Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee

8 March 2022

Grass Cutting 2022

Executive summary

The Council is responsible for mowing of grass across a number of different land types. Broadly speaking, the grass in the urban areas is mown under the Streetscene contract while rural highway verges are cut under the Highway Term Maintenance contract.

Most of the Council's grass cutting arrangements for 2022 are based on historic maintenance levels. Amenity grass is cut monthly between March and November. The majority of grass in urban areas is cut to this frequency for aesthetic reasons. The Council has a number of large biodiversity areas and in recent years considerable effort has been made to increase this provision.

Rural highway grass verges are cut for safety reasons or to control the growth of vegetation such as bramble, ragwort or saplings. The annual cut is later in the season following the flowering period, usually after August, with safety cuts on visibility splays being undertaken when required.

The Council also maintains a number of Protected Verges, these are areas that have been identified as containing flora or fauna of particular ecological merit and receive maintenance in line with specialist advice to support these species.

The annual rural verge highway grass cutting is undertaken by the highways term contractor and is outcome based, with all identified grass cut within the specified contract period.

A number of trials have been undertaken to identify the impacts of moving to different management approaches to encourage greater biodiversity. The trials have identified the issues with the various types of provision and this will be used to inform decisions when amending grass cutting services.

Increased environmental awareness, ongoing financial pressures, and the Council's declaration of a Climate Emergency (and pledge to become carbon neutral by 2030) has meant the Council continually reviews the management of grass areas and seeks to implement sustainable and ecologically sound practices on as many areas as possible.

These grass management practices contribute to the required reduction in carbon emissions whilst remaining within current and future budget constraints. Implementation of agreed management methods also contribute towards consistency

of operations throughout the Wiltshire area. The approach for improving highway verge biodiversity is in accordance with the desired outcomes as laid out in the Green Blue Infrastructure Strategy adopted by the authority.

A new urban grass cutting contract is being tendered for commencement in December 2022 and the highways term contract, which includes rural grass cutting, expires at the end of March 2023. The future grass management in the contract will be linked to policies relating to climate change mitigation and the Green Blue Infrastructure (GBI) Strategy with the move to more biodiversity management.

The Council's grass management practices will be kept under review and will be amended as necessary and as opportunities arise, especially with regard to the new contracts.

The Council also offers the community an array of services that allow them to set their own grass cutting standards. Opportunities for local provision include Service Delegation and grass cutting licences.

Proposal

That the Committee note the grass cutting arrangements for 2022 and the background to the provision.

Reason for proposal

To detail the grass cutting arrangements for 2022 and the background to the provision as requested by the Committee.

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Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee

8 March 2022

Grass Cutting 2022

Purpose of report

1. To advise the Committee of the grass cutting arrangements on Wiltshire Council land and highway in 2022.

Background

2. The Council's current urban grass cutting arrangements are based on historic maintenance levels, with rural highway grass cut for safety reasons. Urban amenity grass is cut monthly between March and November mainly for aesthetic reasons. However, the Council does have a number of large biodiversity areas throughout the county where different regimes are followed.

3. The current urban provision is delivered via a resource-based contract which sometimes restricts the flexibility of delivery as the number of areas that can be maintained is limited by the resources available within the contract but is a cost-effective method of managing grass cutting.

4. The urban amenity grass cutting service has four main priorities:

- Local Priorities

  Allowing our communities the opportunities to set their own priorities in the provision of open space through Service Delegation, licences or local agreements.

- Carbon & Biodiversity

  Ensuring the Council's amenity land stock contributes to the Council's Carbon Neutral commitment for 2030 and the emerging Green Blue Infrastructure (GBI) Strategy.

- Health and Well Being

  Providing open spaces to improve the health and well-being of our Wiltshire communities.

- Best Value

  The grounds provision must meet the outcomes of the Council's Mid-term Financial Plan whilst maximising the benefit of resources.

5. With regards to rural highway grass verges the main drivers for mowing relate to safety and serviceability. Historically, the rural network was cut during the months of May and June, consisting of visibility splays at junctions and a single swathe to the remainder of the network. If growing conditions warranted it, areas that presented safety issues were then cut reactively.

6. In 2021 the approach to rural verge grass cutting was modified so that visibility splays are cut in May/June, with the remainder of the network being cut after September. Reactive cutting is undertaken throughout the summer, mainly where widths of carriageway became obstructed to an unacceptable level. This alteration was brought about by the recognition that highway verges provide a valuable environmental resource and by changing mowing schedules there is the potential to increase biodiversity.

7. Following the experience gained from the works undertaken in 2021 it was noted that despite broad support for improving the biodiversity of highway verges there were a number of local concerns, expressed by members of the public relating to encroachment of vegetation into the carriageway width and potential safety anxieties. To address this issue, along with the visibility splays, sections of road that present potential issues due to their limited width have been mapped and will be cut through May and June.

8. The Council also maintains a number of Protected Verges, these are areas that have been identified as containing flora or fauna of particular ecological merit and receive maintenance in line with advice to support these species.

Main considerations for the committee

9. The management of grassed areas is an important function of the Council with a significant amount of time and resource currently allocated to it.

10. There are different management methods used throughout Wiltshire. This is largely determined by the designation and use of the land. The adopted management practice for a given area will be influenced by a number of factors including:

- Time required to carry out operations,
- Resources needed, including the requirement for dedicated teams and machinery
- When to undertake operations, i.e. time of year and frequency,
- Safety of users.

11. Management of grass areas also has an impact on wildlife and the environment, and this varies depending on the method used.

12. Increased environmental awareness, ongoing financial pressures, and the Council's declaration of a Climate Emergency (and pledge to become carbon neutral by 2030) requires a continual review of the management of grass areas throughout Wiltshire and implement sustainable, ecologically sound practices.

13. These grass management practices must contribute to the required reduction in carbon emissions whilst remaining within current and future budget constraints. Implementation of agreed management methods will also contribute towards consistency of operations throughout the Wiltshire area.

14. There are a range of grass management methods used throughout Wiltshire, each with a varying degree of impact on the environment and the use of resources. In some areas combinations of grass management methods are used.

15. The proposed arrangements for the 2022 season are:

Category	Expected maintenance season	Expected freq. of cut	Type of cut	Areas M^2	Annual M^2
Amenity grass areas	Second week March - end of October	1 cut every 4 weeks	Cuttings to be as flown	3,180,936.82	25,447,494.56
Environmental	Second week of March to the end of September	2 to 3 cuts	Cuttings to be as flown	178,451.29	535,353.87
Wildflower/ conservation areas	Second week of March to the end of September.	2 cuts (Mar and Sept)	Cuttings to be collected and composted on site	279,021.32	558,042.64
Cemetery cut	Second week of March to the end of October	1 cut every 21 calendar days	Cuttings to be as flown.	53,887.91	969,982.38
Hedges	Beginning of November to end of March.	Annual	N/A	141,997.35	141,997.35
Shrubs	Beginning of November to end of March.	Annual	N/A	221,560.60	221,560.60

16. Details of the types of provision to land can be viewed at:

https://wiltscouncil.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=585648ac864846f581dfbffc8455abaa

17. Rural verge grass visibility splays will be cut in May/June, with the remainder of the network being cut after September. Reactive cutting will be undertaken throughout the summer as necessary, mainly where widths of carriageway became obstructed to an unacceptable level or there are safety issues.

Potential future management options

18. Any future grass management will be linked to policies relating to climate change mitigation and the Green Blue Infrastructure (GBI) Strategy. When deciding the future management of grassland, factors for consideration prior to adopting changes will include:

Rewilding (Shelterbelts)

19. Rewilding is a form of ecological restoration with an emphasis on humans stepping back and leaving an area to nature, as opposed to more active forms of natural resource management. Rewilding efforts can aim to create ecosystems requiring passive management.

20. Rewilding is ideal for areas with little use and are also areas that can make an excellent shelterbelt between different land use types. Due to the limited management required these areas should not be reduced in number and should be established wherever possible.

Maintenance (Environmental) Cutting

21. Cutting frequency would usually be to two or three times a year. Clippings would be left on the ground to break down naturally. This results in benefits such as a reduction in CO2 emissions, carbon sequestration, redeployment of resources and the potential reduction in operational costs when compared to amenity cutting.

22. Reducing the frequency of cuts would result in the need to mow areas of longer, thicker grass. Under the current amenity grass cutting arrangements this limits areas to the available resources without additional costs being incurred, but this should be addressed with the new Streetscene contract in December 2022. For rural highways this would incur additional carbon production and costs due to increasing the current frequency of cutting.

23. Without removing the cut grass, an increase in biodiversity and the associated benefits would be harder to achieve with this method of management. Also, by continuing to return nutrients to the soil through the breakdown of the clippings, the rate of growth would remain unchanged. Despite the disadvantages this method is still preferable to amenity cutting frequencies for environmental reasons.

Rural (Safety) Cutting

24. Rural highway visibility splays on junctions and some bends, together with some of the particularly narrow lanes, are cut in the middle of May.

25. The remaining verges are left uncut until September. Leaving these areas until much later to cut should enable wildflowers to set seed and spread more widely in the verge.

Reduction in Backing Up (cutting around obstacles)

26. The frequency of backing up around obstacles when cutting should be reduced where possible, saving time and focussing the use of resources elsewhere.

27. Backing up around mature trees could be discontinued in many locations. Allowing grass to grow around tree bases would reduce the risk of damage to the trunk and roots from grass cutting machinery, and compaction of the

ground under the canopy of the tree could be prevented, helping to maintain a healthy root system.

Wildflower Areas Cutting

28. Regular cutting of amenity grass areas, irrespective of location and the amount of use they receive, is a traditional practice largely undertaken to maintain an accepted appearance.

29. In parks and open spaces this has resulted in many hectares of 'green desert'; expanses of closely mown grass that are rarely used for the types of recreational activities where short grass is essential. They can also lack diversity with regards to visual appearance and the species that they support.

30. Rural highway verges are predominately cut and flown leaving cuttings to decompose and encourage greater grass growth.

31. In recent years, an increased awareness of environmental issues has resulted in a change to some traditional practices. One of these is to identify areas, generally within amenity grass and highway verge, and to manage them as grass wildflower meadows.

32. The establishment of grass meadows can have a number of potential benefits. For example:

- **Increase in biodiversity**. By creating conditions that support a range of plants and wildlife, in particular pollinators which have suffered widespread decline. The onsite composting also creates an excellent habitat for wildlife such as slow worms.
- **Reduction in atmospheric pollution**. By trapping potentially harmful airborne particulates.
- **Carbon sequestration**. By removing CO2 from the atmosphere and storing it in the soil.
- **Redeployment of resources to priority areas**. For example, to areas that do require more frequent cutting such as play areas.
- **Reduction of CO2 emissions**. If there is an overall reduction in machinery usage.
- **Reduction in operational costs**. If an overall reduction in the use of resources is achieved.
- **Reduction in soil nutrients**. Produces less vigorous growth resulting in a reduction of arising requiring disposal. Aids in the establishment of a variety of species rather than supporting predominantly vigorous grasses.

33. A major consideration for the establishment of meadows in relation to the Council's declaration of a climate emergency is their importance in carbon sequestration and increasing biodiversity. Grassland (which includes highway verge and public open space) has a significant role in carbon capture and storage.

34. Research suggests that cutting grass and removing the clippings (best practise for meadow management) does not have a significant negative

impact on carbon levels in grassland because most of the carbon is stored in roots and organic matter in the soil.

35. Species rich grasslands are thought to store more carbon than those that are less diverse, further highlighting the benefits of increasing biodiversity.

36. Although the frequency of cutting on urban amenity grass would be significantly reduced by creating a meadow, these areas still require a degree of management. This involves the cutting and removal of arisings (clippings) at least once per year and within a narrow timeframe which may have an impact on resources and equipment within the small window of opportunity.

37. Depending on the size of the meadow, this operation often requires the use of specialist tractor mounted or tractor trailed machinery. The cost of this equipment can range from £15,000 (for the mower) to £150,000 for larger capacity machines.

38. Currently the Council has one owned wildflower meadow mower (for highway mowing) and one provided by the streetscene contractor for urban areas. These resources are fully allocated to the trial areas currently in operation and are at capacity.

39. For additional sites this would need an investment in appropriate machinery or an increase in operational hours and their associated cost for the 2022 season. However, from December 2022 with the new Streetscene contract these costs will be mitigated for the urban mowing, and the proposed new highway contract will also review these operations.

40. Cutting and collecting large areas of meadow can be a resource intensive operation. Further analysis would be required to determine the carbon emissions of annual, or twice annual, cut and collect operations compared to regular mowing throughout the growing season. With the move to alternative fuels this will over time reduce some of the current issues.

41. There is a relatively small window of opportunity to cut and collect meadow areas. It is usually undertaken in late summer through to early autumn, with operations needing to be completed before ground conditions become unsuitable for heavy equipment. This means that demand for machinery during this time is very high and could be a barrier in certain areas to adoption.

42. Extending the cut and collect period and starting operations earlier could result in additional cuts being needed if there was a lot of regrowth. Any additional grounds maintenance operations using diesel powered machinery would result in an increase in carbon emissions.

43. The sowing of Yellow Rattle could be used to impede grass growth. If good establishment is achieved, there would be a reduction in arisings to be removed and it would also be quicker to cut. This would reduce further as the nutrients become depleted. The plant itself also provides a source of nectar. This will be explored with the new contractor in December 2022.

Hay Meadows

44. Another option for consideration could be to expand the potential to manage some areas as hay meadow (current example Heathlands, Warminster). Hay meadows have been undertaken successfully. It is often a mutually beneficial arrangement whereby the contractor harvests the hay to sell and the Council benefits by having the area cut and the arisings removed at no cost to the authority. This is in addition to the environmental benefits of hay meadows.

45. The value of the hay cut from hay meadows depends on its quality. This can be affected by the plant species present within the meadow and by the level of contamination. Caution must be taken to ensure that the hay does not include toxic plants such as Ragwort if it is to be sold as forage. If the hay meadows are in an area that can be easily accessed by the public there is a risk of contamination from litter and dog faeces. Atmospheric pollutants can also contaminate the meadows. For these reasons, location is a key factor in the ability to harvest the hay.

46. Hay also has a market value that can go up or down. If the market value or the quality is low, then the contractor may charge to harvest it.

47. Specialist equipment is required to harvest the hay. Contractors use their own equipment for this activity. Further research is required on this aspect for the new Streetscene contract and discussions will be held with suppliers.

Disposal of Arisings (Clippings)

48. Managing areas as meadow according to best practice requires the removal of arisings. This can generate a large amount of green waste that needs to be disposed of, even if disposed of on site.

49. It costs the Council to send green waste to be composted. This also involves transport from the site of cutting to the site of disposal, adding to the carbon footprint.

50. Disposing of arisings on site and letting them break down naturally is a more economical option. However, it may not be possible to dispose of all clippings on all sites, especially if there is a large quantity.

51. To determine suitability for onsite disposal a number of factors need to be considered:

- **Proximity to properties and water courses.** Decomposing grass can produce unpleasant odours and leachates. Grass piles should be a suitable distance away from houses and water courses.
- **Position.** Large piles of decomposing grass can be considered unsightly so should be located out of view of properties, roads, and footpaths etc.
- **Fly-tipping** of green waste on public open space is a common problem and the Council will take enforcement action against offenders if there is sufficient evidence. By tipping large piles of grass clippings on site the Council could be at risk of giving conflicting messages to the public.

Signage needs to be clear to ensure the Council's actions are understood.

Amenity, Recreation and Cemetery Cutting

52. This is grass cutting undertaken on a three to six weeks frequency (depending on area, weather conditions, grass growth etc.).

53. Due to the carbon implications, cost and reduction in biodiversity caused, this type of maintenance needs to be reduced where appropriate. However, it is vital to support access to recreational open space, play areas and public accessibility to cemeteries. Hence, there will always be a requirement for this maintenance where appropriate.

54. When ceasing amenity cuts this needs to be undertaken in a sensitive manner to ensure local residents understand the change. Council trials have shown this requires considerable communication and time to mitigate any misunderstandings or challenges to the change.

Other Changes to Cutting Regimes

55. In addition to establishing meadows in accordance with best practice and reducing the frequency of cuts to two or three times per year, there are many other potential variations on the management of amenity grass and highway verges with the aim of improving financial and environmental sustainability. For example, some areas could be left uncut indefinitely (in effect rewilding the sites), or alternatively cut and collected every other year or cut annually leaving the clippings on the ground. Surrounding edges could be cut, whilst leaving the centres to rewild.

56. Limiting factors such as the availability of resources and the ability to dispose of clippings means that there is a need to explore a number of grass management options.

57. Taking a strategic approach to grass management will help to ensure that future operations are financially and environmentally sustainable and that they remain so in the long term.

Public Expectations and Communications

58. Grass areas are widespread and are often in highly visible locations such as along roadsides and in residential areas. Therefore, changes in management are noticed by a significant number of residents and visitors to the area. How grass areas are managed can be an emotive subject, especially where people are opposed to any changes in procedure.

59. In the past there has been strong public reaction to changes in grass management. It is not uncommon for a reduction in cutting frequency or establishment of a grass meadow to result in an increase in complaints received by the Council. Local media has been used to voice the dissatisfaction of some residents in the past. Other residents have organised

petitions and lobbied Councillors with the aim of reinstating more regular cutting schedules.

60. A number of reasons are often given for the objection to areas of long grass. Common concerns are:

- Areas are unsightly,
- Increased fire risk of long grass in hot weather,
- Dog owners would find it difficult to pick up after their pets or would simply choose not to bother,
- Depriving public of space intended to be used for recreational activities,
- The perception that an unmaintained area will lead to further anti-social behaviour such as littering.

61. Previous changes in grass management have also resulted in positive feedback from residents who support the council's objectives of increasing biodiversity and improving conditions for wildlife.

62. Examples of positive feedback are:

- A noticeable increase in bird and insect numbers,
- Pleasure at seeing wildflowers in bloom,
- Pleased that the Council is implementing measures to protect wildlife,
- Being able to enjoy wildlife with children with increased biodiversity on the doorstep.

63. Increasingly, the Council is being contacted by residents who would like to see more areas left uncut. Some people complain that certain sites are still regularly cut and feel that the Council is not doing enough to protect the environment.

64. Being clear on the reasons why changes to management practices are needed is important in order to manage public expectations. It will be necessary to make sure this information is easily available on the Wiltshire Council website and social media pages to help to promote the Council's commitment to tackling climate change.

65. On site notices and interpretation boards will be used to promote the reasons for establishing meadows or making changes to cutting regimes. A consistent message from all areas of the Council is needed for the long-term success and acceptance of changes to grass management practices.

66. In order to maintain a good level of support, changes will be introduced on a trial basis initially, prior to being carried out on a larger scale. This helps to gauge public opinion and if necessary, communications can be developed to address particular concerns, or adjustments made to the management practices.

67. Although complaints are still received for some areas that had the cutting frequency reduced many years ago, an increased awareness of environmental issues, and meadows becoming a more familiar feature, appears to be

resulting in greater acceptance and a reduction in the number of complaints overall.

68. Allowing communities to make suggestions through the local council for increased biodiversity areas, where Wiltshire Council had not already identified it as a possibility, allows locally supported schemes to be progressed if resources allow. Or for the local community to provide the provision themselves via a licence or other arrangements.

69. Community Area Transport Groups and Community Area Boards can be vital partners in identifying areas for improved biodiversity and local support.

Environmental impact of the proposal

70. The priority of provision and arrangements for grass cutting are designed to improve the biodiversity of Wiltshire's green spaces, assist in delivering the Council's Carbon Neutral pledge for 2030 and maximise the benefits of the county's open spaces, whilst still meeting the road safety requirements.

Equality and diversity impact of the proposal

71. There are no identified equality or diversity issues associated with grass cutting.

Risk assessment

Risk	Mitigation
Public / Community not supportive of increased biodiversity large open spaces. Potential difference of opinions	Implement trial schemes. Areas signed with communication plan.
Increased Public / Community expectations - Unable to provide maintenance where unsuitable sites proposed.	Communication plan on expected outcomes.

Financial implications

72. Streetscene is currently projecting a break-even position for the 2022/23 financial year, which includes a £0.4 million saving. There is no available budget to implement additional grass cutting work or anticipated to be in future financial years. Therefore, any changes to grass management amendments will need to be delivered within the current budgets.

Legal implications

73. There are no legal implications with this report.

Options considered

74. Without a change to the management of grass cutting the Council would be unlikely to meet its carbon neutral 2030 commitment. However, a wholesale

move to rewilding, wildflower meadow and biodiversity management on would be likely to meet considerable resistance. It would be necessary to take local communities with us on the journey, in a planned and managed way as a 'big bang' approach will not work.

Conclusion

75. The majority of the Council's urban grass cutting arrangements for 2022 are based upon historic maintenance levels. Amenity (cemetery and parks) grass is cut on a three to six weeks frequency. Most of the grass in urban areas is cut to this frequency for aesthetic reasons. The Council has a number of large biodiversity areas and in recent years considerable effort has been made to increase this provision.

76. The current urban grass cutting service is provided through the resource based Streetscene contract. This limits the flexibility of delivery as the number of areas that can be maintained is restricted by the resources available within the contract. A new Streetscene contract is being tendered for commencement in December 2022 and is anticipated to provide greater flexibility.

77. Rural highway grass verges are cut for safety reasons or to control the growth of vegetation, such as bramble, ragwort or saplings by the Highway contractor. The annual cut is later in the season following the flowering period after August, with safety cuts on visibility splays being undertaken when required. The new Highway maintenance contract will start in June 2023.

78. Increased environmental awareness, ongoing financial pressures and the Council's declaration of a Climate Emergency (and pledge to become carbon neutral by 2030) has meant the Council continually reviews the management of grass areas and seeks to implement more sustainable and ecologically sound practices on as many areas as possible.

79. These grass management practices contribute to the required reduction in carbon emissions whilst remaining within current and future budget constraints. Implementation of agreed management methods also contribute towards consistency of operations throughout the Wiltshire area.

80. A number of trials have been undertaken to identify the impacts of moving to a regime encouraging greater biodiversity. The trials have identified the issues with the various types of provision and this information will be used to inform decisions when amending grass cutting services.

81. The future grass management in the contracts will be linked to policies relating to climate change mitigation and the Green Blue Infrastructure (GBI) Strategy with a move to encourage greater biodiversity as a result of grass management operations.

82. The Council also offers the community an array of services that allow them to set their own grass cutting standards. Opportunities for local provision include Service Delegation and grass cutting licences.

Background papers

The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None

Appendices

None