

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Tuesday 14 th January 2020
Report Subject	Grass Cutting Policy Review and Wildflowers on Grass Verges
Cabinet Member	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Streetscene & Countryside
Report Author	Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Council provides a grass cutting service at a number locations and at key facilities around the County. The Grass Cutting Policy has been regularly reviewed since 2012 with the last version being approved in January 2018, which demonstrated the Council's compliance with the latest Highway Code of Practice, which was released in March 2017.

Following the impact of the summer weather on the 2019 grass cutting season, the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee requested that the Council's Grass Cutting Policy be reviewed and a report on the policy was presented to the Committee in October 2019. At the meeting the Committee requested further information relating to the collection of grass cuttings which they felt would improve the service provided.

The report also provides further details on the pilot areas for planting of wildflowers which were detailed in the previous report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Environment and Overview Scrutiny notes the cost of collecting grass during the grass cutting operation and recommend Cabinet approves the current policy.
2	That Environment Overview and Scrutiny support the pilot programme of wildflower planting and managing areas for biodiversity with those Town & Community Councils who have expressed an interest in supporting the initiative.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	BACKGROUND OF GRASS CUTTING POLICY
1.01	The Grass Cutting Policy was last revised in January 2018 and a copy is attached (Appendix 1).
1.02	The County has a legal responsibility for managing the Highway Network in terms of keeping the routes available and safe for the passage of the highway user. It undertakes this duty in its role as the Highway Authority. Grass-cutting takes place on highway verges in areas that are key to maintaining visibility, such as at junctions, laybys, and the inside of bends. The aim of grass-cutting is to keep the highway safe and to maintain visibility for all road users.
1.03	Regular grounds maintenance of publicly accessible areas is recognised to improve the appearance of those areas, and maintains the accessibility by the communities that look to enjoy these green spaces.
1.04	The current delivery mechanisms for grass cutting is as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rural Highway Verges – Contracted• Urban Verges and visibility – Contracted• Amenity Areas – Part contracted / part in-house• Cemeteries – In-house• Tenants Gardens – Contracted• Hedges – Contracted• School Playing fields – Contracted• Rights of Way – Contracted (Managed by Countryside services)
1.05	The frequency of cutting is set as core standards in the current Grass Cutting Policy as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rural Highway Verges – once per year• Urban Verges and visibility splays – 4 times per year• Amenity Areas – Maximum 13 cuts per year / every 2-3 weeks• Cemeteries – Every 2-3 weeks• Tenants Gardens – Maximum 13 cuts per year / every 2-3 weeks• Hedges – once per year• School Playing fields – up to 16 cuts per year
1.06	The programme of grass cutting is scheduled as described in the Policy, however there are periods where the grass will grow more quickly between cuts. Favourable weather conditions, usually in early summer, can cause grass to grow more rapidly.
1.07	During early June 2019, heavy rain interrupted grass cutting services whilst resources were redirected to respond to localised flooding incidents, and were not able to restart the grass cutting rounds whilst the ground remained too sodden for the machinery to operate. Meanwhile, this was a peak grass growing period, and the additional growth interrupted schedules into July 2019.

1.08	July 2019 was a record breaking month for temperatures and this again promoted the pace of grass growth. In efforts to address the issue of rounds struggling to keep up with the accelerated growth, Streetscene & Transportation engaged additional support from an incumbent contractor to assist the in-house amenity grass cutting teams to catch up. Additional contractor support continued until the end of September 2019.
1.09	Grass-cutting may be undertaken more frequently by Town & Community Councils (T&CC). This is at their discretion, with our agreement, and is funded by the T&CC. Under such circumstances, Town & Community Councils are encouraged to take on an extended role in the provision of grass cutting for either additional sites, or more frequent cuts.
1.10	Core Standards can be enhanced on health and safety grounds - where appropriate, through discussion with the Streetscene Area Coordinators and Operational Managers. Streetscene Operational Area Managers can provide advice on current standards, and the appropriate solution for additional services, along with how these may be supported through either the in-house teams or contractors, and the indicative costs.
1.11	<p><u>Wildflowers</u></p> <p>Encouraging communities to manage verges and other areas such as smaller roundabouts where visibility is not an issue and amenity areas, for wildflower planting and care, can improve the aesthetics of the areas and reduce the burden on the grass cutting service. This can only be considered where it is safe to do so, and not in conflict with health and safety management of verges.</p>
1.12	Roadside verges and other areas can be sanctuaries for wildflowers, pollinating insects, reptiles, amphibians and small mammals. These are seen as essential green corridors for which these species disperse.
1.13	Through a variety of grant funded and partnership projects, a number of different approaches to wildflower area creation and management have been trialled by the Countryside Service as an alternative to the usual 'engineered' annual wildflower areas which, although often having a stunning visual impact, rely on regular re-creation. Alongside tree planting, areas of amenity grassland and road verges have been allowed to grow longer for the summer with a later cut to allow grasses and flowers to grow throughout the season. This approach has incorporated necessary and essential maintenance work to ensure there is no impact on highway safety.
1.14	Streetscene & Transportation have been contacted by a number of Town & Community Councils to put forward areas for consideration of wildflower planting, and where regular grass cutting can be avoided, these areas are to be trialled as an alternative to less frequent cuts and longer grass. In these instances we would look to the Community Council to contribute towards the costs of the wildflower seeds, and we have been advised that the benefit may not be fully realised until the second season.
1.15	Each Streetscene Area Coordinator has also been ask to nominate an open site in their area, which could be left to grow and would receive just

	one cut a year (with the grass collected). This would encourage biodiversity and provide a natural sanctuary for wildlife.
1.16	<p>An assessment of each site will need to be carried out to consider existing wildlife, historic designations or features, plant identification to consider invasive plants and protected species and other wildlife interests. Any works and on-going management of these sites will need to consider the hazards of working in the verge, traffic management considerations and a risk assessment for the site.</p> <p>Once chosen the sites will be clearly signed to notify residents that the site is not to be cut and will remain an area of natural biodiversity.</p>
1.17	<p><u>Grass Collections</u></p> <p>Environment & Scrutiny Committee have requested further information in relation to the additional costs of collecting grass cuttings. We do not currently collect grass cuttings as the equipment needed to collect and remove them would significantly increase the cost of the mowing service. The grass collection boxes need regular emptying, which would cost significantly more to collect, reduce productivity and incur costs for transporting the cuttings and disposal through composting. This enhancement of the service would be costly, uneconomical and environmentally unfriendly, owing to the additional travel involved.</p>
1.18	We currently cut 1,113 amenity sites and cemeteries, along with 20 football pitch sites, which is in excess of 270 hectares, which is undertaken with the in-house teams consisting of 42 operatives. Contractors provide services to cut schools, tenant's gardens and highway verges.
1.19	The in-house grass cutting teams would require the re-procurement of existing mowing equipment which are currently not designed to collect grass. Additional small skips and loading vehicles would be required to collect the grass as the existing fleet vehicles would not have capacity to carry the arisings. It is estimated that this would generate approximately £297k of additional costs over a full season.
1.20	<p>Soft market-testing with the incumbent contractor for grass cutting services has indicated that overall costs would likely increase by in excess of 70% to provide a grass collection service in addition to the existing grass cutting arrangements.</p> <p>In total, the cost of providing a collected service in all areas would exceed £0.5m and would be equivalent to a 1% increase in Council Tax for all residents</p>
1.21	In order to mitigate the concerns raised by the Scrutiny Committee, the operational teams are currently preparing to carry out a 'Winter Cut' in January 2020 where appropriate it is appropriate to do so when areas will be cut to reduce winter growth, subject to weather and ground conditions.
1.22	The teams will then be resourced and prepared to start the first cut of the season from 1st March 2020, subject to weather conditions at that time, which again is intended to minimise excessive growth and support the

	teams in the timely completion of scheduled cuts. This will occur alongside the weed-spraying of the edges and around furniture/obstacles, which will improve the efficiency of the rounds and reduce the requirement for strimming.
1.23	After mowing, any grass cuttings on the pavement will be blown back on to the grass as soon as possible and any long grass in the area of sheltered housing will be raked and removed. The option to collect grass in the areas around sheltered properties during the first cut remains within the current policy and within existing budgets
1.24	The operational grass cutting teams have been reconfigured for the new season to ensure that the rounds are distributed more evenly across the County, provide consistency in the workforce and deliver more timely completion of grass cutting schedules.
1.25	It is intended that these additional resources will ensure that the growth of grass is managed and, along with the timely start to the cutting season, will prevent excessive length of cuttings and remove the need for grass collections to take place.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	It is the intention of the service to maintain budgets and deliver the service with cost neutral implications.
2.02	To provide an additional grass cutting collection service would see an additional requirement for the following: Staff: 7 drivers @ £15k ea. per annum - £105k Vehicles: 7 no. 7.5t skips plus emptying etc. @ ~ £15k ea. per annum - £105k Plant / Equipment: Replacement with grass collection boxes - £20k Disposal: ~ 4,000tonnes p.a. - £67k Total: £297k additional costs
2.03	The operational improvements being put in place over January 2020 and in preparations for the grass cutting season will be covered from within existing service resources and budgets.

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	The Streetscene & Transportation service has undertaken risk assessments on the provision of the standard and frequency of all grass cutting services which are outlined within the policy.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	<p>Consultation took place with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational departments and stakeholders With Cabinet Member
4.02	Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee supported the existing policy and the proposals for introducing wildflower areas at their meeting in October 2019.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – Grass Cutting Policy (January 2018).

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	Highways Act 1980.
6.02	Code of Practice for Well-managed Highway Infrastructure (2016).

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: Stephen O Jones – Chief Officer – Streetscene & Transportation</p> <p>Telephone: 01352 704700</p> <p>E-mail: Stephen.o.jones@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	None.