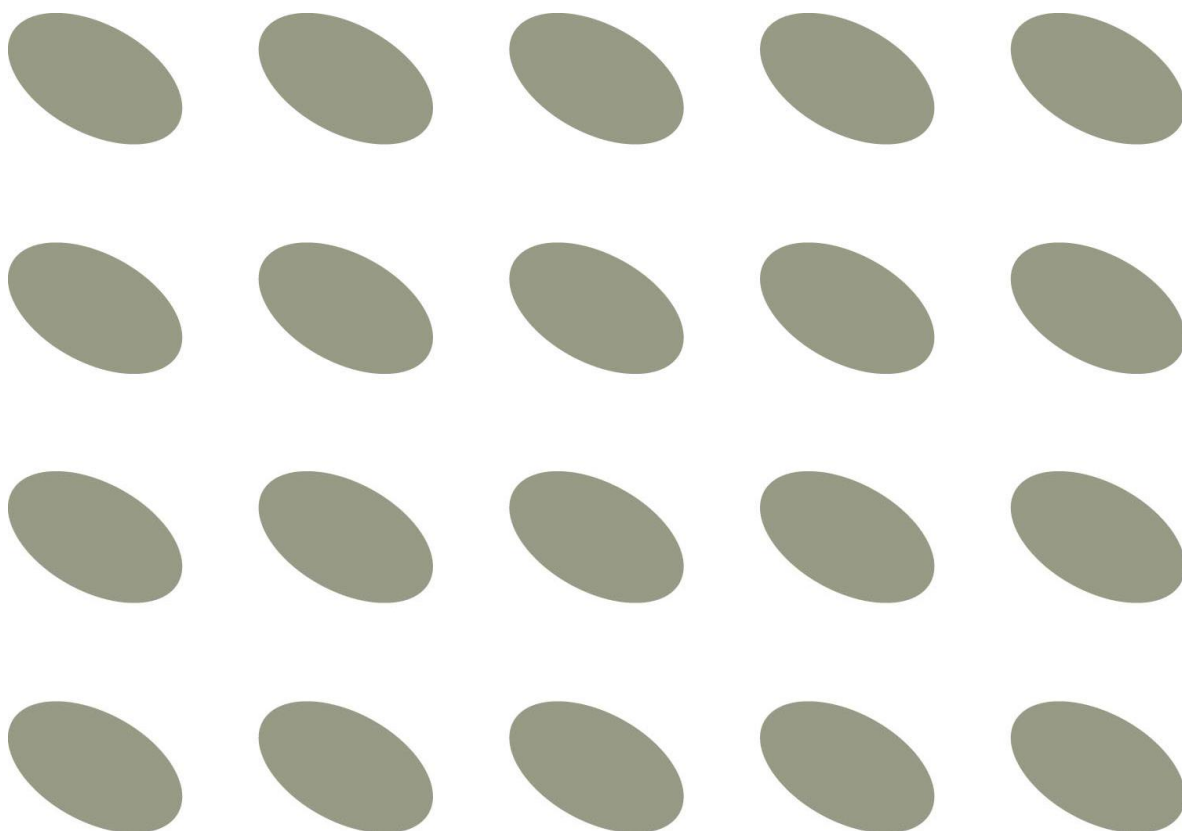




Scottish Borders Council

A Mini Best Value Review of the Parks and Open Space Service (Grass Cutting)



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GB 11409



GB 11132



GB 14074

Association for Public Service Excellence

2nd floor Washbrook House

Lancastrian Office Centre

Talbot Road, Old Trafford

Manchester M32 0FP

telephone: 0161 772 1810

fax: 0161 772 1811

email: enquiries@apse.org.uk

web: www.apse.org.uk

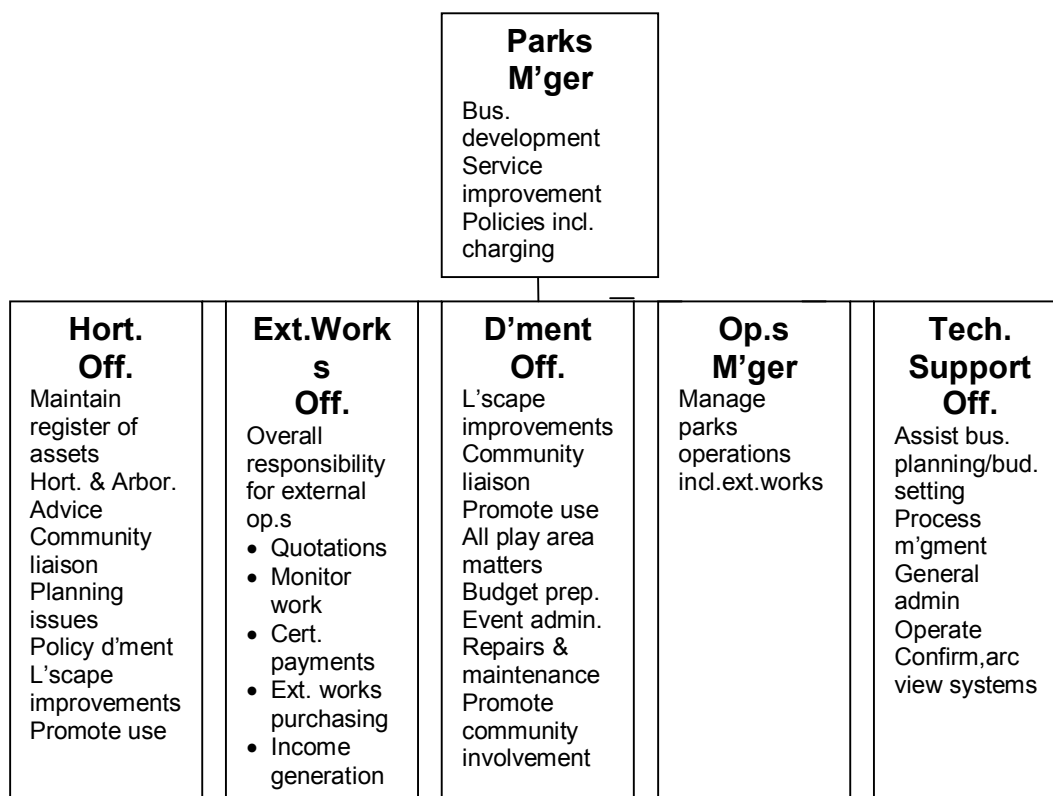
1.0 Introduction

1.1 This report contains the findings of a mini Best Value Review which was commissioned to look at grass cutting activities undertaken by the Council. As these form part of an integrated horticultural service, the opportunity was taken to review grass cutting within the context of all activities undertaken by the Parks and Open Spaces Section. (see appendix A).

2.0 Background

2.1 The functions performed by the Parks and Open Spaces section fall into two broad categories – client support,/development, and operations. Across the Council, similar and related functions are also undertaken by other sections - Bereavement Services, Education and Lifelong Learning, Property Management, Cleansing, S.B Local and by Planning.

2.2 Parks and Open Spaces has an establishment of 92 FTE staff and funding for a further 46 seasonal staff for 26 weeks of the growing season. It is managed by a team of five plus a Technical/Administrative Support Officer. These are based at the Newton St. Boswells and Galashiels offices, both of which present a customer interface.



- 2.3 The Parks Operational Manager, supported by an Assistant, is responsible for the delivery of all grounds maintenance activities .Operatives work a 41 hour week in the summer and a 33 hour week in the winter.
- 2.4 They are organised into five geographical teams. There are two nurseries - Wilton Park and Glenraig – with the latter being under review.
- 2.5 Overall, the service has a budget of £1.75m. It also attracts an annual income totalling approximately £1.4m from internal and external clients.

3.0 How good is the service?

3.1 Client support and development

3.1.1 The client support and development work of the section is limited due to a lack of capacity. This has resulted in the Parks Manager undertaking a substantial part of this work personally, distracting him from his leadership role.

3.1.2 Work in progress includes:

- The Open Space Audit and Plan which is at an advanced stage of preparation and should prove to be a major building block for the future of the section's work.
- Improvements to play areas of which the Authority would appear to be well provided.
- The implementation of two woodland management plans supported by over £100k of external funding.
- Preparation of an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund's "Parks for People" Programme for Wilton Lodge Park, Hawick
- Increasing community involvement especially in the regional *Scotland's Floral Gateway Competition* and the national *Beautiful Scotland competition*..
- Day to day administration of allotments and pitch bookings.

3.1.3 All of this work, however, is being undertaken in the absence of up-to-date policies/strategies and there is poor connection between the council-wide corporate plan and operational delivery on the ground. If this situation was reversed,the Council's ability to attract investment both from developers through the Section 68 and 75 planning processes and from central funding would be greatly enhanced. With a 15% increase in population and 24% increase in households predicted

for the area by 2024, the opportunities for the former and the ability to improve the quality of life in the Borders are significant

- 3.1.4 Landscape management is a low priority. This seems to be contrary to the Council's positive approach to sustainability. The Authority may be at risk in relation to claims for negligence especially regarding tree management.

3.2 Operations

- 3.2.1 Given the size of the Borders area, its sparsity, and the diversity that exists in terms of topography, climate etc, the task of maintaining the area to a consistently acceptable level should not be underestimated. In recent years the situation has become even more challenging with unexpected variations in climate which has lengthened or shortened the growing season from one year to the next. Year on year there have also been real difficulties with recruitment – particularly of seasonal staff.

- 3.2.2 On the whole, the service has risen to these operational challenges, but has not fully reconciled the issues in terms of outlook following local government reorganisation. The service does not seem to be resourced other than for the “day job” with documentation and management information systems having not kept pace. Consequently, the service continues to be operationally as opposed to outcome focussed and is becoming more and more reactive. For example, during the 2006-07 season a number of unacceptable operational lapses were reported by councillors which should not have occurred.

- 3.2.3 The lack of good management information systems makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of individuals, teams and the service when compared to best practice. Industry comparisons indicate that productivity is below average and costs above average - but given the lack of reliable management information, such comparisons need to be treated with extreme caution:

- 3.2.4 Given the lack of performance information available from within the service, a selection of sites in the Galashiels, Jedburgh, Selkirk and Hawick areas, including three cemeteries, were visited during September, 2007. Specific attention was paid to the quality of grass cutting – it was considered to be of an acceptable level in comparison with the standards commonly adopted by Councils across the UK.

3.2.5 This view is supported by a major external customer and by those residents who responded to the Council's 2006 General Household Survey. 71% were satisfied with the quality of grass cutting. This figure rises in Teviot and Liddesdale (91%) and Tweeddale (87%) but in Berwickshire satisfaction falls to 66%. It is recommended that a thorough investigation is undertaken to identify the cause of this differential performance.

3.2.6 On travelling through the area, other aspects of the section's operational activities also appeared satisfactory with bedding out achieving a high standard. The parks themselves, although somewhat bland and lacking in variety, are well looked after as were play areas.

3.2.7 The depots visited were found to be satisfactory – ordered storage, clean, well maintained - as was the machinery. There appeared to be no shortage of machinery, and opportunities may exist to review the existing use of machinery with a view to rationalisation.

3.2.8 The operatives who were spoken to were impressive, being positive, committed and cited examples of using their initiative (e.g. documenting their own rounds). Problems were reported in relation to the poor quality of some sites that were being handed over to them for maintenance. They also acknowledged that substantial opportunities existed to “manage out” high cost problem sites.

3.2.9 In summary:

- Under the circumstances, standards were found to be reasonable with the quality of grass cutting being on a par with other authorities.
- Management information is limited – estimating costs is difficult
- Costs appear to be above average – although it is not clear if this is because of overheads (e.g. geography) or inefficiencies
- There is a trend developing - from planned work to “fire fighting”
- Activities are largely based on historical practices which have changed little over time. Operatives are largely trusted to get on with what they have always done. This works well, but is a risk.
- There is scope for improvement, but investment in capacity and information systems will be necessary

4.0 Will the service improve?

4.1 In relation to the service generally, it has benefited from the improvements that have been made over the last two years regarding staff training (*“training has improved remarkably”* Several Staff), communication and staff involvement which should be commended. The recent recruitment of trainees is also to be applauded especially given the relatively high age profile of the current staff. However, to achieve a step change in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, more is required.

4.2 In particular, attention is required to address

- Improved and updated policies / strategies
- A move from operational routine to customer driven outcomes
- Better management and performance information
- Service direction informed by customer feedback and performance data
- More active supervision, and less reliance on custom and practice
- Risk management – with special emphasis on liability for trees
- Dependency on seasonal staff.

4.3 There are a number of capacity issues.

- There is a gap in operational middle management
- Roles, responsibilities and accountabilities need to be re-defined
- Development needs must be identified and resourced, through continuing and meaningful community dialogue

If all the above are addressed, it is considered that the service will significantly improve.

In relation to **grass cutting**, improvements will necessitate

- a detailed examination of what land is currently maintained
- better matching of service standards to the purpose of each site
- Agreeing and applying a hierarchy of standards (higher and lower)
- Addressing capacity issues
 - Machinery – types, numbers, locations
 - Skills
 - More effective enablement and empowerment of staff

However this should be undertaken as part of a comprehensive review of the service as a whole

- 4.4 The Parks and Open Space service is a core function of the Council and contributes significantly to the achievement of the Council's objectives. This contribution needs to be formally recognised and steps taken through the introduction of a performance management framework to facilitate delivery. The current business plan needs to become more outward looking with targets that are SMART.

5.0 Recommendations

5.1 Short Term

- 5.1.1 That a more effective system for recording, acting upon and responding to all complaints is put in place.
- 5.1.2 That the improved level of communications with staff be further developed.
- 5.1.3 That elected members and major stakeholders are proactively informed of issues such as inclement weather conditions which are adversely affecting maintenance operations and landscape quality
- 5.1.4 That a formal means of consulting /engaging with the public and stakeholders generally, including providing feedback, is established; that the feedback process commences with a thorough investigation into the poor levels of public satisfaction in the Berwickshire area.
- 5.1.5 That problem sites are identified and action plans prepared for 2008-09 season.
- 5.1.6 That an annual calendar of key events and operational milestones is prepared and that local event organisers are consulted to assist with work planning
- 5.1.7 That a system for monitoring the maintenance/ management of leased fine turf sites is established.
- 5.1.8 That a system of quality checks is introduced and that records of such and action taken reported to staff and members.
- 5.1.9 That a detailed examination of the current budget is undertaken to improve understanding of the current baseline position.

5.2 Short - medium term

- 5.2.1 That the strategic importance of the Parks and Open Spaces Service and how it contributes to the policy objectives of the Council be documented and communicated to senior management and elected members.
- 5.2.2 That a comprehensive review of the Parks and Open Space functions be undertaken within the context of meeting the Council's policy objectives.
- 5.2.3 That the above review addresses the issues identified in the current client and development functions, notably:
- The capacity issues relating to policy/strategic planning
 - Tree maintenance/management
 - Better use of the opportunities provided by Section 69 and 75 planning processes in relation to the provision, upgrading and maintenance/management of parks and open spaces.
- 5.2.4 That a comprehensive asset register of all land currently maintained by the Parks and Open Space Service be prepared including ownership, function and maintenance regime.
- 5.2.5 That a comprehensive review of how specifications are developed and implemented, to maximise operational efficiency - to include staffing levels, depots, the type, quantity and means of procurement of all plant, the procurement of all related supplies and services.
- 5.2.6 That the impact and overall benefit to the Council of undertaking external work is assessed prior to any new contracts being agreed

Appendix A - Parks and open space functions

A: Client support and development

- Parks management
 - Liaising /consulting with communities and groups
 - Problem solving
 - Oversee events
 - Advise others on parks issues
 - Education/awareness raising
 - Allotment management & admin.
- Play area provision
 - Developer negotiations
 - Inspect and maintain
 - Advise others
 - Quality of life programme
- Administer Trade in the private sector
- Policy & Strategy

B: Operations

- Grounds maintenance including;-
 - grass cutting
 - Shrub/hedge maintenance
 - Nursery provision, Bedding &Floral decoration
 - Tree work (pruning, felling, planting)
 - Weed control
 - Woodland maintenance
 - Sports Pitch maintenance
 - Cemetery maintenance
 - Rural path maintenance
 - Dog fouling enforcement
 - Litter picking
 - Bin emptying
 - Seats and signs maintenance
 - Landscaping incl cemetery improvement programme

Appendix B - Members' complaints

The following complaints from elected members prompted the Head of Service to prepare a discussion note to The Trading Operations Sub-Committee which then resulted in this "mini" six day review.

- **Jedburgh**-accused of using wrong machinery (rotary v cylinder) which resulted in lines of grass clippings along, for example, the linear grassed areas through the centre of the town. Matter raised at Trading Committee. Complex issue involving weather, time of year, driver ability, machinery available - will require comprehensive overview of what assets need to be maintained and to what standard, but set against other demands on budget
- **Coldstream**- complaint from Chair of Scrutiny re lack of backup work (strimming, herbicide treatment). Subsequent investigation conformed poor / unacceptable performance - acknowledged.
- **Coldstream Civic Festival** – photos showing dignitaries standing in long grass with yellow long clippings being very evident on enclosing embankment. Totally unacceptable - operatives claim they visited the site twice that week but no checks carried out and, given lack of systems, no other records available. Breakdown of culture of trust and responsibility
- **Selkirk** – photos showing path with overhanging weeds/nettles as opposed to one metre wide mown verge. Clearly had been missed all season and, possibly, longer. Councillor claims same problem arose last year. Better and more systematic documentation of rounds would reduce risk of such failures - and if they did occur, someone could be held accountable.