

Part I

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Bonfante

All Wards

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 20 NOVEMBER 2024
REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (RESIDENT SERVICES AND CLIMATE
CHANGE)

REPORT OF THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP ON GROUNDS MAINTENANCE

1 Executive Summary

1.1 On 30 July 2024, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee determined that a task and finish group should be established to review the arrangements for grounds maintenance.

2 Recommendation

2.1 That Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report.

2.2 That Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend to cabinet to consider the eleven recommendations set out this report.

3. Explanation

Introduction:

3.1 Continental Landscapes Limited (CLL) operate the grounds maintenance contract for the Council. The grass cutting season during the summer of 2024 proved challenging (this is discussed later). CLL were invited to meet with cabinet during the summer to discuss what issues there were and what improvements could be made. This resulted in many proposed improvements for the grass cutting season for 2025 which were agreed by Cabinet members, and the Executive Member for Environment in a subsequent meetings with CLL. The proposed improvements have also been endorsed as recommendations by the task and finish group established by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee established to review the arrangements for grounds maintenance in 2024/25.

3.2 The scoring matrix and the scope and aims and objectives of the task and finish group are listed in Appendix A.

3.3 A scope of the task and finish panel was to cover:

- the performance of the grounds maintenance contract
- understanding of how the contract compares to previous contracts, and prestige areas
- understanding the impacts of changing weather patterns having an impact on grass cutting:
- an overview of the communications arrangements around grass cutting
- considering implications and benefits of using wildflower areas / no mow areas
- exploring the cost of grass collection and whether HCC will contribute to these costs

- 3.4 The objectives expected through this scrutiny were to determine if recommendations could be made:
- to improve public perception in relation to grass cutting
 - to improve biodiversity and
 - to improve the level of service using financial contributions from HCC (*to contribute towards the cost of collecting grass cuttings to avoid them blocking drains in the road*)
- 3.5 The Council has a contract for grounds maintenance with Continental Landscapes Limited (CLL) which commenced in April 2020 for a period of 9 years, with the option to extend for a further 9 years.
- 3.6 The CLL contract provides the following horticultural services:
- Grass cutting
 - Hedge cutting
 - Rose beds maintenance
 - Mixed shrub bed maintenance
 - Annual bedding maintenance
 - Weed treatment
 - Leaf fall management
 - Support for Anglia / Britain in Bloom
 - Garden maintenance (assisted gardening for council housing)
- 3.7 The task and finish group met on three occasions between August and October 2024 and received presentations and information from council officers and also CLL.
- 3.8 The following topics were explored during the meetings:
- The schedules of the services including grass cutting and hedge cutting in particular
 - Weed control
 - Information about the challenges with rapid flush of growth caused by the weather patterns impacting grass cutting productivity during March/April and May/July 2024
 - Actions taken by CLL during the 2024 grass cutting season to combat the challenges
 - Actions being taken to improve the grass cutting service for the 2025 grass cutting season
 - Wildflower and long grass areas to increase biodiversity
 - Communications with residents
- 3.9 There had been a high level of queries and complaints received during the late spring/early summer about grass in the across the borough; about long grass and poorly/unevenly cut. The task and finish group heard from CLL and council officers about the changing weather patterns, and unseasonal wet and warm conditions. led to an unusual strong flush of growth over relatively short periods of time. This impacted on productivity for grass cutting.

3.10 The wet weather in March and April meant that ground conditions were extremely difficult, and several days were suspended for grass cutting and other tasks undertaken. The first 2 cuts were however completed on schedule where mowing machines could access. Further unseasonal wet and warm conditions were experienced from early May through June into July which caused a thick, rapid growth across the borough. This resulted in the strongest growth flush seen for some time and the impact of this weather was experienced across the country with areas of the southeast continuing to see perfect growth conditions late into the summer.

Task and Finish Objectives and Recommendations:

3.11 **Objective 1: To improve the level of service (seeking financial contributions from HCC)**

3.11.1 **Recommendation 1: To recommend the new approach to the scheduling of grass cutting (waves/zones) for March 2025**

3.11.2 The grass cutting season is between March and October/November each year (dependant on the weather and when the grass stops growing). At present, the schedule of grass cutting has been for the 7 cutting teams to each be deployed to a different area of the borough throughout each of the scheduled cuts. This means that areas geographically near/adjacent to each other, or across the road, may not be cut at the same time. This can appear confusing to residents. It is recommended that a wave/zone approach is commenced from the start of the next grass cutting season in March 2025. The borough will be split into about 7 zones. With this wave approach, all resources are deployed to an area, including supervisors, to complete the cut in that area all at the same time. Each zone will each have a dedicated ride on and blower/trimmer, and all flats/communal areas and playgrounds will be covered in the same zone (they are not necessarily scheduled at the same time in the current schedule). The cutting team would not move to the next wave/zone until the quality checks have been undertaken and 'signed off' by both CLL and Council officers. This will not only ensure that the cut meets the quality required but will also be a more efficient use of staff and machinery resources and likely to reduce travel journeys/travel time for the machinery and operatives.

3.11.3 Each zone might take a differing number of days to complete depending on size for example Zone 1 (Welwyn/Woolmer Green/Villages) will be scheduled to take 1 day for full completion, but Zone 3 (Peartree etc) will take 2.5 days. Overall, each of the 11 cuts will still aim to be completed within 20 days in accordance with the contract.

3.11.4 The draft proposed zones are listed below, but work is ongoing to refine them so may be amended. They are not ward based zones but for member's information wards that the zones will mostly cover are identified in brackets in red text.

Zone	Areas Covered	Indicative wards covered
1	Digswell, Harmer Green, Woolmer Green, Oaklands, and Welwyn Village	<i>Welwyn East and West</i>
2	Haldens, Panshanger, part of	<i>Haldens and Panshanger</i>

	KGV, and part of Peartree	
3	Howlands and the Peartree area	<i>Peartree, Hollybush and Howlands</i>
4	Handside and Knightsfield area	<i>Sherrads and Handside</i>
5	North of Hatfield and picking up roads leading into Hatfield and the Garden Village	<i>Hatfield Central, Hatfield East and Hatfield Villages</i>
6	South Hatfield and Ellenbrook areas	<i>Hatfield East, Hatfield Villages, Hatfield Southwest, Welham Green & Hatfield South</i>
7	Welham Green, Brookmans Park, Cuffley, Essendon, Northaw and areas inbetween	<i>Welham Green & Hatfield South, Northaw & Cuffley, Brookmans Park and Little Heath</i>

3.11.5 CLL are also looking to complete back-to-back cuts when the initial flush of growth starts to try to better manage the flush of growth as much as possible. This will mean that 2 cuts will be undertaken in the time normally taken to complete 1.25 – 1.5 cuts. This will take place within the current budget and contracted number of cuts.

3.11.6 One of the discussions at Overview and Scrutiny when scoping the task and finish group was about how grass cuttings sometimes drift into the road and block drains, and how beneficial it would be if there was co-ordination between WHBC and Hertfordshire County Council to prevent this. It was suggested that one of the objectives of the task and finish group was to seek financial contribution from HCC towards a ‘cut and collect’ service. However, during the work of the task and finish group it was explained how prohibitive the cost would be for any council and so this was not pursued. However, this was consideration was given to this issue in recommendation 8.

3.11.7 Recommendation 2: To reduce grass cut height to 25mm and address biodiversity with further wildflower areas

The current height of the cut for grass is 45mm. The cut height was increased a few years ago to encourage greater biodiversity in the grass. However, a shorter cut height would ensure that the grass does not become as long and would be easier to manage in wet weather and when the flush of growth starts. The task and finish group heard from CLL and officers that increased biodiversity can be better met instead by creating further areas of long grass and wildflower (see recommendation 3.13.1). The recommendation is therefore to reduce the cut height to 25mm from the start of the next grass cutting season in March 2025.

3.11.8 Recommendation 3: Commence the first grass cut earlier in season (if possible)

3.11.9 The grass cutting season is between March and October/November each year (dependant on the weather and when the grass stops growing). If possible (depending on the weather and it is not too wet still), CLL propose to start the

grass cutting rather than in previous years in order to get the first cut(s) completed efficiently ahead of the flush of growth.

3.11.10 Recommendation 4: To acknowledge CLL's investment into the contract with the purchase of 8 new mowers

3.11.11 It is not unusual for mowers to breakdown especially when the ground is wet, and when the grass is very long. The current mowers used by CLL on the contract are hydraulic. When breakdowns occur, the parts can often take some time to be delivered. CLL have therefore decided to purchase 8 new mechanical mowers at significant cost, 2-3 years sooner than scheduled. Mechanical mowers are easier and quicker to maintain so this will increase efficiency and reduce lost time from machinery breakdown.

3.11.12 CLL have also purchased new pole saw cutters to enable branches/hedges to be cut more easily and efficiently at height.

3.11.13 Recommendation 5: For officers to consult with the Executive Cabinet Member for Environment to consider new KPIs for quality in the contract

3.11.14 The task and finish group were made aware that there have been regular meetings by the Executive Member for Environment with officers and CLL to discuss and plan improvements for the next grass cutting season. Part of this will include looking at the KPIs for performance of the contract to ensure that there are more KPIs around quality. The tasks and finish group were in favour of this to optimise the performance of the contract.

3.11.15 As part of the objectives of the task and finish group, information was presented to the group about cut and collection of grass. This is not a method used by the majority of councils. It has been estimated that the additional cost of a 'cut and collect' service would cost between an additional £3 million and £4 million per annum. This cost would include additional vehicles, mowers, personnel, fuel and grass cuttings disposal cost. The task and finish group concluded that this is not financially viable for the council.

3.11.16 The task and finish group requested information about the use of glyphosate for weed control. Weed control is undertaken by spraying around obstacles in grass (eg benches, litter bins etc). We use a glyphosate based spray carried out by fully trained and certified operatives. We do not use this chemical spray in town centres or play areas, which are hand weeded.

3.11.17 The task and finish group heard about an independent study commissioned by Cardiff Council that found that glyphosate treatment has the lowest overall environmental impact. Glyphosate-based control methods used the least materials, had the lowest environmental impacts and also the lowest economic costs. The task and finish group accepted that although the council are keen to be able to use alternative weed control in the future, glyphosate based products are the optimal product at this time and are used at the minimum level needed and not in more sensitive areas such as town centres and play areas.

3.12 Objective 2: To improve public perception in relation to grass cutting

3.12.1 Recommendation 6: Communications Plan

3.12.2 The task and finish group felt that good communications with residents about grass cutting was critical as it is a very visible service. It was recommended that a communications plan is developed by the end of January 2025 to communicate some key messages. These include

- Information about the new approach to the scheduling of grass cutting (wave/zones approach)
- Information about the changing weather patterns
- Impact of weather on the grass cutting schedule, especially during periods of flush growth

3.12.3 The communication plan should use a variety of media including a press release, the One Magazine publication in March 2025 and social media posts.

3.12.4 Recommendation 7: Update the website content

3.12.5 It was recommended that the council's website is also updated with revised content about the new approach of grass cutting (waves/zones), about changing weather patterns and the impact on grass cutting schedule, especially during periods of flush growth. In addition, the [address look up](#) on the website for when the next grass cut is due will be updated with the new schedule.

3.12.6 Recommendation 8: Scheduling of road sweeping

3.12.7 It was recognised that when grass cutting takes place, especially when the grass is long and the grass verge is narrow, that sometimes grass cuttings fall into the road. This can cause blockages of the drains. Given the cost of grass 'cut and collect' it was decided that HCC would not be approached to contribute towards the cost of collection. However, officers were asked as far as is reasonably practicable to try to align the road sweeping after a cut to the grass verge has taken place. The road sweeping schedule is less frequent than grass cutting, but this will be undertaken where possible.

3.12.8 Recommendation 9: Hard cut back of shrubs

3.12.9 CLL intends to undertake a hard cut back of shrubs and hedges for the 2025 grass cutting season. Usually, the cut back is taken back to the point of the previous season's growth. However, we have experienced how quickly grass and all other vegetation can grow. Therefore, the plan is to cut vegetation back further (harder) than usual in the 2025 season to try to manage the growth easier going forward, which should also look better visually. This hard cut back is recommended.

3.12.10 Recommendation 10: Optimise mechanisms for exploration of scrutiny of the environment portfolio

3.12.11 The task and finish group discussed how broad ranging the Environment portfolio was and how there used to be a dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Environment. Officers explained that the number of committees had been consolidated since that time, but that areas within the Environment portfolio are regularly examined at Overview and Scrutiny Committee. In addition, items under the Environment portfolio also are now presented and discussed at

the new Biodiversity and Climate Change Cabinet Panel. Officers and members are asked to maximise the opportunity for exploration and scrutiny of the Environment portfolio in the work programmes of both Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Biodiversity and Climate Change Cabinet Panel.

3.13 Objective 3: To improve biodiversity

3.13.1 Recommendation 11: To introduce further areas of wildflower areas (with signage)

3.13.2 Wildflower areas are grassed areas that which we leave uncut to allow for wildflower meadows to flourish and provide a valuable habitat for insects and pollinators.

3.13.3 There are 9 existing areas of long grass and wildflowers in the borough located at:

- Southway – Hatfield (includes Travellers Lane roundabout)
- Woodhall Park
- Stanborough Green – Land opposite Herts Police HQ
- The Ridgeway – A section on opposite side to Weltech Centre
- Waterend Lane – up on banking
- Old A1 near Red Lion, Ayot Green
- The Quadrangle – a section of the centre green area
- Rear of Council offices
- Areas of the Black Fan Lagoon and Black Fan Road

3.13.4 Council officers working with CLL are considering a number of other locations that could be suitable for further wildflower areas. An initial list of these locations is listed in Appendix A. However, this is only an initial list and the locations need to be assessed as suitable, so the list is likely to be amended.

3.13.5 The task and finish group also discussed how important it is that there is signage at the wildflower areas so clear to residents that these are being managed in this way. It is therefore recommended that signage is provided to wildflower areas. CLL offered to pay for such signage at no cost to the council.

4. Legal Implications

4.1 There are no new legal implications arising from this report. If any variation to the existing contract is subsequently needed (eg new KPIs) this will be undertaken in accordance with the procurement rules and processes.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 There are no new financial implications as a result of this report. none of the recommendations increase the cost to the Council.

6. Risk Management Implications

6.1 Grounds maintenance is a universal, visible service. Any impacts on the grass cutting schedule and productivity do give rise to complaints and queries from residents. It is therefore important that the contract is closely monitored which is

managed through regular contract meetings. Any impact/disruption to the grass cutting schedule needs to be clearly communicated to residents.

7. Security and Terrorism Implications

7.1 There are no security and terrorism implications arising from this report.

8. Procurement Implications

8.1 There are no new procurement implications arising from this report. The new approach to the scheduling of grass cutting and any new KPIs for quality will be implemented as a variation to the existing contract.

9. Climate Change Implications

9.1 Further provision of wildflower areas will increase the biodiversity for insects and pollinators.

10. Human Resources Implication(s)

10.1 There are no human resource implications arising from this report.

11. Health and Wellbeing Implications

11.1 The use and enjoyment of our open spaces in the borough support the health and wellbeing of residents and visitors.

12. Communication and Engagement Implications

12.1 As recommended by the task and finish group. A communication plan and revised website content is critical to make residents aware of the recommended changes for the 2025 grass cutting season and the new scheduling approach in particular which will improve the service, visual amenity of the borough and the perception by the public.

13. Link to Corporate Priorities

13.1 The subject of this report is linked to the Council's Corporate Priorities of 'Run an effective council' and 'Action on Climate Change'.

14. Equality and Diversity

14.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has not been carried out in connection with the proposals that are set out in this report as the recommendation does not require a policy or service change.

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Title(s) Executive Director (Resident Services and Climate Change)
Date 1 November 2024

Appendices:

Appendix A: The scoring matrix, the scope and aims and objectives of the Task and Finish group for grass cutting and grounds maintenance

Appendix A:

The scoring matrix, the scope and aims and objectives of the Task and Finish group for grass cutting and grounds maintenance

Scrutiny Scoring Matrix

Topic/area of interest: Grass Cutting / Grounds Maintenance Contract

Public Interest + Strategic Value + Risk + Corporate Priorities + Financial Value = Scrutiny Value Score

	Numerical score			
Public Interest	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Risk to Council or service delivery	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Alignment to Corporate Priorities	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Financial Value	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Issue of concern for partners?	low 1	medium 2	high 3	2
Will the outcome of scrutiny review result in any meaningful impact on the Council service?	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Will the outcome of scrutiny result in any benefit for a significant part of the community / partners / stakeholders or the Council?	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Total Score				20

Decision:

A number of matters were discussed regarding grass cutting, including the contract performance, the introduction of wild areas / more wild flowers and the communication of grass cutting schedules. The committee acknowledged the level of complaints/comments from residents in this area. There is a perception that performance is reducing which members would like to explore. A debate was also held on whether the council should collect grass - this would have significant cost implications but members would like to explore whether HCC would contribute to this to reduce costs around blocked drainage.

A **task and finish panel** will be set up to cover:

- the performance of the grounds maintenance contract;
- understanding of how the contract compares to previous contracts, and prestige areas;
- understanding the impacts of changing weather patterns having an impact on grass cutting;
- an overview of the communications arrangements around grass cutting;
- considering implications and benefits of using wild flower areas / no mow areas; and,

- exploring the cost of grass collection and whether HCC will contribute to these costs

The objectives expected through this scrutiny are to determine if recommendations could be made:

- to improve public perception in relation to grass cutting;
- to improve biodiversity; and
- to improve the level of service using financial contributions from HCC

Task & Finish Terms of Reference

Scrutiny Review Title	Grounds Maintenance
Scoring Matrix Result	20
T&F Panel Members	
Co-opted Members	
Portfolio Holder (s)	Councillor Sandreni Bonfante
Officers	Sue McDaid, Emma Walker, Paul Harris
Key Stakeholders	
Background Issue to review - the rational for scrutinising this issue	
<p>The Committee discussed regarding grass cutting, including the contract performance, the introduction of wild areas / more wild flowers and the communication of grass cutting schedules.</p> <p>The committee acknowledged the level of complaints/comments from residents in this area.</p> <p>There is a perception that performance is reducing which members would like to explore. A debate was also held on whether the council should collect grass - this would have significant cost implications but members would like to explore whether HCC would contribute to this to reduce costs around blocked drainage.</p> <p>Due to potential financial implications, this T&F panel is recommended to finish by November 2024 to ensure any cost implications can be considered by Cabinet in December 2024 as part of the budget setting process.</p>	
Scrutiny Aims and Objectives	
<p>The objectives expected through this scrutiny are to determine if recommendations could be made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to improve public perception in relation to grass cutting; • to improve performance of the grass cutting contract; • to improve biodiversity; and • to improve the level of service using financial contributions from HCC 	
Review of Implications/Impacts/Risks	
<p><i>Failure to adequately undertake grass cutting can have issues in relation to safety (sight lines for vehicles), wellbeing (ability for public to utilise parks and open spaces) and reputational damage.</i></p>	

Methodology for Gathering Evidence

- Presentation from and opportunity to question the contractor, including Information on contractor performance (contract monitoring data); information relating to weather patterns and changes over time (nationally published data); and, future plans
- Information on contract specifications including areas such as number of cuts and specified prestige areas (contract data)
- Considering areas suitable for wild flowering / no mow areas, and impacts on biodiversity and maintenance requirements
- Cost of grass collection (contractor quote) and contact with HCC regarding cost sharing (officers)
- Complaints data

Proposed time scales and meeting frequency (aim for 2 to 3 moths)

Start date	August 2024
Frequency of Meetings	6 Weekly
End Date	October 2024

Reporting back to OSC/Recommendations to Cabinet

Date of OSC	November 2024
Date of Cabinet	December 2024

Appendix B: Initial list for assessment as Wildflower areas

- Upperfield Open Space
- St Michael's View
- Crossways
- Glebe Road Green – Old Welwyn
- Warren Close
- Cornerfield/Longmead
- Bishops Rise/College Lane Open Space
- Brookside Crescent – Cuffley
- Swanley Bar Lane/Hawkshead Road
- Eastor – Haldens
- Rowans Open Space – Haldens
- Corner of Panshanger Drive/Moors Walk
- Bericot Way – Behind Barrier
- Hillyfields Open Space
- Cranborne Gardens
- Knella Workshops
- Hens Lane – Left hand side past golf course
- Moors Walk open space
- Nursery Hill open space
- Fern Grove
- Willow Grove