

Overview of Responses and Recommendations

Budget Proposals 2024/25: Reduce frequency of parks, open spaces and verge maintenance		Service Director: Jon Winstanley Author: Paul Hendry		8 February 2024 Version 1 (Scrutiny Commission)	
Proposal:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To reduce the number of cuts on urban residential grass verges from 7 to 2 per year To reduce grass cutting on residential open space grass areas from 7 to 4 per year <p>As a consequence of reduced grass cutting there will also be a reduction in the frequency of litter picking on grass verges and open spaces across the district, as this is carried out as part of the grass maintenance operation.</p>				
Total budget 2023/24:	£367,000	Initial proposed saving 2024/25:	Up to £ 220,000	Recommended saving 2024/25:	£90k (final amount TBC)
No. of responses:	<p>In total, 165 responses were received. The breakdown of responses is as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 154 - A resident of West Berkshire 7 - A visitor to West Berkshire 3- A West Berkshire business owner 9- Employed by a West Berkshire business 7- Employed by West Berkshire Council 10 - A Parish/Town Councillor 0- A District Councillor 0 - A partner organisation 1- A West Berkshire Council service provider 3- Other 				
Key issues raised:	<p>The majority of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposals (62% against reductions in verge management and 66% against reductions in open space management). The responses against the proposal were both many and varied but in general a summary of the main points raised can be set out against the following headings: safety issues, social impacts, impacts on children and youth, health impacts, damage to infrastructure, local economic impacts, and ongoing maintenance issues.</p>				

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	<p>Most of those against the proposal are concerned about the safety at road junctions and have concerns about the impact of long grass on sightlines obscuring vision. Responses also raise concerns about negative impacts on the visual amenity of residential areas, and local pride. One respondent referred to this as social ecology, the study of how individuals interact with and respond to the environment around them, and how these interactions affect society and the environment as a whole. There is concern among respondents that residential areas which look unsightly will experience further issues with antisocial behaviour and criminality.</p> <p>The majority of respondents are very concerned about long grass, increased litter and litter hazards hidden in long grass, and increased dog fouling. There are concerns about the damage caused to pavements and carriageway edges as a consequence of grass growing into the tarmac and breaking up path edges. There are concerns that this will also impact on the effectiveness of drainage systems exacerbating flooding in some areas whilst increasing highway maintenance costs. There are concerns about the impact on vulnerable individuals. It was suggested that there will be increased risk to disabled drivers, or those with mobility or other health problems. Concerns were raised regarding wheelchair users and pedestrians with pushchairs who may not be able to use highway footways and footpaths.</p> <p>Other respondents have cautioned that the reductions may not realise some of the environmental benefits anticipated, pointing out that wildflowers don't just appear in long grass without very specific cutting schedules with timings to avoid flowering periods. There are also concerns that the impacts of adverse weather, particularly heavy rain, making cutting of very long grass much more difficult and reducing progress of the cutting teams. There are health concerns for humans and pets alike, hayfever being a particular concern but also Lyme disease due to ticks breeding in the grass sward, and grass seeds which can embed in dogs' ears. Safety concerns expressed also included the increased risk of fire from long dry grass.</p> <p>There are concerns about the loss of leisure and recreational amenity on open spaces, and long grass discouraging use of these areas by children and youths.</p>	

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	<p>Many of those responding in favour of the proposal considered that this was a sensible cost cutting measure which will, or could, bring about ecological and carbon reduction benefits for all members of the community. Some responses pointed out that this was the lesser of all evils considering the council's difficult budget-related decisions. Other respondents made a very clear case for appropriate scheduling of cuts so as to promote the development of wildflower verges and cautioned that timing is critical. One respondent provided more specific and detailed comment, seeing no reason why the verges needed to be cut more than twice a year and proposed the two cuts should be in March/April and August/September/October. This would leave the grass uncut in May, June and July, allowing biodiversity to increase.</p>		
Equality issues:	<p>The implementation of the change will be applied uniformly across the district. The change is not expected to contribute to inequality. If approved for implementation, reasonable care will be taken to ensure that pavements are safe and accessible, and road sightlines are not obstructed.</p>		
Suggestions for reducing the impact on service users:	Suggestion	Council response	
	A lot of the responses spoke about promotion and the need for promotion to be focussed before going ahead with effective messaging to promote the benefits of long grass for biodiversity.	If the proposal goes ahead this can be dealt with by our PR team and with updated information on the council's website. The website will have detail on the proposal and a proposed schedule of cutting so that the general public have information on when cutting is likely to be carried out in each area. This schedule could be impacted by weather conditions and other factors and can never be guaranteed.	
	A number of respondents spoke about sowing wildflower seeds to bolster what nature can provide.	Wildflower seed will not germinate if sown directly onto grass. The land would need preparation first and this is not feasible nor appropriate.	
	There were some requests for the regime to include a 'cut and collect' so as to promote wildflowers by reducing soil fertility and grass vigour, and to	This would be an ideal scenario but is not deemed feasible as 'cut and collect' takes much more time and is significantly more expensive. Not only would there be no saving, but the practice would also involve a budget pressure overall.	

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	address complaints about heavy grass arisings being left on the grass surface.		
	Some respondents asked that volunteers or the public should be encouraged to take on maintenance. Further they asked that the council provides clear guidance to the public as to safe ways to maintain verges.	In some areas across the district residents do carry out their own maintenance but this is not openly promoted by the council. Perhaps, there could be an opportunity to promote that option more widely.	
	Focus our cutting regime on verges which are essential for vision. Other comments received asked that the council considers at an alternative regime which would see the verges and open spaces cut to the same frequency.	In order to meet a savings target the numbers of employees proposed to be assigned to grass has been reduced by more than 50% to 5 full time staff. This is extremely lean. This does not allow for tailoring of cutting/strimming to suit locations/situations or highway requirements. Harmonising the cutting frequency across open spaces and verges will increase the volume of grass cutting and consequently the level of saving will be significantly reduced.	

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Identified benefits or opportunities	Suggestion	Council response	
	Greater biodiversity in urban spaces that will be valuable to the whole community.	Agreed and supports the Environment Strategy priorities and helps to address the climate and ecological emergency, which have been declared by the council.	
	Will be beneficial for children who can experience nature close at hand.	Agreed	
Alternative options for applying the saving in this area:	Suggestion	Council response	
	Pass open space and urban verges management responsibilities to the relevant parishes.	It may well be that some of the parishes may want to employ a small local contractor to cut grass in their area. There are some merits in this as the cutting can be better tailored to suit local need (and promote ecology). Not many local authorities have truly engaged with 'devolution' however.	
	Cut remuneration packages of senior managers in the council to save costs. To consider a wage freeze rather than make redundancies within services. Also for the council to restrict management activities; socials, training, and entertainment.	The council has taken steps to restrict recruitment. There has never been significant expenditure on socials or entertainment, this was never a part of staff retention policies. Training budgets were previously reduced across the council other than mandatory and career-related training.	
	Several responses asked the council to cease expenditure on non-essential projects	This is already being considered as a consequence of restrictions on council-funded capital schemes.	

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Suggestions for income generation:	Suggestion	Council response	
	Try to increase sponsorship of open spaces and parks	This is currently a consideration being explored.	
Officer conclusion and recommendation as a result of the responses:	<p>Most of the respondents are against this proposal. Concerns raised include the likelihood of areas looking unkempt and the potential to attract antisocial behaviour, risk of litter, dog poo and other hazards being lodged in long grass. On the positive side, there will be benefits for local biodiversity at a time where there is a local and national ecological emergency. Adoption of this proposal will come with some operational challenges as the contractor staff remaining may not have enough spare capacity to respond quickly to non-routine tasks or urgent requests e.g. to clear specific sightlines. This option is still available to decision makers because of the challenging financial situation. Officers have noted the risks associated with this proposal and will be ready to implement the changes if approved.</p>		

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