

Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee Follow-up: Performance monitoring mechanisms for grass cutting

1. Issue

- 1.1 At the meeting of Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee on 17 November 2022, members of the committee asked officers to look into a possible Key Performance Indicator (KPI) on grass cutting/complaints about grass cutting.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 A KPI on grass cutting is **not recommended** because performance is already monitored in other ways that provide a good indication of what is happening in this area, but that are not well-suited to a KPI that would be in the public domain. This is because the performance monitoring methods need considerable contextualising – something that would not be possible through a simple KPI.

3. Background

- 3.1 Grass cutting is a seasonal activity. Between March and October each year, amenity grass cutting schedules are published as a rolling three weekly timetable on the West Suffolk Council website – <https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/grasscutting>
- 3.2 For grounds maintenance operational purposes the district is divided into three geographical areas, and the council aims to cut approximately one third of the amenity grass in each area, each week. Amenity grass areas are commonly found within communal areas in housing estates, parks, playing fields, recreation grounds, cemeteries, playgrounds, and highway verges located in residential areas. West Suffolk Council has a service level agreement with Suffolk County Council to cut the highway verges. When on site, the team review whether the grass needs to be cut and whether there are areas which shouldn't be cut (for example, the area contains bulbs or wild fauna of significance). Prior to cutting the teams are also tasked with litter picking the areas. Each week during the grass cutting season the Grounds Maintenance teams cut the equivalent area of 333 football pitches.
- 3.3 Adherence to the grass cutting schedules is affected by various factors such as weather, machinery reliability, staffing capacity and access (for example, parked cars). If areas are not cut when planned, the teams return as soon as possible to complete the work. Amenity grass cutting works are scheduled and published one week in advance in conjunction with the local weather forecast to ensure schedules can be as accurate as possible.

4. Feedback

- 4.1 The telephone number for Customer Services and an online form to report problems or issues is available through the [grass cutting web page](#)
- 4.2 During the 2022 cutting season of March to October we received no formal complaints in relation to grass cutting, we did however, receive 47 enquiries relating to grass cutting through the grounds maintenance online form, 43 of which required action to be taken.

5. What does success look like?

- 5.1 Some grass areas are managed in different ways and may be left longer before cutting to support the local environment and encourage plants, animals, and insects as part of the council's wider work to tackle climate change. There are increasing numbers of conservation and meadow grass areas across West Suffolk. This is part of an ongoing aspiration to both promote and encourage an increase in biodiversity across the district.
- 5.2 West Suffolk Council is not solely responsible for the cutting all of the grass areas in the public domain. Other maintaining bodies include Suffolk County Council, housing associations and parish or town councils. The website publishes contact information for those organisations, so members of the public can divert queries to the right organisation. West Suffolk residents can use the 'Find my nearest' tool on the website to identify which areas West Suffolk council [maintains](#).

6. What could we measure through a KPI?

- 6.1 There are three main elements of the grass cutting service that could be monitored through a KPI, which are set out in the table below, along with an evaluation of how effective such a measure would be:

Potential KPI	Evaluation
Adherence to grass cutting schedule	This would be a challenging KPI to construct as there would need to be a unit against which to measure progress, for example, metres squared of grass, something that would be very costly to monitor. Further, the reasons given in paragraph 3.3 would need to be communicated as otherwise issues such as weather and parked cars that prevented cutting taking place would be wrongly attributed to council performance. Adherence to schedules is better monitored qualitatively by Operations staff who are able to include these factors in their judgement of progress and the need for further action.
Customer queries received	This would not be a good indicator to be assessed on a monthly basis (the usual time frame for KPIs reported to PASC) given the

	three-weekly cycle of grass cutting. Further, there is no way of assessing whether customers had first viewed the schedules online, or whether there were factors that had prevented cutting such as those in paragraph 3.3
Customer complaints received	This would not be a good indicator as the numbers are so low. During March – October 2022, no complaints were received. KPIs with very low numbers don't work well, as an increase from 1 to complaints, for example, looks like a 100 per cent increase and raises concerns unnecessarily.

7. Consideration and next steps

- 7.1 Given the evaluation of possible KPIs in section 6, a public KPI is not considered to be a suitable performance measure for grass cutting. Instead, it is recommended that monitoring continues to be carried out through the Operations team, Customer Services Team and the Portfolio Holder for Operations.