

Overview of Responses and Recommendations

Appendix N8b

Budget Proposals 2017/18: Urban Grass Cutting		Head of Service: Gary Lugg Author: Paul Hendry – Countryside Manager	2 March 2017 Version 3 (Council)
Proposal:	To reduce the urban open space and road verge grass cuts from ten to eight per year.		
Total budget 2016/17:	£193,000	Recommended officer saving 2017/18:	£40,000 (20.7%)
Initial proposed saving 2017/18:	£40,000 (20.7%)	Final recommendation to Council 2017/18:	To proceed with this proposal
No. of responses:	<p>In total, 27 responses were received. Of those that responded:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19 identified themselves as residents of West Berkshire • 4 as council employees • 5 as Parish/Town Councils • 4 as other, including Unison 		
Key issues raised:	<p>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. 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.</p>		
Equality issues:	No issues were raised during the consultation, that weren't already included in the EqIA stage 1.		
Suggestions for reducing the impact on service users:	Suggestion	Council response	
	Reseed verge areas with an indigenous wildflower/plant mix that would be beneficial to biodiversity, could be left far longer before cutting was needed and could provide a	<p>Impractical. This would require significant investment in terms of capital, and to preserve the wildflower sward we would need to regularly cut and clear (removing off site) all grass arisings to preserve the sward. If we do not cut and clear then we will lose any benefits in introducing wildflowers to the verges and open spaces.</p>	

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	sustained attractive appearance.		
	Grass cutting frequency should be based on when it is required to be done based on length. In a hot dry summer the grass does not grow as much as a wet summer, but I have seen your contractors cutting grass that looks like a bowling green before they cut it, which is not necessary.	In dry years where grass cutting is required less often then the council will actually realise a saving under the current contract. The trend however is for wetter summers and grass does actually grow much later in the year according to recent trends. Introducing a frequency based arrangement for grass cutting is something we can discuss with prospective contractors before the current contract expires, but there is not likely to be any guaranteed savings as the grass sward is expected to have a longer growing season rather than a shorter growing season.	
	Perhaps you need to use these people who have to do community service on some of these jobs, they don't need to be paid.	Impractical. There is not a reliable volunteer workforce who can undertake regular work like this. It is considered better to work with the parish and town councils as part of the devolution agenda.	
	Parish councils take on some of this work, supplementing the reduction in cuts with their own their own funded cuts.	This suggestion is being pursued as part of the devolution agenda.	
	Sponsorship of some verges for income generation.	Sponsorship of some roundabouts and grass areas is already in place but simple maintenance of grass is not an attractive proposition for sponsors.	
	Promote the cutting of verges by residents themselves.	In some cases residents already do but there is no compulsion to do this and often the practice ceases and as residents move away.	
Alternative options for applying the saving in this area:	Suggestion	Council response	
	Review of final salary pension schemes/pay and conditions/lease cars agreements for staff.	These are matters under review already.	
	Directly employ your own labour rather than paying towards	To employ a direct labour force is likely to be more costly as the council will have to set up its own labour force, recruiting staff, providing premises and machinery. These	

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	contractors profits. Use prisoners and other miscreants for a lot of the work.	overhead costs are unlikely to be significantly more cost effective. The council does use the community service organisations for some of its work, however as mentioned above it is not a regular reliable workforce on which to base a key service.	
	Reduce the number of councillors and their expenses, let them volunteer their time to cut grass for the community.	Numbers of councillors is already under review.	
	Put out to contract/review the contract	This is a contracted service and we're reviewing the specification for a new contract in 2017. This may realise additional savings above the reduction in grass cutting.	
Suggestions for income generation:	Suggestion	Council response	
	Contractors offer commercial grass cutting services commercially	Contractors may be able to raise additional income this way; however we're uncertain that this would realise any income to the council. Normally this kind of additional work is not reliable enough to bring about sufficient economies of scale for savings to be realised.	
	Compost grass cuttings and sell to residents.	Impractical. This requires the collection of grass cuttings from verges and open spaces and is very costly.	
	Increase Council Tax	Noted, this is a matter for elected members.	
	Is it possible to provide paid cuts for those who want extra, or initiatives to increase civic pride (brighter village) or central resources that can be borrowed by residents groups etc if they want to take more care themselves.	We are in discussion with parish councils about their involvement in some local services and the use of community groups to carry out some services.	
Charge for such things as tennis courts, skateboarding parks and similar such facilities.	These facilities are under the control of the Town Council. West Berkshire Council has a charging policy for similar facilities elsewhere.		

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Suggestions for how others may help contribute:	None received.		
Officer conclusion and recommendation as a result of the responses:	Working closely with local councils it may be possible to minimise the impacts of this reduction in grass cutting in local communities. This, as well as a revision of the current grounds maintenance contract, seems to present the best options for realising this and other savings. It is therefore recommended that the council progress with this proposal.		

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