

**REVIEW OF GROUNDS MAINTENANCE – SERVICE STANDARDS
(Report by the Head of Operations)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Grounds maintenance is a key service for the Council and one which is highly regarded by residents and visitors to the district. Although it was reviewed in 2011 and a saving of £150k made the Economic Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Committee have asked if the service can be reviewed by the Environmental Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.2 This report considers the first stage of this process in relation to service standards for grounds maintenance. Once any variations have been made to these standards it will be possible to consider the potential for any savings that might emerge from alternative service delivery options and the risks associated with them. This will be considered as part of the wider savings review, alongside all other options, that has already commenced so that it can feed into the various MTP/Budget reports later in the year.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Council is required by law in the Open Spaces Act 1906 section 10B to *“maintain and keep the open space or burial ground in a good and decent state.”* This applies to authorities who have *“acquired any estate or interest in or control over any open space”*. Clause (a) also requires the authority to *“hold and administer the open space or burial ground in trust to allow, and with a view to, the enjoyment thereof by the public...”*
- 2.2 HDC Grounds Maintenance (GM) provides a range of services:-
- keeping the land owned by the Council in a good condition and well maintained;
 - managing the tree stock owned by the council;
 - cutting hedges,
 - fence maintenance
 - maintaining shrub and flower beds

- litter picking in parks
 - Inspection of play areas.
- 2.3 New housing developments being built in the district have planning requirements for public open space and play areas to be provided. As a consequence the grounds maintenance service has an increasing amount of land which has to be maintained at the same time that staff available to do this work has been reduced.
- 2.4 To accommodate the additional land transferred to the Council in 2011/12, the 2010 review looked at where areas of public open space could have reduced maintenance due to its location. Additionally a reduction in flower beds, changes in shrub bed maintenance regimes and a change to play area inspections (from a standalone operation to a team approach), were introduced
- 2.5 As a result of this and other changes, a saving of 5 full time equivalents was made in the grounds maintenance staff levels.
- 2.6 For a long period of time the Council has carried out grounds maintenance functions on behalf of Cambridgeshire County Council (30yrs), Luminus Housing Association (12 yrs) and Ramsey Town council (12+ yrs). In respect of the former this work is limited largely to grass cutting and weed spraying; the full service is provide for Luminus and Ramsey. The combined value of this work is approximately £180k per annum. Work is also done for other parish councils under annual contracts but these are of a small value (c £19k).
- 2.7 Ramsey TC is happy to continue with the service we provide subject to any review of standards. The County Council and Luminus agreements are currently under review and if either decides to take their work back in-house or procure independently then there would be a requirement to TUPE staff. The number of staff who would be TUPE'd would be a matter of discussion with the County and Luminus. Currently there are 18 grounds maintenance staff and 3 arborists. The financial impact of losing either of these contracts would require detailed analysis because of the way in which all work is currently integrated.
- 2.8 Should any work be lost the flexibility of the team could be severely compromised and the ability to undertake the required winter work may necessitate the use of Agency staff as, for a variety of reasons, failure to undertake the winter work could result in insurance claims.

3 Service Standards and Changes to date

3.1 Based on a *normal maintenance season* the current service standards for grass cutting are dependant on the type of location and they are as follows:-

GA	General amenity grass and other open space in housing areas and urban highway verges - 12 times per annum	Cylinder and rotary
GB	Parklands- 16 times per annum	Cylinder and rotary
GD	Lawns – 16 times per year (the majority of these sites require pedestrian movers)	Manual Cylinder and rotary
GF	Highway verges, inclined rough grass area, mounding and general meadow – 3 to 6 times per annum. (Highways verges were reduced from 6 to 3 in line with CCC budget cuts)	Rotary and flail
GG	Closed church yards – 4 times per annum	Rotary, fail + hand mowing
GH	Open Cemeteries – 16 times per annum	Cylinder and rotary

3.2 Standards relating to other areas of work such as hedge cutting, shrub bed maintenance etc have been reviewed and are done to what it is believed are the minimum necessary to meet acceptable maintenance standards.

3.3 Grass cutting accounts for nearly 35% of the grounds maintenance budget but this along with a lot of other types of work is carried out in the summer months only. By its very nature the spring/summer growing season generates a requirement for more hours to be worked. To cope with this workload and avoid overtime payments, the grounds maintenance staff work annualised hours. This means that in the spring/summer and early autumn they work longer hours and shorter hours in winter which fits with the reduction in work and daylight hours.

3.4 The winter work covers a number of different areas such as annual shrub pruning (main activity), tree/hedge cutting, equipment maintenance, maintaining fencing etc and litter picking. Any reductions

in the staffing levels for the summer consequently may mean there is an insufficient staffing resource able to undertake the winter work. As this is skilled work it would be difficult to use agency staff unless they had the relevant qualifications and experience. Failure to do the essential winter work will lead to increased costs at a later stage, potential insurance claims and a lack of visibility on paths close to roads etc.

- 3.5 As previously mentioned, the number of flower beds has been reduced, and the ones still in place continue to be maintained to a fairly high standard because of their high visibility locations. These could be possibly transferred to the Town Councils if they were agreeable. Other flower beds are gradually being changed to low maintenance beds by the introduction of perennial plants.
- 3.6 The majority of hedges that were cut twice a year are now cut once a year. The tree work in is carried out in the main by the arborists with the grounds maintenance staff doing the hedges and shrubs in the winter months. The arborists carry out work on trees all year round.
- 3.7 The other area of work which is a significant cost is the removal of litter in the parks by the grounds maintenance staff which accounts for approximately 12% of the budget (circa £110k). This seems to be high compared with the cost of the litter picking elsewhere and I believe a saving can be derived from a reduction in this element of the service.

4.0 Changes in Standards

- 4.1 Staffing is the largest cost in the grounds maintenance service and therefore it is the key to any savings. The biggest saving in grounds maintenance, as demonstrated in the last 2 APSE ground maintenance reviews is the annualisation of the workers hours. This saves having to pay overtime in the summer and the employment of Agency Staff. This is something which we have already done when the contracts came back in house a few years ago.
- 4.2 As grass cutting is the area where the majority of budget is spent it is the logical place to look for savings. However, there is not a straight forward relationship between a reduction in cuts and savings. There are a number of reasons for this
- different equipment maybe needed,
 - the time per cycle is longer due to the height of the grass
 - additional strimming is required

If the number of cuts is reduced to below 9 then a rotary mower is required because of the length of the grass. The use of the cylinder mowers mulches the grass and returns it to the cut area. A rotary

mower does not do this but instead leaves the long grass on top of the cut area. This looks unsightly and diminishes the amenity use of the grass area and to remove it would be expensive. Consequently it can be expected this reduction in service would generate a significant number of complaints.

- 4.3 Currently the section has three rotary mowers of varying size, 14 ride-on cylinder mowers and a variety of manual grass cutting machinery. If a reduction in grass cutting standards was chosen as the way forward new mowers would be required for next year. At £18k each, this would result in a requirement for an extra £252k this year to replace the mowers ahead of the growing season next year. Further to this in disposing of the old mowers the second hand value of them is quite low and would not meet the current capital write down allowance and this difference would have to be absorbed by the service.
- 4.4 A reduction in the number of grounds maintenance staff will not reduce any of the central overheads as they are normally retained until a full or part time post can be released. Consequently those central costs would be transferred to other areas of the council.
- 4.5 The GA grass cutting regime accounts for the majority of the time spent on grass cutting and but only accounts for 24% of the total GM budget. This restricts the saving potential of this regime
- 4.6 If any changes are made to the standards for grass cutting they would not result in a straight proportional reduction in costs as the reduced standard will actually takes longer to complete per cycle. For example moving from GA (12 times) to GF (6 times) only reduces the cost by one third and results in a poorer service, and other potential costs.
- 4.7 In respect of the other areas of work in the grounds maintenance as I have already indicated we have reduced them to minimum standards apart from a small number of flower beds in the main towns. The only aspect of work where I believe a reduction can be made in respect of the litter picking which at 12% of the budget is very high and further work is needed to identify the saving.

5.0 CONCLUSION

- 5.1 The relationships within the grounds maintenance budget are more complex than other services and care has to be taken not to achieve a saving in one part of the budget but cause an increase in another.
- 5.2 A reduction in grass cutting may not necessarily result in savings but rather generate additional work in having to undertake a range of additional work such as the time to litter pick longer grass prior to cutting, collection of the grass, double cutting and extra strimming. If


the grass is not litter picked prior to cutting then the litter is shredded and it is almost impossible to try and pick up all the little pieces. In addition below 9 cuts it invariably means rotary mowers are required which would involve additional capital to purchase what was needed.

- 5.3 It is evident from my analysis that some savings can be found in discrete areas like litter picking but not by reducing the number of grass cuts because it would mean having to take on additional resources in winter to do the essential work.
- 5.4 Once the service standards have been agreed options for service delivery will be considered as part of the ongoing savings exercise.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 It is recommended that:

- further work be undertaken to identify the potential for reducing the level of litter picking and the resultant saving.
- The remaining service standards, including grass cutting be retained as set out above.

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