

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

3rd March 2021

REVIEW OF SUMMER GROUNDS MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME

Report of the Head of Neighbourhood Services

Cabinet Member: Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader

Purpose of Report

To review the performance of the summer grounds maintenance programme undertaken during 2020/21 in order to seek continuous improvements to service delivery and ensure that we achieve the best possible outcomes for our communities from the resources available to us.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee:-

- a. Notes the achievement of all core grounds maintenance service standards this year, during what has been an exceptionally challenging year.
- b. Notes the record number of Green Flag awards achieved this year.
- c. Notes the comprehensive additional Covid control measures put in place to protect staff and the public.
- d. Notes the continued high performance of verge cutting.
- e. Notes the enhanced service standards achieved jointly with Town and Parish Councils that we have partnership agreements with.
- f. Notes future developments for the service relating to planned trials for an evaluation of alternative methods of weed control to the current application of chemical herbicide.
- g. Notes the decision of Cramlington Town Council to withdraw from its partnership with NCC.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the following key themes in the draft Corporate Plan for 2017-2021:-

- 'Enjoying' - We want you to love where you live

Key Issues

1. The core service standard for grass cutting is to achieve a frequency of between 10 & 13 cuts during the growing season each year. This was achieved in all areas of the county.
2. Covid-19 has presented a range of challenges in respect of the need to adapt working methods, vehicles and equipment, and develop new risk assessments to enable the continued delivery of critical front-line services, whilst also ensuring the health and safety of staff and the general public.
3. To ensure Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing services could be delivered while adhering to social distancing rules a range of additional measures have been required, including hiring additional vehicles and changing deployment models. In addition, absence related to Covid has meant that additional staff have had to be engaged to ensure service levels were maintained. The cost of these additional measures during 2020/21 is forecast as £185,000.
4. Weather conditions included intense and/or sustained periods of both wet and windy conditions during the growing season. This resulted in some short suspensions of grass cutting, when staff were deployed to alternative maintenance duties, and some delays to the application of the weed treatment programme.
5. The number of cars parked at residents homes during the day due to stay at home and work from home measures resulted in challenges to delivering weed treatments in residential streets as staff were unable to access kerb lines and parts of the pavement to apply contact herbicides to areas of weed growth.
6. The annual highway verge cutting programme has gone well and was delivered on time within the optimum cutting months of June to July, ensuring sight lines, particularly at junctions, were unobstructed to maintain the safety of road users.
7. The number of highway verges cut later in the season to help protect wildflowers with particularly high conservation value have been increased this year to more than 80 verges.
8. All urgent priority 1 and essential priority 2 tree works have been completed on time.
9. Neighbourhood Services continue to develop collaborative arrangements with key stakeholders such as town and parish councils and community and voluntary groups to help target activity where it has the most impact.
10. The formal environmental partnership arrangements that the Council has in place with Ashington, Seaton Valley, Blyth, Choppington, Morpeth, Hexham, Berwick, Newbiggin-by-the-Sea and Amble Local Councils continue to work

well and are delivering enhanced service standards tailored to the requirements of the local council.

11. The environmental partnership agreement with Cramlington Town Council will end early on 31st March 2021, with the local council opting to deliver revised standards of grounds maintenance and some cleansing services via alternative arrangements. The additional staff engaged to deliver the enhanced services are being redeployed across Neighbourhood Services teams where there are vacant posts. As the partnership arrangements are based on a direct cost recovery plus 7% contribution to cover corporate overheads, the financial impact of the arrangements ending is limited to the loss of the 7% overhead contribution (£24k). Measures will be put in place to offset this shortfall in income within the overall Neighbourhood Services revenue budget.

BACKGROUND

REVIEW OF SUMMER GROUNDS MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME 2020/21

Neighbourhoods Services engage seasonal staff each year for a 30 week period ranging from April/May to end of Sept/October in order to provide an adequate staffing resource to undertake regular grass cutting and grounds maintenance works over the spring/summer 'growing season'. This year a total of 52 seasonal staff have been employed to undertake grounds maintenance activities over the growing season at a cost of £676k.

Full time Grounds Maintenance staff continue to work to the seasonal hours working model which was successfully introduced last year, resulting in an efficiency saving of £110k. Grounds maintenance staff work 43.75 hrs a week for 30 weeks during the growing season and 28 hrs a week for 22 weeks of the winter maintenance season. This working pattern is more closely aligned to the requirements of the service, with the majority of grounds maintenance works being undertaken during the 'growing season' from April to October.

The overall standards of grounds maintenance have been good this summer despite the challenges presented by Covid-19 and difficult weather conditions. The foundation for this has been the successful winter work program delivered during 2019/20, the tree works, path edging works that were focussed on high footfall areas, and general shrub maintenance work. These activities significantly improve the visual appearance and public perception of how well maintained the local environment is, whilst also making it easier to undertake grass cutting activity during the growing season by having clear maintenance lines to work to and removal of obstructions such as low hanging branches.

The main grounds maintenance activities and details of performance this year are summarised below.

Grass Cutting Activity

The core level of service for amenity grass cutting is to achieve between 10 and 13 cuts during the season (usually beginning in April through to October). We have achieved this standard for amenity grass in all areas of the county this year, and in areas with enhanced grass cutting arrangements we delivered a higher frequency of cuts.

Covid-19 had an impact on grass cutting services, initially causing a short suspension of the service. After reviewing safe systems of work and hiring additional vehicles to ensure social distancing was observed, we were able to quickly re-start services. Staggered start and finish times were implemented to avoid grouping of operatives in depot yards, which has impacted our efficiency but not to the extent where core targets were missed.

Several periods of particularly challenging weather patterns were experienced during the year that affected grounds maintenance activity. Prolonged wet periods caused downtime where we could not cut grass, and the periods of warm sunny weather which followed promoted rapid growth that resulted in higher than normal arisings due to the length of the grass we were cutting. This impacts on the visual appearance of areas of amenity grass due to the cuttings being more visible on the surface rather than being mulched in.

Across the 5 largest service enhancement partnership areas in SE Northumberland we have delivered a significantly enhanced grass cutting service this year.

We did not meet all our targets in respect of our enhanced grass cutting aspirations, for example in Cramlington we achieved between 17 and 18 cuts against a commitment to undertake 20 cuts.

Because of concerns over partnership performance Cramlington Town Council have decided to withdraw from the Cramlington Partnership at the end of this year and are developing alternative approaches to deliver a revised set of environmental enhancements.

The scope and scale of all other existing partnerships have either been maintained or increased this season.

We continue to deploy the specialist, remotely operated, grass cutting equipment capable of operating on steep banksides. This equipment is deployed on banksides county wide and has recently been deployed on difficult to reach roadside verges, improving safety for our staff.

Highway Verge Cutting

We aim to cut verges on the strategic road network during June and July, prioritising sight-lines on junctions etc, before then undertaking verge cutting on non-strategic verges.

We continue to operate with reduced use of external contractors and greater use of our own staff and equipment. Progress against the programme is monitored robustly and resources deployed flexibly, which enabled us to complete all of the strategic network verge cutting and a full cut of verges on non-strategic rural roads this year within our two-month timeframe target.

The cutting of roadside verges is vital to ensure that vegetation does not restrict visibility for drivers, cyclists and pedestrians. In addition to the road safety benefits,

these works also improve the look of an area and keep the road network in better condition by preventing plants encroaching onto the road and also affecting the roadside drainage systems.

We understand the importance of biodiversity and we are fortunate to have verges with plant communities of particularly high conservation value in some parts of Northumberland.

We have worked with ecology and community groups including Natural England, North Pennines AONB and the National Park Authority to agree where those verges are, and have agreed in recent years to delay cutting 70 of these verges until later in the season. This has been increased to over 80 verges this year.

Weed Control

We aim to undertake an application of herbicide at the start of the growing season each year in order to control weed growth on the hard surfacing within urban areas. This work is undertaken in-house so that applications can be delivered at the right time by staff with local knowledge. We also undertake spraying around obstacles, such as seating, street lights, trees etc and other soft surfaces to improve the efficiency of our grass cutting service.

Weed control has been challenging this year due to the excellent, warm and wet growing conditions this summer, with many areas requiring two or more applications to achieve an acceptable standard. Build-up of silt and detritus continues to provide challenges in some areas where we have not been able to deploy mechanical sweepers fully, this is material in which weeds can germinate and grow.

Periods of windy conditions reduced the number of available spraying days this year, and the number of cars parked on residential streets due to stay at home and work from home measures resulted in challenges delivering weed treatments in these locations.

It should also be noted that due to restrictions on the type of herbicides that can now be used, we have to rely on contact herbicides which are applied to the surface of growing plants and normally take up to two weeks for the weed killer to be taken into the plant and the vegetation to brown off and die back – before staff return to scrape out and remove the dead vegetation. These contact herbicides are not as effective, as they are prone to being washed off vegetation during periods of even light rainfall and have no residual weed killing ability to kill off germinating seeds.

Covid-19 has also created issues for our sweeper service as significant numbers of people now work from home, resulting in many more cars parked against the kerb edge. We have mitigated this in some areas by leaflet dropping areas, informing residents of the date we will sweep the area. In the most part, this has been a successful approach to the problem and one we will continue to deploy in difficult areas.

Tree Works

Within the Neighbourhood Services structure there are 3 Tree and Woodland Officers who are responsible for managing our trees to ensure public safety. These staff are also responsible for investigating and responding to public complaints relating to trees (such as cutting out light, root growth causing damage to property and so forth), as

well as managing and supervising 3 specialist teams of arborists who undertake the actual works.

The table below shows the 'running total' for outstanding tree works as at November 2020.

Priority	Works response time	Outstanding cases Nov 2020	Trees attended to
Priority 1 – Urgent public safety work	Within 7 days	North - 0 West – 0 South East - 0	North 22 West 7 South East 9
Priority 2 – Non urgent, but essential safety work	Within 12 months	North – 20 West – 100 South East - 150	North 218 West 189 South East 445
Priority 3 – Non essential, but desirable work	As resources allow	North – 900 West – 548 South East – 1500	North 183 West 138 South East 399

All priority 1 works are routinely being completed within 7 days, and all priority 2 'non-urgent but essential' safety work is being completed within 12 months. However, there remains a backlog of 'non-essential but desirable' priority 3 work. This does generate complaints from residents who feel they are adversely affected by the presence/condition of a tree but, are unable to resolve this.

NCC's Tree Strategy (Growing Together) 2015-2020 requires reviewing and refreshing and this will be undertaken in 2021 as there have been other emerging priorities in 2020.

The reviewed policy will reflect the authorities aims regarding tree and woodland management. By Summer 2021 we will set out a document with clear management goals outlining how we will respond to urgent and non-urgent public requests and how we will proactively manage our tree stock in areas of high footfall. In conjunction with the Climate Change Team we will identify areas to develop our new tree planting policy. This will expand our existing tree population and its potential to capture atmospheric carbon to assist in meeting our target of Northumberland being a 'net zero' county in terms of carbon emissions by 2030.

Urban Tree Challenge Fund – Planting

The council was successful in its bid to the Forestry Commission's Urban Tree Challenge Fund - securing £265,000 for a new two-year tree planting programme.

The initiative will involve standard size trees being planted at 29 locations. The project aims to improve the county's urban tree cover, improving the landscape and making them more appealing areas for recreation and for wildlife. The extra trees will also make a contribution to carbon capture.

Phase 1 was completed in February 2020 planting 374 standard trees across the South East area. Watering and maintenance were carried throughout the summer months.

Phase 2 will take place during winter 2020/21 this will include planting an additional 259 trees. These additional sites are in Blyth, Bedlington, Choppington, Hexham and Prudhoe.

Free Tree Scheme

The Council launched a new initiative in August 2020 to help residents, schools and community groups plant more trees by offering 10,000 free tree saplings to everyone based in Northumberland. The scheme was incredibly popular, and demand was so high that the scheme was expanded to offer 15,000 trees. Our collecting dates were initially postponed due to the lockdown restrictions, but have now been undertaken following in December under Covid-19 secure arrangements.

In total 14,621 trees were ordered for distribution under the scheme.

Distribution method	Number of Trees (and % of total purchased)
Trees collected by residents	7461 (51%)
Trees delivered in packs to school & voluntary groups	2400 (16.4%)
Trees delivered directly to residents who are shielding	22 (0.2%)
Total Trees Distributed	9883 (67.6%)

Given the current lockdown measures and the need to ensure the remaining uncollected trees are planted before the end of the winter tree planting period (end of February 2021), it is not considered viable to undertake a further round of resident collection arrangements. The remaining trees will therefore be planted by NCC using a mixture of staff and volunteers at a range of locations, including some of our reclamation sites and Local Nature Reserves. We will also be liaising with some of the Town & Parish Councils who are also planning to undertake tree planting activity this year to see if they wish to purchase some of the trees. Any residents unable to collect their free tree this year will be offered a free tree in the 2021 promotion.

Floral Planting

This year, due to Covid restrictions, there has been no Northumbria in Bloom competition, but the Neighbourhood Services Teams have continued to support Town and Parish Councils with floral displays including the provision of plants from our in-house nursery, which this year produced 236,319 plants for use in Northumberland.

Parks and Green Spaces

This year our parks and green spaces have been visited and enjoyed by more people than ever before. Delivering effective grounds and site maintenance services has been critical to ensuring that people can enjoy these valuable spaces when they have faced so many other restrictions.

Parks Volunteers and 'Friends Groups' continue to add significant value by undertaking valuable maintenance and promotional activity, complimenting and enhancing the work of our staff.

We have increased the number of parks achieving the accolade of 'Green Flag' status from 9 to a record of 11 Green Flag Awards this year. This international accreditation scheme recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces.

The results were announced in October and the awarded parks were Alexandra Park, Ridley Park, Astley Park, Dr Pit Park, Carlisle Park, Hexham Park, Berwick Parks, Bolam Lake Country Park, Plessey Woods Country Park, Hirst Park and Eastwoods Park, Prudhoe. Hirst Park achieved the award after having been through a major Heritage Lottery funded rejuvenation project, and Eastwood Park achieved the award for first time ever.

Winter Grounds Maintenance Programme

The permanent NEAT staff employed within Neighbourhood Services are now delivering this year's winter works programme, this includes shrub bed maintenance, hedge cutting, edging of footpaths and basic tree work (raising crowns/removal of low hanging branches).

There are a number of constraints on when shrubs, hedges and trees can be worked upon to avoid damage/disease to the trees/shrubs themselves and/or to safeguard nesting birds and other wildlife. There is therefore a narrow window of opportunity each winter to undertake the winter grounds maintenance programme in order to improve the visual appearance of the county.

These activities improve the visual amenity of these green assets, and they are also key to setting the conditions for a successful summer grounds maintenance programme as they provide better defined maintenance lines and more efficient access for ride on mowers.

Additional mechanical sweeping will also be delivered to reduce build ups of silt and detritus, which will reduce the amount of material in which weeds can germinate and grow next spring.

It should also be noted that the grounds maintenance teams, along with street cleansing teams can be called upon during periods of prolonged ice/snow to undertake winter services duties, such as gritting priority footways, car parks and snow clearance activity. This work takes priority over their normal duties, due to the need to ensure the safety of the public during periods of more severe winter weather.

Future Developments

We are currently undertaking a trial of electric powered hand-held tools (strimmer's, hedge cutters, chainsaws etc) with a view to reducing both the carbon footprint of our existing equipment, which is predominantly petrol powered, whilst also further reducing the level of hand arm vibrations generated by the equipment to protect the health and safety of our staff.

Neighbourhood Services will design and undertake a weed control trial for 2021/22 which will evaluate alternatives to the use of the chemical herbicide, glyphosate. The results of the trial will help inform and shape future policy on weed control activity.

Glyphosate is currently approved for use by both the EU and the UK government. This approval ends in December 2022, and at this stage it is not known if the licence will be renewed.

The trial will involve at least three alternative weed killing methods, and a short report will be produced by February identifying several trial locations, trial methodology and time frames. In addition to measuring the effectiveness of each method we will be working with our climate change team to fully evaluate the impact of the tests on the environment including energy use of alternative methods.

IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	Maintaining the local environment to a high standard so it is visually appealing to both residents and visitors is a key priority for the Council.
Finance and value for money:	The overall 'NEAT' budget of £6.84m covers all street cleansing and grounds maintenance activity across the whole county, undertaken by a team of 186.19 FTE staff as part of an integrated environmental service so also includes public conveniences, markets and bereavement services. It is considered that the Green Flag accreditations for parks and on-going high performance in terms of Local Environmental Quality (LEQ) indicators demonstrate that the visual appearance of the county remains at a high standard.
Legal	none
Procurement	none
Human Resources:	None
Property:	None
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) N/A	A high quality environment helps improve residents sense of well-being. Clearance of weeds/vegetation from footpaths and clearance of overhanging shrubs/branches also provides a safer environment for people with impaired vision and/or mobility.

Risk Assessment:	All risk assessments have been reviewed this year to ensure Covid risks are being effectively managed and this has resulted in changes to deployment models for staff to ensure they stay safe when delivering these services
Crime & Disorder:	A high quality environment promotes social inclusion and engenders a sense of civic pride, both of which help reduce anti-social behaviour.
Customer Considerations:	The main area of complaints with grounds maintenance is in relation to weed control, particularly in urban areas. In 2021/22 a trial of alternative methods will be undertaken.
Carbon Reduction	The service is assessing where petrol powered equipment can be replaced by electric powered equivalents. The nature and timing of grounds maintenance activities pays due regard to biodiversity issues, for example by agreeing to certain verges being left uncut to promote greater biodiversity, avoiding hedge cutting activity during nesting periods and using native flower mixes in planting schemes that support pollinators.
Health and Wellbeing	A well maintained environment and good standards of Local Environmental Quality can only be achieved by having an effective Grounds Maintenance Programme in place. Access to well maintained green spaces supports positive physical and mental health outcomes.
Wards:	All

Background papers:

None

Report sign off.

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