

GRASS MANAGEMENT REVIEW

Report by Director - Infrastructure & Environment

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

14 November 2023

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Members on grass management undertaken within the Parks & Environment Service, outlining the current situation and proposed next steps.**
- 1.2 Grass Management Services are provided by Parks & Environment as part of a suite of amenity services. Further to changes made in 2018, and following the appointment of a new Service Manager, Officers have been reviewing performance and the wider policy context to inform a future approach to grass management, reflective of resources, community feedback and the Council Plan.
- 1.3 Based on findings, this report outlines some steps being taken including a proposed revised model of operation, designed to address deficiencies with the current model, to be piloted during 2024/25.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 I recommend that the Executive Committee:**
 - (a) notes the findings of the Grass Management performance review.**
 - (b) approves a Pilot Study, testing out a revised model of operation, to be piloted in 2024.**

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 Grass Management services are provided by Parks & Environment as part of a suite of amenity services, including:

- Weed management
- Tree and shrub management
- Street cleansing
- Play park inspection and maintenance
- Public toilet provision
- Greenspace management
- Bereavement services and cemetery management

3.2 The following is a breakdown of the grass maintained by the Parks & Environment section:

Amenity Grass maintenance	424ha
High Amenity Grass maintenance	3.2ha
Biodiversity/Low Amenity Grass maintenance	28ha

3.3 Through the 2018 Financial Plan, it was agreed to implement changes to grass cutting and greenspace management to deliver savings, which included;

- Removal of bedding plant provision
- Moving from a 10 to a 20 working day grass cutting cycle on general amenity areas
- Creation of Biodiversity areas

3.4 The grass cutting frequencies deployed since then are as follows;

Category	Frequency	Rationale
Biodiversity areas	1-3 cuts per year	Allowing these areas to establish as longer grass to support local pollinators and wildlife, contributing to our duties around supporting local biodiversity.
General amenity areas	Every 20 working days	Extend the gap between cuts to achieve efficiencies within the service while achieving a consistent standard across the board.
High amenity areas	Every 10 working days	Ensure pitches, war memorials and key civic spaces are maintained in a way that is reflective of their recreational or civic value.

3.5 In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, grass management services were significantly reduced while staff were redeployed to assist in the Council's statutory duties. Monitoring of performance and outputs since then has been undertaken, looking at route performance, enquiries/complaints received and engaging with staff.

- 3.6 This year saw exceptional growth early in the season, due to climatic conditions. Customer enquiries relating to grass management also rose sharply during this time.
- 3.7 The Council is also required to respond to statutory duties, including Biodiversity Duties (Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004), Climate Change Duties (Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and Participatory Budgeting (Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2005).

4 GRASSCUTTING PERFORMANCE: OPERATIONS AND CHALLENGES

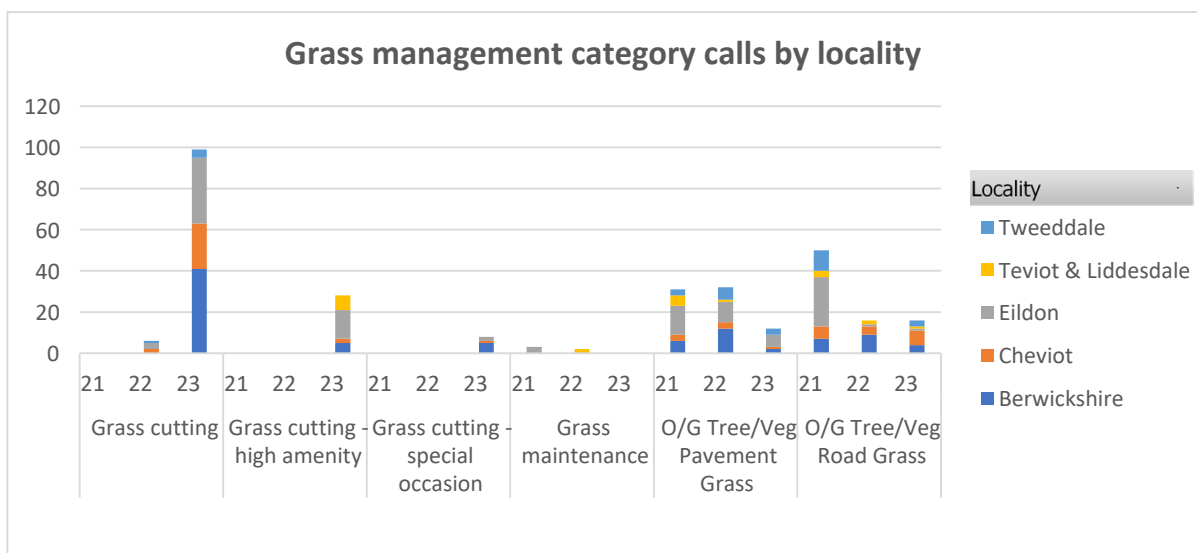
- 4.1 Grass management is delivered by operational squads deployed across all five Localities. Squads operate from depots in Galashiels, Hawick, Peebles, Duns and Kelso, with three satellite depots at Eyemouth, Coldstream and Jedburgh and an operational base at Newcastleton. Each squad undertakes grass management activities following a set operational route.
- 4.2 As outlined above, since 2018 the 20 working day frequency has been applied to all general amenity areas including play parks, schools, cemeteries, village greens, care homes and other amenity open spaces. As a 'one size fits all' approach this has generated challenges in some areas;
- Grass growth over 20 working days can be particularly long in certain locations/under certain climatic conditions.
 - This can be exacerbated where squads fall behind on their routes due to machinery breakdown or staff shortages (see below), meaning the time between cuts becomes longer than 20 working days.
 - The amount of arisings when it is cut can be very difficult to manage - they should be mulched and dispersed but, when grass has reached a certain length, they can clump and don't get mulched properly. This can result in additional work to remove arisings which are deemed significant enough to require lifting, taking more staff time. This year there were a number of enquiries regarding the visual impact of arisings left lying in cemeteries and staff made return visits to remove arisings.
- 4.3 Performance data indicates that, across the board, the majority of cut cycles are delivering on or around the 20 working day frequency:

General Amenity Squads		Working Days between Start Dates
Locality	Squad	Average/Cut
Berwickshire	Coldstream	20.00
	Duns	18.75
	Eyemouth	19.25
Cheviot	Jedburgh & Landward	20.25
	Kelso & Landward	20.75
Eildon	Galashiels & Tweedbank	23.00
	Melrose & A68	28.00
	Selkirk & A7	25.50

Teviot & Liddesdale	Hawick	25.00
	Hawick Landward	25.75
	Newcastleton	16.50
Tweeddale	Peebles	20.75
	West & East	19.50
Average (excl. Newcastleton)		22.25

However, some areas (shown in amber) are averaging a slightly longer frequency than the 20 working day target. Below summarises some of the challenges around this.

- 4.4 Fluctuating sickness absence and ageing workforce – over the 12 months to the end of March 2023 absence levels within Parks & Environment ranged from 5.74% to 9.78%. Managing staff cover to maintain business continuity presents an additional pressure. For example, in Teviot & Liddesdale (and separately in Eildon) there were multiple sickness absences within the same time period during the summer months. This resulted directly in routes being delayed at peak growth time and staff being deployed from other depots to provide cover. Cover is also needed on occasion to support statutory frontline services such as Burials and Waste.
- 4.5 Fleet - the service has experienced issues around aging fleet, compounded by delays on repairs from the workshop services. Additionally, lead-in times on new fleet and availability of hired fleet impacts on service delivery. Lack of vehicle availability can affect staff morale. Investment in new machinery this year has gone some way to address this going forward.
- 4.6 Climatic conditions – with the changes in climate, we are seeing more unpredictable growth; warmer, wetter summers, fluctuating temperatures and unexpected weather patterns affect grass growth. In 2023 we experienced a wet and mild early growing season, resulting in rapid grass growth.
- 4.7 Customer feedback - the number of enquiries relating to grass management rose sharply in 2023 with increases in Eildon, Cheviot and Berwickshire in particular. The nature of enquiries received appears to have changed over this period (this may be due to changes in recording methods):



4.8 According to records, there were 17 official complaints relating to grass cutting undertaken by SBC Parks & Environment since October 2022.

5 POLICY CONTEXT

5.1 In reviewing our Grass Management operations, a wider appraisal of the policy context is critical in considering future service design.

5.2 The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 obliges local authorities to 'promote and facilitate' public participation in their decisions and activities, including the allocation of resources through Participatory Budgeting (PB). This is a way for residents to have a direct say in how to spend part of a public budget. Officers have considered opportunities to undertake Participatory Budgeting in planning a review of Grass Management.

5.3 The Council sets out in the Climate Change Route Map, under the Nature Based Solutions theme, commitments to a Greenspace Management Review:

"Greenspace Management Review		
Route Map Action	Description	Desired outcome
NR1	Review of greenspace maintenance operations to identify opportunities for a) increasing biodiversity and support pollinators and b) reducing carbon emissions, c) reviewing weedkilling operations, recognising the value of our greenspaces to local community resilience and wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less intensive grasscutting in specific areas where appropriate. • Increased areas of pollinator-friendly longer grass/meadow grass habitat. • Increased wildflower habitat. • Trialling alternative approaches to weed control.

- 5.4 Under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, public bodies in Scotland have a duty to further the conservation of biodiversity. Government funding, such as the Naturescot Nature Restoration Fund, are targeted to supporting Local Government investment in nature restoration. The Scottish Government Scottish Biodiversity Strategy outlines the commitment to protect at least 30% of our land and sea for nature by 2030 (30x30 Target). The 2021 and 2022 Programme for Government committed to the deployment of Nature Networks. These two are key components in increasing ecological connectivity and restoration of nature more widely, helping to deliver the [Scottish Biodiversity Strategy](#).

There is close alignment and support of other area-based commitments to nature restoration including the Nature Restoration Fund. Similarly, there is a growing movement towards making space for nature in burial grounds, as explored in a recent [APSE report](#). Organisations such as Caring for God's Acre set out best practice in Burial Grounds management, <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/>.

6 PROPOSED GRASS MANAGEMENT REVIEW

- 6.1 As outlined above, within current service provision there are constraints and challenges within the Service regarding capacity and resources, as well as unpredictable climatic conditions. At the same time, customer feedback indicates that community satisfaction has dropped. There are also increasing requirements for Local Authorities to deliver networks for nature and support local pollinators.
- 6.2 It is, therefore, proposed to develop a revised model of operation designed to address deficiencies with the current model with the aim of improving outcomes for communities, for staff and for nature/biodiversity. It is proposed to undertake a Pilot where we review resource deployment to ensure our preparedness to manage local priority sites, particularly during peak growth occurrences, depending on climatic conditions.
- 6.3 The objective is to use local knowledge - empowering staff and working with communities - to build on the 'Biodiversity sites' already established and trial relaxed cutting regimes where appropriate. By reducing the frequency of cuts in these sites, it is anticipated this will enable squads to deploy additional cuts in agreed priority sites, at key times of the year, where required. This builds in flexibility to the routine cyclical works, enabled by focussing resources on these key areas. The naturalised sites would still receive 1-2 cuts per year and would need to be monitored to manage weed control.
- 6.4 Through the pilot the aim is to work with both operational staff and communities to:
- Identify sites that are suitable for a relaxed cutting regime, to offset any additional cuts required elsewhere, and conversely;
 - Identify key general amenity sites that are local priorities to deploy any additional cuts where required.

- 6.5 The key principles we propose to explore through the trial are outlined below:
- Active cemeteries are priorities.
 - Community priority sites identified within a route will be monitored and targeted where required for additional cuts in response to growth conditions.
 - Opportunities to offset this with a relaxed grasscutting regime for biodiversity, across general amenity areas and less active/inactive cemetery grounds, will be trialled.
- 6.6 This pilot will test a more flexible approach within the cycle of 20 working days to general amenity areas, providing a balanced approach to service delivery to meet local needs and priorities, while delivering biodiversity benefits.
- 6.7 By trialling this approach through a Pilot, we can build intelligence around engagement and delivery, monitor outcomes, and phase in changes where appropriate.

7 NEXT STEPS

- 7.1 In order to trial this approach, it is proposed to undertake a Pilot across three operational routes in different localities. The suggested routes are as follows:
- Berwickshire - Duns/Chirnside/Westruther route
 - Eildon - Galashiels/Tweedbank route
 - Teviot & Liddesdale - Hawick landward route.
- 7.2 Officers propose to engage with relevant operational squads, building on their local knowledge to review opportunities within their route to recalibrate cutting regimes. As well as designing deliverable outcomes, this approach seeks to build consensus and buy-in on agreed service standards and outcomes.
- 7.3 Following this, engagement with relevant community councils and other stakeholders will be undertaken, to agree priorities for service delivery.
- 7.4 Once agreed, new route designs will be prepared in advance of the 2024 growing season.
- 7.5 Communication and awareness raising is critical to encourage community buy-in. Signage will be deployed at naturalised sites and a communications plan will be prepared. Feedback will be sought during the Pilot.
- 7.6 The performance and outcomes of the Pilot will be monitored throughout 2024 and a further update brought back to members.

7.7 If agreed, it is proposed that the Pilot would be undertaken as follows:

October/November 2023	Staff engagement on three trial routes.
November 2023 – January 2024	Community engagement with relevant stakeholders.
February – March 2024	Design new routes/sites as agreed.
March – September 2024	Delivery, recording outcomes and community feedback.
November 2024	Report back to members, considering outcomes and next steps.

7.8 An additional strand of work will consider opportunities for communities to get involved in their local area, building on the great work carried out across communities, as celebrated at the Greener Gateway Community Awards. We will encourage biodiversity and work with local communities to assist where possible in community efforts to deliver planting displays with flower varieties that support pollinators.

7.9 Stakeholder involvement - as part of harmonisation of standards across the service, we are keen to explore opportunities with other Community Planning Partners, such as RSL's, to see where we can align services, or service standards, to improve outcomes for communities.

7.10 A further consideration in proposing this Pilot is the Digital Transformation agenda. As the Service strives to become more data-driven, the role of digital technology will be critical. Future digitisation could present opportunities for improved collaboration of staff and communities in inputting and accessing data on local services and opportunities and providing a more responsive service.

8 IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Financial

There are no costs attached to the proposed operational review set out in this briefing paper.

8.2 Risk and Mitigations

The proposals contained here are designed to enhance outcomes for communities by making resource available to target agreed priority sites, such as play parks and key community spaces. In making changes to service provision around grass management, there is a risk that one user group, such as rural congregations, could be disadvantaged by reducing grass cutting in one area. However, working with communities in agreeing these priorities will mitigate against this.

8.3 Integrated Impact Assessment

A Stage 1 IIA has been completed and will be published. No negative impacts have been identified as a result of the pilot being proposed in this Report.

8.4 Sustainable Development Goals

The recommendations contained in this report would support the UN Sustainable Development Goal number 15, "Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss" in that areas identified with communities will be considered for increasing and improving local biodiversity benefits.

8.5 Climate Change

The Climate Change assessment checklist has been completed, and identified positive impacts on 4) local opportunities for health and wellbeing, recreation, and 5) enhancing local plant species and natural habitats. The LBAP actions includes protection and enhancement of habitats and species from revised greenspace management, including appropriate mowing regimes. The proposal will contribute to those aims. Additionally the proposals support 6) Adaptation, in that reduce cutting of grass areas improves potential to survive drought conditions.

8.6 Rural Proofing

No rural proofing impacts have been identified

8.7 Data Protection Impact Statement

There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report.

8.8 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

There are no changes required to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation, as a result of these proposals.

9 CONSULTATION

- 9.1 The Director (Finance & Procurement), the Director (Corporate Governance), the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Director (People Performance & Change), the Clerk to the Council and Corporate Communications have been consulted and no comments received.

Approved by

Name

John Curry

Title

Director – Infrastructure & Environment

Author(s)

Name	Designation and Contact Number
Carol Cooke	Parks & Environment Manager

Background Papers:**Previous Minute Reference:**

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 Carol.Cooke@scotborders.gov.uk