



GRASSCUTTING AND BIODIVERSITY – EFFECTIVENESS OF BIODIVERSITY PLANS

Report by Service Director Assets & Infrastructure

AUDIT & SCRUTINY

10 MAY 2021

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 This paper provides information, as requested, on the existing greenspace management and maintenance operations, including grasscutting regimes, carried out by the Parks & Environment Section. It also summarises the ongoing work to deliver 'biodiversity plans' by Scottish Borders Council and the opportunities and challenges presented therein.
- 1.2 Scottish Borders Council's Parks & Environment Section provides operational grounds maintenance services across the public realm, including civic spaces, parks, cemeteries and churchyards, footpaths, sports facilities, play facilities, general amenity areas, schools, industrial estates and woodlands. The Service is also responsible for management and maintenance of public toilets, street cleansing and litter bins and manages Council-let allotment sites.

2 GREENSPACE MAINTENANCE AND GRASSCUTTING REGIMES

- 2.1 The management and maintenance of our greenspace is the responsibility of the various Area teams within the Parks & Environment Section. Operational Maintenance is run from five Main Depots – Peebles, Galashiels, Hawick, Kelso & Duns - with four Satellite Depots at Coldstream, Eyemouth, Newcastleton & Jedburgh. Across these locations there are five Forepersons, seven tractor drivers & forty-six operatives. Grasscutting operations are undertaken using the following machinery;

Tractors with mowers	7
Ride-on mowers	17
Pedestrian mowers	29
Strimmers	34

- 2.2 The current operational activities undertaken in the management of the Council's greenspace were introduced as part of the Neighbourhoods Review in 2018. The aim of the review was to deliver a more economically efficient, environmentally friendly service. The following outlines the various grasscutting regimes;

- High Amenity grass areas - cut on a 10-working day cycle (with grass cut & lifted)
- Sports pitches - cut on a 10-working day cycle (grass arisings left on site)
- Amenity grass areas - cut on a 20-working day cycle (grass arisings left on site)
- Low Amenity and Biodiversity grass areas - cut once or twice per year

2.3 Other maintenance operations include:

- Annual maintenance of shrubs and perennial plants
- Trees and woodland areas are formally inspected on an Area by Area basis once every 5-years. Additional ad-hoc inspections are undertaken, as required, on a safety basis, i.e. following severe high winds
- A weed killing programme is undertaken throughout the Borders in the Spring each year, when approx. 350km of urban footpaths are treated. Additional ad-hoc weed killing is done thereafter as required
- Parks & Environment are now also undertaking the grass maintenance for 109km of countryside footpaths

2.4 The following is a breakdown of the assets maintained by the Parks & Environment section;

Service	Quantity
Amenity Grass maintenance	424ha
High Amenity Grass maintenance	3.2ha
Low Amenity Grass maintenance	28ha
Beds - Shrub, Rose, Herbaceous	12ha
Woodland	100ha
Cemeteries	154
Allotments	82 plots
Countryside Footpath grass maintenance	109km

3 BIODIVERSITY

- 3.1 The following tries to capture the breadth and range of Biodiversity planning and management that is carried out across the Council. Under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, public bodies in Scotland have a duty to further the conservation of biodiversity. The Council has a range of functions that can help deliver the Biodiversity duty.
- 3.2 The Biodiversity strategic function is retained by the Heritage & Design section of the Policy and Implementation Department, which leads the co-ordination of the Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership.
- 3.3 A broad range of biodiversity planning and management is carried out across the Council and further information can be found in the Council's Biodiversity duty report:
https://www.scotborders.gov.uk/downloads/file/2211/biodiversity_duty_delivery_report,

- 3.4 The Council co-ordinates the Community Plan partnership and the Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership. The Council is a long-standing and original member of the Tweed Forum which has a catchment management planning focus and works closely with the Southern Upland Partnership, a south-Scotland NGO with a focus on rural communities and renewables, and with Borders Forest Trust. A further series of implementation projects have been developed by the Council to deliver biodiversity offsets arising from major wind farms.
- 3.5 The Access Team manage Lindean Loch Site of Special Scientific Interest near Selkirk in a manner which enhances the biodiversity and public enjoyment of the site. A breeding bird survey is undertaken each year.
- 3.6 Coldstream Cemetery is being developed by the Council. The design objective is to create a cemetery on the edge of the town that will be attractive, provide an appropriate setting for burials, be sustainably managed and largely planted with native species. The site is being enclosed by a native hedge and there will be a grass maintenance regime that favours meadow grassland species, as well as a simple SUDs scheme planted with native species. It is hoped that the design and the location will together result in an attractive spot for contemplation and memorials.
- 3.7 As outlined in section 2, the Parks & Environment Section has been continuously reviewing its operations. Many grass areas have been identified where either no, or a single, cut is carried out resulting in hugely beneficial habitat opportunities for a wider variety of biodiversity to exist. Following ongoing discussion with stakeholders, such as Tweed Forum and Buglife, the Council are about to start trialling a new regime of 'cut and lift' of grasscutting arisings which is beneficial to the creation of impoverished soils which support the natural colonisation of pollinator friendly plants. Some illustrative photos are included in the Appendix.
- 3.8 After 2019, Scottish Borders Council ceased the provision of annual bedding across the region as part of the Neighbourhoods Review. Alternative planting proposals have been developed with communities involving more sustainable planting and removing the Council's use of peat based compost in the process.
- 3.9 Tree risk management is ongoing with Tree Safety Surveys and major works contracted out to third parties. The procurement of this work includes requirements for biodiversity supporting measures, such as retention of tree stumps as habitat creation. The identification of both protected and sensitive wildlife habitats, such as bat roosts and badger setts, is part of the survey activity.
- 3.10 A bid in 2017 to the Tesco 'Bags for Life' for funding to improve biodiversity across the Scottish Borders resulted in an award of £10,000. The funding was used to support local groups with their own biodiversity projects, including Ancrum, Chirnside and Eyemouth, as well as to improve selected Council-managed sites by the introduction and maintenance of wildflowers. Twenty sites were identified in Burnmouth, Clovenfords, Coldingham, Eyemouth, Hawick, Jedburgh, Kelso, Melrose and West Linton. 8,655 wildflower plugplants were purchased and then planted in Spring 2018 into the existing grassed areas that were then left uncut for the following

growing season. Establishment of the wildflowers had some success, however the strongly-growing grasses prevailed in several locations to the detriment of the newly-planted wildflowers.

- 3.11 In 2014, a trial of establishing a meadow area of 'Yellow Rattle' was undertaken. Yellow Rattle is a grassland annual which is used to suppress grass growth and encourage wildflower colonisation. This was developed and managed jointly by Borders College and Scottish Borders Council. The cutting and lifting of arisings is done in part by a private contractor who had the correct machinery.
- 3.12 Parks & Environment are piloting hardy annual wildflower cultivation within amenity grass areas with two nominated sites in each of the five locality areas, approx. 50sq.m each. Parks & Environment are also working with two local floral groups in Peebles and Lauder trialling wildflower cultivation.
- 3.13 Biodiversity areas - The introduction of larger areas of long grass at selective locations throughout the Borders. The resulting longer grass sward between cuts contributes to the biodiversity of the greenspace within the Scottish Borders.
- 3.14 Rural roadside grass cutting – cutting operations are undertaken only once throughout the season, they are timed to commence in June and, given the size and scale of the network, means that some verges may not be maintained until late July. The specification is to cut the grass 1m into the verge. This is extended at critical junctions and to maintain vision splays at sections of roads which are higher traffic/higher speed. Some unclassified roads verges are not always cut and are left untouched all summer where safety is maintained. The approach to maintenance is modified at areas where there are naturalised plants are in bloom, eg. at Yetholm.
- 3.15 As part of the Council's annual Floral Gateway Competition, the Border Biodiversity Award recognises community projects or initiatives that increase the biodiversity of the Scottish Borders through areas such as, local food production, recycling, or changes to environmental management or maintenance.

4 CHALLENGES

- 4.1 In undertaking grasscutting operations, the Council has, on various occasions, sought to adopt more progressive practices that incorporated a more differential mowing regime, all the while balanced against the need for active leisure and recreation space. This has been met with some resistance from communities. 234 complaints/enquiries were received in 2018 when the new grasscutting approaches outlined at 2.2 were implemented. Where communities have responded negatively to the Council's grass cutting policy changes, this has led to some triggering aspects of the Community Empowerment Act where community involvement and Participation Requests have been received, specifically at Eyemouth and to a lesser extent at Newcastleton.
- 4.2 However, people are increasingly recognising the importance and urgency of the need to adopt a different operational approach. A growing lobby of voices are now canvassing the Council to decrease its traditional intensive

mowing regimes which, in turn, will reduce the Council's Carbon Footprint and provide valuable habitats. While there seems to be an increasing level of public awareness and acceptance of the role of amenity grass in biodiversity, this remains a fairly recent shift in general opinion within the Scottish Borders. The Council has, over the years, had to consider the needs and wishes of communities alongside the best practice for biodiversity benefit. Through benchmarking and networking with other Local Authorities (through the APSE network), it is clear that this challenge is not unique to the Scottish Borders.

- 4.3 Another challenge in rethinking our grasscutting operations is the inherently nutrient-rich nature of the land. Within our green infrastructure, the Scottish Borders manages predominantly nutrient-rich ground which has, for generations, been managed to enhance the already fertile soil. This presents challenges as pollinator friendly planting favours less fertile ground to establish, where grasses and perennial weeds are less able to dominate.
- 4.4 The replacement of machinery in recent years has not been as regular as in the past, resulting in increased maintenance costs associated with repairs & servicing of the grass cutting machinery. Furthermore, to adopt best practice approaches requires specialist equipment, such as machinery that cuts and collects arisings on a large scale. The Council has 5 'Profihopper' mowers (1 per area) that can mulch arisings and collect small quantities, but for optimum biodiversity benefit the collecting of arisings is preferred. This requires procuring, or renting specialist equipment.

5 COMMENTARY

- 5.1 Integral to the challenges faced in protecting and enhancing our Biodiversity and adapting to Climate Change, our greenspaces play a vital role. As outlined above, the Parks & Environment Section has, and continues to, review greenspace maintenance operations in the region. We continue to research and trial ways that our grasscutting operations can contribute positively to Biodiversity and Sustainability. Less intensive management of amenity grass, creation of longer grass areas and a shift towards more pollinator friendly planting (rather than conventional annual bedding) are all part of a constantly evolving and adapting service.
- 5.2 Common to all Local Authorities, the Council has challenges in optimising the use of the resources it has available. The challenges outlined above highlight some of the logistical, financial and reputational issues that are faced in delivering the needs of our communities and ensuring we continue to support our habitat networks.
- 5.3 As stewards of public amenity greenspace for the communities we serve, Scottish Borders Council strive to meet the needs and aspirations of these communities. This green infrastructure provides space for informal and formal sports and recreation and contributes to the sense of place for residents and visitors to our communities. Through careful planning and the use of appropriate machinery, we can continue to meet these needs whilst ensuring biodiversity benefit. Differential mowing regimes can deliver this balance – examples such as that at Bowden Common, the Cobby at Kelso and at cemeteries (such as Stow churchyard, see appendix) demonstrate the added value of differential mowing in creating attractive

open spaces that contribute positively to Biodiversity whilst maintaining open space for recreation and enjoyment.

6 CONSULTATION

- 6.1 The Executive Director (Finance & Regulatory), the Monitoring Officer/Chief Legal Officer, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Service Director HR & Communications, the Clerk to the Council and Corporate Communications have been consulted and any comments received have been incorporated into the final report.

Approved by

Name	John Curry	Signature
Title	Assets & Infrastructure Service Director	

Author(s)

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Background Papers: [insert list of background papers used in compiling report]

Previous Minute Reference: [insert last Minute reference (if any)]

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Carol Cooke can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

Contact us at Craig Blackie – cblackie@scotborders.gov.uk

Appendix - Photos



Longer grass with pollinator friendly species colonising – Bridgend Park, Kelso



Chirnside differential mowing creates longer grass / pollinator friendly species around tree planting



Longer grass management in cemeteries enables pollinator friendly species to colonise (Stow)