

Subject:	Parks and Open Spaces Update	Status:	For Publication
Report to:	Corporate Scrutiny Committee	Date:	17 th November 2014
Report of:	Parks and Open Spaces Manager	Portfolio Holder:	Operational Services and Development Control
Key Decision:	<input type="checkbox"/> Forward Plan <input type="checkbox"/>	General Exception	<input type="checkbox"/> Special Urgency <input type="checkbox"/>
Equality Impact Assessment:	Required:	No	Attached: No
Biodiversity Impact Assessment	Required:	No	Attached: No
Contact Officer:	Tamzin Percival	Telephone:	01706 252518
Email:	tamzinpercival@rossendalebc.gov.uk		

1.	RECOMMENDATION(S)
1.1	That the Corporate Scrutiny Committee notes the update to the grounds maintenance schedules as detailed within the report.
1.2	That the Corporate Scrutiny Committee recommend to Cabinet that all future minor amendments to the Parks and Open Spaces service to be delegated to the Head of Operations in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to update members on feedback received during 2014 after the changes to the Parks and Open Spaces service and to make recommendations for the future approach to our grounds maintenance schedule.

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 Not reviewing feedback received as a result of changes may result in loss of confidence from staff and residents in the council as a supportive and understanding council.

5. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS

- 5.1 In winter 2013/14 a number of changes to the grass cutting and grounds maintenance schedules were agreed at cabinet with a formal request that feedback resulting from those changes and any suggested alterations to that plan were brought to Scrutiny Committee for review.
- 5.2 The changes were implemented and throughout the grass cutting season feedback has been recorded and reviewed from the following sources: residents service requests and enquiries;

formal complaints; member enquiries; MP enquiries and grounds maintenance teams. A summary of this feedback and suggested alterations are covered in the following sections.

5.3 **Feedback from residents, member enquiries and MP enquiries.**

We have 115 recorded service requests/ enquiries and 1 formal complaint (which was of a general matter and not related to any specific site). Some sites only received one query throughout the year, whereas other sites had multiple queries relating to them. All sites have been reviewed regardless of the number of enquiries; however those with multiple enquiries have been focussed upon. Some of those sites with multiple enquiries received an alternative trial regime during the season to assess the response and allow a more accurate suggestion for next years schedule. A list of those sites, the number of queries relating to each and action taken or suggested is included as Appendix 1.

- 5.4 From interpretation of the feedback the main points of concern or query from residents were:
- A lack of understanding about the concept of perimeter strips being mown, especially when the unmown area starts to look unkempt.
 - The areas of grass in front of their houses are really important to them. Originally these areas were considered a low priority from previous consultation; however people want to look out on to well-maintained areas.
 - With increased car parking the verges on housing estates need to be crossed by residents and they want to be able to easily walk across short grass.
 - Leaving areas of long grass has caused concerns over dog fouling and litter, although there is little evidence from service requests to suggest there has been an appreciable increase in either.
 - There are some areas of grass within housing estates which are not formal play areas but are the areas of open spaces where children like to play. These should be accessible and useable so that children are not forced to play in the road.
 - Perceived inequalities between areas.

5.5 **Feedback from grounds maintenance teams.**

Both formal and informal feedback sessions were carried out with teams throughout the grass cutting season to assess the impact upon them and the machinery. The main points of considerations are shown in Appendix 2. Towards the end of the grass cutting season the parks and open spaces manager, team leader and grounds maintenance team charge hand visited every site on that teams route and agreed an appropriate regime for that site taking in to account the feedback from external sources, site conditions, site location and overall workload.

5.6 **Feedback from user groups.**

We have received feedback from some bowling clubs. Those which opted for a once per week regimes have found that playing conditions were not always suitable. The bowling green mowers in use this year are due for replacement and quality of grass cutting has been an issue due to poor machinery.

5.7 **General observations**

The mild winter preceding the typical grass cutting season meant that grass growth was of an exceptional rate during spring. In previous years teams had favoured starting temporary staff starting in May to allow them to continue mowing for longer during autumn. However with hindsight it would have been better to have more staff in place 4-6 weeks earlier.

Consequently we aim to start staff no later than the first week of April in 2015 to ensure that we have sufficient staff resources in place when grass growth is at its fastest. This should prevent some of the issues met this year such as long intervals between visits and lines /

/piles of grass clippings left on the surface. Although it must be recognised that we no longer collect grass clippings and there will always be a deposit of grass on mown surfaces.

5.8 A number of sites which were not mown throughout the majority of the season presented issues due to unwanted vegetation types growing - particularly dock. These sites looked rather untidy compared to those which consisted only of grass and short herbaceous plants. A regime to control the dock consisting of either timelier mowing in midseason to prevent dock from growing tall or flowering, or in some cases an application of selective herbicide to kill off the dock and retain the grass is factored in to new schedules.

5.9 The recent retirement of the sports turf charge hand means there is pressure upon the remaining two tractor drivers. This is a foreseen challenge and therefore we have put measures in place to control any adverse effect. We will be training additional staff from the landscape and mobile teams during winter in the safe use of tractors with attachments so that they can provide cover during times of absence. Sites within the tractor routes have also been prioritised. The top priority being pitches with clubs paying to use those facilities. Kick about sites and general amenity areas will receive regular attention, however at times of pressure the kick about pitches and main parks will take priority over general amenity areas.

5.10 **Clarification of regime.**

Taking in to account feedback from all sources and in particular the request from teams to create a simpler system the following categories for mowing regimes will be adopted.

- **Weekly**

Sites will receive grass cutting once per week.

- **Regular (whole or part site)**

Sites will receive a cut each time the team carry out one cycle of the mowing route.

There may be some exceptions due to growth rate and / or site conditions at the time – the teams will monitor this and select the appropriate course of action.

The extent of the mowing area is written on the schedule. Where only part of the site is due to be mown the extent of this area will be at the discretion of the team depending on visual characteristics and ground conditions at the time.

The frequency and interval between cuts can be variable depending on site conditions, rate of grass growth and resources available.

- **Low frequency (whole or part site)**

Sites will receive grass cutting 1-3 times per season. The timing and number of cuts will be at the discretion of the team and depends on a number of factors – site conditions, rate of grass growth, vegetation type on site and resources available.

The extent of the mowing area is written on the schedule. Where only part of the site is due to be mown the extent of this area will be at the discretion of the team depending on visual characteristics and ground conditions at the time.

- **Litter Pick Only**

These sites will receive no grass cutting and have been selected upon location, vegetation type and grass growth. Teams will only attend to any issues upon receipt of a service request.

Other regimes may be specific to a particular site type, such as sports pitch, or more complicated due to the size and nature of the site. These are detailed along with the full site list in Appendix 3.

It must also be recognised that at any time resources present challenges then sites such as parks, gardens, play areas and cemeteries will take priority over amenity and public realm sites.

COMMENTS FROM STATUTORY OFFICERS:

6. SECTION 151 OFFICER

6.1 Given the Council’s financial challenges over the medium term, any financial implications arising must be contained within existing budget resources.

7. MONITORING OFFICER

7.1 No additional comments.

8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

- 8.1
- Ongoing engagement with staff throughout the grass cutting season.
 - Review of feedback received from residents and visitors.
 - Review of member and MP enquiries.
 - Review of feedback from specific user groups, such as bowling clubs.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 Changes have been suggested taking in to account the feedback received from all sources to form a schedule which will suit the needs of more residents and is considered workable by the teams carrying out the work. The next grass cutting season may still present issues and therefore further alterations cannot be discounted. The extent and nature of these will determine if those alterations can be made throughout the season or require a more extensive review.

9.2 The full list of sites (Appendix 3) will be distributed to all councillors with a request for comment and opportunity to answer any queries to be submitted by end of November, so that any other minor alterations may be factored in to new work programmes.

Background Papers

Background Papers	
Document	Place of Inspection
Last year’s cabinet paper	S:\General Folder\Parks and Open Spaces review\6_Parks and Open Spaces cabinet report TP version.doc
Appendix 6 Full List of Sites from last year	S:\General Folder\Parks and Open Spaces review\Appendix A Full List of Sites 2014-15.docx