

Review of West Suffolk Council Grounds Maintenance Operations

Report number:	OAS/WS/23/018	
Report to and date(s):	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	9 November 2023
Cabinet member:	Councillor Ian Shipp Cabinet Member for Leisure Tel: 07368 134769 Email: ian.shipp@westsuffolk.gov.uk	
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Decisions Plan: This item is included in the Decisions Plan.

Wards impacted: All West Suffolk council wards.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 1. Consider and discuss the intended scope of the Grounds Maintenance Review being carried out by the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and outlined in this report.**
- 2. Offer any specific perspective or issues which may help guide the review or should be considered as part of it.**

1. Background

- 1.1 The new administration at West Suffolk Council has called for a review of grass cutting and wider Grounds Maintenance at the Council. This will be in the form of a report and recommendations from the Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Cllr Ian Shipp, to the Cabinet for review and decisions on next steps.
- 1.2 The Council owns or is responsible for a significant amount of public open space in the district amounting to over 500 hectares. The responsibility for maintaining the grass within these areas rests with the Landscapes team within the Green Space and Heritage Service in the Operations Directorate.
- 1.3 The service has been facing some significant, coinciding challenges that will need to be considered as part of the review. These include:
- Over recent years, a steady increase in the amenity grass areas we have to maintain.
 - Increased demand for other work including shrub/hedge maintenance and bedding.
 - A rise in Service Requests and an increasing backlog.
 - Ending the use of Glyphosate or other chemicals to treat weeds and growth in areas where it is not wanted.
 - Staffing challenges.
 - The unprecedented pattern of warm and wet weather this year which has continued well into the Autumn.
 - Significant increases in the cost of equipment.
- 1.4 The timescale for this review is such that any costed recommendations can be implemented as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process. As such, recommendations from the Portfolio Holder for Leisure will need to be ready for submission later this calendar year.
- 1.5 The focus of the review and its report will be the cutting of amenity grass throughout the district. However, grass cutting is just one of the seasonal grounds maintenance tasks performed by the in-house Landscape team. It will therefore be important to consider grass cutting and any potential changes in a wider context.
- 1.6 It is also intended for the review to look at the impact of the cessation of using Glyphosate, or any other chemicals, to treat weeds on land owned by the council that was instigated from April 2023. This will need to be considered in conjunction with the approach carried out by Suffolk County Council for its treatment of weeds in the highway.

- 1.7 A cross party advisory group has been established to provide support to the Portfolio Holder during the review. This group will provide input and comment on the review which the Portfolio Holder for Leisure will consider before making recommendations to Cabinet or implement, whichever they see fit. The Portfolio holder will also seek the views of Parish and Town Councils as part of this review.

2. **Intended scope of the report**

- 2.1 It is intended that the scope of the report will be as follows:

1. What do we maintain?
 - Details of amenity grass areas (area, type, location, how its grown in size)
 - Sports pitches
 - Highways
 - Parks
 - Cemeteries
 - Beds, planters, baskets
 - Shrubs and other winter maintenance
2. Who do we maintain it for?
 - Ourselves
 - SCC Highways
 - Parish and town councils
 - Others
3. How do we maintain it?
 - Staff number/structure
 - Depot locations
 - Equipment
 - Schedules
 - Annual cycle of work
 - Number of cuts to amenity grass
 - Biodiversity and areas that are left
 - Volunteer and community groups
4. At what cost?
 - Annual revenue budget
 - Capital costs
 - Income (grants, town and parish, commercial, 10 year developer maintenance funding)
5. Communications
 - What we communicate
 - How we communicate it
6. Issues
 - Peak demand and its impact
 - The cessation of using Glyphosate

- Hand Arm Vibration (HAV) and its impact on operations
- Work we can struggle to cover
- Technical and administrative support
- Customer Services Team impact
- Work to digitise maps and scheduling

7. Options and recommendations

- Suggest a range of options with pros, cons and budget impact
- Could include; more permanent resources, outsourcing all/some of the work, doing the work differently, ditching SCC Highways work (what's happened at Ipswich Borough Council?), ditching work for others, further subsidiarity - parish and town council review

8. Proposed timescales

- Working back from budget setting
- Report and recommendations from Portfolio Holder early November
- Cabinet review for budget setting

3. Consultation and engagement to be undertaken

- 3.1 A Cross Member Advisory Group and Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be consulted by the Portfolio Holder for Leisure before finalising his report to Cabinet.

4. Implications arising from the proposals

- 4.1 Implications arising from any proposals in the final report, including; financial, legal, environment or sustainability, HR or staffing, changes to existing policies and impact on external organisations will be considered as part of the Portfolio Holder's review.