

Subject:	Update on changes to grounds maintenance.	Status:	For Publication
Report to:	Corporate Scrutiny Cabinet	Date:	10 th February 2014 12 th February 2014
Report of:	Director of Customers and Communities	Portfolio Holder:	Operational Services and Development Control
Key Decision:	<input type="checkbox"/> Forward Plan <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	General Exception	<input type="checkbox"/> Special Urgency <input type="checkbox"/>
Equality Impact Assessment:	Required:	Yes/No	Attached: Yes/No
Biodiversity Impact Assessment	Required:	Yes/No	Attached: Yes/No
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1.	RECOMMENDATION(S)
1.1	That Corporate Scrutiny recommend to Cabinet the proposed changes to the grounds maintenance schedule.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 2.1 To provide an update to cabinet, following further detailed consultation, regarding proposed changes to grounds maintenance schedules in order to achieve £100k of savings through staff reduction.

3. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

- 3.1 The matters discussed in this report impact directly on the following corporate priorities:
- **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 Risk considerations were detailed in the initial cabinet report relating to making the £100k savings. However changes to grounds maintenance practices do pose other risks :

Invasion / increase of unwanted species where maintenance regimes are reduced. To prevent further spread we are investing in a tractor mounted mower able to cope with long grass / weed growth that may be used at the end of each summer or just prior to seed set of that plant to prevent spread.

Succession – whereby areas left uncut naturally revert back to woodland going through various stages vegetation dominance in the process. Again the investment in suitable machinery to halt this succession will enable this to be prevented where it is not appropriate.

Accumulation of litter in long vegetation. This will be monitored and any hot spots dealt with on an ad hoc basis until patterns emerge which may lead to changes in litter picking schedules on a more routine basis as resources allow.

5. BACKGROUND AND UPDATE

- 5.1 The following paragraphs provide information relating to the type of site or aspect of the service. A full list showing every site and the proposed management is attached as appendix A. Each site has been assessed on an individual basis taking into account its location, ground conditions and use.
- 5.2 There will be three members of staff lost from the amenity grounds maintenance aspect of the service. These being team members regularly cutting parks, gardens, cemeteries play areas, verges and amenity grass. This equates to losing one full team who would typically be responsible for a route of approximately 120,000m² (based on area only and not accounting for frequency of cut). The proposed changes would reduce the overall area by approximately 180,000m² thus removing some additional pressure which allows remaining team members to cover key sites during times when staff may be absent due to holidays or sickness and also to account for the impact of the additional 5 days annual leave per employee.
- 5.3 One tractor driver is retiring and the post will not subsequently be filled. Work will be split between the remaining two tractor drivers with priority given to facilities where clubs pay to play sports. We are reviewing the machinery used and planning to invest in lighter equipment that allows us to access areas when conditions are not as favourable and thus improve continuity of maintenance.
- 5.4 There are many factors which influence the ability to carry out grounds maintenance ranging from human factors to weather conditions and vehicle breakdown or servicing. It is therefore important that the proposed changes are currently viewed as a first draft and flexibility to make operational changes is supported as time progresses. How an area of vegetation reacts to a change of maintenance regime can vary widely and we must be able to monitor changes and make appropriate alterations to schedules and practices as and when necessary.
- 5.5 We understand that the decisions taken and options for each site will not suit every resident and are expecting many queries. It is important that teams are given support during this transition. Where a resident or visitor has a valid reason as to why our selected option is not suitable we will review that option and make alterations as necessary. However any changes which increase commitment may require an offset elsewhere so as to avoid a simple increase in workload that is not achievable and likely to result in unnecessary pressure on staff.
- 5.6 **Parks and formal / memorial gardens.**
Where the site is relatively small, such as Hempstead's Memorial Garden in Bacup, then the whole site will remain unchanged in terms of priority and frequency of visits. Such sites are of a higher priority than amenity sites and this will be reflected in the standard of maintenance.
- 5.7 For larger sites where there are several facilities provided on site or a more varied type of vegetation then a diverse approach to maintenance will be adopted. Formal areas such as gardens and play areas will remain a high priority, whereby woodland and associated fringes or large open areas of grass will not be intensively managed leaving areas to become more naturalised. Where opportunity exists to improve areas for ecological, aesthetic or recreation reasons through more natural means of management or development of alternative vegetation types then this shall be explored and supported where resources allow. Where an active group exists the changes to that site are made in conjunction with that group.
- 5.8 **Cemeteries and Closed Churchyards.**
The four RBC cemeteries will remain high priority sites with visited areas and active burial plots being maintained to existing standards; however many have fringes and woodland edges or areas which will be managed in a more natural style.

- 5.9 There have been discussions with church wardens / clergy regarding closed churchyards with a view to adopting more ecologically and less intensive management in parts of each site. Where areas are known to be well visited then maintenance patterns will remain unchanged, however edges and quieter areas will be left unmown and vegetation response monitored. Some sites are still in discussion and changes will be made only in agreement with the church.
- 5.10 **Amenity grass**
These are the areas of grass with no other function and are typically located along roadsides and within housing estates. The selected maintenance regime will vary between sites and is very much dependent on the location and ground conditions and other features (e.g. trees, water courses and pathways). Chosen options include ceasing maintenance, cutting a path or roadside strip only, cutting a swathe or area, leaving areas under trees uncut, changing the type of vegetation, reducing frequency of cuts or making no changes at all.
- 5.11 Amenity sites which form key gateways to the valley or are located along high profile routes will receive greater attention than others.
- 5.12 **Highway verges**
These are areas of grass owned by LCC and maintained by RBC under the public realm agreement. The public realm budget received from LCC is gradually being reduced over the next three years and our maintenance regime will reflect this reduction. As most sites are adjacent to key routes, form gateways or are at road junctions the scope for reductions is limited and likely changes include the cutting of strips immediately adjacent roads rather than whole verges. There will be some reductions in frequency; however a minimum number of cuts are required each year to ensure sight lines are not blocked for safety reasons.
- 5.13 **Non RBC sites / leased sites / unregistered sites**
While reviewing sites maintained by RBC it was found that a number are either owned by another party, leased to someone else or were unregistered with the land registry (therefore ownership not known).
- 5.14 For those sites not owned by RBC we shall be contacting the owner and informing them that we shall not be continuing maintenance.
- 5.15 For sites which are currently leased to someone else we are checking the terms of the lease and where maintenance responsibility does not lie with the council we shall be contacting the leaseholder and informing them that we will not continue to maintain the land and that maintenance responsibility lies with them.
- 5.16 Unregistered sites may have differing outcomes depending on factors such as location, position in relation to currently maintained land and potential value. For example, where the site lies in a prominent position (such as adjacent a main access route) and is immediately abutting maintained land then we shall register the site as belonging to RBC and continue maintenance.
- 5.17 Where the land is not in a prominent position and / or not adjacent other maintained land then the decision to adopt the land will be taken by our Property Management Team, who may choose to register the land should it have significant strategic importance or value, however maintenance will not continue.

- 5.18 Land that is not in a prominent location, nor abutting currently maintained land and not of any strategic significance or value will not be registered and maintenance will cease.
- 5.19 In addition to this there is land currently maintained that may have value for selling or leasing. At some sites residents have expressed an interest in taking on that that land and other potential sites have been identified by members of community groups or grounds maintenance staff. A list of those sites will be submitted to the Council's Property Manager.
- 5.20 **Play Areas**
Play area maintenance will remain unchanged in terms of both the grounds maintenance and the safety inspection regime.
- 5.21 **Bowling Greens**
Each bowling club has been met with on at least one occasion to discuss various options which may help provide a more sustainable future for pavilions and greens. The size of each club varies and some clubs are in a stronger position than others. All clubs are exploring alternative ways of working with us ranging from assisting by carrying out smaller tasks such as painting edging boards, to reduce pressure on staff workloads, to considering leasing facilities (Whitworth and Stubblelee clubs) and taking on greater responsibility for the facility overall.
- 5.22 The Bowling Club at Stubblelee Park is planning on applying to Sport England for a grant to erect a new pavilion and possibly other works (path resurfacing and fencing). We will be supporting them throughout this process.
- 5.23 The way each club uses the facilities varies, with some clubs solely using pavilions during the summer playing season and others also using the pavilion during winter months for indoor recreation (such as dominoes and cards), which has an impact on the cost of running that facility (mainly heating and lighting expenses). Those clubs and user groups who do not access or use pavilions in winter felt that this was an unfair benefit and when discussed with all clubs there was acknowledgement that paying for winter use was not unreasonable and one club suggested a fee of up to £30 per month would be affordable. Consequently our annual fees and charges now reflect this with one fee for summer use of the bowling green and pavilion (set as previous years) and an additional fee for winter use of the pavilion (set at £120 – equivalent to £20 per month).
- 5.24 There is also a discrepancy between the level of facilities provided at each pavilion and it has been suggested that clubs with better facilities should pay more than those with more basic ones. Further work is required on this topic; therefore annual fees will be the same regardless of this factor for 2014/15 with a view to introducing a graded scale (as we currently have with football pitches) for 2015/16.
- 5.25 The work and discussions with our bowling clubs is an on-going process and likely to change and develop over the coming months and years.
- 5.26 **Sports pitches**
Facilities whereby clubs pay per season to use the venue will be given priority over kick about areas and larger areas of amenity grass.
- 5.27 Discussions with clubs via the football forum and Rossendale Leisure Trust or other mechanisms will continue to explore improved ways of managing pitches.

5.28 Allotments

Free Lane allotments is currently undergoing the process to become a self-managed site, consequently routine maintenance will cease. All other council allotments will remain under current terms. New allotments, such as those proposed at Stacksteads, will be self-managed and have no impact upon maintenance regimes.

5.29 Seasonal planting displays

There is a strong desire to continue providing colourful summer displays, however the type of planting used to provide that will come increasingly from the use of perennials rather than annual plants.

5.30 New styles of planting for troughs and planters will be trialled in places, in many cases in conjunction with active groups who are also willing to take on future maintenance of the planters. The Rotary Club of Bacup have also offered help with sponsorship for planters in Bacup. A list of planters and changes for each is attached as appendix B.

5.31 There is a recognition that winter displays are less effective and greater investment should be made to provide natural swathes of spring bulbs in preference to formal bedding. Consequently with the exception of a few high profile sites we shall invest our efforts into and work with groups to create natural planting displays where appropriate such as woodland areas and grass verges.

5.32 Flower meadows

Flower meadows trials over recent years have shown variable performance. Consequently any future areas will be developed with careful selection of site and species. Where active groups request them and can work with us to maintain them then they shall be created. Successful sites such as Bolton Road North, Edenfield will be maintained and some sites will be allowed to revert to grass.

5.33 Tree work

A tree management policy has been developed and is currently being circulated to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet for consultation and potential adoption. Tree maintenance will continue, however the policy aims to improve guidance and allow income generation. The proposed income generation has been discussed at other consultation sessions and has received a high level of support from community groups.

5.34 Private Work

There are currently a small number of private contracts undertaken whereby grass cutting is carried out for companies within Rossendale. The value of these contracts is very small and provides an insignificant amount of income. Therefore we will be contacting those companies and informing them that our maintenance will cease and they need to source an alternative arrangement. This allows us to focus resources on RBC owned sites.

5.35 Other

Christmas tree collection points have been in place for two years. The setting up, monitoring of use, removing trees and then taking down the collection points is a significant improvement in relation to previous doorstep collections. However the system still impacts upon winter maintenance. Residents typically take Christmas trees to the drop off points by car and therefore it is proposed that in future years residents are signposted to other recycling facilities within the borough. Grounds maintenance staff are then able to continue with winter tasks such as shrub pruning, drainage work and edging off without interruption. This will increase the amount of winter work carried out each year – something which staff feel has been neglected over recent years yet considered vital preparation work for summer.

5.36 We will continue to support the work of volunteer and community groups where our resources allow.

COMMENTS FROM STATUTORY OFFICERS:

6. SECTION 151 OFFICER

6.1 The report explains how the previously agreed £100k reduction in the Parks and Open spaces revenue budgets will be achieved.

7. MONITORING OFFICER

7.1 No additional comments to add

8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

- 8.1
- Member's bulletin article followed by Members briefing session on 9th July 2013.
 - Citizen's panel questionnaire circulated and responded to during August 2013. Questions and results are attached as Appendix C
 - Consultation meeting with friends of groups and bowling clubs held on 5th September. A summary of the consultation exercise carried out is attached as appendix D.
 - Individual detailed consultation meetings with each group currently actively engaged in the maintenance of parks and open spaces carried out between October and December 2013.
 - Individual detailed consultation with bowling clubs carried out between October and December 2013.
 - Site meetings and discussions with church wardens in September 2013.
 - Attendance at Football Forum and discussions with football clubs from 2012 to present.
 - LCC public realm manager – details still being discussed.
 - Staff consultation with team members employed within the parks and open spaces team throughout 2013.
 - Overview and Scrutiny Committee February 2014.
 - Future updates will also be submitted to Overview and Scrutiny.
- 8.2 Consultation with bowling clubs, other sports clubs and engagement with active groups is a continuous and on-going process.
- 8.3 There are new groups being formed and we will engage with them when making decisions regarding the sites they have an interest in.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1
- Flexibility and adaptation are important. The changes proposed may need to be altered as time progresses.
 - Changes are being made in agreement with active groups, stakeholders and clubs who use and help us to look after our sites where these exist.
 - Each site has been assessed on an individual basis; therefore the chosen options vary widely.
 - Changes are not going to suit everyone and therefore it is important that staff receive support during the transition.

Appendices attached:

Appendix A Full list of sites and changes.

Appendix B List of planters and troughs.

Appendix C Results of Citizens panel questionnaire

Appendix D Summary of group consultation exercise.