

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Tuesday 15th October 2019
Report Subject	Grass Cutting Policy Review
Cabinet Member	Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Countryside
Report Author	Chief Officer (Streetscene and Transportation)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 is reviewed.

The Grass Cutting Policy has been regularly reviewed since 2012, with the last version being presented to Cabinet for approval in January 2018, when the revised policy demonstrated compliance with the latest Highway Code of Practice, which was released in March 2017.

The Council provides a grass cutting service in a number of locations and at key facilities around the County, and the report also provides further details relating to increased interest in the planting of wildflowers in areas where grass cutting is less frequent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommends Cabinet approves the Grass Cutting Policy.
2	That Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee approves the promotion of a programme of wildflower planting with those Town & Community Councils who wish to support the initiative.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	BACKGROUND TO THE GRASS CUTTING POLICY
1.01	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 maintain visibility and keep the highway safe for all road users.
1.02	Regular grounds maintenance of publicly accessible areas is recognised to improve the appearance of those areas, and maintains accessibility for the communities that look to enjoy these green spaces.
1.03	The Grass Cutting Policy, which includes the standard for all highway and open space grassed areas was last revised in January 2018, and a copy is attached (Appendix 1).
1.04	<p>All grassed areas in the County are categorised into one of the following definitions and the service current delivery arrangements for each is as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Highway Verges – Contracted • Urban Verges and visibility – Contracted • Amenity Areas – In-house • Cemeteries – In-house • Tenants Gardens – Contracted • Hedges – Contracted • School Playing fields – Contracted • Rights of Way – Contracted (Managed by Countryside services)
1.05	<p>The frequency of cutting for each category is defined within the current Grass Cutting Policy as follows:</p> <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 commencement date for all classifications of grass is flexible however the budget is fixed and if the service starts earlier in the year there will be insufficient budget for cuts later into the year.
1.07	Recent milder winters have had an impact on the service as grass continues to grow, even during the winter period. This results in longer grass for the first cut of the year which slows down the grass cutting operation and requires cuttings to be removed in some locations. If

	resources allow the service intends to undertake a single winter cut, if these circumstances are experienced in future.
1.08	Favourable weather conditions, usually in early summer, can also cause grass to grow more rapidly, meaning the grass is longer when by the time we reach the site. The length of the grass extends the cutting time, which in turn further extends the period between cuts – allowing the grass to grow even more before the next visit.
1.09	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 wet for the machinery to operate. Meanwhile, this was a peak grass growing period, and the additional growth interrupted schedules into July 2019.
1.10	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.
1.11	There are no proposals to change the grass cutting standards however flexibility over the starting date is proposed to ensure the service can compensate for mild or severe winter weather. In addition a winter cut for amenity areas will be undertaken in the event that there is a mild winter and winter maintenance resources can be diverted to undertake the work. The operation will also be dependent on ground conditions, as the work cannot be undertaken if the ground is too wet.
1.12	Grass-cutting may be undertaken more frequently by Town & Community Councils (T&CC) but this is at their discretion and with the Council's agreement. Any enhancements to the standard above the policy would be funded by the T&CC. Under such circumstances, T&CC's are encouraged to take on an extended role in the provision of grass cutting for either additional sites, or more frequent cuts.
1.13	<u>Wildflowers</u> 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 area 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.
1.14	Roadside verges and other areas can also be sanctuaries for wildflowers, pollinating insects, reptiles, amphibians and small mammals. These are seen as essential green corridors for which these species disperse.
1.15	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.
1.16	Streetscene & Transportation are recommending Town & Community Councils put forward areas for consideration of wildflower planting, and where regular grass cutting can be avoided, these areas are trialled as an alternative to less frequent cuts and longer grass.
1.17	Those sites to be considered, an assessment 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.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	It is the intention of the service to maintain budgets and deliver the service with cost neutral implications.

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	Consultation took place with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational departments and stakeholders • With Cabinet Member

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	The Streetscene service has undertaken risk assessments on the provision of the standard and frequency of all grass cutting services which are outlined within the policy.

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

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	Appendix 1 – Grass Cutting Policy (January 2018)
6.02	Code of Practice for Well-managed Highway Infrastructure (2016)
6.03	Contact Officer: Stephen O Jones – Chief Officer – Streetscene & Transportation Telephone: 01352 704700 E-mail: Stephen.o.jones@flintshire.gov.uk

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	None