

27 July 2015

Response to “Cut our Common” Petition

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Councillor Louise Harrison - Clean and Green

Executive Summary:

This report outlines the response to the petition entitled “Cut Our Common” requesting that the Authority re-visits the decision to cut the grass in some areas once per year and reinstates regular maintenance of Walsall’s green spaces.

The budget savings for 2015/16, agreed by Cabinet in February 2015, contained a reduction in grounds maintenance of £524K. This included reducing the grass cutting on 26 sites to once per year, delivering a saving of £43K.

Following implementation of the new arrangements, complaints were received from local residents stating that the long grass was having a negative impact on site users and was visually unattractive and the “Cut Our Common” petition has been received with in excess of 500 signatures.

Public demand has instigated a review of the annual grass cutting of the 26 sites with a view to reinstating fortnightly grass cutting. On 24 June 2015, a report “Tractor Mowing of Large Grassed Areas” was presented to Cabinet recommending

1. That Cabinet agree to reinstate fortnightly grass cutting to the 26 sites identified for the 2015/16 season with costs being met from the Economy and Environment directorate budget.
2. That a review of grass cutting arrangements on the 26 sites is carried out to determine whether savings can be made in 2016/17 taking into account residents’ views and biodiversity benefits.

Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee are requested to acknowledge the outcome of the cabinet report “Tractor Mowing of Large Grassed Areas” dated 24 June 2015

Reason for scrutiny:

A petition entitled “Cut our Common” has been received. This petition contains more than 500 signatures and in line with the Council’s petition scheme a relevant senior officer is required to give evidence at a public meeting of one of the Council’s Scrutiny and Performance Panels on the issues it contains.

Recommendations:**That:**

1. Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee note Cabinet’s decision of 24 June 2015, namely:
 - a. to reinstate fortnightly grass cutting to the 26 sites identified for the 2015/16 season with costs being met from the Economy and Environment directorate budget.
 - b. to review grass cutting arrangements on the 26 sites to determine whether savings can be made in 2016/17 taking into account residents’ views and biodiversity benefits.

Background papers:

Report 1 - Cabinet report “Tractor Mowing of Large Grassed Areas”

Resource and legal considerations:

To re-introduce fortnightly grass cutting to the above 26 sites would cost circa £28k for a grass cutting season based on use of an agency resource over the summer season together with associated equipment costs. Proportionately for the remainder of this year the cost would be around £25k.

There are no legal implications.

Citizen impact:

Complaints have been received from local residents stating that the long grass was having a negative impact on site users and was visually unattractive. Opposing views were expressed by some residents who felt that, where vegetation had been allowed to develop, they enjoyed seeing the variety of wild flowers and associated wildlife that began to appear.

Environmental impact:

Naturalised grass areas increase biodiversity and natural habitats.

Performance management:

The costs incurred from the reinstatement of grass cutting on the 26 sites will be monitored and managed within existing Economy and Environment directorate budget.

Equality Implications:


It is considered that there are no equality implications with the proposal. An EqIA was written as part of the 2015/16 budget process and will be updated in the review of grass cutting for 2016/17.

Consultation:

Consideration of public comments regarding the condition of the 26 sites has been taken into account.

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1. Report

Agenda item

Cabinet – 24 June 2015

Tractor Mowing of Large Grassed Areas

Portfolio: Clean and Green – Councillor Louise Harrison

Related portfolios: None

Service: Clean and Green Services

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Summary

- 1.1 Following the change in Administration of the Council on the 3 June 2015 a review of the annual grass cutting of 26 sites across the borough was requested with a view to reinstating fortnightly grass cutting at those sites.
- 1.2 This report advises members of the costs and implications of re-introducing fortnightly grass cutting to these sites which were previously reduced to an annual cut via the 2015/16 Budget Savings process.
- 1.2 The frequency of grass cutting was reduced from fortnightly to just once a year, delivering a saving of circa £43k including the cost of an Environmental Operative plus associated vehicles and equipment.
- 1.3 Following the switch to the new arrangements, complaints were received on some of these sites from local residents stating that the long grass was having a negative impact on site users and was visually unattractive.
- 1.4 Opposing views were expressed by some residents who felt that, where vegetation had been allowed to develop, they enjoyed seeing the variety of wild flowers and associated wildlife that began to appear.
- 1.5 To re-introduce fortnightly grass cutting to the above 26 sites would cost circa £28k for a grass cutting season based on use of an agency resource over the summer season together with associated equipment costs. Proportionately for the remainder of this year the cost would be around £25k.

- 1.6 Any amendment to this particular budget saving requires Cabinet approval as it involves a change in policy. An early decision is required as the problem of long grass and any related complaints will become proportionately worse the longer it is before any amended cutting regime is implemented.
- 1.7 To determine the impact or benefit of cutting fortnightly or annually on each site a further review and public consultation would be required and could not practically be carried out this grass cutting season.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Cabinet agree to reinstate fortnightly grass cutting to the 26 sites identified in this report for the 2015/16 season with the cost of £28k being met from the Economy and Environment directorate budget.
- 2.2 A review of grass cutting arrangements on the 26 sites is carried out to determine whether savings can be made in 2016/17 taking into account residents' views and biodiversity benefits.

3. Report detail

- 3.1 As part of the 2015/16 budget process, savings totalling £524,050 in respect grounds maintenance activities were approved as follows:

Description	Saving (£)
1 x Environmental Officer post	-25,889**
Assistant Manager green spaces	-34,711
2 x Environmental officers Arboretum	-45,841
2 x Environmental officers Grounds North	-51,777
1 x Environmental officers Grounds South	-25,889
Eliminate agency budget (Grounds North)	-88,884
Eliminate agency budget (Grounds South)	-88,884
Seasonal bedding	-60,000
Christmas tree	-3,500
Tyres	-4,000**
Fuel	-7,000**
Maintenance	-7,675**
Reduction in private contractor fees	-18,000
Reduction in overtime	-32,000
Other staffing efficiencies (e.g. replacement staff on lower grades)	-30,000
Total	-524,050

- 3.2 The grass cutting on 26 sites throughout the borough, as listed below, was reduced from fortnightly to a regime of cutting just once each year. This saving equated to circa £43k** including the cost of an Environmental Operative and associated fleet costs.

Area/Sites	
1.	Aldridge Airport
2.	Clayhanger Common
3.	Open space at Green Lane, Leamore
4.	Open space rear of Cavendish Road
5.	Pouk Hill open space
6.	Open space at Odell Road/Irvine Road
7.	Ross Farm open space
8.	Open space to the rear of Lichfield Road, Bloxwich (the site runs adjacent to Bloxwich Cemetery)
9.	Open space to the rear of Glastonbury Crescent
10.	Open space known as Kent Road Rec (located opposite Old Hall pool)
11.	Open space at Poplar Avenue (located to the rear of Jane Lane Close)
12.	Open space at Fallings Heath (located at Cook St/Wood St, Darlaston)
13.	Open space to the rear of properties at Wilkes Avenue, Bentley
14.	Open space at Woodend Road (leading to Gillity estate)
15.	Delves Common
16.	Open spaces at Walstead Road (one adjacent to Walsall golf club, and one at the junction with Walstead Road and Laburnum Road)
17.	Nest Common
18.	Open space known as Leylands Farm (located to the rear of Wolverhampton Road, Pelsall)
19.	Pelsall common (area of the common located adjacent to Commonsides)
20.	Open space to the rear of The Parkway and Brook Meadow Road
21.	Open space at Stubbers Green
22.	Open space known as Bentley Railway (located adjacent to the southern end of Lodge Farm estate)
23.	Open space known as Rhys Thomas open space (located off Pennine Way, Lodge Farm estate)
24.	Open space at Pool Hayes Lane (located to the rear of properties at Milford Avenue, Pool Hayes estate)
25.	Open space known as Pooles Lane Rec (located between Pooles Lane and the southern end of Littleton Road playing fields)
26.	Open space known as Fibbersley Canal (located between Fibbersley and Monmer Lane)

3.4 Following the change in Administration of the Council on the 3 June 2015 a review of the annual grass cutting of 26 sites was requested with a view to reinstating fortnightly grass cutting at those sites.

3.5 A review of the grass cutting arrangements was carried out, based on the recent complaints received, along with the consideration of the biodiversity benefit of allowing grass to grow for a whole season before annual mowing.

3.6 Two options were identified:

- a) Option 1 - Revert to fortnightly grass cutting for all of the 26 sites
- b) Option 2 - Revert to fortnightly grass cutting for a number of sites

3.7 Due to time constraints of the cutting season, it was considered that there was insufficient time to fully assess the views of the local communities in respect of their preferences, or fully consider the biodiversity benefits for each of the 26 sites at this time. It is therefore proposed to reinstate fortnightly grass cutting with immediate effect and carry out a review to determine the impact or benefit of cutting fortnightly or annually on each site with appropriate public consultation at the end of this grass cutting season.

4. Council priorities

4.1 The reinstatement of fortnightly grass cutting will contribute to delivering the Corporate Plan and The Walsall Plan 2013-16 by reducing levels of crime and providing the right environment for people to live in so helping to create safe, sustainable and inclusive communities.

5. Risk management

5.1 The risks identified with increasing the grass cutting frequencies on the above sites are identified below:

- a) It will take 4–6 weeks to re-introduce fortnightly grass cutting due to the fact that the length of grass will require a flail ‘cut and collect’ operation to bring it back to a maintainable standard. The impact will therefore not be seen immediately.
- b) To introduce fortnightly grass cutting to all sites may increase complaints from groups/residents that support natural grass land and the associated biodiversity benefits.

6. Financial implications

6.1 To re-introduce fortnightly grass cutting to the above 26 sites would cost an additional £28,000 pa. This additional cost can be met from the Economy and Environment directorate budget.

7. Legal implications

7.1 There are no legal implications with this report.

8. Property implications

8.1 There are no property implications with this report.

9. Health and wellbeing implications

9.1 In September 2012 the Council adopted the Marmot Objectives as objectives for improving health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities for the people of Walsall. These objectives have provided the framework for the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the Sustainable Communities Strategy and “The Walsall Plan”. The recommendations in this report are consistent with these priorities.

10. Staffing implications

10.1 One additional Agency employee will be required to work until 30 September 2015.

11. Equality implications

11.1 It is considered that there are no equality implications with this proposal but the EqIA will be revisited in the review at the end of the year.

12. Consultation

12.1 Consideration of public comments regarding the condition of some of the sites listed in this report has been taken into account in the preparation of this report.

Background papers

None.

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