

## ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

<b>Date of Meeting</b>	Tuesday, 11th January 2022
<b>Report Subject</b>	Review of Grass Cutting
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Cabinet Member for Streetscene
<b>Report Author</b>	Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation)
<b>Type of Report</b>	Operational

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Grass Cutting Policy has been reviewed regularly since 2012 with the latest version being approved in January 2020, which included further details on the pilot areas for planting wild flowers and information relating to the collection of grass cuttings following a request from the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Council provides a grass cutting service at a number locations and at key facilities around the county. It is good practice to review the performance of our grass cutting operations at regular intervals in order to determine whether any policy changes may be required for service delivery.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the performance of grass cutting operations across the county throughout the 2021 season.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Scrutiny welcomes the report, supports the work undertaken and confirms that it is satisfied that no changes are required to the policy.
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### REPORT DETAILS

<b>1.00</b>	<b>EXPLAINING THE BACKGROUND</b>
1.01	The Council 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 and 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.

	<p>Grass cutting and grounds maintenance standards are set out in our Grass Cutting Policy. We also employ Streetscene Standards, which are reviewed typically every three years (the next review date is planned in November 2022). The Grass Cutting Policy was last revised in January 2018 and subsequently reviewed in January 2020 with no amendments made (see <b>Appendix 1</b>).</p>
1.02	<p>We have a range of grass cutting and grounds maintenance operations in place, which vary from external contracted services on highway verges, roundabouts and central reservations, weed spraying, tenant gardens and school grounds to our own in-house service delivery for amenity areas and public open spaces, such as car parks, cemeteries, leisure centres, libraries, council offices, housing estates, town centres, sheltered housing, bus stops, play areas and playing fields and nature conservation areas. We do not maintain private land or land owned by bodies other than the Council.</p>
1.03	<p>Grass cutting across the county was initially affected by the initial 'lockdown' in March 2020 as a number of services were suspended due to the restrictions in place at the time; however as the restrictions began to be lifted over the summer of 2020, grass cutting services resumed and we began to recover and achieve the standards set out in the policy.</p>
1.04	<p>Our own in-house grass cutting operations were impacted heavily during the Spring of 2020, due to the lack of available workforce owing to high sickness absence levels, self-isolation and deployment to other key services, such as waste and recycling operations; consequently, grass cutting and grounds maintenance operations were reduced or scaled back during this period.</p> <p>As a result, we started to observe increased growth in vegetation to unmanageable lengths, as well as a decrease in environmental cleanliness and increased customer complaints as the season progressed. As the restrictions were lifted, grass cutting and grounds maintenance operations were reintroduced in most areas of the County during the Summer of 2020; however, there was a backlog of work and operations were not fully resumed in some amenity areas.</p>
1.05	<p>There is no doubt that the last 18 months has been an extremely challenging time for the Council and the entire authority has had to manage unprecedented levels of uncertainty, react to multiple and different pressures and maintain services that are critical to the residents of Flintshire. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen restrictions placed upon individuals and organisations. These restrictions have significantly impacted on the operations undertaken and how these were carried out during this time.</p> <p>In Streetscene &amp; Transportation, overall, the service has shown a good level of resilience, although it should be recognised that certain services have and will continue to experience significant disruption. The emergency situation as a result of the pandemic and Brexit is far from over and the summary that follows provides an overview of what continues to be a fluid and uncertain situation.</p> <p>However, notwithstanding this, complaints relating to the overall standard of grass cutting have been limited, with only a small number of complaints received, which relate to localised issues of quality or due to equipment failure.</p>

1.06	In March 2021, the grass cutting season recommenced with all areas of the county receiving the full service provision, albeit with convoy vehicle working in place in order to maintain social distancing and crews working as “bubble” groups. The bubble working principle divided the grass cutting crews into independent teams or “bubbles,” which enabled them to carry out critical functions without the need to interact with other colleagues. The purpose of doing this was to mitigate the risk of the whole service needing to self-isolate under the Test and Trace system and protect this critical frontline service.
1.07	The grass cutting teams are area based and consist of seven teams, with one additional team dedicated to grounds maintenance at Council owned cemeteries. The first cut of the season took place in the second week of March 2021 and the teams achieved between 11 and 12 full cuts by the end of the season, which ran late into October 2021 due to the unusually warm autumn (see <b>Appendix 2</b> for the grass cutting performance dashboard). It is also important to bear in mind that the 2021 season also recorded exceptionally wet periods of heavy rainfall in June and again in September, which impacted on vegetation growth and service delivery.
1.08	The in-house service has performed well throughout the season and the Covid-safe measures put in place have ensured that grass cutting operations have continued uninterrupted throughout the season and in line with the current policy. Contracted grass cutting services have also performed well with highway verges maintained to the required policy standards.
1.09	It is noted, however, that the level of service provided in relation to weed spraying has not met the standard expected. Weed spraying across the county is normally provided through external contractors. Unfortunately, when the season commenced, the incumbent contractors notified us, at short notice, that they were unable to fulfil the contract this year, due to their own ongoing issues with the pandemic and resourcing. In response, we procured a second contractor, who although was ready to commence the weed spraying in July, also advised at short notice that they could not deliver as service. Following this, we procured another, third contractor, who has had limited availability to deliver the weed spraying programme since August 2021, which has meant that the programme has fallen behind. In recent weeks, we have been attempting to engage with a fourth contractor; however, this is also proving challenging with limited availability.
1.10	The new weed spraying contract will be re-procured in time for the 2022 season with alternative options to the ‘lotting’ process to build in resilience and access to additional contractors in light of the issues faced this year.
1.11	Given that grass cutting performance has been delivered to the required standards, is not proposed to change the existing policy at this time and service delivery standards appear to be set at the appropriate level.

<b>2.00</b>	<b>RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS</b>
2.01	The service has had to adapt to new ways of working during the pandemic, which has impacted resource levels e.g. increased requirement for agency staff, increase in PPE/hygiene measures, convoy vehicles. All additional costs due to

	the pandemic have been funded through the COVID hardship funding provided by the Welsh Government.
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<b>3.00</b>	<b>IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT</b>
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3.01	Any changes to service provision during the pandemic were progressed through the relevant Tactical Groups and EMRT for decision making and approval, and were tracked through daily Business Contingency Plans.
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<b>4.00</b>	<b>CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT</b>
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4.01	The business contingency plans put in place during the pandemic were developed with wide consultation with officers within and across portfolios and trade unions. All decisions regarding operational service levels during the pandemic were made through EMRT and the various Tactical Working Groups that were set up.
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4.02	Any future changes to the grass cutting policy will be consulted with the area coordinators and area manager, service delivery teams, colleagues in ecology and biodiversity along with the Cabinet Members for the Streetscene and Transport portfolio and Planning, Economy and Environment portfolio. Any amendments identified will be presented to the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee as required.
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<b>5.00</b>	<b>APPENDICES</b>
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5.01	Appendix 1 - Grass Cutting Policy Appendix 2 – Dashboard showing grass cutting performance for 2021
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<b>6.00</b>	<b>LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS</b>
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6.01	None
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<b>7.00</b>	<b>CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS</b>
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7.01	<b>Contact Officer:</b> Barry Wilkinson, Highway Network Manager <b>Telephone:</b> 01352 704656 <b>E-mail:</b> <a href="mailto:barry.wilkinson@flintshire.gov.uk">barry.wilkinson@flintshire.gov.uk</a>
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<b>8.00</b>	<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>
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8.01	None
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