

GRASS CUTTING

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Argyll and Bute Council maintains almost two million square metres of grassed open space across its large and geographically diverse area. This is roughly equivalent to the size of Monaco; or 257 Hampden Parks. This report provides details of how that grounds maintenance service is delivered following a succession of budget reductions which have resulted in changes to specification.
- 1.2 Over the course of last year there were a number of service delivery issues in the Cowal, and to a lesser extent across the wider Council area, where grassland maintenance had not been carried out to the pre-determined specification. This was due in part to a limited level of resilience within the team, an aging demographic in the workforce and a number of sickness absences some of which were medium – long term. With the exception of Cowal, the rest of the council area was generally delivered to the specification although the same limited level of resilience exists across all the council area.
- 1.3 This report sets out measures that will be put in place to communicate should service specification not be achievable. However, it should be noted that every endeavor will be made to ensure that specifications are met.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Members are asked to endorse this report.

3.0 DETAIL

Frequencies/schedules

- 3.1 The current specification has been formed over time and originated from historic grass cutting schedules that were in place prior to Argyll and Bute being established as a local authority in 1996. In recent times those historic schedules have been amended through a succession of budget reductions to arrive at the frequencies set out in Table 1 below.

- 3.2 In 2012/13 a significant reorganisation from the then Streetscene Services took place where Members were involved in a series of workshop sessions where different local choices were taken from a menu of options including maintenance of public conveniences, grassland maintenance, strimming and weedkilling, rose and shrub bed maintenance, planting etc.
- 3.3 The grass cutting season is 1st April to 31st October. Schedules are determined on a route basis in order to optimise logistics to deliver the service as efficiently as possible.
- 3.4 All sports fields are scheduled to be cut 21 times per year. The remainder of grass which includes amenity areas, cemeteries etc. are scheduled to be cut as per the table below, these frequencies having been previously discussed by area committees. These frequencies can vary slightly depending on the extent of the growing season and the number of scheduled games/matches which take place in each individual area.

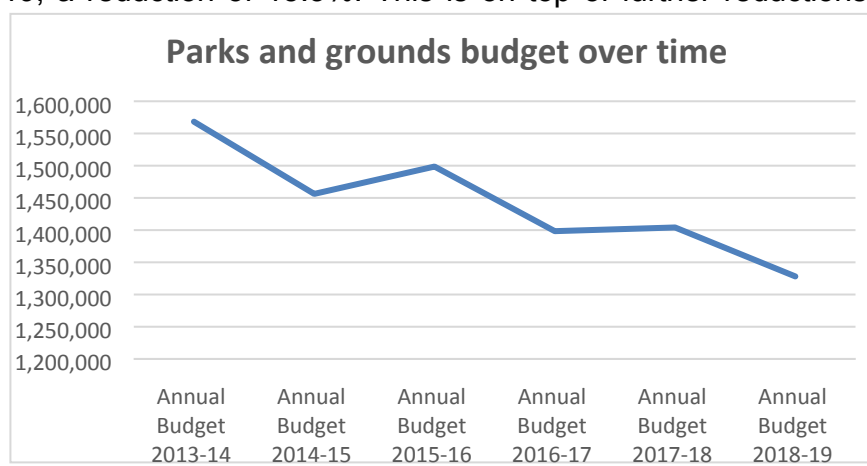
Table 1

Area	Scheduled number of cuts
Bute	12
Cowal	15
Mid Argyll	14
Kintyre	14
Islay	14
Lorn	17
Mull	13
Lomond	17

- 3.5 Reducing the number of cuts any further is not considered to be achievable in terms of delivering meaningful cashable savings. Fewer cuts mean the grass is longer when it is cut, so the time to complete the tasks increase and the strain on equipment is greater. This would lead to more equipment down-time and greater maintenance and/or replacement costs.

The Budget Position

- 3.6 The grass cutting budget is not presented in the ledger as a separate cost line, rather it is part of the overall parks and grounds budget which also includes annual bedding, hedge maintenance, weed spraying, floral, rose and shrub beds etc.
- 3.7 Overall the budget has reduced from £1,568,290 in 2013/14 to £1,328,108 in 2018/19, a reduction of 15.3%. This is on top of further reductions which took



place prior to 2013-/14 during a number of budget review processes.

Ongoing Delivery to Current Service Standards

- 3.8 The current service standards are achievable within the existing budget, staffing and machinery framework, however, resources are so closely matched to those standards that there is limited if any resilience to respond to issues which inevitably arise. Decisions are having to be made on a regular basis to prioritise what work can be carried out with the available resource. It is not unusual for our operational supervisors and managers to be faced with competing demands including digging graves/burying the dead, collecting bins, making safe potentially dangerous defects and grass cutting. Inevitably, but unfortunately, grass cutting often has to be left. Last year in one of the administrative areas there was an unusual increase in burials over a period which meant that very little grass was cut whilst resource was diverted to grave digging and burials.
- 3.9 Given the non-statutory nature of the grass cutting service (apart from roadside verge cutting) versus the statutory requirements for Councils to deliver services like bin collections and burials, the grass cutting team often support the statutory functions mentioned above during peaks and demand. What this means in practice is that if there is limited staff absence within the Operations team and no significant events of peaks in service demand then the service can be delivered to the current specification. Over the course of the past season the delivery against specification was largely achieved apart from some problems in the Cowal area due largely to a number of medium to long term absences, grass cutting frequencies fell behind the specified number of cuts. The service has taken forward a number of innovative changes including annualised hours, seasonal working, shift patterns and collaborative arrangements with third sector and local groups.
- 3.10 Although the provision of a grass cutting service is a non-statutory function, the effective maintenance of public open spaces supports the economic development and growth of the area both in terms of attracting tourists as well as new residents. Providing and suitably maintaining sporting facilities also supports another strategic priority – allowing people to live active, healthier and independent lives.

Improved Communication

- 3.11 Issues in Cowal last season and subsequent customer and member contacts highlighted that this is an area of programmed service delivery which may benefit from proactive communication procedures. These procedures will mirror those for other service areas such as bin collections which have seen a huge reduction in customer contacts in recent years as a result of a proactive approach to communicating service disruption information and contingency arrangements.
- 3.12 With the recent introduction of the Roads and infrastructure Control Hub which provides a centralised approach to financial planning, asset management, programming and planning of works and the flow of information (proactive and

reactive) the mechanisms are now in place for further improvements in the flow of information beyond those mentioned above.

- 3.13 The central team is regularly engaging with operational area based staff to build an overall picture of service delivery (with this picture now to include current and future status of grass cutting operations per area) at any given time, being alive to issues which may give rise to avoidable requests for service, enquiries and complaints, and pulling relevant information together in a consistent and customer-focused format for onward transmission via existing mechanisms e.g. posting service disruptions on the Council website, emailing briefings to Councillors, providing information to the contact centre team on developing incidents, providing information to the corporate communications team to help answer any press enquiries and/or for potential use on social media.
- 3.14 Complementing that proactive engagement and support being offered to operational staff a single internal phone number has been set up which allows operational staff tackling live incidents to phone into the central team and appraise them of the situation. Given the team's customer focus they are then ensuring they ask the right questions and have all the relevant information which is available at that time. Experience suggests that critical information is less about the reasons for an issue and more about what steps are in place or being developed to return to business as usual/catch up.
- 3.15 We are also in the process of producing a document with photos. This document will detail the grass maintenance standards we are now able to deliver given the reduction in budgets/resources experienced over the last decade or so. It is intended that we publish the document on the council website to give individuals a reference point and an understanding of what we are able to achieve. I would hope that this will help members of the public to better appreciate the standards that we now work to.

Community participation

- 3.16 There are a number of good examples across the council area where local communities are carrying out grass maintenance work. This approach enables the council, in partnership with communities, to deliver more comprehensive services. With the likelihood of further budget reductions in coming years, community participation offers a model that would help to ensure we can continue to maintain grassland areas to a reasonable standard.

4.0 CONCLUSION

- 4.1 This report highlights the succession of budget pressures which have resulted in a reduction in specification and also a reduction in the corresponding workforce associated with grounds and grass maintenance. Whilst every endeavour will be made to deliver to the service standard in Table 1 above, where this can to be achieved due to operational demands, an enhanced level of communication will be sent out to Members to ensure Members are made aware of any variances to specification.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Policy – as established in previous budget decisions

5.2 Financial – from within existing budgets

5.3 Legal – none known

5.4 HR – none known

5.5 Equalities/Fairer Scotland Duty

5.5.1 Equalities – none

5.5.2 Socio-economic duty – none

5.5.3 Islands – none

5.6 Risk – none known

5.7 Customer Service – none known

Interim Executive Director with responsibility for Roads and Infrastructure

Kirsty Flanagan

Policy Lead Councillor Robin Currie

February 2020

For further information contact: Jim Smith, Head of Roads and Infrastructure Services, Tel: 01546 604324