

ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Tuesday, 14 th January 2025
Report Subject	Grass Cutting and Weed Control Performance Review
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Streetscene & Transportation
Report Author	Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The council provides a grass cutting service at a range of locations and key facilities across the county. The grass cutting policy has been regularly reviewed since 2012 with the last review undertaken in January 2023 with the revised policy approved by Cabinet in March 2023.

This report has been requested by members of the Environment and Economy Overview and Scrutiny Committee following concerns raised about weed control and grass cutting over the summer period in 2024.

It is good practice to review the performance of our grass cutting services at regular intervals and this report provides an overview of performance of our grass cutting operations for the 2024 season following the introduction of the revised policy.

The report also provides further details on the preparations for the 2025 season following the review of performance for this year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Scrutiny notes the work of the portfolio in its delivery of grass cutting services across the county.
2	Scrutiny acknowledges the preparations being made for the 2025 grass cutting season.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	BACKGROUND OF THE GRASS CUTTING POLICY
1.01	<p>The grass cutting policy was last reviewed in January 2023 and approved by Cabinet in March 2023. A copy of the revised policy is attached in Appendix 1.</p> <p>The revision of the policy followed an all-member workshop in January 2023, which was delivered jointly by the Streetscene & Transportation and Planning, Environment & Economy portfolios, which sought to bring more focus on biodiversity in our grassland management regimes. The approved change of policy also sought to reduce the use of glyphosate on land managed by the council in a controlled and targeted way, due to the carcinogenic properties of such chemicals and harmful effects on human health, wildlife, and animals.</p>
1.02	<p>The main changes to the approved policy included reduced mowing on all suitable verges (avoiding visibility splays and banks), allowing the grass / wildflowers to grow in certain areas and increasing the number of areas to be included in reduced mow or wildflower management to improve the biodiversity.</p> <p>Approval was also given for the targeted reduction of pesticides and the use of alternatives, such as mechanical removal of weeds or organic sprays or opt-out schemes. This involved stopping the use of chemical herbicides within town centres, school grounds and green spaces, for example in parks or recreational areas, along with excluding the use of chemical herbicides in contracted services, such as the schools' grounds maintenance contract, and using alternative weed control methods instead (e.g. heat-based methods, organic sprays, manual/mechanical removal methods).</p>
1.03	<p>Under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, public authorities must maintain and enhance biodiversity. Sympathetic mowing of road verges and amenity grasslands can help meet this duty. The Act states that all public authorities are required, when undertaking their functions in Wales, to seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity wherever possible within the proper exercise of their functions. In doing so, public authorities must also seek to promote the resilience of ecosystems.</p>
1.04	<p>The council also has a legal responsibility under the Highways Act 1980 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, and effectively manage any hazards that may cause a member of the public to trip or fall. We also have a legal obligation to manage certain species of weeds under the Weeds Act 1959 as well as a legal requirement under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for managing invasive species.</p>
1.05	<p>As can be seen from the different pieces of legislation, there is a balance to be struck in terms of meeting our statutory duties for enhancing biodiversity and reducing the use of harmful chemical weed killers, whilst ensuring safe access and passage to the public highway.</p>

1.06	<p>In addition, regular grounds maintenance of areas that are accessed by the public is recognised to improve the aesthetic appearance of those areas and maintains accessibility for the communities that look to enjoy these green spaces. However, safety remains the priority for grass cutting, such as rural road verges and visibility splays at junctions, for instance.</p>
1.07	<p>Following complaints received about grass cutting and weed control during the 2024 summer season, a report has been requested by the Environment and Economy Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The purpose of this report is to provide an overview to the Committee of the grass cutting performance during the 2024 season, highlighting key achievements, challenges, and operational adjustments.</p> <p>We recognise that grass cutting and weed control are critical elements of the Council's Streetscene service, ensuring safety, maintaining amenity spaces, and supporting biodiversity objectives. This report reflects on the season's performance outcomes and identifies areas for improvement to inform future planning.</p>
1.08	<p>The current delivery mechanisms for grass cutting operations are as follows: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Highway Verges – Contracted • Urban Verges and Visibility Splays – Contracted • Amenity Areas – Partially contracted / partially in-house • Cemeteries – In-house • Assisted Tenants Gardens – In-house (on behalf of Housing) • Hedges – In-house • School Playing Fields – Contracted • Rights of Way – Contracted (Managed by Countryside Services)
1.09	<p>The frequency of cutting is set as core standards 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 • Assisted Tenants Gardens – Maximum 13 cuts per year / every 2-3 weeks • Hedges – once per year • School Playing Fields – up to 16 cuts per year
1.10	<p>The programme for grass cutting operations is scheduled as described in the policy; however, there will be periods when the grass and foliage will grow more quickly between cuts. Favourable weather conditions, including warmer temperatures, humidity, and increased UV light, usually in early summer, can cause grass to grow more rapidly.</p> <p>As a result, specific dates for when the grass will be cut cannot be provided, as it depends on weather conditions and how fast the grass grows. We will carry out additional cuts at junctions for visibility when needed if safety issues are identified.</p>

1.11	<p>The 2024 grass cutting season began later than planned during the week of 11th March 2024 and concluded earlier than planned, during the week of 4th October 2024, due to adverse weather conditions. Crew availability was affected by the winter maintenance schedule at the start of the season, as many operatives from the grounds team were being regularly deployed on road gritting operations or adverse weather response at that time.</p>
1.12	<p>Persistent warm, wet weather from the early spring period through to the late summer posed significant operational challenges, and we saw a surge in grass and weed growth across the county, which affected progress on scheduled rounds and increased public complaints as a result.</p> <p>A summary of the number cuts is included in the Grass Cutting Dashboard Summary 2024 (please see Appendix 2).</p>
1.13	<p>Due to recent budget cuts, resources are being stretched more thinly compared to previous years. Like other local authorities across the country, Flintshire has had to reduce spending this year on all its services, but the number of sites being maintained for grass cutting has not reduced. We currently maintain 1,030 sites for grass cutting, along with 16 cemeteries and 850+ gardens for the Assisted Garden Scheme.</p> <p>Budget setting for 2024/25 included various options for grass cutting operations, including reducing the service standards for grass cutting generally across the county and reducing the areas cut within unused parts of the cemeteries, as well as bringing some previously contracted services in-house (e.g. weed control and assisted tenants' gardens), which amounted to an overall £85k reduction in the revenue budget.</p>
1.14	<p>As a result, there are fewer members of the grounds maintenance team compared to previous years and grass cutting gangs operated with reduced staffing from five to four-person teams. While the adjustment was initially manageable, recruitment and retention issues, and additional responsibilities diverted to flooding response has compounded delays to the schedule. Despite these difficulties, between eight and nine cuts per area were achieved across the network. The extended grass-growing season, resulting from the warming climate, has progressively made it more challenging to maintain the standard of service historically provided to residents. During periods of rapid growth, it may not be possible to keep pace, despite the team's best efforts to manage the demand. Balancing customer expectations against the weather and resources available is becoming increasingly challenging.</p>
1.15	<p>In addition, the service experienced a number of operational issues with the reliability of some of the machinery and equipment used for grass cutting and weed control, such as the flail deck for the gang mower and the hot foam stream, which took longer to restore than expected due to the specialist nature of the equipment and long lead in times for replacement parts.</p>
1.16	<p>Cemetery maintenance and parks required additional prioritisation during peak demand periods, with teams redeployed to address urgent complaints. Warmer, wetter conditions further slowed progress against the schedule, particularly on larger sites where heavy machinery was impractical. Weed removal also presented significant challenges with accelerated growth outpacing available resources.</p>

1.17	<p>In terms of weed control, we have continued to look for alternatives to using chemical pesticides throughout the season and we have trialled different products and methods, including organic herbicides hot foam treatment (i.e. known as foam-stream), heat treatment, weed ripping and some degree of manual hand weeding. However, these usually require a second treatment and can be more expensive. In previous years, external contractors have typically performed one or two sprays per year, and this too has had very limited effect.</p>
1.18	<p>Whilst we do adopt manual hand pulling weeds in some specific settings, this approach is very time consuming and financially unviable to use across the entire county. Weeds must be removed from the root to ensure they are effectively destroyed and so, each weed must be dug out carefully before pulling.</p> <p>In addition to this, we employ completely chemical-free options such as two small sweepers, which can remove silt and debris, and a mechanical ‘weed ripper’ that attaches to the sweepers.</p> <p>Our street cleansing teams are also required to “side out” or “edge out” footpath edges. Some alternative means, such as not treating perimeters of parks and open spaces, adding more wildflower meadows, and additional tree planting to further encourage habitat, wildlife, and biodiversity, are also being explored.</p> <p>We will carry out further trials in 2025, in conjunction with the foamstream, to assess the efficacy of the latest version of their chemical free treatment method.</p>
1.19	<p>Collaborative work with the biodiversity team continued to strengthen, with enhanced site management, public engagement, and training opportunities for operatives. The success of the in-house management of the Assisted Gardening Scheme (AGS) on behalf of the Housing and Communities portfolio also provided a positive example of adaptability and cross-portfolio teamwork.</p>
1.20	<p>The Assisted Gardening Scheme (AGS) was brought in-house this season, covering 850 properties. Nine operatives across three teams managed this workload effectively, overcoming challenges such as changes in property lists mid-season. Close collaboration with housing services ensured quality work, reduced complaints, and exceeded expectations. This success has led to securing AGS hedge reduction work for the winter season.</p> <p>This season showcased the adaptability and commitment of teams despite numerous challenges, laying a foundation for continued improvement in efficiency and service delivery.</p>
1.21	<p>Below is a summary of the key challenges this season: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weather Conditions: One of the wettest summers on record made many areas unsuitable for cutting, particularly larger spaces requiring heavy machinery. Teams also responded to flooding incidents in late May 2024 and poor weather in October 2024, delaying scheduled work and shortening the grass cutting season.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing: Operating with reduced team sizes due to budget constraints, coupled with recruitment and retention issues, affected productivity and schedule adherence. • Machinery Reliability: Delays in repairing the gang mower and limitations in capacity impacted open space maintenance, particularly during peak growth periods. • Public Complaints: High public expectations, exacerbated by visible delays in cemetery and play area maintenance, led to increased enquiries and complaints.
1.22	<p>Despite significant challenges, the teams demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Notable achievements included: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion of eight to nine cuts across most rounds throughout the county, maintaining safety and amenity standards. • Successful in-house management of the Assisted Gardening Scheme, improving quality and reducing costs. • Enhanced collaboration with the biodiversity team, including training for operatives and improved site management practices. • Successful award of biodiversity funding from Welsh Government to purchase a new tractor, new cut and collect machinery, a new gang mower and a quad bike for organic weed spraying.
1.23	<p>Future Improvements and Action Plan</p> <p>Based on the 2024 season review, the following steps are proposed to improve performance in readiness for the 2025 season:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Machinery Upgrades: Deployment of the newly purchased tractor and gang mower to improve reliability and efficiency for large open spaces and wildflower site management. • Enhanced Weed Management: We continue to review and trial any new alternative weed control products as they come to market and become licensed for use. The introduction of a weed spraying quad bike and non-glyphosate-based treatments for more comprehensive and timely weed control. We will continue to deliver 'weed killer free' alternative methodologies, such as wider use of weed ripper machine and other mechanical sweepers. • Improved Staff Resourcing: Reduce reliance on agency staff and review operational team sizes to address staffing gaps during peak periods. We will also be instructing our grass cutting gangs to manually pull weeds out when deployed for grass cutting to further reduce the need for weed spraying. We will refresh training with our cleansing teams, who are required to edge out footways in their respective areas. • Revised Schedules: Adapt grass cutting schedules to reflect operational lessons learned, prioritising high-demand areas such as parks and cemeteries during critical periods.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Engagement: Expand public awareness of biodiversity initiatives and maintenance schedules to manage expectations and highlight ongoing efforts to balance safety, aesthetics, and ecological goals.
1.24	<p>Highway Verges</p> <p>The highway verge grass cutting contract has just completed its first season of a two-year contract.</p> <p>The season starts on 1st April each year with the first round of visibility cuts (four in total throughout the season). The contract is delivered by a single contractor split into three areas: North, Central and South.</p> <p>The single swathe cut starts on 1st July each year and is expected to be completed within four weeks.</p> <p>Monthly contract management meetings are held throughout the season, involving discussions regarding KPIs, Health & Safety and contractor payments.</p> <p>The new contractor has performed well this season with minimal complaints regarding highway verges.</p> <p>Please note that hedges, cycleways, and daytime cyclic maintenance operations were removed from this contract to be delivered by our in-house teams this season.</p>
1.17	<p>Schools Grounds Maintenance Contract</p> <p>The schools' grounds maintenance contract is supervised and managed by Streetscene on behalf of the Education and Youth portfolio. Winter works will continue as planned, mainly focusing on football pitches and hedges, whilst the contractor will offer support and assistance during times of inclement weather. The contract runs well, and we received minimal complaints from the schools this season. The contractor has completed the last summer season of the contract and discussions will now take place to review whether we will enter into the first of the possible two-year contract extension (as per contract).</p>

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	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	This is an operational report and, as such, does not require a full integrated impact assessment.
3.02	The Streetscene & Transportation portfolio 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 has taken place with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational teams and stakeholders With the Cabinet Member for Streetscene & Transportation
4.02	The Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee supported the existing policy and the proposals for targeted reduction of chemical pesticides and introducing wildflower areas at their meeting in March 2023, which were subsequently approved by Cabinet in March 2023.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – Approved Grass Cutting Policy (March 2023)
5.02	Appendix 2 - Grass Cutting Performance Dashboard 2024

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: Barry Wilkinson, Highway Network Manager Telephone: 01352 704656 E-mail: barry.wilkinson@flintshire.gov.uk</p>
7.02	<p>Contact Officer: Christopher Goddard, Streetscene Service Manager Telephone: 01352 704550 E-mail: christopher.goddard@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>AGS (Assisted Gardening Scheme): A programme managed by the Council to provide gardening services, such as grass cutting and hedge maintenance, for eligible residents requiring assistance.</p> <p>Biodiversity: The variety of plant and animal life in a particular habitat, often supported by specific management practices like wildflower site creation or reduced mowing schedules.</p> <p>Cemeteries (Cems): Areas managed by the Council for burial and memorial services. Grass cutting and maintenance in these areas are prioritised to maintain dignity and accessibility for visitors.</p>

Dashboard: A reporting tool used to monitor performance, record progress, and track key data such as operational hours, complaints, or completed tasks.

Gang Mower: A large mower designed for cutting extensive open spaces quickly and efficiently. Typically used for parks, sports fields, and large grassed areas.

Glyphosate: A chemical herbicide historically used for weed control. Glyphosate is the active ingredient in many weed killers used in agriculture, horticulture and gardening. The Council has reduced its use in favour of organic / non-chemical alternatives to support environmental goals. There are legal rules on the use of herbicides and the manufacturers' instructions and the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 must be complied with.

Foamstream Applicator: A non-chemical weed control system that uses hot water and biodegradable foam to treat weeds effectively.

P1 (Priority 1): High-priority operational tasks or maintenance areas requiring immediate attention, such as town centres or critical visibility zones.

Rounds: Pre-defined routes or areas allocated to grass cutting teams to ensure systematic coverage of the network within the season.

Strimming: The use of handheld or small motorised equipment to trim grass and vegetation in areas inaccessible to larger machinery, such as around obstacles or kerbs.

Visibility Splays/Areas: Grass areas adjacent to roads or junctions maintained to ensure drivers have clear sightlines for safe navigation and traffic flow.

Wildflower Sites: Specific areas managed to encourage the growth of native wildflowers, supporting biodiversity and reducing maintenance frequency.