

Consultation Summary Report

Why we consulted

Over the last five years, we've had to find savings of £41m. Since 2012/13, the government has given us less money by reducing the Revenue Support Grant by £30m, whilst over the same period we've seen increased demand for our services.

For 2017/18, we estimate that our budget will be £117m. To achieve a balanced budget we'll have to identify £8m of savings or increases in our income.

In order to inform this process, we published a list of those proposals which would likely have a direct impact on service users, and sought the views from those affected and interested:

- to understand the likely impact
- to identify any measures to reduce their impact
- to explore any possible alternatives for both savings and income generation

Approach

We published all the proposals on our website on 31 October 2016 with feedback requested by midnight on 11 December 2016.

Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), which outlined the overall background to the exercise, and provided links to each of the individual proposals on our [Consultation Portal](#).

Each individual page included further details on the specifics of what the proposal contained and what we thought the impact might be, along with any other elements we'd taken into account. Feedback was then invited through an online form and through a dedicated email address. Hard copies of the proposal documents and surveys were also made available on request.

As well as publishing the consultations on our website, we also emailed members of the West Berkshire Community Panel (around 800 people), local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions. Heads of Service also made direct contact with those organisations directly affected prior to them being made publicly available.

Finally, we issued a press release on the 31 October 2016, and further publicised our consultations through our Facebook and Twitter accounts. We also placed posters in our main offices and libraries, and made them available to WBC Councillors and Parish and Town Councils to put up in the wards/parishes.

Proposal Background

The Countryside Service manages the Grounds Maintenance contract which delivers maintenance of parks, open spaces, amenity areas and highway verges in the district. As the Highway Authority, we are required to cut the rural and urban highway verges in order to maintain a safe environment for all users of the highway. Highway verge and open space grass cutting is primarily carried out to maintain a pleasant and attractive environment.

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There has been a previous reduction to rural grass cutting to two cuts a year from the previous three.

Proposal Details

To reduce the urban open space and road verge grass cuts from ten to eight per year, saving £40,000 per year from a £193,000 budget.

Legislation Requirements

There is a duty on the Highway authority to maintain a safe highway network. The proposed reduction in grass cutting will not reduce highway safety.

Consultation Response

Number of Responses

In total, 27 responses were received.

Summary of Main Points

Most of those comments against the proposal were concerned about the aesthetic impact of the lack of grass cutting and its impact in the pride that residents take in their local environment. Concerns were also expressed about the safety issues with long grass and grass cuttings being left to lie on the surrounding hard paved areas, these being hazards to old people and children. Long grass was also seen as an attractive place for dog walkers to allow their dogs to foul. There was concern also about the untidy nature of verges and open space bringing about a general decline in the amenity of the area with potential for increased crime and antisocial behaviour.

Those in support of the proposal said that faced with the option they preferred this rather than other service reductions. Some went further to suggest that with some investment the verges and open space areas could become better for wildlife as a result. One respondent said that grass cutting should occur only when it is required, i.e. more grass cutting in wetter years when growth is strong and less in dryer years.

The parish councils who responded said that this was something that they would be interested in funding, or at least discussing, as part of the Devolution work.

Summary of Responses by Question

1. Are you...?

	Number	%
A resident of West Berkshire	19	70.4%
Employed by West Berkshire Council	4	14.8%
A Parish/Town Councillor	5	18.5%
A District Councillor	0	0%
A Service Provider	0	0%
A Partner Organisation	0	0%
Other	4	14.8%

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2. How far do you agree with the proposal to reduce the urban open space and road verge grass cuts from ten to eight per year?

	Number	%
Agree	7	25.9%
Neither agree nor disagree	8	29.6%
Disagree	8	29.6%
Don't know	1	3.7%
Not answered	3	11.1%
Total	27	100%

3. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how this proposal might impact people? For example, do you think it will affect particular individuals more than others?

Concern was raised about the impact of long grass lying on pavements and hard standing areas on health and safety, specifically the risks to older and infirm people, and children. There was a concern raised by Thatcham Town Council about the potential impact on street drainage and that, although they supported this proposal, they only do so if there is no impact on flood risk.

4. If the decision is taken to proceed with this proposal, do you have any suggestions for how we can reduce the impact on those affected? If so, please provide details.

Council officers will have to ensure that arisings from the cutting of grass areas are blown back away from pavements and hard standing areas. There were suggestions about volunteers taking on the role or indeed the local parish and town councils. One respondent suggested that arisings should be collected and composted and then offered for sale locally.

One respondent also suggested that we only cut when required, or consider what areas need less cutting with efforts focussed on where the current level would be required for aesthetic purposes. They suggested that the local community could advise on where cutting frequency could be manipulated to make the necessary saving.

5. Do you have any other suggestions as to how these savings (approximately £40,000) might be delivered within this service? If so, please provide details.

Some respondents suggested that there might be a benefit for wildlife and that the reduction could be managed as a wildlife area. We had a suggestion that Council members might like to make up the cuts by trimming the grass themselves.

6. Do you have any suggestions on how we might increase income, either in this service, or elsewhere in the council?

A range of responses were forthcoming; reduced council staff pensions, review pay structures, review lease car entitlement, make councillors volunteer their time instead of drawing expenses and consider a reduction in the number of councillors in the

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district. One respondent suggested that the council's contractors offer private grass cutting services (as a means of reducing costs). One respondent said they would be prepared to buy the compost resulting from the increased amount of grass, although it should be noted that the collection of grass cuttings is not routinely carried out as part of the verge and open space maintenance. Two respondents said that they would cut their own grass with a reduction in Council Tax.

7. Is there any way that you, or your organisation, can contribute in helping to alleviate the impact of this proposal? If so, please provide details of how you can help.

A parish council said it was already discussing with WBDC the devolution of some services whilst another commented on similar lines by suggesting that funds be transferred to the Parish who would then make up the reduction from their own funds.

8. Any further comments?

There was a suggestion that community groups could help in some locations where there were specific health and safety concerns. This 'civic pride;' being a means for local communities to help the council in return for funds then being made available to community groups to take on certain functions.

Officer conclusion and recommendation can be found in the associated Overview of Responses and Recommendations document.

Paul Hendry
Countryside Manager
Planning and Countryside
28 December 2016

Please note: *In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.

All the responses have been provided verbatim as an appendix to this report. Whilst this summary seeks to distil the key, substantive points made, it should also be read in conjunction with the more detailed verbatim comments to ensure a full, rounded perspective of the views and comments are considered.