

Budget Proposals 2024/25: Reduce frequency of parks, open spaces and verge maintenance

Consultation Summary Report

Why did we consult?

The council is facing unprecedented financial pressures. From historically high inflation increasing contract costs, to rising housing costs and through to large increases in cost and demand in supporting our most vulnerable residents with social care, the council has some major cost increases.

In 2024/25, we need to find £14.2 million in savings or income generation. This figure is based on the assumption that Council Tax increases by 4.99% overall in line with previous government referendum limits. We have identified £12.2 million worth of savings and income generation, of which approximately £1.75 million comes from proposals that require public consultation.

Through extensive internal discussions and meetings with our service providers, we've identified 10 proposals.

For more information please visit <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/balancing-our-budget>

Approach

We published all the public facing proposals on our website on 27 November 2023 with feedback requested by midnight on 11 January 2024.

Respondents were directed to a central index pageⁱ, which outlined the overall background to the exercise, and provided links to each of the individual proposals on our Consultation and Engagement Hubⁱⁱ.

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 considered. Feedback was then invited through an online survey, and hard copies of the proposal documents and surveys were made available on request.

As well as publishing the consultations on our website, we also emailed members of the West Berkshire Community Panel (around 2,500 people), local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions. Service Directors contacted those organisations directly affected prior to them being made publicly available.

Finally, we issued a press release on 28 November 2023, and further publicised our consultations through our social media accounts and residents' e-newsletters. We also placed posters in our main offices and other council properties e.g. libraries and family hubs and made them available to WBC Councillors to put up in the wards/parishes.

Proposal Background

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West Berkshire Council's Countryside Service manages grounds maintenance services across the district. The current grounds maintenance contract, which commenced in January 2023, provides for the grass maintenance of several hundred small open spaces, large public parks and open spaces, and highway grass verges. It also covers litter collection, including dog waste bins and litter bins in these areas. Other services provided include sports pitch maintenance and the management of Henwick Worthy Sports Ground.

These services impact directly on our residents and communities. Many residents will use our parks, open spaces and sports facilities, and almost all will benefit from having green open spaces and verges with trees within the streets where they live.

The grounds maintenance contract currently delivers:

- an average of 7 cuts a year of urban residential grass verges
- an average of 7 cuts a year of residential open space grass areas
- weekly collection of litter from parks and open spaces

This is comparable to services provided by other councils, albeit many councils are currently reviewing their service levels.

The Countryside Team is also responsible for local delivery of biodiversity services, such as the management of rural grass verges and urban nature reserves. Increasingly we are working with communities to improve urban areas and parks for wildlife. Over the last two years, the council has been working with the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) to identify verges on the rural road network which can support wildflowers.

Legislation Requirements

There is no statutory requirement for the delivery of grounds maintenance services. The council has a responsibility under the various highways acts to maintain a safe urban and rural verge network.

Proposal Details

- 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

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.

This should realise a saving of up to £220,000.

Consultation Response

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Number of Responses

In total, 165 responses were received.

Summary of Main Points. (Those against the proposal).

The majority of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposals. The responses against the proposal to reduce grass cutting frequencies 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.

Safety issues:

A number of concerns were raised about the impact of reduced cutting on the urban highway verge network particularly sightlines. There is concern that sightlines will be obscured given the reduction to 2 annual cuts potentially leading to an increased number of road traffic accidents due to obscured vision. Impacts on the disabled, disabled vehicle users and those with restricted movement were mentioned.

Respondents also considered that residents will not be able to walk on the verges which are a safe place to avoid footways and road issues and so add to safety concerns. Vulnerable groups were identified as being: the disabled, sight impaired, pushchair and wheelchair users. Many respondents raised concerns about increased litter and glass which will gather on verges. Similarly, concerns were raised about the amount of dog poo which will be left on verges due to the difficulty that dog owners will experience picking up dog poo in long grass. Some respondents made a correlation between this issue and the proposed reduction in dog and litter bins.

Less commonly mentioned concerns relate to the likely increase in less desirable plant species which can prove harmful to children, giant hogweed being a stated example. It is suggested that this was the outcome of similar proposal in Oxfordshire.

Social Impacts:

A number of respondents expressed concerns about reduced grass maintenance making the District look uncared for leading to further social decline and antisocial behaviour. According to one respondent who gave a more detailed response, Oxford City Council and also Oxfordshire County Council embarked upon a similar reduction in grass cuts in 2021 to present. This change has reportedly resulted in compromised infrastructure, large rise in crime and reduction in community wellbeing, for the following reason: "place people in a disorderly environment, then you are more likely to see a rise in disorderly behaviour". We are advised by the respondent that after 2 years the effects of the reductions there have seen an adverse consequence in many areas, some of which were completely unforeseen. The respondent referred

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to the experience of Brighton and Hove City Council who received local and national criticism for open space maintenance reductions (this criticism related to reduction in weeding and pesticide application).

Comments received suggested that there is a danger that volunteers within the community would not offer themselves for duties, for community litter picking and footpath maintenance etc, due to the task being “overwhelming”. Some responses suggested that if the council appears not to be concerned about the condition of residential areas, then why should communities.

It was noted by a number of respondents that the cutting of verges and open spaces has already been reduced over several years resulting in residential areas becoming less “welcoming, clean, safe, attractive and accessible” and any further reduction would be detrimental to “your own stated aims”.

Impacts on children and youth:

Many respondents raised concerns about the impacts of long grass on open spaces on play opportunities for children and on informal sport. Long grass makes the use of open spaces by children and youths much more difficult. Respondents consequently stated that physical activity would be reduced due to the local environment being less attractive and with open spaces, paths and footways being encroached upon by long grass and vegetation. One respondent observed: *“we already suffer from a lack of open spaces and a lack of sports facilities and this will be another blow to keeping children active”*

Health impacts:

Increased prevalence of rats, ticks etc. were quoted by some respondents as being likely to cause health issues. Many respondents raised concerns about locally increased incidence of pollen and so hayfever.

Some respondents raised concerns about flowering grasses and grass seeds blowing around which can be a hazard for dogs and cats, as grass seeds can get in the fur of their feet and inside ears.

Some respondents referred to the likelihood of detrimental impacts on residents’ mental health as a result of locations looking unsightly and as a consequence of some of the social concerns set out by others above. Concern was raised about the risk of adults and children twisting ankles on open spaces and other uneven ground concealed by long grass.

Structural damage:

Many respondents pointed out the likelihood of damage to highway gutters where grasses will establish as a consequence of long grass falling onto the carriageway edge, affecting the flow of water in the channels. Many also pointed out the impacts of grass cuttings falling into ditches and drains leading to blocked drains, and causing or exacerbating localised flooding.

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Respondents were concerned that footways will be narrowed and damaged at the edges due to the increased vigour of hardy grass species breaking up tarmac and kerbs at the edges.

Local environment:

Apart from the general observations of increased litter, fly tipping, dog poo and the resulting community impacts of this, some respondents offered the opinion that the ecological and environmental benefits would not be achieved, stating that biodiversity needs spaces which are managed properly so as to have a positive impact. One respondent pointing out that “wildflowers won’t just appear”.

Local economy:

There was concern about the local economy of a local environment that looks uncared for. West Berkshire towns e.g. Newbury continue to attract new residents and businesses and thus income from business rates etc. partly because it is such a pleasant well-kept district.

Ongoing maintenance issues:

Some respondents stated that a reduction from 7 to 2 cuts is drastic and asked if the cutting regime could be evened out between verges and open spaces i.e. resulting in 4 cuts on all grass areas.

Concerns were raised that the reduced number of cuts would not be achieved due to climatic conditions, heavy rain for example, or at other times when grass growth is vigorous. This would make the stated cutting schedules much more difficult to achieve. Many respondents raised concerns about the large amounts of grass cuttings which will be left on verges with an increased likelihood of fire.

Summary of Main Points Raised by Respondents

The responses against the proposal were much less varied but nevertheless well presented.

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. Some responses pointed out that this was the lesser of all evils and when considering the council’s budget and affordability and that the council must find ways to protect social care services. Comments included: “good cost cutting measure but grass maintenance needs to be timed properly”, “let nature do its job for more wildflowers or scatter wildflower seed”, “saving made in an ecologically friendly way, with less verge cutting the biodiversity does improve”, and “It can look beautiful if everyone understands your ideology”.

There was a general presumption that reduced grass cutting would bring about increased wildflowers, and numbers and diversity of invertebrates including insects. There was some caution around this from a number of respondents however. A very clear case was made for appropriate scheduling of cuts so as to promote the development of wildflower verges. Managing cutting frequencies and timing

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and also the process was an overriding theme in the responses, supporting the view elsewhere that flowers will not just appear naturally. One response asked and that the programme should also involve the collection of cuttings so that over time this reduces the soil fertility (wildflowers prefer less fertile soils), and therefore the volume of growth. This might then result in verges only needing to be cut once in the future.

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.

Some respondents proposed that the council should scatter wildflower seed on verges and open spaces too, in order to bring about greater diversity of flowering plant species.

There were many responses which were supportive of increasing the information provided to the public, and increased public relations to go alongside the reduction in grass cutting frequency, so as to address any concerns raised about the proposal.

Other more general comments made comparisons between the urban and rural settlements. It was stated that as some rural parishes have very few open spaces, and very few urban residential grass verges, this proposal could be seen as a form of levelling up.

Some respondents acknowledged other difficulties particularly relating to open space use by the public for recreational purposes, suggesting that perhaps some of the marginal open spaces could be cut just twice a year alongside the verges as a compromise. They suggested that where there is limited recreational use then cutting paths through the open space might suffice, leaving the majority of the open space to be cut just twice.

Finally, there were some responses suggesting that as in some years the vast majority of the general public may see little impact from the reduction in open space maintenance from 7 cuts down to 2, especially in areas where many residents manage their own verges.

Summary of Responses by Question

1. Which of the following best describe you? Please select all that apply.

	Number	Percentage
A resident of West Berkshire	154	93.33
A visitor to West Berkshire	7	4.24
A West Berkshire business owner	3	1.82
Employed by a West Berkshire business	9	5.45

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Employed by West Berkshire Council	7	4.24
A Parish/Town Councillor	10	6.06
A District Councillor	0	0
A partner organisation	0	0
A West Berkshire Council service provider	1	0.61
Other	3	1.82

There were also 7 responses from organisations and groups including parish councils, Friends of the Earth and someone stated to be an Active Pensioner.

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following proposals?

- i. To reduce the number of cuts on urban residential grass verges from 7 to 2 per year

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	24	15
Agree	29	18.13
Neither agree nor disagree	9	5.63
Disagree	25	15.63
Strongly disagree	73	45.63

- ii. To reduce grass cutting on residential open space grass areas from 7 to 4 per year

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	25	15.92
Agree	23	14.65
Neither agree nor disagree	6	3.82
Disagree	22	14.01
Strongly disagree	81	51.59

The reasons for these responses is set out above in the section titled '*Summary of Main Points*'.

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

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There were many interesting responses addressing this question, these are summarised below:

- Those periodically affected by flooding will be impacted more as roadside gutters become overgrown with grass, and drains become blocked more often as a consequence.
- Those with mobility issues and the disabled who may be more restricted when negotiating the junctions and sightlines.
- Disabled residents and those with mobility difficulties who cannot easily negotiate pavements narrowed by vegetation on verges and open spaces.
- Pushchair users, as weeds at footway edges clog axle-bearings.
- Motorists in general as a consequence of dangerous reduction of clear sightlines.
- Children and youths who can no longer use the open spaces for informal play and sport.
- Dog walkers who will find it difficult to act responsibly and clean up after their pets.
- It will impact on everyone equally, everyone suffers because other key services, which serve a narrow section of the population, is becoming increasingly more expensive.
- Those on low incomes who have children who need these open spaces for play. They have no other recreational options.
- Young children playing in grass areas contaminated with long grass, dog poo and broken glass.
- Those who suffer mental health issues such as depression, looking out on land which no one cares for.
- Homeowners as there will be an impact on house prices as a consequence of a local environment no one cares about.
- Asthma sufferers due to pollen levels.
- Everyone but children especially due to increased likelihood of ticks/Lyme disease etc.
- Vulnerable communities due to long grass being set on fire or catching fire naturally.
- Youths with few positive outlets encouraged to engage in anti-social activity by unkept residential areas.
- People without gardens who otherwise enjoy parks and open spaces.
- For those who enjoy and understand wildlife, there will be more flowers and insects.
- Everyone gains from the enhanced biodiversity and the improved aesthetics of the local environment. Children in particular can benefit from the development of "urban meadows".
- If it is managed correctly, it should not have a negative impact on anyone. We have wrecked untold damage on our environment by wanting everything to look neat and tidy.

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

Publicity:

A lot of the responses spoke about the need for focussed promotion before going ahead. Also, that there needs to be strong messaging to promote the benefits of long grass for biodiversity. The public need to be directed to the council's website so that they clearly know what the council will deliver and the expected outcomes and that requests for service and complaints are directed to a website that clearly explains the cutting regime.

Improving verges:

Some respondents spoke about sowing wildflower seeds. Others mentioned the importance of scheduling the cutting of verges and open spaces properly to as to make sure wildflowers were not being cut unnecessarily. There were some requests for the regime to include a 'cut and collect' so as to promote wildflowers by reducing soil fertility, and to address complaints about clumps of long cut grass being left on the grass surface.

Promoting 3rd party maintenance:

Some respondents asked that volunteers or the public should be encouraged to take on maintenance (although caveated by saying that overall they realised this was probably unrealistic). Further they asked that the council provides clear guidance to the public as to safe ways to maintain verges.

Prioritisation:

One respondent said that we should focus our cutting regime on verges which are essential for vision. Other comments received asked that we look at an alternative regime which would see the verges and open spaces cut to the same frequency.

General comments:

There were few suggestions, those that were offered asked the council to publicise the remuneration packages of senior managers in the council and cut costs there. To consider a wage freeze rather than make redundancies within services. Whilst several responses asked the council to cease expenditure on non-essential projects, management activities, socials, training, and entertainment. Other general comments included, "prevent car parking on verges so they can get cut", "tarmac everything"

5. Do you see any benefits or opportunities that may arise from these proposed changes? If so, please provide details.

Those in support of the proposal provided responses which were much less expansive on the benefits but nevertheless there was agreement that benefits included:

- More space for nature to thrive;

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- Greater biodiversity in urban spaces that will be important for overall biodiversity and feeding of urban dwelling species that may inhabit or be on feeding routes such as bats and red kites;
- Reduced carbon footprint; and
- Cost savings.

6. If you, your community group, or organisation think you might be able to help reduce the impact of this proposal, if the decision is taken to proceed with it, please provide your contact details below.

18 individuals provided their names against this question.

7. Any further comments?

Most of the comments in this section are set out above and have just been repeated including concerns about dog mess, litter, glass, dangerous sightlines, and welcoming the proposal in terms of increasing local biodiversity. Overall, however the responses were negative and unhelpful. The more helpful responses reiterated the request for information, and particularly information on what land would be subject to what cutting regime. Other responses asked the council to lobby government for more assistance stating that the situation the council currently faces is unacceptable.

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

Paul Hendry
Countryside Manager
Transport and Countryside
15/01/2023

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.

ⁱ <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/balancing-our-budget>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/consultations>