

Subject:	Parks and Open Spaces		Status:	For Publication	
Report to:	Cabinet		Date:	18 th September 2013	
Report of:	Director of Customers and Communities		Portfolio Holder:	Leader of the Council and Communities and Partnerships	
Key Decision:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Forward Plan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	General Exception	<input type="checkbox"/> Special Urgency <input type="checkbox"/>
Equality Impact Assessment:	Required:	Yes	Attached:	Yes	
Biodiversity Impact Assessment	Required:	No	Attached:	No	
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1.	RECOMMENDATION(S)				
1.1	That Cabinet recommend to Council that £100k is removed from the 2014/15 budget, to be achieved via the changes to the parks and open spaces service as set out in section 5.9.				
1.2	All future minor amendments to the Parks and Open Spaces service to be delegated to the Director of Customers and Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.				

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to update members on the outcome of consultation around the service changes to the Parks and Open Spaces service and to make recommendations for the future approach.

3. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

- 3.1 The matters discussed in this report impact directly on the following corporate priorities:
- **Regenerating Rossendale:** This priority focuses on regeneration in its broadest sense, so it means supporting communities that get on well together, attracting sustainable investment, promoting Rossendale, as well as working as an enabler to promote the physical regeneration of Rossendale.
 - **Responsive Value for Money Services:** This priority is about the Council working collaboratively, being a provider, procurer and a commissioner of services that are efficient and that meet the needs of local people.
 - **Clean Green Rossendale:** This priority focuses on clean streets and town centres and well managed open spaces, whilst recognising that the Council has to work with communities and as a partner to deliver this ambition.

4. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 All the issues raised and the recommendation(s) in this report involve risk considerations as set out below:

Undertaking appropriate engagement and consultation on potential service changes is essential to help us understand the impact of potential changes and inform decision making. Importantly, this also reinforces a culture of engagement and empowerment, and will mitigate the risk of challenge.

There is a risk that results of engagement and consultation will be seen as a democratic vote. This is not the case. These results give us an indication of public opinion and help us to understand the impact of proposals on certain groups, so that we can mitigate the impact where possible, but residents agreeing or disagreeing with proposed service changes does not mean that they must or must not be implemented as a result.

Not reviewing the way that we currently run our services would leave The Council at risk of not being able to meet the challenges of the Medium Term Financial Strategy to make the £1.5m cuts required by 2015/16.

Not reviewing our approach to grass cutting and the provision of sites to support wildflowers and insects will pose an ongoing risk to the future of our wildflowers and insects.

5. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS

- 5.1 As part of our response to the Medium Term Financial Strategy, as set out in the report to Cabinet on 12 June 2012 – ‘Medium Term Financial Strategy – Achievement of Budget Reductions’, we have been reviewing all service areas, including the Parks and Open Spaces service.
- 5.2 Some staff have indicated that they may leave in the next few months (either through voluntary redundancy or retirement) and this provided an opportunity to review how the service may be delivered if they were not replaced. We are aiming to achieve £100,000 savings from this service and it is hoped that this can be delivered as a result of natural staff turnover, without having to revert to a structural review and compulsory redundancies. This amount relates to around 4 posts.
- 5.3 Proposals to consult on the review of this service area, and a number of others, were presented to Cabinet on 12 June 2013, and this was approved.
- 5.4 Managers have been engaging with all staff in the team to understand what changes would need to be made to the maintenance schedules if those staff were not replaced. A Member Session was held on 9 July 2013 to explain the proposals to members and to seek additional ideas. Thirteen members attended this session. Following these sessions, an article was included in the Members Bulletin which was circulated to all Members in August 2013. A copy of this article is attached at Appendix 1.
- 5.5 A question on these proposals was included in the Citizens Panel questionnaire which was circulated to around 750 residents, who are a representative sample of the wider Borough. In addition, it was forwarded to around 500 community contacts. The questionnaire ran throughout August 2013 and 403 responses were received, of which 62% agreed or strongly agreed with the recommended changes consulted upon and 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed with them; 16% neither agreed nor disagreed. A copy of the questionnaire is attached at Appendix 2 and the results of the consultation are attached at Appendix 3.
- 5.6 There are already a number of groups who carry out work within our parks and open spaces which improves the quality of those sites, and who are willing to continue or increase their involvement. A wider session with community groups, such as ‘Friends of parks groups and bowling clubs took place on 5 September to discuss some more of the detail with them and consult on possible options and changes to the service. Results of the consultation exercise are attached at Appendix 4.
- 5.7 Alongside this consultation, recent research and associated reports and findings have been highlighted nationally which also need to be considered. Probably the most important, timely and relevant is “Bees and other pollinators: their health and value”, published by DEFRA on 5 July 2013, in which Lord De Mauley (Environment Minister) said that the government would consider issuing advice to councils on how to better protect habitats, telling them to plant nectar rich flowers and create wildlife patches in parks. One of the negative impacts on the health and resilience of pollinating insects has been inappropriate plantings of flowers in high

streets, car parks, municipal parks and gardens which are devoid of nectar and pollen.

5.8 In addition, the principle of local authorities moving away from traditional maintenance regimes to benefit wildlife and more generally the benefits of alternative maintenance in gardens and parks has been widely promoted for years, with research conducted and articles highlighting findings in industry magazines and general press, for example:

- “Councils are cutting costs”, Euroflor urban flower trials report by Maureen Keepin, Landscaping Magazine, June 2011.
- “Biodiversity in action”, a report by Luke Barras-Hill, Landscaping Magazine, June 2011.
- “Biodiversity in Urban gardens (BUGS)”, research projects by Sheffield university carried out in 2002 and 2004-2007.
- “Plants for Bugs”, project carried out by the Royal Horticultural Society since 2009.
- “Super grass! Why mow the lawn, when long grass looks lovely and encourages the insects - essential for a healthy garden”, by Monty Don, Daily Mail, 22 July 2011.
- “Greener, prettier and more biodiverse: grass-free gardens for the next Millennium”, Lionel Smith, University of Reading, 17 May 2013.

These reports highlight the risk of loss of our wildlife, including wildflowers and insects, due to excessive grass cutting and poor selection of planting schemes across the country. It is therefore prudent to consider the content and recommendations of these reports as part of these proposals.

5.9 As a result of the consultation sessions, and published reports, the following overall recommendations for changes are proposed:

- Continue to give the same priority to cemeteries, memorials, park frontages and gateway and town centre sites.
- More use of shrubs and perennials instead of bedding plants.
- Vary the amount of maintenance in each park, with the changes to be agreed in consultation with local parks groups.
- Consider options for self-management for council maintained land, in consultation with local groups who use them.
- Remove some areas from the grass cutting schedule to support wildflowers and insects.
- Reduce the area cut on verges to 1-2m strips; and
- Reduce the number of formal flower displays.

5.10 Further partnership work with groups who use council maintained land, members and staff will continue. Each site will be assessed and a more detailed report of changes proposed will be brought forward in due course.

5.11 An Equality Impact Assessment has been opened and is attached at Appendix 4. A full EIA will be brought forward in due course, following further consultation. Key issues arising from the initial EIA were:

- Of those who agreed with the proposals, those in the 50+ age group were most likely to agree. (66%);
- Of those who disagreed with the proposals, those in the 60+ age group were most likely to disagree (24%);
- 27% of respondents stated that these proposals would have a significant or moderate

impact on them or their family and this was higher for those aged 40-49 (37%), those aged 60+ (33%) and those with a disability (33%);

- 33% of respondents said there would be a small impact, 35% said there would be no impact, and 5% said they didn't know.

COMMENTS FROM STATUTORY OFFICERS:

6. SECTION 151 OFFICER

6.1 A saving of £20.8k has already been realised following the voluntary redundancy of one of the Chargehand Gardener posts. This contributes to the £100,000 saving and the budget for 2014/15 will be reduced by £100,000.

7. MONITORING OFFICER

7.1 No additional comments.

8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

- 8.1
- Cabinet – 12 June 2013.
 - Member Session – 9 July 2013.
 - A question was included in the Citizens Panel Questionnaire which was circulated in August 2013.
 - Consultation with community groups and bowling clubs on 5 September 2013.
 - Ongoing engagement with staff.
 - Ongoing conversations and discussions at Rossendale Football Forum.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 Given the scale of the savings challenge which faces Rossendale Borough Council, as set out in the report to Cabinet on 12 June 2013 – 'Medium Term Financial Strategy – Achievement of Budget Reductions', it has been necessary to review a number of service areas, including the Parks and Open Spaces service.

In order to achieve £100,000 of savings, it is necessary to change the way that the service is delivered and members are therefore requested to approve the recommendations set out in section 5.9 of this report.

Background Papers

Document	Place of Inspection
Medium Term Financial Strategy – Achieval of Budget Reductions	wwwhttp://www.rossendale.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/769/cabinet.rossendale.gov.uk
Citizens Panel Questionnaire	http://www.letusknow.org.uk/residentsurvey2013/