

TEWKESBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to:	Executive Committee
Date of Meeting:	6 June 2018
Subject:	Grass Cutting – Update
Report of:	Peter Tonge, Head of Community Services
Corporate Lead:	Peter Tonge, Head of Community Services
Lead Member:	Lead Member for Clean and Green Environment
Number of Appendices:	One

Executive Summary:

Ubico is the Council's contractor for undertaking grounds maintenance across the Borough. This report provides the Executive Committee with an update on where the Council's contractor, Ubico, is with the annual grass cutting programme and work to improve the service.

Tewkesbury Borough Council (TBC) is responsible for grass cutting of its own land and has a contract arrangement with Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) Highways and Parish Councils to cut various areas of grass across the Borough. GCC Highways currently contract Amey for highway verges across the county and in Tewkesbury Borough these are mainly verges and roundabouts along lanes and major trunk roads, The majority of the grass that TBC / Ubico cut on behalf of GCC Highways is within developments such as the Wheatpieces estate, Newtown, Bishop's Cleeve, Winchcombe, Longford, Ashleworth and Gotherington.

The verges along the A38 on the dual carriage south of Tewkesbury, the Tewkesbury Road into Cheltenham and around junction 9 of the M5, for example are not the responsibility of TBC / Ubico.

TBC officers have provided comprehensive maps to Ubico detailing all land required to be maintained, however the frequencies and quality of grass cutting has resulted in complaints by members of the public and concern from Councillors.

An improvement action plan has been produced and agreed with Ubico to ensure compliance monitoring.

Significant additional resource, including manpower and equipment, has been brought into the area from other places to tackle the backlog as quickly as possible.

If the Executive Committee agrees, the improvement plan will be monitored by Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendation:

That the Executive Committee

- 1) **APPROVE** the improvement action plan;
- 2) **APPROVE** the allocation of £10,000 from the Uncommitted Contingency Reserve to deal with remedial grass cutting works; and
- 3) **RECOMMEND** that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee monitors the delivery of the action plan.

Reasons for Recommendation:

To ensure that suitable and sufficient resources and performance management is in place to ensure a high standard of grounds maintenance across the Borough.

Resource Implications:

Currently the Council pays approximately £396,500 for its grounds maintenance services. A review is underway as to whether this is sufficient to maintain the levels of grounds maintenance and in particular grass cutting that Members wish to see across the Borough.

Legal Implications:

None directly resulting from this report.

Risk Management Implications:

The greatest risk to the Council of poorly maintained land and open space is that of reputational damage.

Performance Management Follow-up:

It is suggested that the responsibility for monitoring actions arising following this report be the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Environmental Implications:

Whilst some environmentalists would argue that a natural environment is better for insects and wildlife, it stands to reason that, if the Council wishes to maintain a safe and attractive environment, grass cutting has a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of the population.

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Following the transfer of the grounds maintenance team to Ubico, the property team agreed to map all land ownership including trees and grass cutting to assist with delivery of the contract. The property team has worked with the Ubico over the past 3 years to map the location of trees and areas of grass across the Borough that require maintenance.
- 1.2 A significant amount of work has been undertaken by both Ubico management and TBC officers to identify the issues and agree an action plan to rectify the historic situation. The property team is leading from a TBC perspective pending the appointment of a Grounds Maintenance client monitoring officer.
- 1.3 The grass cutting season generally starts around the end of March or beginning of April. The wet, warm and sunny weather this year has meant that the grass has been growing at a considerable rate.
- 1.4 New maps clearly indicating the areas of land to be maintained, (TBC land) were issued to Ubico in April 2018 with the instruction to cut only the grass on TBC land in line with the normal schedules.

1.5 Ubico also carry out a programme of pro-active winter works on behalf of TBC which tends to be dealing with tree management etc. Ubico started cutting the grass in the first week of April with seven crew members, at this time there were 15 outstanding winter works jobs that were considered high risk following the high winds and snow during the winter as there were a large number of trees with broken branches. This meant that for the first couple of weeks some of this resource was dealing with these outstanding winter issues and not cutting grass.

1.6 Generally the grounds maintenance team run with a crew of eight. A further three have recently been added bringing the total now employed to undertake grounds maintenance to 11.

2.0 HIGHWAYS LAND

2.1 It was apparent when the grass cutting started that there is a great deal of highway land within developments across the Borough that need cutting more than twice a year (the statutory minimum required for safety reasons).

2.2 A meeting was held with the County Council highways manager in April to discuss the issue of highway grass and it was agreed that the property team would map all the highway land as this would have two benefits, TBC would have knowledge of all the highway land that was being cut and the square meterage would be accurate for the invoicing. The highway land was mapped at 27.5 acres 110,000 sq. metres of verges. In addition to this there is 355 acres of TBC land that is cut.

2.3 A further meeting was held in early May with the highways manager to agree the frequency of the cuts, it was agreed that all highway land could be cut at the same frequency as TBC land which is every 4-6 weeks and highways would pay for this pending a county wide review of maintenance.

3.0 OTHER RELEVANT ISSUES

3.1 Since the instruction in April to cut the grass in line with the maps it was found that there have been some discrepancies. This has now been clarified and rationalised.

3.2 One of the discrepancies has been that there were a small number of areas that are not in the ownership of the Borough or the County that were being maintained erroneously by Ubico. The ownership and responsibility for maintenance of these areas is being investigated.

3.3 Due to the above issues and the warm and wet weather, the grass has grown longer than normal before a first cut and this has led to some quality issues, where the longer grass has been left on site, looking unsightly. (More frequent cuts of shorter grass essentially 'chops' the grass into smaller pieces without the need to collect.)

4.0 UPDATE

4.1 TBC management have noted that there are a number of areas of particular concern to Councillors and members of the public and have deployed additional resource into these areas to deal with the problems as a matter of urgency. This additional resource will include a new contractor whose teams will focus on the areas requiring immediate attention allowing the Ubico teams to continue to maintain routine cutting without disruption.

4.2 The remedial grass cutting works will incur additional costs which may not be met from existing budgets. It is proposed, therefore, to establish a contingency fund of £10,000 to cover any additional work in excess of budget provision.

- 4.3 An improvement action plan has been developed clearly setting out the expectations to manage the process moving forward. The plan is attached at Appendix 1.
- 4.4 The current priority is to ensure that Ubico clear the backlog. However as a result, the quality of the cut may be to a lower standard than normal, in some areas this may be because the grass has grown longer than normal. Interim arrangements are in place where possible to ensure that road sweepers are picking up in areas where a lot of grass cuttings are affecting road surfaces.
- 4.5 TBC officers are informed by Ubico that all TBC areas have been cut once and that they are now working on a second cut to address the quality issues.

5.0 RELEVANT GOVERNMENT POLICIES

5.1 None.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (HUMAN/PROPERTY)

6.1 None arising from this report.

7.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS (SOCIAL/COMMUNITY SAFETY/CULTURAL/ECONOMIC/ ENVIRONMENT)

7.1 None.

Background Papers: None.

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Appendices: 1. Grounds Maintenance (Grass Cutting) Action Plan.