re-design are required to ensure the right service levels, can be delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible at minimum cost.
- 4.17 The review will enable us to decide how best to deliver the service and identify priorities where re-investment is required
- 4.18 The review will be time limited, commencing in September 2019 and ending in March 2021.
- 4.19 Between September 2019 and March 2020, grass-cutting routes will re-designed and optimised for efficiency to allow the frequency of grass cutting on grassed areas across the borough to be increased to circa every three weeks from March 2020 until October 2020. Consideration will be given to the appropriateness of the maintenance schedules for a particular locality and any known local ground conditions that may affect works and alternative management regimes will be considered such as the establishment of wild flower areas at suitable locations.
- 4.20 Re-design of operations and increase the level of maintenance carried out on a time limited basis will require re-investment in the service of £181K during the financial years 2019/20 and 2020/21.
- 4.21 Route optimisation and preparation of revised grass cutting schedules will require an additional staff resource to provide technical support to the process from October 2019 to March 2020, with a one-off cost of circa £14k.
- 4.22 Subject to weather conditions, grass cutting usually commences in March. Revised mowing schedules will be implemented in March 2020 and will require an estimated additional three Environmental Operatives at an increased cost of circa £7k for the increased frequencies for grass cutting in March 2020 to be funded in the 2019/20 financial year.
- 4.23 Revised grass cutting schedules will be adopted on a time limited basis for the 2020 season, from April 2020 until the end of October 2020. Depending upon the results of the route optimisation exercise this will require an estimated additional three Environmental Operatives and result in additional costs of circa £49k for the 2020/21 financial year.

- 4.24 Grounds maintenance work is affected by weather conditions. During prolonged periods of wet weather operations may have to be suspended on some sites due to the damage mowing machinery may cause and the risk of equipment getting stuck. During hot, wet weather, grass will grow faster which can reduce cutting frequencies and in periods of prolonged hot, dry weather operations may be halted when grass does not grow. Delivery of grass cutting may vary from the pre-planned schedules.
- 4.25 The frequency of highway weed spraying will be increased from one to three occasions on a time limited basis for the 2020 season, until the end of October 2020. This will result in additional costs of circa £35k for the 2020/21 financial year.
- 4.26 The highway weed spraying contract is currently for one herbicide application per annum, with the option to increase this to two if required. An increase to three applications per annum would be a variation under the terms of the existing contract and will require assistance from Corporate Procurement to ensure legality.
- 4.27 In order to further increase weed control for the 2020 season increased herbicide applications on other facilities such as car parks would be necessary. One additional Environmental Operative plus materials would be required, resulting in additional costs of circa £20k for the 2020/21 financial year.
- 4.28 The control of weeds growth on roads, splitter islands and footways is linked to street cleansing activities. Regular sweeping removes detritus in which weeds can grow and prevents seedlings from maturing. A separate report concerning the effects of the reduction in street cleansing is due to be considered by Cabinet in September 2019.
- 4.29 The current highway weed spraying contract ends in March 2020, with an option to extend for a further twelve months. The opportunity exists to reconsider how the service is delivered.
- 4.30 As part of the service review, the provision of arboricultural maintenance will be increased on the same time-limited basis. An additional resource will be deployed to undertake semi-skilled tasks, such as the removal of epicormic growth or low branches. This will release the qualified arborists to carry out the specialist work required to maintain the Authority's tree stock to safe standards. This will require two additional Environmental Operatives at a cost of circa £56K for the 2020/21 financial year.
- 4.31 The additional staff resource required to undertake the review will be provided via the use of existing labour with permanent resources backfilled with agency labour.
- 4.32 The outcomes, impacts and benefits of increasing planned grass cutting, weed control and planned and reactive responses to tree problems will be considered at the end of the review periods.

Council Corporate Plan priorities

4.33 Grass cutting, weed control and tree maintenance links to the current priorities set out in the 2018-2021 Corporate Plan as follows:

- Internal focus – All Council services are efficient and effective.
- Economic growth - for all people, communities and businesses.
- Communities - are prospering and resilient with all housing needs met in safe and healthy places that build a strong sense of belonging and cohesion.

Risk management

4.34 The following risks have been identified:

Risk	Control Measures
Public / Community not supportive of increased cutting frequencies on all large open spaces Potential difference of opinions	Local Consultation – Time will be required to prepare, consult, analyse and decide.
Increased customer expectations - Unable to afford increased maintenance schedules on a long term basis	Communication with Public that increased services are time limited Mainstream funding identified and approved by Cabinet / Alternative savings identified and approved by Cabinet to allow continuity of service.

Financial implications

4.35 The review of grass cutting, weed control and arboricultural work and the implementation of revised schedules on a time limited basis will incur additional one off costs of £21K during the 2019/20 financial year as follows:

- Re-design of grass cutting routes - £14K
- Additional grass cutting during March 2020 - £7K

4.36 Further additional one-off costs of £160K will be incurred during the 2020/21 financial year as follows:

- Additional grass cutting for April 2020 to October 2020 - £49k
- Additional contract weed spraying - £35K
- Additional weed spraying on carparks etc - £20k
- Additional arboricultural works - £56K

- 4.37 Clean and Green is currently projecting a break even position for the 2019/20 financial year. There is no available budget to implement increased grass cutting, weed control or arboricultural work in the current or future financial years. Therefore, additional revenue budget allocations are required, or implementation of these proposals would likely result in a net overspend within the Service.
- 4.38 Any amendment to budget savings requires Cabinet approval as it involves a change in policy.

Legal implications

- 4.39 There are no legal implications with this report.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.40 Highway weed spraying is currently carried out by an external contractor under a 2 year contract that expires in March 2021 with the option to extend for a further 12 months. The contract is for one herbicide application per annum, with the option to increase this to two if required. An increase to three applications per annum would be a variation under the terms of the existing contract and will require assistance from Corporate Procurement to ensure legality.

Property implications

- 4.41 There are no property implications with this report

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.42 There are known benefits associated with a clean and well-maintained local environment and access to parks and green spaces. These help to support economic growth, attracting investment to the borough, supporting employment and leisure and encouraging visitors to the area.
- 4.43 Unkempt or neglected areas may encourage littering, anti-social behaviour and possibly fly-tipping, resulting in degradation of the local environment and reducing pride in the local community
- 4.44 Where grassland areas are adjacent to, or near, other habitats or natural areas, they will increase the wildlife value of those sites. Public access to green space has clear health benefits, not just in terms of physical exercise, but also for goodmental health and wellbeing through contact with and appreciation of nature.

Staffing implications

- 4.45 All proposed temporary additional resources would be provided via the use of existing labour with permanent resources backfilled using agency labour.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.46 It is not considered that the reintroduction of increased grass cutting, weed control and arboricultural activities has any inequality issues.

Consultation

- 4.47 Consultation with local residents and site users on reduced grass cutting was carried out as part of previous budget savings proposals.
- 4.48 A public consultation exercise will be undertaken as part of the review prior to reinstating grass cutting regimes on large open spaces and rural highway verges as local residents may prefer a more natural environment supporting biodiversity, wildlife habitats and access to a variety of flora and fauna. All public consultation responses will receive conscientious consideration in association with the corporate Communications Team.

5. Decide

- 5.1 Cabinet is requested to consider this report in determining additional one-off funding for a review and associated outcomes of enhanced grass cutting, weed control and tree management.

6. Respond

- 6.1 Mowing routes will be optimised to deliver increased grass cutting frequencies.
- 6.2 Additional temporary staff resources will be sourced to deliver the optimisation of mowing routes.
- 6.3 Additional temporary staff resources will be sourced to undertake additional grass cutting, weed spraying on other areas and semi-skilled tree work.
- 6.4 Revised arrangements will be communicated as appropriate.
- 6.5 Present outcomes of the review to Cabinet in Autumn 2020.

7. Review

- 7.1 Grounds maintenance budgets will be monitored via existing budget monitoring processes.
- 7.2 Visual outcomes and site categories / usage will be used and considered along with service requests, comments, compliments and complaints to determine the effectiveness and appropriateness of maintenance regimes.

Background papers

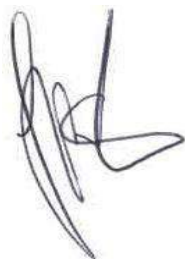
Corporate Budget Plan 2016/17 to 2019/20 and Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2017/18

Corporate Budget Plan and Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2016/17

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Appendix A

Gang mow sites - large areas:

- Pelsall Common
- Woodend Road/Gillity
- The Parkway/Brookmeadow
- Rhys Thomas open space
- Pool Hayes open space
- Odell Road open space
- Delves Common
- Ross Farm/Swannies Field
- Nest Common
- Walstead Road open spaces
- Glastonbury Crescent open space
- Bentley Railway
- Green Lane (Leamore) open space
- Poplar Avenue (Bentley) open space
- Open space rear of Lichfield Road Bloxwich
- Kent Road Recreation Ground
- Cavendish Road open space
- Aldridge Airport
- Wilkes Avenue open space
- Pouk Hill
- Fibbersley Canal
- Fallings Heath open space
- Leylands Farm
- Pooles Lane Recreation Ground
- Clayhanger Common
- Stubbers Green

Highway Verges

- Noose Lane (Willenhall) – verge running adjacent to Memorial Park, from junction of Beech Road, to the car park that serves the park itself;
- Wolverhampton Road West (Willenhall) – verges either side of the carriageway, between numbers 199 to 279;
- Hough Road (Pleck) – verge running adjacent to railway line , between numbers 2 – 130;
- Bosty Lane (Rushall) – verge running adjacent to farm land, between number 123 and the Royal Oak pub;
- Little Aston Road (Aldridge) – verge adjacent to farm land, between numbers 173 and 205;
- Walsall Road (Aldridge) – verge running adjacent to farm land, between junction of Longwood Lane and number 214;
- Aldridge Road (Aldridge) – verges running adjacent to farm land, on both sides of carriageway, between number 19 and Longwood canal bridge;
- Barr Common Road Aldridge – triangular verge junction with Longwood Road;
- Aldridge Road (Streetly) – verge running along service road adjacent to hedgerow, between numbers 2 and 204;
- Sutton Road (Walsall) – verge running adjacent to farm land, both sides of the carriageway, between junction of Beacon Road and number 515;

- Sutton Road (Walsall) island verge at the junction with Skip Lane;
- Beacon Hill (Streetly) – verge running adjacent to farm land, between junction of Beacon Road and junction of Aldridge Road;
- The Parade (Brownhills) – verge running adjacent to Holland Park – between junction of Chester Road North and the A5;
- Fishley Lane Bloxwich – verge adjacent to canal side;
- Stoney Lane Bloxwich – open space rear of high rise flats
- Redbourne Road Bloxwich – open space rear of Isaac Walton pool
- Vernon Way Bloxwich – verges either side of road from junction with Lichfield Road, leading up to Sneyd PH;
- Ashley Road Bloxwich – verge running adjacent to canal side;
- Mossley track Bloxwich – verge running from Vernon Way to Broad Lane
- Sneyd Lane Bloxwich – verge by Baileys Pool
- Bloxwich Lane Leamore – land by fishing pool (Butlers Pool)
- Wood Lane Short Heath – verge either side of road, from M6 motorway bridge, to junction with Shelley Road
- Leckie Road North Walsall – small open space known as Leckie Wildlife
- Hilton Road New Invention – small open space known as Allens Rough Pit Mound
- Greadier Street Short Heath – small open space adjacent to canal side
- Littleton Road New Invention – small open space adjacent to woodland
- Oakridge Drive Short Heath – small open space adjacent to former railway line
- Mill Lane The Butts – small open space running to the rear of Borneo Street
- Norton Road Pelsall – verge rear of Mallard Close, near canal bridge
- Northfield Way Clayhanger – verge on left hand side of road on approach to dead end