

# TEWKESBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

<b>Report to:</b>	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	11 February 2020
<b>Subject:</b>	Grounds Maintenance Working Group Report
<b>Report of:</b>	Grounds Maintenance Working Group
<b>Corporate Lead:</b>	Deputy Chief Executive
<b>Lead Member:</b>	Lead Member for Clean and Green Environment
<b>Number of Appendices:</b>	2

## **Executive Summary:**

The Grounds Maintenance Working Group was established by the Executive Committee at its meeting on 6 March 2019 and the Terms of Reference for the Group are attached at Appendix 1.

The Working Group met on four occasions between September 2019 and January 2020 where a range of issues were considered as set out in the Work Plan, attached at Appendix 2, and a number of recommendations have been developed as a result of its work.

The Working Group considers there is further work to be undertaken but recommends that, as there are synergies with the work of the Depot Services Working Group, this would be more effectively carried out by that Group.

## **Recommendation:**

**To CONSIDER the progress made by the Working Group and to RECOMMEND TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE that the recommendations set out in Paragraph 3 of the report, including that future monitoring of grounds maintenance be undertaken by the Depot Services Working Group, be APPROVED.**

## **Reasons for Recommendation:**

Significant progress has been made by the Grounds Maintenance Working Group since its inception resulting in a number of recommendations for improvements to the service. The Working Group considered that, whilst there is a continuing role for Members to play in terms of monitoring grounds maintenance, this should be subsumed within the work of the Depot Services Working Group which has a wider remit to look at the Ubico contract generally.

**Resource Implications:**

Whilst there are no direct resource implications arising from the report at this time, it should be noted that the Council has set aside reserves as contingency in order to ensure that the grounds maintenance service has access to them should the need arise.

It should also be noted that the Borough Council continued to cut County Highways-owned land in 2019/20 at an estimated cost of £44,000. The sustainability of maintaining this position in the longer term will need to be kept under review in light of pressures on the grounds maintenance service and the significant deficit within the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

**Legal Implications:**

The Highways Authority has a duty to maintain verges for safety reasons. The Borough Council currently undertakes this work across Tewkesbury Borough via Ubico. The Borough Council also undertakes this work on behalf of a number of Parish Councils. Whilst no specific duty falls to District Councils to cut grass, the level of which is at the discretion of the individual Council, it stands to reason that, if an authority has a responsibility to keep its land free from litter and detritus, it needs to maintain the land to a sensible level in order to do this effectively.

**Risk Management Implications:**

Grass cutting is a high profile service and any service failings impact on the reputation of the Council.

**Performance Management Follow-up:**

It is proposed that monitoring of grounds maintenance will be carried out by the Depot Services Working Group going forward; however, performance will also continue to be considered as part of the Ubico performance report to 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 then a programme of grass cutting has a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of the population.

**1.0 INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND**

- 1.1** Following an unacceptable level of complaints being received about grass cutting from members of the public in the early part of 2018, the Executive Committee expressed concern about the level and quality of grass cutting across the borough. In response, a Grass Cutting Improvement Plan was adopted by the Executive Committee with responsibility for monitoring given to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee subsequently established a small Grass Cutting Working Group to oversee the delivery of the Plan and presented its findings to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12 February 2019. The report included a recommendation to establish a further Member Group, with effect from the new Council term, with Terms of Reference as set out at Appendix 1. The Executive Committee approved the report and the Grounds Maintenance Working Group was subsequently established by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 28 May 2019.

1.2 The Terms of Reference require the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to 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.

## 2.0 **GROUNDS MAINTENANCE WORKING GROUP WORK PLAN**

2.1 The Working Group agreed a Work Plan at its first meeting, attached at Appendix 2. The topics considered by the Group included:

- A report into grounds maintenance and street cleansing carried out by external consultancy WYG.
- Funding of the grounds maintenance service.
- Consideration of wild flower planting as a means of reducing costs.
- Levels of complaints for the current year.
- The approach to highways land which Tewkesbury Borough Council cuts on behalf of Gloucestershire County Highways.
- Additional developments that had been adopted and were required to be cut.
- How the planning regime could assist in reducing the level of work for future developments.

2.2 As the first meeting of the Working Group took place in August 2019, it was noted that Ubico was already well into the grass cutting season. There had been a considerable improvement on the previous year due to the work on re-routing rounds, additional funding for overtime / agency staff and the additional equipment that Ubico has purchased in preparation for the year.

2.3 At the second meeting of the Working Group, Members considered the report that had been undertaken by WYG on whether Ubico was providing a value for money service. Member considered the outcomes of the report which were as follows:

*“grounds maintenance for Tewkesbury is just about satisfactory but grass is unkept in places. Weed growth also seems to be an issue.”* And

*“Ubico is providing good value – if greater quality is required then in addition to the very good internal service review and improvement plan being put into place the Council should consider investing more into the service in respect of money to fund additional labour resources”.*

2.4 Members also queried why the level of resource that was highlighted in the report did not equate with the level of resource that was actually on the ground. It was clarified that the information from the report was from the date when the service transferred to Ubico and that the number of staff had differed due to some originally being part-time and replaced by the full-time equivalents.

2.5 At that meeting Members also noted that complaints had significantly reduced during the 2019 grass cutting season and that quality and timeliness of grass cutting had improved significantly.

2.6 At the third meeting in October 2019, Members considered the use of Section 106 monies to better support the grounds maintenance service. The Head of Finance and Asset Management was present at the meeting and confirmed that some Section 106 monies had been transferred into the Council’s reserves fund and was being used to fund the additional contingency that was currently allocated to support the service. Members were informed that it is highly likely that this contingency funding would continue into the 2020/21 financial year.

- 2.7** Also present at this meeting was the Community Infrastructure Levy Manager and a Legal Advisor. Members queried whether developers could be required to consider grounds maintenance as part of their planning submissions e.g. could they be required to use slow growing forms of grass or other types of planting to ensure that future levels of work for the Council were minimised.
- 2.8** Members also received an update on the pilot that had been undertaken at Brook Close in Winchcombe where a small, discreet piece of highways land had only been cut twice during the growing season and had been closely monitored.
- 2.9** Finally, Members also discussed the potential for wildflower planting including the benefits and disbenefits of this approach. One of the benefits was the potential for reducing grass cutting in future years, however one of the disbenefits discussed was that the area can often look much worse before it looks better.
- 2.10** At the final meeting of the Working Group in January, Members considered the performance information relating to the quality of grass cutting for the 2019 growing season. Overall, 94 areas had been inspected across the borough with the following results:

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Number assessed at this level</b>
A	<p><b>A Grade (Good)</b></p> <p>No litter</p> <p>Grass cutting kept on top of</p> <p>Minimal clippings due to being cut regularly</p> <p>No weeds</p> <p>Flat ground</p> <p>Well maintained generally e.g no holes in ground, seeded</p>	26
B	<p><b>B Grade (Acceptable)</b></p> <p>Minimal grass cuttings</p> <p>Minimal weeds</p> <p>Regularly cut</p> <p>No more than 2 pieces of litter</p>	42
C	<p><b>Grade C (Unacceptable)</b></p> <p>Grass longer</p> <p>More grass cuttings remain due to grass being too long when cut</p> <p>A few weeds</p> <p>Possibly uneven ground</p> <p>No more than 2 pieces of litter</p>	20

D	<b>Grade D (Poor)</b> 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	6
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2.11 Members were also updated on the digitisation of maps and rounds for grass cutting which has been completed. This will now be updated on an annual basis to take consideration of land ownership changes and any new estates / land that are adopted.

### 3.0 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 The work undertaken by the Group has resulted in a number of recommendations which it is proposed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee take forward to the Executive Committee as follows:

3.1.1 **Recommendation 1** – Ubico Schedule of Rates - Members considered the WYG report in quite some depth and noted the findings. One area of particular concern was that Ubico did not appear to have a schedule of rates for pricing work. It was agreed that Ubico should produce a comprehensive schedule of rates to ensure that it is pricing work correctly. The schedule of rates should be shared with the Council (Head of Community Services).

3.1.2 **Recommendation 2** – Planning Policy - Members discussed with the CIL Manager and the Legal Advisor the option to include a requirement for developers to include innovative planting regimes which would reduce the level of work on these developments in future years and it is recommended that the Head of Development Services / Planning Policy Manager shall consider whether it is possible to include a requirement to consider innovative approaches to grounds maintenance, including different grass varieties, within planning policies around new public open space.

3.1.3 **Recommendation 3** – Wildflower Planting - Members discussed whether the use of wildflower planting could reduce the need for grass cutting in future and it was decided that no further work on wildflower planting should be considered (other than EU funded schemes already being considered) until the current project at The Grange Field is complete and the impact evaluated.

3.1.4 **Recommendation 4** – Maintenance of land on behalf of Gloucestershire County Highways - Based on the results of the trial undertaken at Brook Close, Winchcombe to reduce the number of cuts undertaken, it was felt that the trial should be extended to a further two pieces of grass verge. These have yet to be decided but possible areas have been identified in Alderton, Bishop’s Cleeve, Buckland, Hucclecote, Gretton and Laverton. The reason for choosing these areas is because they are large areas of work and the teams do not have any other works in those areas, hence they are travelling specifically to undertake this work. These pieces of land should be agreed by the relevant Ward Members and, where necessary, the Parish Council should be informed of the proposal.

- 3.1.5 Recommendation 5 – Grass Cutting Standards** - Members considered the quality of grass cutting at various locations across the borough and noted that performance was adequate but that the areas of land that were of the lowest rating (category D) should be eliminated and that a higher quality (either A or B) should be the target. As such, it is recommended that a new performance target should be set for Ubico to reduce the number of category C and D rated grass cutting.
- 3.1.6 Recommendation 6 – Potential for Hire Contract for Equipment/Sharing Across Ubico Partners** – This should be progressed by asking Ubico to undertake a piece of work to provide a comparison in order to consider whether a hire contract would be an appropriate way forward.
- 3.1.7 Recommendation 7** - Officers should continue to work with partners to identify opportunities to deliver efficiencies by working more closely on grass cutting.
- 3.1.8 Recommendation 8 – Future Grounds Maintenance Monitoring and Improvement** - The Working Group considered that, whilst there is a continuing role for Members to play in terms of monitoring grounds maintenance, this should be subsumed within the work of the Depot Services Working Group which has a wider remit to look at the Ubico contract generally.

#### **4.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

4.1 Not applicable.

#### **5.0 CONSULTATION**

5.1 Not applicable

#### **6.0 RELEVANT COUNCIL POLICIES/STRATEGIES**

6.1 Not applicable.

#### **7.0 RELEVANT GOVERNMENT POLICIES**

7.1 Not applicable.

#### **8.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (Human/Property)**

8.1 Not applicable.

#### **9.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS (Social/Community Safety/Cultural/ Economic/ Environment)**

9.1 Considered as part of the work of the Working Group.

#### **10.0 IMPACT UPON (Value For Money/Equalities/E-Government/Human Rights/Health And Safety)**

10.1 Considered as part of the work of the Working Group.

**11.0 RELATED DECISIONS AND ANY OTHER RELEVANT FACTS**

**11.1** Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 28 May 2019.

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**Background Papers:** None

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**Appendices:** Appendix 1 – Terms of Reference  
Appendix 2 – Grass Cutting Working Group Work Plan