

Grass cutting scrutiny review



February 2019

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Introduction

Following an unacceptable level of complaints received about grass cutting from members of the public in the early part of 2018, a number of elected Members expressed concern about the level and quality of grass cutting. Whilst it was acknowledged that the unusual weather had contributed to the severity of this event, councillors did not think that sufficient remedial action was being taken. Accordingly an improvement plan was subsequently approved by the Executive Committee the implementation of which to be monitored by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Background

Tewkesbury Borough Council is responsible for grass cutting on its own land and has a contract arrangement with Gloucestershire County Highways and some parish councils to cut various areas of grass across the borough. Tewkesbury Borough Council has a contract with Ubico to deliver this. The majority of the grass that the council contracts Ubico to cut on behalf of Gloucestershire County Highways is within housing developments located in areas across the borough such as the Wheatpieces estate, Newtown; Bishops Cleeve; Winchcombe; Longford; Ashleworth; and Gotherington. Tewkesbury Borough Council only cut roundabouts and trunk road verges where they neighbour a development. On highway verges - such as along the A38 south of Tewkesbury, the Tewkesbury Road into Cheltenham and around Junction 9 of the M5 – Gloucestershire County Highways currently has a contract with Amey to undertake the work.

Purpose

At its meeting on 29 November 2018, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee resolved to establish a Member working group to consider the improvements that had already been made through delivery of the Grass Cutting Improvement Plan (attached at Appendix 2) in order to provide Members with confidence that suitable action had been taken to deal with the problem that had occurred in the 2018 growing season. In addition, the working group would consider further actions that needed to be taken to ensure that suitable arrangements were in place for the 2019 growing season.

Methodology

The working group would meet up to three times in order to:

- consider the efficiencies already made by Ubico;
- receive information from Ubico about current levels of activity within the borough as well as in West Oxfordshire District Council and Gloucestershire County Council;
- consider a variety of recommendations for the 2019 growing season; and
- propose a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which Ubico would report on regularly going forward.

Terms of Reference for the working group are attached in full at Appendix 1.

Meetings of the working group

Meeting 1 - 6 December 2019

The working group considered the Grass Cutting Improvement Plan and noted that the majority of the

13 actions had been completed. One of the significant actions related to the production and accuracy of grass cutting maps that showed the areas of Tewkesbury Borough Council land and Gloucestershire County Council land that needed to be cut. Members noted that areas where ownership of land was unknown had predominantly been resolved with one notable exception in Mitton. Tewkesbury Borough Council had committed to continue maintaining the land in Mitton until the issue with the owners was resolved.

Particular improvements that were noted were as follows:

- grass cutting maps were now up to date and broadly accurate;
- grass cutting rounds were in the process of being put into a logical order to ensure the best use of the crews' time, therefore minimising travelling time;
- all equipment was now included in a maintenance programme; and
- increased and effective supervision was in place.

Members were informed that approximately 355 acres of Tewkesbury Borough Council land was cut and maintained by Ubico – the equivalent of 270 football pitches. In addition to this, the council cut and maintained approximately 110,000 square metres of verges for Gloucestershire County Highways; generally this was in housing estates as opposed to main roads.

The working group was presented with hard copies of the maps for consideration. As well as grass cutting in these areas there were a significant amount of other works which needed to be carried out which were predominantly in relation to other grounds maintenance, such as cutting back hedges and trees which was undertaken outside of the grass

cutting season due to the bird nesting, and tree work which could only be carried out in the winter months.

Members also considered the service specification which stated that Ubico should maintain the grass in the borough but set out no standards or quality that should be adhered to. Members felt that this should be addressed in the longer term by a variation to the contract and in the short term by the introduction of some Key Performance Indicators.

The Head of Community Services briefed the working group on the current budget for grounds maintenance which for the 2018/19 budget year was approximately £368,000. Gloucestershire County Council paid Tewkesbury Borough Council approximately £5,000 to cut highway verges in the borough despite this costing Tewkesbury Borough Council in the region of £54,000. The Head of Community Services mentioned that the income for the County Council land would be increased to £10,000 in 2019/20 which would still result in a Tewkesbury Borough Council subsidy of £44,000. It was also noted that the problems encountered in the 2018 grass cutting season had resulted in an overspend of £72,000 due to the need for additional resources.

Representations

The working group heard from the following invited representatives:

- Gloucestershire County Highways
- Ubico Operational Manager – Cheltenham Borough Council
- Ubico Operational Manager – Tewkesbury Borough Council
- Ubico Operational Manager – West Oxfordshire District Council

The Ubico Operational Manager from West

Oxfordshire gave a presentation outlining the way that the service was delivered and managed within that area. Members noted that the budget for that service was approximately £600,000 but they had considerably more staff (including seasonal staff during the cutting season) and resources.

The working group was particularly impressed with how the grounds maintenance fleet was managed via a lease contract which meant that there was always spare resource to cover breakdowns and additional service needs. Members learned that there was a formal service specification that Ubico and West Oxfordshire District Council had signed up to which was managed and monitored by that council. The specification set out that the grass would be cut between 14 and 18 times a year as necessary. The Ubico Operational Manager from West Oxfordshire also discussed the mapping system used which linked maps to cutting rounds and allowed for improved contract management of the service. Members explored key differences between West Oxfordshire District Council's service and Tewkesbury Borough Council's service which was, in the main, the greater number of staff at West Oxfordshire District Council, which allowed for greater flexibility, the contract for the equipment and fleet, which allowed for greater resilience when something went wrong; and the mapping system that linked maps to grass cutting rounds.

The working group heard from the Gloucestershire County Highways Representative who explained that the County Council required highway land to be cut to a safety standard which generally amounted to two cuts per year in most areas and the standard fee payable to contractors for that work was 4p per square metre. On main roads (A & B roads) the grass would generally only be cut back to approximately one metre from the roadside to ensure visibility for drivers. The working group also heard about assessments of alternatives to grass cutting being

undertaken by the County Council on rural verges to ensure a greater mix of biodiversity in these areas.

Members discussed the use of equipment and queried whether the correct equipment was on hand at Ubico and whether it was fit for purpose and properly maintained. The Ubico Operational Manager for Tewkesbury Borough Council assured Members that all equipment was maintained by Ubico at the depot in Cheltenham and there was a programme to check and replace equipment prior to the start of the grass cutting season.

The working group found the information from partners useful and felt there would be value in exploring some of the ideas in more depth as longer term actions, for instance, the lease for vehicles and equipment and expansion of the current mapping system.

Meeting 2 - 11 December 2018

The working group considered the information that had been gathered from the previous session and agreed that the efficiencies that had been made so far on the grass cutting methodology were positive.

The working group discussed in detail whether to continue the grass cutting of verges in line with the County Council requirements and agreed that for the 2019/20 growing season they would prefer that these areas were cut at the same frequency as previous years but that a small, inconspicuous area should only be cut twice, as per the County Council requirements and that this area should be monitored so that Members could see the impact. **(Rec 3)**

The working group considered the fact that Ubico had asked for additional funding for the 2019/20 growing season but considered there was little value in increasing the budget without assessing the current system improvements. Rather they felt that the improvement to date should have an impact and,

if properly managed and monitored, this would achieve the desired outcomes in the short term. Members also agreed that Key Performance Indicators should be agreed and monitored regularly. **(Rec 4)**

The working group also agreed that the digitisation of the grass cutting maps alongside the cutting rounds should be undertaken rather than the current paper-based maps. **(Rec 2)**

As well as actions that could be delivered for the 2019/20 cutting season, there were a number of longer term actions including investigating the arrangements for equipment hire and sharing of equipment across Ubico contracts; reviewing the approach to cutting County Highways verges; introducing digitised mapping; and working better with partners. **(Rec. 5)**

The working group agreed that a full audit of grass cutting equipment should be undertaken to ensure that it was fit for purpose and that all resources (including staffing) for the grounds maintenance contract were being fully utilised. **(Rec 1)**

Meeting 3 - 17 January 2019

The working group considered the draft report, recommendations and Key Performance Indicators and agreed that this would form a good basis for monitoring the performance of Ubico's grass cutting in 2019.

The working group discussed whether the budget available for grounds maintenance should be increased; however, being mindful of the council's financial position, the majority of Members felt that it would be prudent to monitor the impact of the improvements that had already been made before taking that decision. There was also a brief debate

about the need to increase the base budget for grounds maintenance to reflect additional land added to the contract by way of adopted housing estates etc. It was agreed this should be reviewed periodically and the grounds maintenance budget increased as appropriate. **(Rec 6)**

Recommendations:

1. That Ubico be required to:
 - undertake an audit of all equipment to ensure it is fit for purpose prior to commencement of the grass cutting season; and
 - make better use of resources/staffing to ensure the workforce is being used to full capacity together with giving consideration to introducing apprenticeships in order to provide succession planning and resilience.
2. That electronic mapping be made a corporate priority to enable IT to complete this work by February 2019.
3. That a small piece of land currently maintained by Tewkesbury Borough Council on behalf of Gloucestershire County Council be identified for cutting twice yearly, as opposed to the current 8-10 times per year, and monitored to understand the likely impact of reducing the number of cuts in other parts of the borough in the future.
4. That in view of the improvements that have been made in terms of round efficiency, mapping and supervision/management, to continue to provide the grounds maintenance service for 2019/20 on the same basis as the current year and to closely monitor delivery throughout.
5. That a member group be established with effect from the new council with Terms of Reference attached at appendix four.

6. That the level of additional land that the council has adopted should be reviewed periodically and, where appropriate, consideration be given to increasing the grounds maintenance budget.

Proposed Key Performance Indicators:

- 100% of grass cutting rounds will be completed in line with round schedules;
- any deviation from grass cutting rounds must be reported to Tewkesbury Borough Council in advance, or reported by the Operational Manager on same day with reason i.e. 100% deviations reported within 24 hours);
- all areas must be litter picked prior to grass being cut;
- grass cutting must be quality checked and 10 areas inspected at least once per month to check it is being cut to the appropriate standard i.e. % measure of A or B grade (Appendix 3);
- where an area cannot be cut, or cannot be cut to a suitable standard, the council must be notified by the following day along with a suggestion for remedial action;
- all equipment must be suitably maintained in line with the maintenance schedule and, where needed, any new equipment should be available with 48 hours of breakdown - any significant purchases (over £5,000) must be approved by the council.

Conclusion

The working group consider that the information they have received, both from Tewkesbury Borough Council Officers and from partner organisations, has been open and honest, and it has been a good learning exercise and a useful review to undertake.

The report will be presented to the Executive Committee for consideration and, if adopted, the recommendations and Key Performance Indicators implemented and monitored by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, via the member group proposed at Appendix 4.

Acknowledgements.

The Chair of the working group expressed the view that the review of grass cutting in the borough had been useful and productive exercise, resulting in recommendations and performance indicators which should minimise the likelihood of an event on the same scale as the 2018/19 grass cutting season. The working group would like to thank those that participated in the review in particular the following:

- Gloucestershire County Highways Representative
- Ubico Operational Manager – Cheltenham Borough Council
- Ubico Operational Manager – Tewkesbury Borough Council
- Ubico Operational Manager – West Oxfordshire District Council

Members of working group - Councillors: K J Cromwell (Chair), D T Foyle, J R Mason (Lead Member for Clean and Green Environment), H C McLain, M G Sztymiak and M J Williams (Vice-Chair).

Grass cutting improvement plan working group terms of reference

1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To work with the Head of Community Services to implement the Grass Cutting Improvement Plan approved by the Executive Committee at its meeting on 6 June 2018.

2. CONSTITUTION AND POWERS

- i. The working group shall comprise four members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Lead Member for Clean and Green Environment.
- ii. The quorum of the working group shall be three members.
- iii. The working group shall, at its first meeting, appoint a Chair; and Vice-Chair, if necessary.
- iv. Substitution arrangements will not apply.

3. FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

The working group will meet as required in order to produce a detailed report on progress in implementing the Grass Cutting Improvement Plan for the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12 February 2019.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE

- i. To monitor the Grass Cutting Improvement Plan.
- ii. To hear from partners and other councils as necessary to make recommendations on the number of cuts required, the level of cut across different areas of the borough and the spend required to achieve this.
- iii. To ensure arrangements are in place for a suitable grass cutting service for the borough when the 2019 season commences via the delivery of the Improvement Plan.
- iv. In conjunction with the Head of Community Services, to develop specific Key Performance Indicators to monitor the grass cutting service.

5. DELEGATED POWERS

To prepare a monitoring report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2019 with any service recommendations being made to the Executive Committee, and council if additional financial resources are required.

GROUNDS MAINTENANCE (Grass cutting) ACTION PLAN January 2019

Project managers – Head of Community Services (TBC), Head of Operations - Ubico (Ubico)					
	Action	Target Date	Responsible Officer	Status	Comments
1.	Introduction of a case management system for reporting of work and the management of staff and communication to the public.	December 2017	Head of Community Services - Tewkesbury Borough Council/ Landscape Operations Supervisor - Ubico	✓	Complete. This case management system now allows us to log calls regarding grounds maintenance and track progress on works outstanding and work completed. This gives us a much better oversight of works completed and significant more information to better communicate with the public.
2.	<p>Introduction of clear and accountable KPI's including confirmation of completion of work timescales as outlined below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 'Urgent' to be actioned within 24 hours as there is either risk to people or property or a reputational risk to Ubico or TBC ✓ 'High risk' to be actioned within 2 weeks of being reported ✓ 'Medium risk' to be actioned within 3 months of being reported ✓ 'Low risk' to be actioned within 6 months of being reported 	March 2018	Head of Community Services - Tewkesbury Borough Council/ Landscape Operations Supervisor - Ubico	✓	These KPIs relate mainly to programmed and urgent winter works, have been agreed with Ubico and set standards for how Ubico will respond to requests from TBC.

3.	A further round of new maps to be issued to ensure that all crews have all relevant and up to date information.	04 June 2018	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council	✓	This is to address inconsistencies in the mapping sets, discovered by carrying out checks. There is an acceptance that this is an ongoing piece of work as ownership of land changes and land is adopted, however we are confident that the current maps best reflect the most up to date situation.
4 (a).	Actively seek out third parties of land historically maintained by TBC and negotiate a speedy solution to the maintenance of that land.	July 2018	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council / Grounds Maintenance & Project Officer	✓	A number of 3 rd parties of land have already been identified and arrangements made to maintain the land.
4 (b).	Require 3 rd parties to maintain their land or enter into a contract with them to maintain on their behalf.	February 2019	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council / Grounds Maintenance & Project Officer	☺	Land that we know is not in the ownership of TBC or GCC or third parties has now been identified and negotiations are in place as to who maintains them in future.
5.	Weekly client meetings to update TBC of Ubico's progress and TBC to discuss issues with the grass cutting implemented March 2018	June 2018 & ongoing.	Grounds Maintenance Project Officer - Tewkesbury Borough Council/ Landscape Operations Supervisor – Ubico.	✓	Weekly client / contract monitoring meetings allow issues of nature and quality of work to be discussed. Meetings now happen weekly and will continue until the review is complete.
6 (a).	Regular monitoring checks by TBC officer	June 2018 & ongoing	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council / Grounds Maintenance &	✓	To ensure that the crews are carrying out the cutting according to the maps. Once crews have completed the back log these check will be extended to quality checks.

			Project Officer		
6 (b).	Ongoing monitoring checks carried out by Officers on an ad-hoc basis.	Ongoing until grass cutting season ends.	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council / Grounds Maintenance & Project Officer	✓	Ubico notify TBC every day of the areas that are being maintained that day. Officers carry out ad-hoc spot checks to ensure that the crews are where they are supposed to be and that work is being carried out as agreed.
7.	Weekly member updates with schedule for the following week of areas being cut.	June 2018	Head of Community Services - Tewkesbury Borough Council	✓	All Councillors were informed regularly as to progress on grass cutting until Ubico had had improved the situation. Further updates are by way of the O&S Committee.
8 (a)	Develop quality KPIs to monitor quality of cuts.	July 2018	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council	✓	Short term KPIs were developed to manage the urgent needs at that time and consisted of daily updates and regular improvement plan meeting. These have been delivered.
8 (b)	Develop longer term KPI's in line with the service specification.	March 2019	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council / Head of Operations (Ubico)	✓	KPIs developed by the grass cutting working group.
9 (a)	Tracking devices fitted to all vehicles.	June 2018	Landscape Operations Supervisor - Ubico	✓	Tracking data allows officers to query historic information in the case of complaints and health & safety issues.
9 (b)	Tracking devices fitted to all mowing equipment.	March 2019	Landscape Operations Supervisor - Ubico	TBC	Consideration is now being given as to whether tracking equipment can be fitted to all mobile mowing equipment.
10 (a)	Introduction of an electronic mapping system for all crews to access.	June 2018	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council.	✓	This technology is in place for tree inspections.

10 (b)	Introduction of an electronic mapping system for all crews to access.	December 2018	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council.	☺	Basic electronic mapping will be in place by February 2019. Exploring options for more sophisticated mapping in line with an in-cab technology project.
11.	Ubico to introduce grass cutting round sheets for crews to sign work off on a weekly basis for contract monitoring.	August 2018	Head of Community Services – Tewkesbury Borough Council.	✓	Sign off sheets are now in place and when the crew completes a piece of work they sign off that it is completed. This allows better accountability as supervisors can check on the work and ensure that it is completed to a reasonable standard.
12 (a)	Ubico to review the rounds to ensure they are efficient for the movement of staff and equipment	August 2018	Landscape Operations Supervisor - Ubico / Head of Operations - Ubico	✓	Better route mapping will allow Ubico to maximise the use of resources. Rounds have been reviewed.
12 (b)	Ubico to implement new rounds to ensure they are efficient for the movement of staff and equipment	February 2019	Landscape Operations Supervisor - Ubico / Head of Operations - Ubico	☺	New rounds have been created and will be trialled during the first cut and any amendments needed will be implemented
13.	Ubico to establish any resource or equipment requirements along with a business case to ensure the future efficient operation of the service for TBC to consider.	January 2019	Head of Community Services - Tewkesbury Borough Council Head of Operations - Ubico / Landscape Operations Supervisor - Ubico.	☺	This has been completed as part of the improvement project plan work. This is being also undertaken as part of the longer term improvements and will be updated into a full project plan for this work.

Grass Cutting Standards

A Grade (Good)

No litter

Grass cutting kept on top of

Minimal clippings due to being cut regularly

No weeds

Flat ground

Well maintained generally e.g no holes in ground, seeded



B Grade (Acceptable)

Minimal grass cuttings

Minimal weeds

Regularly cut

No more than 2 pieces of litter



Grade C (Unacceptable)

Grass longer

More grass cuttings remain due to grass being too long when cut

A few weeds

Possibly uneven ground

No more than 2 pieces of litter



Grade D (Poor)

Grass is of an unacceptable length

Weeds present

A lot of grass clippings left after cut

Overgrown around obstacles e.g street signs, trees.

Takes longer to cut

Litter present in quantities



Grounds Maintenance Member Group terms of reference

1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To work with the Head of Community Services to oversee the delivery of the council's grounds maintenance service and to consider and develop a number of longer-term projects in relation to the service.

2. CONSTITUTION AND POWERS

- i. The group shall comprise four members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Lead Member for Clean and Green Environment.
- ii. The quorum of the working group shall be three members.
- iii. The group shall, at its first meeting, appoint a Chair; and Vice-Chair, if necessary.
- iv. Substitution arrangements will not apply.
- v. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will review the Terms of Reference on an annual basis and make a recommendation to the Executive Committee as to whether there is a continuing role for the group.

3. FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

The group will meet as and when required.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE

- i. To oversee the delivery of the council's grounds maintenance service.
- ii. To consider and develop a number of potential longer-term projects including:
 - exploring the potential for introducing a hire contract for equipment;
 - sharing equipment across Ubico partners;
 - revising the council's approach in respect of maintaining Gloucestershire County Council land;
 - further digitalisation of maps and routes to include site hazards etc; and
 - working with partners, including parish councils and housing associations, to look for opportunities to optimise efficiency.

5. DELEGATED POWERS

To report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as and when required.

All issues that require a decision will be reported to the Executive Committee and/or Council.