



## **SCRUTINY TASK GROUP REPORT**

### **GRASS VERGES REVIEW**

**NOVEMBER 2012**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 A review of grass verges was initiated by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting in July 2012. There was a general feeling that there were issues about the way in which the verges had been maintained this summer and the outcomes from this review could provide valuable input to the agency agreement with the county council.
- 1.2 This report sets out the findings and recommendations arising from the scrutiny review undertaken by the grass verges scrutiny task group.

#### **2. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE**

##### **2.1 Membership of the task group:-**

- Councillor Penny Hall (Chair)
- Councillor Nigel Britter
- Councillor Jacky Fletcher

##### **Terms of reference agreed by the O&S Committee**

- To understand how standards of service are set in particular each “Cut/maintenance of the verges as specified .in the agreements between CBC and GCC and to consider if improvements to the specification could be made
  - To understand the training programme for new operatives, the supervision given during their work and the assessment process of quality after each cut/ maintenance.
  - To make recommendations to improve systems where required
  - To understand customer care issues; how the relevant department respond to issues on the service raised by the general public and members and how they consider and act on the issues, again to make recommendations on improvements
- 2.2 In addition to the above the working group agreed that it may be useful to include reference to enforcement measures to prevent cars parking on verges as their presence impacts on the visual image and maintenance of the verges. It was

also agreed that consideration of climate change mitigation may be useful as some residents have talked about the use of urban meadows in appropriate locations. It was agreed that the review should look at what opportunities planning could play in such mitigation

### **3. HOW DID THE TASK GROUP GO ABOUT THIS REVIEW?**

- 3.1 The grass verges group met on four occasions and spoke to a range of people involved in the mini agency contract. They all contributed to the discussions at our meetings and were able to respond to members questions or bring back additional information to subsequent meetings. The officers involved were:
  - Jane Griffiths, Commissioning Director
  - John Rees, Ubico
  - Adam Reynolds, Parks Development Manager
  - Tony McNamara, Community Parks Development Officer
  - Chris Riley, Gloucestershire County Council (GCC)
- 3.2 Members would like to thank all of the officers who attended meetings and contributed to the review.
- 3.3 The task group reviewed a variety of evidence including:
  - the relevant extracts from the mini agency agreement
  - round schedules
  - training schedules
  - reports on potential mitigating actions
  - biodiversity options
  - best practice from other councils
  - photographs of verges
  - complaints data.
  - inspection data

### **4. OUR FINDINGS**

#### **Current service delivery**

- 4.1 The current service is delivered through an agency agreement with the county council who will pay for 5 cuts per year (£55K). The borough council provide additional funding (£120K) so that in total 15 cuts per year are undertaken which is classified as amenity standard grass cutting as opposed to highways standard. The current total budget for the verges is £175K.
- 4.2 Ubico undertake the work on behalf of the borough council and the employees involved in managing and undertaking the work are experienced officers. The county council have recently transferred a manager from another part of the county to manage the contract. He is developing working relationships with officers and members and will implement monthly monitoring meetings.
- 4.3 Ubico deploy rotary mowers for verge maintenance as opposed to the cylinder mowers used in parks. This is because the verges are not always flat and there

- are stones which would be difficult to use a cylinder mower. However it means that the clippings are left on the grass, and in wet weather the nature of the rotary action means that grass will clump.
- 4.4 The council is able to employ someone who can follow the crews around to blow the cut grass off pavements etc. and back onto the verges, and the street cleaning rounds are arranged so that the aim is a litter pick before grass cutting occurs wherever possible.
- 4.5 In areas where cars park on verges it can make it difficult to maintain the verges to a good standard because of the rutting which occurs. In many parts of the town the verges have been planted with bulbs which add to the attractiveness of the town. Grass cutting in this area does not commence until the bulb foliage has died back. Where trees and street furniture are located in verges, weed control is undertaken twice per year within six inches of the tree base/street furniture to ensure that the grass and weeds die back so that grass cutting can take place effectively without the need for specific strimming.
- 4.6 There are four crews who are all experienced employees and they have their own rounds. They complete round sheets and at the end of each day advise the customer services team so that if there are queries from the public, the team are aware of what has and has not been cut. The supervisors from Ubico undertake a random spot check inspection of approximately 30 sites per month and flag up any issues.
- 4.7 Each new member of staff has a half day induction (backed up by a checklist and appropriate policies) and they are made aware that they are the public face of the council and should treat everyone with respect and deal with all enquiries politely and courteously. If they are unable to answer a query then they should telephone the office. There is a low turnover of staff so induction training is mostly for agency and temporary operatives. There is also a weekly team leaders meeting with the managers where issues can be fed back. If there are issues with operatives the team leaders can then take these up with the individuals concerned.
- 4.8 A health and safety day is held each month when managers spend the whole day focusing on H&S issues, such as risk assessments and talking to operatives about whether they understand their H&S obligations.

## 5. FINDINGS

- 5.1 This summer has been one of the wettest summers on record. The review group noted that this meant that there has been a longer growing season and also more vigorous growth. Grass cutting has continued during the wet weather to ensure that the grass is maintained at a manageable level as the equipment cannot cut grass beyond a certain length.
- 5.2 Cutting wet grass has resulted in clumping and some complaints of grass blocking drains or blowing onto pavements and there has been a perception in parts of the town that the standard of verge maintenance has not been as effective as in previous years. There is a perception from the public that when cut grass is being blown back onto the verges it is actually being blown into the gutters.
- 5.3 During dry weather, the grass is quickly dried out by the sun and wind and will soon dissipate but this does not happen when the weather is wet.

- 5.4 The wet weather has also impacted on the weed contract as the first weed spray which was due April/May was delayed until mid June due to the weather. At the time of drafting this report the second weed spray was anticipated to be completed by early November.
- 5.5 The policy of leaving the bulb foliage to die back before the grass is cut leads to complaints at the start of the grass cutting season. The wet weather meant that the foliage did not die back as quickly as in previous years.
- 5.6 Other councils have had similar concerns about the quality of grass cutting in their areas. Gloucester City Council has recently set up a scrutiny review and Tewkesbury Borough Council requested a briefing note.
- 5.7 For the period April 2012 to August 2012 there have been four formal complaints with regards to grass verges. This compares to none in the same period in 2011. During this period in 2012 there were 114 enquires raised about grass verges and logged by the customer services team. Most related to long grass and edges not being strimmed.
- 5.8 Members of the working group were generally happy with the way in which Ubico respond to members requests for service and that when issues are identified there is a quick response to remedial action.
- 5.9 There are currently no regular meetings between CBC/Ubico and GCC officers with regards to verge maintenance. This means that it is difficult for the contract to be managed effectively to ensure that resources are used to best effect.
- 5.10 Some verges are damaged by parked cars but also by CBC refuse vehicles and delivery vehicles turning in tight/narrow roads and GCC highways maintenance vehicles parked off-road when undertaking highways repairs.
- 5.11 The county council recognise the importance of the well maintained verges in the urban areas as this is part of the quality of life which contributes to the economic vitality of the town. The review group are aware however that in rural areas the county council do not pay for the same level of grass verge maintenance.
- 5.12 There is evidence in other parts of the country where councils are reducing the maintenance standards for their verges and also examples of where councils are adopting a biodiversity policy. Cheltenham's green space strategy (2009-2024) does promote biodiversity but has no specific references to verges. The reason the verges were not included is because the strategy was written to be in accordance with planning policy guidance with PPG 17, and verges do not form part of the guidance. It was also focused on land within CBC ownership and above 0.2 hectares.
- 5.13 On occasion when highways have been adopted the county council have not insisted that the developer cuts the verges before adoption which on occasion has meant some difficult maintenance issues in the first year of adoption.
- 5.14 The council's green space strategy (2009 – 2024) identified the impacts of climate change on Cheltenham and the impacts it would have on service delivery
- 5.15 World Class Places: The Government's Strategy for Improving the Quality of Place – (2009) –identified that the design and upkeep of spaces and the provision of green space and green infrastructure as two of the four elements of a quality place

## **6. OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 6.1 The working group considered whether it was feasible to pick up grass clippings but recognised that there is a considerable cost and given the financial situation

- of the council this was unrealistic. The group also considered whether it would be possible to leave the grass during wet weather. It was felt that there would be more complaints if the grass grew too long and also the current equipment may not be able to cut grass that has grown too long. However it was felt that there needs to be some form of adaptation given that it is likely that there will be other summers which are wet and it is anticipated with climate change there will be longer growing seasons. It was felt that the climate change risk assessments held by the council and Ubico needed to fully consider the implications of longer growing seasons and changing weather patterns on service delivery in the future.
- 6.2 The working group explored the options of whether in certain parts of the town consideration could be given to allowing a less frequent level of cut – to align to highways as opposed to amenity standard of grass cutting. This may require investment in new machinery on an invest to save basis if we are cutting longer grass. It was recognised however that any such change would need to be handled sensitively and implemented only in areas which were appropriate. .
- 6.3 They also explored the opportunities on new developments to plant wild flower seed mixes in verges as has been done to great effect elsewhere. The council is able to make such recommendations through the planning process. We also wanted to see more thought given to verge design and maintenance during the planning phase both from a GCC and CBC perspective to ensure that opportunities to create a more sustainable approach to verge maintenance in the longer term are considered.
- 6.4 Consideration could also be given to planting wild flower seeds in existing verges but the working group recognised that this would need to be done on a cost benefit analysis as the land would need to be prepared before the seeds could be sown.
- 6.5 The working group did consider the ability to plant slow growing grass. It was felt that in verges this may not be a suitable alternative as the weeds (which will inevitably grow) will grow faster than the grass and therefore there will be more complaints. However the group were keen to consider whether this type of grass seed could be used elsewhere in developments to aid climate change adaptation.
- 6.6 The issue of weeds within verges was considered but it was acknowledged by the working group that the cost of spot weed treatments was prohibitive in this financial climate.
- 6.7 They were keen to see some better co-ordination before a highway is adopted to ensure that the developer hands over the highway verge in a well maintained state. This may require the council working with the county council to identify the work which needs to be undertaken.
- 6.8 The agency agreement is negotiated on an annual basis and the working group believed that Ubico were still best placed to maintain the verges due to the economies of scale within their grounds maintenance team. However they recognised the financial pressures that both councils are under and felt that invest to save initiatives may be able to realign the contract to ensure that it maximises the limited resources being put into the contract by both councils. The working group felt that Ubico and GCC officers should be meeting on a regular basis to discuss verge maintenance and other aspects of the agreement to ensure that there is effective contract management and an ability to discuss resource planning and issues as they arise.
- 6.9 Consideration was given to the damage that is done by people parking on grass verges. The working group considered a number of options which officers presented with regards to enforcement opportunities. However they recognised

- that the county wide on street parking contract will be a basic level service and that it was unlikely that opportunities would be forthcoming. However it was agreed that the damage ultimately impacted on the verge maintenance contract and that the costs/benefits of greater enforcement could be explored with the contractor once the new contract is let.
- 6.10 The working group recognised that many large HGV vehicles will damage verges when they have to mount the curb to either turn or manoeuvre in areas with narrow roads or parked cars. However we gave specific recognition to the damage that is done by both CBC and GCC vehicles and whether there is any opportunity to work collaboratively to ensure that we can periodically take remedial action to repair the damaged verges.
  - 6.11 We are aware of the importance of managing public expectations and ensuring that information on service standards is clear. It was felt that the current information on the web site could be improved considerably and that more should be done to manage expectations particularly when the weather or other issues may impact on delivery. We also felt that the team leaders meetings could provide a useful forum for operatives and team leaders to feed into management any issues which are on the patch e.g. weed issues.
  - 6.12 Ubico do undertake quality audits but we felt that they could be organised in such a way to ensure that over a period of time all parts of the town are inspected at least once.
  - 6.13 The green space strategy is due for review and we felt that it should incorporate verges into the strategy. We feel however that the current strategy as it stands encourages biodiversity and recognises the importance of green corridors and therefore even without the redraft could be used as a policy direction to support a review of the way in which we value and maintain verges.

## **7. CONSULTATION**

- 7.1 During the course of this review we have consulted with officers involved in this issue or would be involved in taking forward some of the recommendations. The Cabinet Member Sustainability attended our fourth meeting and had the opportunity to give his views on the way in which the service is provided and take part in the discussion regarding the final draft of the report.
- 7.2 A copy of the report has been sent to the county council, and any feedback we receive will be updated verbally at the O&S committee.

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 8.1 Taking all our findings and options into consideration, the task group agreed a number of recommendations, namely that
- i. Ubico should continue to cut grass where feasible in wet weather. (ref. Para 6.1)
  - ii. Monthly contract management meetings between Gloucestershire County Council and Ubico should commence as a matter of urgency (ref. Para 6.8)
  - iii. The current frequency of cutting should continue but officers from CBC/Ubico and Gloucestershire County Council should meet to consider the biodiversity opportunities for verges within the town. (ref para 6.2)
  - iv. When the green space strategy is updated specific reference is made to verges and the role they can play as green corridors recognising their importance in the quality of the environment and assisting in biodiversity (para 6.12)
  - v. The planning committee should give due consideration to layout and maintenance implications of verges and consider the use of wild flowers or slow growing grass seed in reserved matters (ref para 6.3)
  - vi. To build into the highways agreement that Gloucestershire County Council should liaise with CBC/Ubico ahead of highways adoption to ensure any verge maintenance issues are resolved ahead of adoption (ref para 6.7)
  - vii. In negotiating the 2013/14 verge contract ensure that there is a flexible approach to the use of resources across the contract to maximise the resources being put into the contract (ref para 6.8) .
  - viii. Discussions are held with Gloucestershire County Council about enforcement of illegal parking on verges and remedial action where damage occurs due to CBC or GCC vehicles(ref para 6.9 and 6.10).
  - ix. The web site is updated as a matter of urgency to ensure that service standards are specified and that during periods of service disruption that the website is updated accordingly (ref para 6.10).
  - x. Quality audits should be arranged to ensure that the full coverage of the town (ref para 6.11)

## **9. PROGRESSING THE SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1 It is proposed that should the recommendations be approved by Cabinet then recommendations relating to the operation of the verge maintenance contract are monitored through the regular performance monitoring of the Ubico contract.
- 9.2 Officers will need to discuss the proposals relating to planning with the committee members to ensure that they fully incorporate biodiversity and design issues into

the planning process.

- 9.3 Gloucestershire County Council have received a copy of the report but discussions will need to take place with them on taking forward some of the recommendations which relate to their statutory highways duties.

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<b>Appendices</b>	1. The One page strategy for this review 2. Covering report for Cabinet
<b>Background information</b>	n/a