

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee – 19 September 2018

Review of the Grounds Maintenance Contract - Stakeholder Feedback

Response from Woodley Town Council:

The Town Council has received a large number of complaints about the grass cutting schedule. Many people have reported that they are worried about the possibility of fires occurring as the long grass is now very dry. Infrequent grass cutting along the Bader Way has left this gateway into Woodley looking very scruffy. Many complaints have been received from residents about the unsightly appearance of the overgrown central reservation on the A4 on the approach to Woodley and there are concerns that this could be a fire hazard. Members commented that if grass is allowed to become too long it is more likely to block drains when it is finally cut.

Response from a resident of Colemansmoor Road

I would start by thanking the Committee for taking the time to hear the views of local residents on the matter of changing how the grass cutting has been done.

When the new plan was introduced, the change was immediately noticed as the park on Colemansmoor Road was left with huge patches of grass left uncut (in excess of 80 per cent of the area). This had an immediate impact of my Asthma resulting in me using the maximum dosage permitted on the inhalers I use. Whereas previously I have only used half the allowable dosage of the inhaler (preventer) and very infrequently I used my other inhaler (reliever). Eventually the NHS had to increase the strength of the inhaler (preventer) by changing it. At the time I checked the costings of these changes and it amounted to an 8 fold increase in cost to the NHS. In addition there have been complications which has resulted in the NHS having to revert back to me using the original inhaler (preventer).

I have over the time complained to the Council, initially with no success until I contacted my local MP, this resulted in a meeting with the local Councillor and a senior member of Council staff. This resulted in a change to the plan and then virtually all the grass was cut. It only took a couple of weeks for my Asthma to return to normal.

Unfortunately the following year the grass cutting team reverted to leaving most of the park uncut and subsequently my use of inhalers went up substantially.

At this moment in time after complaining to Council management and local Councillors the team have the last couple of times completely cut the grass in the park back. Again the impact of my health has been significant. Given my experience I would expect other people with Asthma would have had the same problems, but may not be so prepared to be so vocal about it.

Response from a resident of Easthampstead Road (photos included)

Easthampstead road - more than waist high.... I have terrible hay fever and asthma which was at its worst ever earlier this year. Gypsy Lane also had waist high grass but it doesn't show as being so high in the photo. Grass at the corner of Southlands Drive and Erica

Drive was also waist high. Picking up dog poop was almost impossible

Not only is this unsightly it is also a health risk - so many people complaining of shocking hay fever early June, plenty who hadn't suffered before. There has to be a link and allowing areas to go mad like this is also a risk to anyone who can't see what's underfoot broken glass, dog poop, etc. The lack of grass cutting really is a total disgrace.

Response from a resident of Keephatch Park

I understand that you are seeking feedback on grass cutting services.

I live in the Keephatch Park development and am often shocked at the state of the area - how long grass is left before it is cut, weeds growing through pavements and road areas and when the grass is finally cut, the dispensing of it in areas where children play (which usually has dog poo in there as owners are unable to properly clear it due to the grass cuttings!). The area doesn't appear too bad at the moment, but this is only due to the current lack of rain and positive conditions for grass growth.

Further, I grew up in the area around Cantley Park - land provided to the people of Wokingham for their enjoyment. I'm now saddened at the awful state of the parkland which we are unable to fully enjoy as a family due to the approach taken to grass cutting. While the Council can hide behind it being a 'wildflower' and 'wildlife' area, I have no doubt that one of the main reasons for the shocking mess is the cost and associated maintenance of the area!

Response from resident of Emmbrook

Hello, further to your request for comments on the grass cutting locally - grass is not cut regularly enough, not only does it look scruffy but makes it very hard to clean up after your dog (and encourages those who are not so community minded to leave it behind, hidden in the long grass). When grass is cut, there is a significant amount of grass cuttings produced, and usually left behind - resulting in similar problems as above.

Response from a resident of Keephatch (photo included)

Attached picture of the football pitch on the corner of Keephatch and Binfield Roads

I was looking for somewhere to play football with my U8's team on 16th May. The team are all keen, and trying to be fit and health, which should be encouraged. As you will see the area is completely unusable. About 3 weeks later the area was then cut by a tractor, ensuring that the area remained completely unusable, as it was now knee high in cut grass.

I think that the Council have been incredibly fortunate this year with the lack of rain. The dry weather means that there has only been limited requirement to cut grass in the last 2months

Response from a resident

As requested I am writing to complain about the grass cutting - or lack of - in Wokingham, for your Grass Cutting Review.

I have already called the Council a few weeks ago & logged a complaint regarding the way Joel Park, Cantley and Toutley Fields had been cut.

Joel Park was cut in a figure of 8 and everything else was left, no grass cuttings were collected, after I assume a number of complaints it was then cut completely.

Cantley is just a complete joke, the grass is at a ridiculous height and my dog has caught a huge number of ticks from here which can cause serious illness, let alone the possibility of our family getting one. We no longer visit Cantley, which is a great shame.

Toutley Fields were also at a ridiculously high level, making it virtually impossible to pick up any dog mess, not for the want of trying! All grass when it was cut was just left, making it very difficult to walk on! In fact no grass in my area, when it has been cut, is ever collected.

I pay my Council Tax and am appalled at the lack of grass cutting that has been carried out. What little green space we have left is not pleasant to walk through and certainly not aesthetically pleasing to look at.

Most of the side or corner verges are all overgrown making the community look totally unkempt, that is, however, apart from the lovely short cut grass around your Council building.

Maybe if you or your colleagues had taken a walk in the areas that most people were complaining about, you would have seen for yourself first hand that the people have been justified in complaining.

Response from a resident of Charvil

One word APPALLING there are a number of areas not just in Charvil where you cannot see left or right in a car due to the height of the grass and this is dangerous.

Plus a bug of mine, why do we not use grass boxes, the cut grass ends up in the road, washes down the drains, grass blocks drains, causing flooding and extra cost to get someone out to clear the drains.

Response from a resident of Earley

I would say apart from the overly long grass in Laurel and Riverside Parks, which when eventually was cut left excessive cuttings behind ruining future growth, the biggest issue has been roadside grass by the kerbs. I had to complain to get it cut in Egremont Drive and the grass was approaching 12" high and spreading into the pavement causing cracks.

Whilst the road then was cleaned within 48 hours, Sellafield which was as bad was ignored but clearly they would have seen the state.

Response from a resident of Shinfield Park (photos included)

I would like to take the opportunity to provide feedback on the Council's grass cutting policy implemented in April 2016. As a resident of Shinfield Park, Wokingham I'd like to provide some comments and thoughts on why I believe the policy has been a very poor one.

The grass in common areas is now left to grow very long before being cut, as I understand it this is notionally to promote wildlife, the truth however is very different and without a formal cutting plan some areas clearly seem to be left neglected far beyond what should be deemed reasonable. Relying on householders to report or chase this up is time wasting and unfair.

Specifically:

1. The long grass now hides significant amounts of litter which is isn't picked before the grass is cut, as a result significant amounts of plastic and tin is shredded causing worse harm to the environment, the grass management companies believe that litter isn't their problem (probably true but the result is horrendous (see photos),
2. Dogs routinely foul the longer grass in communal walking/play areas which means that often, even responsible dog owners are able to find the offending mess and clear up after their animals,
3. Areas which used to be used for picnics and children's play are now covered in grass so long that children are instead forced onto the roads, or when they do go into the long grass are subject to the animal mess and rubbish mentioned above,
4. Last and probably least, the whole area now looks neglected and a mess, when the grass is long it looks unkempt and when cut, the amount of rubbish left behind makes it look like a third world country, this apparent lack of pride creates a viscous circle.

I've attached a few photos of the roads around Shinfield Park that look like something out of a third world slum for reference, much of it caused by the streaming of long grass.

Please help us restore some pride in our community. Litter and grass cutting may seem like minor issues but they impact everyone.

I'd be very welcome to show you round the area or talk to you or you colleague's in person.

Response from Facebook users:

I've seen the orchids flowering in the verges of roads in Southlake where grass has been left 3-4 inches. If we don't allow wild flowers to bloom there won't be any bees and that's the end of you and me, asthma or not.

Your timing is not well thought out. Cantley Park has been a joke over the last two years. If grass is cut approximately 11 times a year and not left to get out of control. The Council seems to want to have parks as meadows....big difference.

When it is cut along the A4, roundabouts are left very rough with some patches not cut. And, before you say it is for the wildflowers, they had long, long past. Grass all over the road. If the trees come into this service, they are so overgrown, over the road signs along the A4, you cannot see the signs.....what service?

Trees cut down in February and left until August. Rats eating our garden sheds. The grass being cut.....are you joking?

Take a leaf out of Bracknell Forest Council's approach.

All parks should be cut as they have been in the past. Asthma is one of the most common health problems. Leaving long patches of uncut grass has put people's health at risk at great cost to the NHS.

Response from a resident of Spencers Wood

We live in Spencers Wood in a pair of cul-de-sacs off Clares Green Road. We have 3 small areas which are cut by WBC. This year, the service was appalling - the grass was left far too long before being cut and when it was cut there was a dreadful mess left.

In the end, two of us "adopted" two of the areas, hoovered up the mess and then cut the grass properly. Luckily we have a brown bin, and that was filled to overflowing! Since then, the dry weather has meant that no cutting is required lately.

I did place a formal complaint to Wokingham Direct.

Response from a resident of Woodward Close

The playing field in the second part of Woodward Close was left for far too long with the grass growing to approximately 300mm in length before it was finally cut which then left large clumps of grass cuttings all over the field. The grass was subsequently cut after a few weeks before getting too long which was acceptable.

Response from a resident

I've just seen (via a Facebook post) that you are looking for feedback regarding WBC's grass cutting policy in terms of the general quality of service, timeliness and impact to the environment etc.

I think it goes without saying that this year's service has been extremely poor, with excuses earlier in the season that they were unable to cut the grass due to the wet weather, then more recently just leaving the grass long for many weeks at a time.

With the current dry spell, they have been lucky as their policy of doing nothing has paid off due to the grass not growing. However, had it been a normal summer then the severe lack of grass cutting would have been an issue as it was earlier in the season.

The quality of the work is poor with lots of areas in the big open spaces randomly missed due to poor workmanship thus leaving long clumps of grass here and there. As a dog walker, the amount of ticks that have been present in the long grass has been high, obviously ticks can carry fatal diseases that can affect animals and humans so not good. I can understand that due to costs there must be a set programme of grass cutting (say 10 cuts across the season) but that has definitely not been followed, it's been cut 2 or maybe 3 times only this season. Compared to last year when I thought things were getting better after a diabolical previous year when the policy was again to leave the grass long, everything has slipped back again to a poor level.

I don't know if its WBC management that are doing a poor job (I do suspect this is the case!) or the contractors but something needs to change or I believe it will people will vote accordingly at the polling stations next time as this is a very visible service that needs fixing.

All in all, I've lived in Wokingham for over 36 years so clearly love the place, but can only maintain my respect if I see some positive change in respect to this issue.

I know some people talk about keeping some long grass for the wildlife, but my view is that leaving long grass around the edges of big open areas and on grass in the central parts of dual carriageways such as Woosehill spine road is fine as that is not where

people tend to go. However, cutting the grass short in the lovely open areas and playing fields should be attended to on a regular basis so that we can all enjoy, play and be sociable in those areas as opposed to being exposed to hazards such as hidden dog mess, rubbish and tics, etc. hidden in long grass.

I hope this helps you in readiness for the meeting, clearly I feel passionate about Wokingham hence writing this email so let's get Wokingham looking smarter again.

Response from a resident of Earley

My comments, for what they are worth, are that I believe the grass-cutting arrangements to be "adequate and fine"! Bearing in mind the area to be tended to, I believe the Council does pretty well. Just occasionally one might drive past an area, and think the grass looks a bit long, knowing full well that it will be done shortly.

The summer weather has been unforgiving, and everywhere just looked scorched, but by and large, rarely is there overgrowth. I like the wild flower areas, and realise that once the flowers have died, only then can the grass be cut.

Response from a resident of Woosehill Lane

We are more than happy with the grass cutting service near us in Woosehill Lane. Not only does the longer grass with its wild flowers look beautiful but it provides a good habitat for wildlife. There are plenty of places for children to play ball games and when we were young running through longer grass was a pleasure. This should allow the Council spend any savings on essential services.

Response from a resident

Cutting was rather stupid before hot weather-cutting a strip next to path but missing the areas around where children play and random areas within a patch which annoyed residents who felt it looked so stupid they had to cut it themselves. Also some amenity area was cut but a piece the other side of the road wasn't - employees obviously not being allowed to use common sense, came back another day to do the other bit. Residents also annoyed if one employee was mowing whilst another sat doing nothing in the van.

I wasn't aware of piles of clippings left around. During the hot weather them coming to mow was silly - it just stressed the grass more. Weeds were growing in the gutters they could have dealt with.

Sadly the lack of rain meant wild flowers looked a bit of a mess and residents moaned the "weeds" upset their hay fever whilst others loved the few colourful flowers there were. The weather will never be the same year on year so some flexibility is needed please in the contract.

Response from a resident of Woodley

With regard to your review on grass cutting, I would like to give my views. I live in Wright Close, Woodley and have been very disappointed since the change in the grass cutting. The points I raise are:

1) opposite our house is a section of land which is Council owned, which hasn't been maintained by yourselves for years. We cut the bushes and cut the grass as there is a

cycle/footpath and if this wasn't maintained, it would be a danger when cars go across the paths and can't see small children cyclists.

2) Vauxhall Park is not cut regularly enough as with a lot of parks, how can children play in these parks if the grass is so long?

3) weeds growing on kerbs in to the roads, example parts of Bader Way. Not cutting the grass regularly is causing this.

4) grass getting to high/overgrown before it is cut, also hedges not regularly cut back along cycle/footpaths.

5) nothing looks tidy, kids are not using the parks as much, just going to get worse.

6) why are you not getting house owners who plant bushes, for privacy, boundary lines, to maintain them so they don't grow onto paths?

7) you find that there is more litter when the grass/bushes are not maintained. We found once we started to maintain the corner by our house the cycle/footpath, people stopped chucking litter/bottles in there.

I do walk and cycle regularly in Woodley and also drive around Wokingham a lot and would like to see more regular grass cutting and maintenance.

Response from a resident

1. Grass is too long when cut and as the cuttings are left on the ground they look unsightly. Also if wet they rot and smell.

2. Places like Ashenbury Park become fire hazards in very hot dry weather.

3. Tall grass at road junctions is a traffic visibility hazard.

Response from a resident of Southlake

Grass cutting in the Southlake area of Woodley - we have found in the last few years a poor service. Last year the cutting stopped too early in the season so we had long grass along our pathways through the winter followed by the first cut being very late so the grass was well over a foot long. Only for the dead grass to be cut the other week what was a waste of time. The service has gone downhill so much and is not properly controlled like it used to be.

Response from a resident (photos included)

Grass near my house was allowed to reach several feet in height. It was cut on 16 June and was left in large clumps on the ground. My friend lives on the other side of Wokingham. Grass near her home was neatly cut and collected. Please can you explain the different levels of care?

Response from a resident

I would like to commend Wokingham Borough Council on their approach to grass cutting in meadow areas such as Viking Field, Cantley Park and parts of Woosehill Meadows, including their planting of wildflowers in these areas. Despite the numerous voices

complaining about the lack of grass cutting I feel that it is imperative that we have as many areas as possible managed as meadow to provide a haven for wildlife. I was disappointed to see that the grass had been cut early and frequently in Viking Field this year and hope this was a one-off to prevent the possibility of wildfires in the recent very hot weather.

If finances are tight for mowing services I would suggest prioritising those areas set aside as play areas or where visibility for drivers is important but conversely leaving areas such as the middle of the Woosehill Spine road to grow long.

I also think Council finances would be better spent on areas such as supporting vulnerable or disabled people rather than destroying vital ecosystems.

Response from a resident in Lea Croft

Considering the cutbacks on grass maintenance, I was amazed when the grass verges in Lea Croft were cut in July for the third time since March when I hadn't cut our own grass for quite five weeks.

In previous years the verges may have only been cut twice in the period March to October. Surely in such dry weather adjustments could be made to the cutting schedule?

Response from a resident

The grass in WBC areas is left to grow too long before cutting, which looks unsightly and neglected. It also then starts to become a health and hygiene hazard as it is often very difficult for dog owners to find and retrieve their pets' excrement with the result that passers-by can tread in it and children cannot play there without being exposed to the same risk. When the grass is eventually cut it is left lying in clumps, which is unsightly and retards the growth of the grass underneath with the result that the unsightly view persists longer.

One particular area of concern to us is the tarred path between Glebelands Road and Bishops Drive where the grass at the edges has been allowed to grow in from the sides and covers the edging stones, obscuring the difference in height from the grassy side. This is a hazard to people walking on the grass, especially toddlers, who could easily slip and injure themselves.

The net result of the Council's current grass-cutting policy is that our parks and open spaces look untidy and neglected and are no longer inviting spaces for family recreation. The impression given is one of lack of care and we feel it is high time that the policy was changed and a more effective and more frequent cutting service introduced. We realise that WBC has financial constraints but feel this area has been left too long without action.

Response from a resident in Crail Close

Regarding the request for feedback on the (flawed) grass cutting programme at Wokingham BC, I live in Crail Close and look out directly on to the path leading up to Lesley Sears playing fields. The last two years have been disgraceful with grass going uncut for over 6 weeks at a time. This has led to grass growth up to knee length on an average male.

The primary issue here is regarding dog mess, and owners being unable to see where their dogs have defecated, therefore unable to pick it up.

I have two young children and when the grass is this long we are unable to let them play in the area or in the field as there is no way of knowing whether dogs mess has been cleared up. An unsafe and unclean outcome to the Council's "strategy".

Our council tax is now at £251 per month and with atrocious grass cutting services, lower quality, thinner, weaker, handle-less bin bags and a refuse collection team who leave rubbish and debris strewn across the roads I seriously question whether we are getting value for money for the tax paid.

Response from a resident

As a resident of Wokingham I'd like to say that grass cutting is a necessary service that may be required in many areas for reasons of safety.

However, as a biologist I would strongly support a policy of allowing more grassed areas to remain uncut during the summer period in order to support our ever-declining insect and bird populations that desperately need suitable, sustainable habitats in order to breed and survive.

Any such approach clearly needs to be explained to those residents that believe all grass should be regularly cut, but if presented using an evidence-based approach I suspect most people would accept it.

I'd also like to ask about the timing of the hedge management along the footpath between Bishops Drive and Glebelands Road (see attached map). There are a significant number of trees/ shrubs whose fruit could serve as significant food reserves for birds in particular during the winter, yet every year without fail it seems these are cut down in Sept/ Oct just before local wildlife could benefit from them. Can the timetabling of verge maintenance not be adjusted to reflect the benefit or otherwise to wildlife of the vegetation beforehand?

Response from a resident

I just want to state that I agree with the sentiments expressed by other WBC residents that during the spring months the grass on my road only appears to get cut once a quarter, so I finish up cutting the grass outside my property to make the road a bit more attractive/ well maintained appearance. With the hot spell there hasn't been a need to cut.

Similarly, the gutters are seldom swept. So at the moment, full of pine needles.

Response from a resident of Snowberry Close

Responding to the request for feedback on Wokingham Grass cutting, I would say the policy is working except in one area. Areas of large open space such as the green space on the Buttercups estate (between Snowberry Close, Laurel Close and Evergreen way) or the Park by Latimer Road should be labelled communal spaces and have increased grass cutting and grass collection so people can use the space for football, parties etc.

It has been a regular problem, neighbours in the buttercups have been unable to use the green space because the grass is too long or unable to use due to the amount of grass cuttings left behind (in March, April, May and June). I would say for smaller spaces you have the right grass cutting policy.

Response from a resident of Winnersh

I am writing to let you know that the verge grass cutting around the Borough this year has been an absolute disgrace. We had several weeks in Winnersh where the grass was so

high that it was not easy to see the street signs! When it was eventually cut it was left with mounds of hay and brown grass (before the dry weather) and has never looked tidy since.

Parts of King Street Lane have not been touched even once. We had visitors that come to the area once a year, they could not believe the mess throughout the Borough. The approach into Wokingham was a disgrace with the terraces covered in long grass and weeds, nowhere to sit on the grass bank in the sunshine. Then of course we had to contend with all the town centre mess.

Dog walking has been very difficult, firstly trying to find dog mess in the long grass is not easy, trying to pick it up is very challenging! Then you get home and find the dog has caught a tick. Three times she caught a tick, she has managed 10 years without getting ticks, this is more than just a coincidence. No more ticks since the grass stopped growing due to the heatwave, thank goodness for the heatwave I dread to think how much worse the place would look without it.

Cycling on the cycle pavements has been a nightmare, constantly getting caught with low hanging shrubs in the face! The paths being so narrow that you have to stop to let people by. My grandchildren in pushchairs being stung with nettles and scratched by brambles. We have lived here 30 years and have never seen it look so bad. A couple of years ago it was bad, but this year is by far the worst.

Get the Council to stop wasting our money on pointless, distracting road signs and use the money to cut the grass! Time to ditch these contractors and get new, perhaps you should pay local residents to cut areas and streets near their properties, many would be glad to do this for a small fee, they would feel a pride in keeping it looking nice. I for one would be very happy to do that. Probably cost a fraction of what you pay now.

Response from resident of Maple Bank, Ruscombe

I live on Maple Bank in Ruscombe and have quite a lot of Council owned land near me. I have seen over the last couple of years the low frequency of grass cutting has made the area look very scruffy.

I know that I contacted the Council a couple of times to query when the grass would be cut. I was told that the current contractor was free to cut the grass when they chose, but that they were (I think) contracted to cut the grass 6 times during the year. Obviously, this does not work. At one point, the grass opposite my house had reached the window ledges of the flats in Middlefields Court (waist height). The grass was also at the same height along London Road in Twyford/Ruscombe. With the high frequency of dog walkers in the area, myself included, it meant that even with the best of intentions you cannot fully clean up after your dog if it has decided to use the long grass as a toilet.

I cut my grass at home every week. Whilst I would not expect the council to be able to maintain this level of frequency, I would have thought that every 3 to 4 weeks is easily achievable. I know that Councils are working with reduced budgets, but some cuts are one step too far. I hope that a proper consultation is taking place around this issue and that common sense will prevail.

We live in a beautiful part of the country and seeing it go to wrack and ruin is a great shame and easily preventable.

Response from a resident of Shinfield

I have on numerous occasions had to ring the Cleaner and Greener team re cutting grass at a play area so I could take my grandson to play. This is Deardon Way, Shinfield. The

grass has been nearly 2 feet high and I was worried what was lurking beneath. Within about a week this got cut but yet again I had to ring before it was cut again. Another problem - the grass cuttings were left in heaps and not cleared away - on every occasion this occurred. So I was still worried what was beneath.

All around Earley the grass cutting has been a nightmare, left till it was so long it looked like wheatfields or dare I say a third world country. If it was cut on the verges tons of grass were left on top.

Our friends from Thornbury Bristol visited and were very shocked at how shabby and run down the area looked and asked if they had stopped cutting the verges etc. When we went to Thornbury we were delighted to see how neat their verges were and looked very smart.

We were told last year that it was a trial run with cutting and it would definitely improve in 2018. But lo and behold it has been terrible. What with bad weather to blame then heat what excuse is next? Do they not have enough staff? We never used to be so shabby and unkempt and rundown before. We have lived here nearly thirty years and are very sad at how it looks now. I have written to the Council a couple of times without success, maybe your consultation will work wonders. I do hope so.

An irate and sad resident.

Response from a resident of Bishops Drive, Wokingham

I would like to make the following observations regarding the quality of the current service:

In general, the appearance of the Town's public areas and spaces – ranging from the roadside grass verges and gutters to the larger public areas – can now at best be described as 'scruffy'. Apart from anything else, I'm not sure that this sits very well with the Council's desire to make Wokingham "a great place to live". This stems from:

- Less frequent grass cutting. For example, as far as I can recall the grass areas along the pathways in the Glebe Park Estate area have been cut only twice this year – on the first occasion this was carried out far too late in the growing year (the grass was extremely long and as a result the cut was patchy and left large quantities of cut grass) and on the second occasion the dry conditions meant that there was little worth cutting and all it really achieved was the generation of clouds of dust. Following on from this, the accumulation of grass cuttings, along with soil thrown up from the cutting process, leaves the pathway gutter areas untidy and clogged (the pathway down from Glebelands Road into the Glebe Park Estate is a good example).
- Lack of any attention to the weeds growing in the roadside gutters.
- Less frequent cut back of shrubbery along pathways (although the blackberry pickers are perhaps delighted by this).

I appreciate that there is a cost issue involved in all of this and that this cannot be ignored but, in summary, the service that residents are now getting is not want we want.

Response from a resident

Money does seem to be wasted by Councils by having the grass cut by their contractors when the grass has not grown due to lack of rain, thus causing areas of hard dusty soil. I think I have cut my grass 3 times this season and, generally, it has remained green. Leaving the grass long retains moisture in the grass and the soil.

What does need cutting are the hedges/trees that cover road signs, especially speed roundels, you cannot assume everybody who uses a road is local and knows the speed limit on the road. In lots of cases it only needs somebody with secateurs or a pruning saw to walk down a road and clear signs. Do Council politicians and staff drive about with their eyes closed?

Check Winnersh crossroads to A33 crossroads on the B road that runs alongside of the M4, signs there need clearing and washing for a start, but I am sure there are many more areas similar. Don't give me the old chestnut about the Council struggling with the money.

If somebody is caught speeding you are very quick to send the fine, so that money can be well spent keeping signage clear and not placing too many signs together as if it's War & Peace on the signs.

Very often signs are contradictory, you have a sign that says 30mph and in a few car lengths there is one saying 40mph, then slow. If you are meant to be going slow why increase the speed limit in the first place.

Response from a resident of Barkham

As a resident of Barkham, living in Sandy Lane, I find it absolutely staggering that a review is necessary, given that grass cutting has become such a rare event. Unfortunately it seems the only respectable cut has just taken effect in Elizabeth Park, a small but very frequently used facility, because of school holidays.

The grass has not been collected and is mown so infrequently that those of us with dogs who are responsible collectors of faeces, cannot always see where it is! Money has been spent on the play area, yet it gets in such a state due to endless weeds and wet long grass that it cannot and is not used by our children.

The section behind Sandy Lane, again extremely frequently walked becomes impassable due to the ferns, nettles and weeds taking over and literally becoming 6 feet in height. A review? Just let's get back to regular grass cutting and collection.

Response from a resident of Woosehill

I do think that there is room for a more efficient way in which to cut the grass and keep verges and hedgerows clear of the paths.

At the beginning of April our outside grass was cut. At that point it was not long and it had been raining heavily for weeks. The grass cutting machines must have done more damage than good. Since then I think our grass has been cut a couple of times and both times it was very long. It was cut last week and because of the dry weather it had not grown and just made a mess. It all seems to be done in a very ad-hoc way, not cut when needed but cut when it is not needed. Also there is a green space in front of my house that is surrounded by hedging. The only way this is managed is when I contact the Council and request that it is cut down and frees up the pathway from brambles.

We had a complaint from a visually impaired gentleman about the dangers of overgrown pavements. I suggested he contact yourselves.

All in all we are not very happy with the way our Council Tax is being spent on inefficient grass cutting.

Response from a resident of Woodley

It's the first time in 18 years that I have felt the need to cut the grass outside my house and neighbouring street entrance - which I did (in Woodley).

Flexible approach in my eyes is cut when needed - usually at a certain height re spec or timeframe. I understood initially the flexible approach was cut more when needed and less when not needed. 1 cut before 30th May is wholly inadequate and then more cuts when the heat has stopped the grass growth is laughable and not flexible - surely it's the other way round - less cuts when grass not growing - more when growing.

The early cuts are the most important - getting on top at the beginning of the season would help to ensure they are not just playing catch up - the early heat rescued you guys earlier than normal - I hope your contractor is claiming that they didn't. Other local Councils managed early cuts better - so weather is no excuse - that's when more labour should be deployed not now. The cynic in me wonders what resource was passed over to W&M for the wedding at that time.

Do you still employ monitoring people - or do you rely on self-monitoring by the contractor? Deferring payments pre-June I hope has occurred - as 1 cut before 30th May cannot be a flexible approach.

I attach some of my queries below because the people answering queries had little knowledge of the contract - as staff shortages / Localities / Emergency Works are no excuse.

WBC response - With the adverse weather that had occurred over the last few months the contractors were not able to cut the grass as normal, they do not have a fixed schedule as such but it is generally a rolling 4-5 weeks. There could be various factors – staff shortages/ emergency works/weather/localities (obstructions within the area).

The Council do not pick up grass after it has been cut, I believe this was discussed between the Council and contractors.

Resident comment - Thanks for response. How can you monitor your contractor's performance with no spec? If 4 to 5 weeks I would have expected them back as so far 1 cut this year. I don't expect them to pick up grass. I meant the grass was poorly cut with lots missed.

Weather is an easy blame and I can understand this on large areas where poor drainage occurs. Small areas would always be accessible with pedestrian machines but saw no evidence of any works in area. We are back at square 1 with bloody long grass. I am now seeing a lot of Facebook comments including Councillors so will be interesting in next few weeks.

Response from a resident of Antrim Road

It appears that WBC continue to waste money on cutting grass on the highway and other open spaces. The highway verges where I live in Antrim Road were mowed this morning despite there being no grass due to the current weather. The operative wore a mask to protect him from the dust cloud he created but there was no respite for pedestrians.

It would be better if the contractors were told to stop this absurd activity until there is some grass worth cutting. They could litter pick and clear the overgrown road gutters as a more useful alternative until the grass recovers.

Response from a resident of Frensham Road, Crowthorne

I would like to offer written opinion on the grass cutting, particularly related to the infrequency of the grass verges getting cut in the Frensham Road and surrounding roads of Wokingham Without, Crowthorne.

The service has badly deteriorated in the last couple of years, with last year being the worst yet. This year is a little more difficult to comment fully due to the unusually warmer weather, but generally has not been cut quickly enough.

I believe the contractors used changed last year, and I would say the new contractors do a better job of clearing up the cut grass from the pavements etc. than the previous contractors did. The big issue is that the time between cuts is allowing the grass to become too long, for too long a duration.

Now grass pollen is the UK's biggest cause of hay fever suffered, and grass does not produce pollen until it becomes long, so the poor level of cutting is particularly causing health issues to people in the community, my eldest daughter who is 13 being one of them!

The other aspect is that long grass can make it difficult to see if there are potentially dangerous items, rubbish or dog poo lying within it, and most of the long grass is on the roadside grass verges where people have to access their cars, so becoming unavoidable.

Response from a resident of Woodley

My Husband and I have lived in Woodley for 34 Years and we have never known grass verges and parks to be as bad as they have been over the past couple of years. This year seems to have been particularly bad. In fact there was a very lengthy discussion on a local Woodley Facebook page about it. This included a local Councillor who got involved and helped out with getting problem areas looked at.

On the Wokingham Council website there is a section on grass cutting that states "Grass is no longer than 125mm (5 inches) and no shorter than 30mm (1 inch) in general grass areas - most highway verges and parks where it has not been left for wildflower planting or long grass areas"

We have a small green in front of our house and at times the grass has grown to lengths of over one foot, when it is finally cut the grass cuttings are just left in clumps on the green and scattered over the pathways, a slip hazard if wet.

Areas immediately around trees and lamp posts are never cut/strimmed, we actually cut the grass around the tree on the green in front of our house ourselves as it had grown to around two foot high.

We have an alleyway that runs between our road Millbank Crescent and Colemansmoor Lane and the weed growth along it is awful, as are the weeds that grow around the trees up near our local shop.

Local parks have also been an issue Vauxhall Park and Sandford Park in particular. In Vauxhall Park this summer the grass in the wooded area was cut but the grass on the

park got left so long that children would have been unable to play ball and run around safely. It was finally cut but only after complaints were made.

Grass left long in parks also attracts rubbish and you cannot see any dog mess that is left behind by irresponsible dog owners. I also believe that leaving the grass long in the parks is a health hazard regarding ticks which have certainly been on the increase this year amongst local dog owners, and also when the grass goes to seed it also causes problems for dogs as they get these embedded in paws.

The kerbsides/gutters are also a disgrace with weeds growing in excess of one foot high. The ones in our road were only partially cleared this week. We did look at the WBC website which stated that the road sweeper/weed clearance did a round in May but this never happened otherwise the weeds would not have been so long and when we looked at the date it supposedly took place we were in all day and never saw anyone.

Below are a few comments from the discussion on Facebook back in May/June this year regarding the lack of grass cutting:

They have cut the verges down Vauxhall but all the grass is now spread out over the road. The weeds are growing like mad at the roadside, these used to get treated with weed killer at one time.

Quite apart from making Woodley look scruffy and unloved I'm sure if you went to see any of the local vets they would confirm a much higher increase in grass seeds stuck in pets paws and ears, and if they're inhaled into the animals lungs this could well be fatal if not picked up early. Also there's the increase in ticks.

Was out and about this morning and couldn't help but notice all the Council owned grass areas are all overgrown severely. Our council tax gets put up and is the most expensive rate around so I'm told (please correct me if I'm wrong). So why is the Council not taking care of the horticulture in the area. For example, look at Bader Way and all the grass between there and Winnersh Triangle. It's about 5ft high and looks atrocious. Woodley and surrounding areas used to be well kept and maintained and now just looks like they have been forgotten about.

A lot of people are saying how untidy the community is becoming. I hear this most days. You should see the green in Brecon Road and all the posts knocked down because the cars that park there cannot see the posts hidden in the long grass. It is such a mess.

Response from Reading Friends of the Earth

Many local residents do want their Councils to make verges, parks and open spaces more attractive for people and wildlife. At Earley Green Fair, on 4th August, 51 people signed a Friends of the Earth petition calling on local Councils to adopt a 'Pollinator Action Plan' so that our neighbourhoods can be full of flourishing green spaces for people and bees to enjoy. The petition is also on-line below <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/bees> . We expect to deliver this petition to the Council in the autumn. A guide to developing such a plan is available at:

<https://www.buglife.org.uk/sites/default/files/Helping%20Pollinators%20Locally.pdf>

Wokingham's 'flexible' approach seems sound in principle. Many people in Earley are very pleased to see roadside flower planting in many places and the mowing contractors already take care to avoid a wild orchid site by the B3270.

The National Pollinator Strategy for England calls for more flowers, trees and shrubs to provide pollen and nectar, and for cutting grass less often to allow plants to flower.

Apparently Burnley Borough Council estimates that it saves around £50,000 helping pollinators by not cutting grass so often. They are also making savings and helping bees by planting perennial, bee-friendly flowers in their flower beds, instead of annual bedding plants.

Response from a resident of Stonehaven Drive, Woodley

I write with some observations regarding grass cutting and how the green areas in my local area are kept, used and abused!

My property is on Stonehaven Drive and I am lucky enough to have a green area in front of my property and also the bigger green field (Colemans Moore) which recently had the added benefit of an upgraded cycle way added.

Generally when the grass is cut I would say a reasonable job is done. I sometimes struggle with the frequency of the cuts, in particular earlier this year when it was left far too long (time and length) and when it was cut, many of the clippings were left in the road which could potentially cause a problem for other departments later down the line.

What I do struggle with is when the maintenance team take it upon themselves to create a wilder look in certain areas and then fall back on the fact it is for nature and diversity. The green diversity part in my opinion should be kept in the local nature reserves, Dinton Pastures, Southlake, etc. and the green fields and verges should create a statement that Woodley is a well-kept area and not left un-kept.

My main gripe is that the grass around trees is not cut, being told that this is to protect the trees. I cut the grass around the trees in my garden, they are still healthy and the ones in front of my house have clearly been there for many years with the grass being cut around them. The real reason, is saving time, lack of effort and desire to do a good job. Have the Council followed the chaps on their rounds, you will then see the division of labour between break time and actual work, believe me it is not in proportion!

Today the grass was cut in this area and this evening a van has now decided to park on the grass in front of the property where the resident lives. This is directly next to a tree but the Council do not take any action. Two tonnes of metal on the roots of the tree will cause more damage than cutting the grass area. The green areas are just that, green, and not parking bays and definitely not extensions to residents' front gardens. It is also unsightly and selfish especially when there is plenty of road to park on and they have their own garden to mess up if that's what they choose to do!

As soon as a traveller dares park on a grass area the council take action, why the failing and discrimination in this area? If you go to Wokingham and Bracknell, signage is there instructing no parking on grass verges, it does need to happen here to protect the green space (personally you would hope common sense would say, don't park on green verges/areas).

I very much love the green areas in Woodley, they do need to be kept nice and respected by all. I did mention to my local Councillor that by ensuring verges are not parked on this will ultimately mean a vehicle is on the road which by my reckoning should also slow traffic down and make the area safer for all (win/win).

I welcome the opportunity to put my view forward on this subject but I also think that the Council need to be more proactive in such areas and not just wait for things to be reported. People are employed to represent the Borough and should therefore ensure value for money is always obtained without the need to consult in this manner.

To finish off on a slightly different subject, when were the roads in my area last swept? I have an e-mail to say that the agreement is every six weeks, this is clearly not the case and again if the Council did inspections they would realise a service is being paid for and not delivered. Again, this is just basic stuff which should be done as a matter of course and shouldn't need a resident to keep raising an issue.

Response from a resident of Broad Hinton

My thoughts on the 2016 grass cutting service as applied to the Broad Hinton area:

The contractors need supervision, as grass length regularly exceeds cutting limit but the contractor does not attend to it expeditiously.

Different operatives leave different areas uncut, there appears to be no plan. For instance, during the last cut in August an area in front of the seat roughly at the bottom end of Poundfield Way has been left uncut and looks hideous. I have no problem with edges left uncut or small areas between trees and bushes to help wildlife.

At the start of the season (Ok I grant that this year there were exceptionally wet conditions) the grass was left like a jungle and when it was first cut the cuttings were left spread everywhere looking extremely unsightly and making it difficult for dog walkers to clear up after their dogs.

In addition the growth of weeds has increased since this intermittent service began in 2016 which sometimes leaves the area looking like a cabbage patch. Compare this with the excellent results of regular grass cutting of Stanlake Meadow by Twyford Parish.

Response from a resident of Lower Earley

Grass cutting in Lower Earley is no longer frequent as in previous years, and does not appear to be cut as short as before. Large amounts of cut grass are often left behind in clumps. The area opposite my house is Council property but is not cut by the council. The nearby children's play area is also constantly overgrown. Overall this represents a most unsatisfactory level of service considering the high level of council tax for this area.

Response from a resident of Wescott

There are two main issues:

1. Not all verges are being cut on a regular basis. Wescott Ward encompasses much of Wokingham town centre and the approach roads to it from Coppid Beech and the Ford Garage. Of particular concern is the Coppid Beech roundabout and the approach roads. The central reservation was cut for the first time this cutting season a week ago. The weeds were waste high. The verges on the outer side of the roundabout and approach roads have still to be cut. The excuse given is that it is difficult to cut the grass safely without closing the road. The reality is that the same company cuts the verges of the A329M and could use the same techniques at the same time on the verges and central reservations.
2. Because the verges are not being cut on a regular basis, when they are cut the grass is long and falls into the gutters. The grass seeds then germinate and fresh weeds grow. This is not helped by an inadequate weed killing regime and poor standards from the road sweeping teams of OCS (but this is another future topic for O&S I think).

Response from a resident of Sheerlands Road, Arborfield

I live on Sheerlands Road, adjacent to a public walkway connecting Sheerlands Road and Tyler Drive. Prior to 2016 this area was cut regularly and maintained. Since then cutting has been intermittent to non-existent. I have called and emailed the Cleaner & Greener team to remind them to cut it. I have been told by the team and by the contractors that they are confused as to which areas need to be cut when they show up to cut other nearby areas, but the problem continues to happen. This was never a problem prior to 2016. This year, the area has not been cut by the Council at all.

Last year on the occasions the area was cut, after my contacting the team, grass cuttings have not been collected and debris was left in the walkway and over my driveway which the walkway runs next to.

On three occasions this year I have cut the area myself since noticing other areas have been cut but not the walkway. After emailing the team I have not received any response that the area will be cut or in what timeframe. My only option here would be to look to employ a private contractor and have the costs charged back to the Council as there seems to be no clear way of escalating such topics once they have been reported.

I hope this helps in your review of the current service and look forward to hearing about any changes that may be planned and implemented as this situation really needs to change.

Response from the Maiden Erlegh Residents Association

We understand that you have asked for public comments on the standard of grass cutting/maintenance within the Borough. This has been the subject of many complaints throughout Maiden Erlegh and beyond and therefore we welcome this review.

The new contract which commenced last year has not worked well. In the first year, the grass cutting commenced very late in the season. We were told this was due to difficulties encountered with the start of the new contract and weather conditions. However, residents were not at all happy that grass verges and children's playgrounds remained untidy for much of the year. Even the grass and weeds between the roads and kerbs was allowed to grow out of control for weeks.

This year has been little different and we have not detected any improvements. Once again, grass cutting started very late in the season due to 'weather conditions' and our estate now looks very unloved, to the extent that homeowners are worried that the sorry state of our grass verges and parks will put off potential home buyers.

Even when the grass is cut, it is evident that this has not been done well - perhaps due to the length it was permitted to grow - and the fact that grass cuttings are simply left without being cleared up has led to even more complaints. This might be more acceptable if the grass was cut regularly, but if it is allowed to grow to the unacceptable lengths we have noticed this year, then clearly the grass cuttings will cause a mess and may actually kill off some of the grass.

Our grass verges used to be attractive, but now they look a complete mess, some areas worse than others. When grass and weeds are also allowed to grow to a considerable length between the road and kerbside, the appearance of the whole estate looks very shabby indeed.

The overwhelming view of residents is that grass should not be left to grow out of control like this. We support some areas being reserved to grow wild flowers, but the grass verges should be cut more regularly. We have been alarmed to see how long the grass is

allowed to grow in our children's playgrounds as well, and many parents are concerned that children could easily get bitten by ticks as a result.

Our view is that we would like to see more frequent cuts in future, particularly in the spring and early summer; more attention is given to grass and weeds growing between the roads and kerbs; the grass at playgrounds is cut regularly and kept short; and we would like to see measures put in place to restore those verges that have become eroded by cars parking on them. To ensure that restored grass verges do not become eroded again and all verges are protected, we would like to see measures put in place to discourage car parking on verges. In some areas, there are posts in place that do have the intended effect, and we would like to see this extended throughout the estate.

I trust that you find these comments helpful and I trust that they will be addressed in your review. This is the area where we receive the majority of complaints from our residents, and so it is important that this matter is addressed.

Response from the Whitegates Residents Association

Summary

ACER believes that WBC should review the whole grass cutting and street cleaning service to determine:

1. The actual objectives of this service in each area and the success criteria by which its effectiveness can be judged.
2. The funding available.
3. The most effective way of achieving these objectives through careful co-ordination of cutting, weed removal and sweeping.
4. An effective system of monitoring and review for each area (involving local groups where possible) to ensure that relevant personnel know as soon as possible if the objectives are not being achieved and that remedial action can be taken.

ACER recommends that WBC involve town/parish councils and local resident groups in both the determination of objectives and the monitoring and review.

Background

ACER represents some 1500 households in the Whitegates ward of Earley. Since summer 2016 ACER representatives have walked round all the streets in the Whitegates area at regular intervals noting:

- Condition of grass verges;
- Weeds in channel (between pavement and road), at the back of the pavement and (increasingly) in between the kerbstone and the tarmac on the pavement;
- Debris (leaves, soil, grass etc) in the channel and on the pavement.

They also record the amount of litter (and litter hotspots in that road); parking on the road, pavement or verge; flooding issues; other issues (including uneven pavements).

This information is entered into a database which is sent to Cleaner and Greener at WBC. Local Councillors, ACER committee and EASI are also sent copies. The database highlights those aspects of the streets which have improved and those which have deteriorated.

ACER believes that the effectiveness of the grass cutting service cannot be considered in isolation. Maintaining the good condition of the pavement and road requires proper attention to cutting of grass, removal of grass cuttings and other debris and clearance of weeds. Poor management of these issues will lead not only to untidy verges but also to degradation of road and pavement and to an increase in flooding. The following comments from ACER therefore refer to all aspects of street management.

Larger areas of grass

ACER believes that larger areas of grass should be managed according to the requirements of the residents who use these areas. Areas used by children for ball games should be kept short, as should areas for family picnics, but other areas of grass should be allowed to grow and flower to encourage the development of habitats for insects and other wildlife. It should be possible, where there are larger areas of grass, to provide for both by having cut playing areas surrounded by uncut wildlife areas. It is important, however, that when long grass is cut due regard is paid to the disposal of the long cut grass. Allowing long cut grass to blow onto roads and pavements will lead to the establishment of weeds and possible blockage of drains.

Grass Verges

The grass verges in the Whitegates area are in a poor condition: There are two reasons for this:

1. **Infrequent cutting of the grass verges.** During 2017 and 2018 up to the current dry period the grass verges have been cut very infrequently. Cutting started far too late in the spring 2018 (as it did in both the spring of 2016 and 2017). This meant that the grass was extremely long and generally seeding by the time it was cut. This year the second cut did not take place until at least 6 weeks after the first by which time the grass was once again extremely long and seeding.

The consequences of leaving the grass too long before cutting are three-fold.

- First, the seeds settle in the channel and at the back of the pavement and increasingly in between the kerb and the pavement where they germinate in the accumulating debris and lead to weed growth (see below).
- Second, when cut the long grass is not collected and therefore settles in the channel and at the back of the pavement (leading to an increase in debris and weeds) and is washed into drains causing blockages. Cut grass is sometimes blown off the road by workmen but it is soon blown or washed back again. If grass is to be allowed to grow longer the cut grass must be removed immediately after cutting.
- Third, infrequent cutting of grass does not encourage the grasses to 'tiller'. Frequent cutting encourages grass to tiller which in turn leads to a thicker sward which is more resilient to drought and wear. The grass on the verges is currently very sparse because it has been allowed to grow too long before cutting. It has then not been able to stand up to the recent spell of hot, dry weather.

In addition, the long uncut grass hides the uneven surfaces of the damaged verges and thus causes a trip hazard – particularly where pedestrians are having to walk on the grass because the pavement is blocked by parked cars. It should also be noted that the long grass hides litter and thus makes it more difficult for the EASI volunteers to operate.

2. **Damaged verges** – the verges in a number of roads (recorded in detail separately by ACER and sent to Earley Town Council) are very badly damaged due to regular parking on verges, activities associated with building work (particularly where there are extensions) and residents driving over the grass where the drive entrance has been widened without a corresponding widening of the dropped kerb area. In many places these damaged verges are becoming extremely dangerous and although the grass has grown back in some instances this actually compounds the issue as the unevenness is not noticeable. ACER recognises that this is not an issue for this consultation but suggests that if the verges were in better condition it would make the job of the grass cutting team much easier.

Despite repeated requests to WBC to come and cut the verges when they have become too long (and apologies from WBC and eventual action) this situation has not improved since early 2016. The team continue to be late starting the cutting in the

spring due to the weather and continue to leave the verges too long between cuts during the summer. Once cut, long cut grass lies on the pavements and in the channels sometimes for weeks afterwards. Blowing the cut grass off the pavement and road is not sufficient to prevent the spread of weeds and blockage of drains.

Weeds

In most streets where there are weeds these have increased since 2016. In many streets channel weeds and back pavement weeds are widespread and weeds are now beginning to appear between the kerb stone and the pavement tarmac. In the long term this will lead to degradation of the pavement and road surface. There is already a gap appearing between the kerb and the road in roads such as Hilltop Road and Byron Road.

WBC stated that weeds are sprayed three times a year but ACER has seen little evidence of spraying although there has been some hand removal in a few streets. Weed growth could also be reduced if the roads were swept more often, particularly after grass cutting, and if it is decided that verges should be allowed to grow longer before cutting immediate removal of long cut grass must be an essential part of the work.

Debris

The amount of debris in the channels or on the pavement varies from street to street and did seem to have improved in some streets when inspected in September 2017 (compared with June 2017). However, debris has been widespread for much of 2018. It is obvious from the amount of accumulated moss etc. that the backs of some pavements have not been swept for a very long time even where there are no overhanging trees. The accumulation of debris leads to increased growth of weeds and also blocked drains. It is noted that the street sweepers do not necessarily sweep on the date advertised on the WBC website and that they often drive down the middle of the road which obviously does not clear the channels.

Flooding

There are some areas prone to flooding including the London Road service roads – often as a result of blocked drains due to leaves, cut grass and general debris.

The solution

ACER recognises that there is limited funding for street maintenance (grass cutting, street cleaning, repairs) but believes that the current system is not capable of maintaining the condition of the streets never mind improving the state of the roads, pavements and verges and believes that the money currently spent on grass cutting and street cleaning is not spent in the most effective way.

ACER believes that there are a number of measures that could be taken by WBC which would ensure that the money spent on this aspect of street maintenance is used more effectively – i.e. the residents would get more for their money. These measures include in the shorter term:

1. Cutting the grass verges more often – it will be more cost effective in the long term as it will slow down the rate of degradation of the road and pavement materials and maintain the quality and therefore resilience of the grass verge.
2. Co-ordinating grass cutting, sweeping and spraying/weed removal so that any debris from cutting and weed removal is swept away immediately before settling in channels, blocking drains etc.
3. Ensuring that roads which experience heavy parking are swept in the middle of the day when there are likely to be fewer parked cars and therefore the channels can be reached. If residents knew when the roads were to be swept they may even be willing to move cars to allow a more effective sweep.
4. Monitoring the cutting of grass and sweeping of roads and pavements more carefully. Residents do try to help here, but as they do not know when the cutter/sweeper is due they are unable to check if the job has been done properly.

5. Following up on applications for extensions/other building work to ensure that damaged verges have been repaired, litter and debris removed etc.

In the longer term the following should be considered:

1. The implications for on-street parking when considering planning applications for in-fill, HMOs, extensions and businesses.
2. The replacement of some damaged verges in roads such as London Road South, Delamere Road, Erleigh Court Gardens with tarmac parking bays. This would reduce the maintenance cost of the verges and be more cost-effective in the longer term.

Conclusion

ACER asks that WBC reconsider the overall purpose of grass cutting and street cleaning. Is it to keep the streets and roads 'looking good'? Is it a question of health and safety? Is it to maintain the condition of the road and pavement materials? Is it to keep drains clear? It may be necessary to prioritise these objectives and it is possible that they will vary from area to area. ACER does not have data relating to the current spend on cutting verges, cutting open spaces, street sweeping etc. and so is unable to comment on how the overall budget is currently allocated. However, the present system appears to be the worst of all worlds. The grass verges look untidy for most of the year, debris is widespread on pavements and in channels for most of the year, the drains are often blocked by grass and weeds, the pavement and road material are degrading and residents are obviously dissatisfied. Does the current system satisfy any of its objectives?

ACER believes that the grass cutting should be reviewed together with the sweeping and spraying of the streets to determine the most cost-effective way of keeping the streets clean and tidy, the drains free from blockages and degradation of pavement and road material to a minimum and whatever else WBC feel is the purpose of this service.

To conclude, ACER believes that WBC should review the whole grass cutting and street cleaning service to determine:

1. The actual objectives of this service in each area and the success criteria by which its effectiveness can easily be judged.
2. The funding available.
3. The most cost-effective way of achieving these objectives through careful co-ordination of cutting, weed removal and sweeping – if cutting is to be less frequent then more time and resources need to be spent on seeping and weed removal.
4. An effective system of monitoring and review for each area (involving local groups where possible) to ensure that relevant personnel know as soon as possible if the objectives are not being achieved and that remedial action can be taken.

ACER recommends that WBC involve town/parish councils and local resident groups in both the determination of objectives and the monitoring and review. ACER would be happy to be involved in such a review for Earley and happy to adapt its current monitoring system to assist WBC in the review.

Response from Winnersh Parish Council

Thank you for providing the Winnersh Parish Council the opportunity to comment on the current arrangements for grass cutting in the area.

The Wokingham Borough Council web site indicates that the current contract standards are as follows:

- Grass is no longer than 125mm (5 inches) and no shorter than 30mm (1 inch) in general grass areas - most highway verges and parks where it has not been left for wildflower planting or long grass areas.

Parish Council comment; It is clear that these standards are NOT being adhered to, as grass verges adjacent to the highway network and footpaths have considerably longer grass than the standard maximum of 125mm especially during the main growing season of April to July.

The Parish Council suggests that the current arrangements are abandoned and a fixed grass cutting programme is put in place where all grass verges adjacent to the highway and footpaths that are not designated as 'wildflower areas' are cut on a much increased frequency of say once every 15 to 20 days (to fit in with weekdays and avoid weekends) during the main growing season (April to July) and once a month during March and August to October.

- Where grass is left to grow long then litter should not be a cause for complaint
Parish Council comment; The problem with leaving grass to grow long is that litter gets 'trapped' within the grass and when it is mown the litter is cut into shreds, creating more of a problem.
- Care and attention is given to edges and obstacles e.g. fence posts, trees, etc.
Parish Council comment; The strimming around fence posts, trees etc. is reasonable, but the low frequency of carrying out this task is the main issue.
- Finish is free of litter, debris, weed flower stalks and grass culms
Parish Council comment; This clearly does not happen in the current grass cutting contract as the grass is so long when it is cut the cut grass is similar to a 'hay field' and much of the litter (normally shredded) debris, wild flower stalks and grass culms remains within the long cut grass.
- Paths and surrounding edges are free of clippings
Parish Council comment; whilst your contractor makes every effort to clear away cuttings etc. from paths and surrounding areas, as they move through an area, the amount of grass cuttings remaining on the verges is so large that the wind normally carries some of these cuttings back onto surrounding paths, making the area look untidy.
- There is an even spread of well mulched clippings
Parish Council comment; There is normally an even spread of grass cuttings, but they are deep as the grass has been so long and 'sits on top of' grass that is nearly 125mm long and ready for another cut.

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