

TITLE	Grass Cutting
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 28 July 2014
WARD	None Specific
DIRECTOR	Andrew Moulton, Head of Governance and Improvement Services

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WARD:	None Specific
DIRECTOR:	Heather Thwaites, Director of Environment

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Well-maintained public open spaces contribute to the strong sense of satisfaction and enjoyment residents enjoy from their environment. In turn this makes the borough an attractive place to live, work and enjoy recreation and contributes to the health and well-being of residents.

RECOMMENDATION

That Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee notes the contents of the report.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The grass cutting service is provided by Quadron on behalf of Wokingham Borough Council. The Parks and Open Spaces are broken down into Medium and Low Frequency and Highway verges are separated into Urban, Rural and Sightlines. All of the frequencies are shown below.

Parks & Open spaces

- Medium Frequency – This is the category for the majority of parks and open spaces grass across the borough. The allowance is 8 complete cuts across the borough per season. This equates to approximately 5 weeks between cuts throughout the growing season.
- Low Frequency – These are areas of grass that are left to naturalise providing essential habitat for insects and wildlife. There is an allowance for cutting 50% of all the low frequency grass once per year.

Highway Verges

- Urban Frequency – Medium frequency as above. The allowance is 8 complete cuts across the borough per season.
- Rural Frequency – The Council has many rural roads throughout the borough which do not have typically flat grassed verges. The rural lanes can be narrow and verges can be rough vegetation, embankments and even sides of hedges. The frequency of these is only 2 cuts per season and is carried out using the tractor with the side arm 'flail'. The 2 cuts are carried out during June/July and then October/November.
- Sightlines – These are areas that have been specifically highlighted because the area requires cutting for safety purposes due to vision problems for motorists. The sightlines are nearly always short sections of rural verges located at junctions and are incorporated during the Rural cutting. In addition Sightlines are cut again twice per year

which is set to occur during the lapse of time between the rural cuts in April/May and then August/September.

Although the frequency of grass cutting has remained unchanged since 2009, the offer and particularly the frequency may vary depending on the weather conditions. For many years, this has remained constant but over the last two years and this year in particular, we have experienced the challenging combination of warm weather followed by wet weather in a cycle that has seen grass growing at incredibly high rates. This is something that Councils across the country have been grappling with. Rightly, a number of residents have asked questions about the nature of the contract and the intentions for managing this issue in the future.

The Executive Member for Environment will be overseeing a review of how we manage grass cutting over the forthcoming months and areas to be looked at will include frequency, timings and local priorities. The main aim of the review will be to ensure the Council gets best value for money for residents from the resource it has available and so it is considered vital that local people's views and experiences are included. Currently, residents who contact the Council about grass cutting are being asked to register their interest in being involved in the forthcoming review. The schedule for grass cutting has also been put on the Council's website to indicate when the last cut was so that residents can understand when their next cut is likely to be.

In addition to the information above, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has asked for a number of questions to be answered as part of the report and these are addressed below:

- Has the agreed contractual schedule been followed?

The agreed contract schedule has been adhered to in all areas including play areas. The current schedule has remained unchanged since 2009.

- Has the Contractor experienced problems recently and has the abnormally wet weather earlier in the year affected the schedule?

The contractor has experienced some difficulties due to the ongoing wet and warm spells which has continued to accelerate the rate of growth in what is already the 'peak' period of the year. This has resulted in grass that is longer than usual which therefore means that it takes longer for the contractors to complete the rounds. Unfortunately this has led to longer gaps between the first few cuts than we had planned for. In addition there was a prolonged period of rain which caused a delay to the start of the grass cutting season due to the wet ground conditions. It should be noted that the programme is now catching up and the gaps between cuts will reduce as a result; this will become visible in the next few weeks.

- Are playing areas cut more frequently than field fringes and verges?

Play areas are cut eight times p/a and not cut more frequently than other areas. Urban verges are cut eight times p/a.

- Can the grass be cut so that rows of grass are not left making playing ball games difficult?

The collection and removal of grass cuttings is not included within the grounds maintenance contract and is not a service that has ever been provided by the council. This work is labour intensive, carries excessive waste costs and has not been considered economically viable as a borough wide operation.

- What is the scope for changing the schedule?

This will form part of the review and would require that we work with our contractor to ensure that any new proposals do not incur additional cost for the council and are operationally possible. Discussions with the contractor have already begun to explore and identify realistic, achievable options for the future. As part of this review, we will be talking to ward members, town and parish councils, residents and any other interested parties to gain their views, ideas and suggestions so that this can be fed in to any changes we may propose in the future.

The financial impact of changes to the schedule would depend on the actual change implemented. For example, an increase from 8 to 11 cuts p/a could cost in excess of £100,000 p/a.

Contact Josie Wragg	Service Environment
Telephone No 974 6002	Email josie.wragg@wokingham.gov.uk
Date 16/07/2014	Version No. 1

Copy of Information on-line Petition Supplied by Mr Clark

Grass cutting in parks and open spaces in the borough of Wokingham are broken down into: •

Medium frequency - majority of parks and open spaces grass - 8 cuts per season which is roughly 5 weeks between cuts in the growing season •Low frequency - areas of grass are left – 50% of low frequency grass is cut once per year Cutting frequency can often extend beyond 6 weeks due to poor weather conditions.

During the peak growing season, this frequency remains the same. Unsurprisingly, even after 2-3 weeks, grass grows to such a length that the parks and open spaces which many residents would like to enjoy are overgrown. Litter and dog mess can often be hidden in this long grass, causing potential health risks. When the grass is eventually cut, the contractor appointed to maintain Wokingham's green spaces leave all the cuttings behind. This creates 2 problems.

The first is that rather than having long grass which restricts activity and mobility for children and the elderly, there is a thick blanket of grass cuttings, making it very difficult to play games and walk through. The second and more concerning issue is that metal drinks cans, dog waste etc. that are hidden in the long grass are shredded by the mowers and hidden under the blanket of grass causing a real laceration and health hazard to people and animals. To be part of the discussion, please follow me on Twitter @WokyGreenSpaces

What would you like to happen?

To improve the current regime, I propose the following changes:

- a. To introduce a "High Frequency" category to the list. This would include all playing fields and some of the larger open public spaces. The "High Frequency" period would start on the 1 May and end on the 31 August. This is roughly an 18 week period and would require grass to be cut on a fortnightly basis (9 cuts).
- b. To amend the "Medium Frequency" regime by extending the frequency of cutting to 6 weeks (from 5). This would run alongside the "High Frequency" regime where all grass was cut (3 cuts during the "High Frequency" period). "Medium Frequency" areas would also be extended to the outer edges and less used areas (as agreed) of all playing fields and public spaces, reducing the need to cut the entire area on a fortnightly basis.
- c. Remove all "High Frequency" grass cuttings. This will reduce the risk of lacerations from shredded litter and exposure to dog mess.

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

28 JULY 2014

Grass Cutting Indicative List of Witnesses and Timetable

Important Notes:

1) *This list is not exhaustive and further witnesses may be added at the discretion of the Chairman.*

2) *All timings are approximate and may vary dependent on circumstances.*

Name/Organisation	Provisional Timings
Brian Clark, local resident and Lead Petitioner	Opening Statement/Presentation 19:40-19:45 Questions from the Committee 19:45-19:55
Philip Truppin, Clerk of Earley Town Council and member of the Wokingham Clerks Forum	Opening Statement/Presentation 19:55-20:00 Questions from the Committee 20:00-20:10
Angus Ross, Executive Member for Environment and Julia Woodbridge, Horticulture and Amenity Coordinator	Opening Statement/Presentation 20:10-20:15 Questions from the Committee 20:15 to 20:25
Opportunity for witnesses to raise points of clarification/responses to points made	20:25-21:35
Committee discussion/decision	20:35 to 20:50