

Overview and Scrutiny committee– 2 September 2013

Progress report on recommendations from Grass Verges Task Group

Accountable member	Councillor Roger Whyborn, Cabinet Member Sustainability
Accountable officer	Jane Griffiths, Commissioning Director
Ward(s) affected	All
Key Decision	No
Executive summary	<p>The Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a task group to review grass verge maintenance and this group made a number of recommendations which were approved by Cabinet in December 2012. This committee had requested a progress report to be presented so that the committee could satisfy themselves that the recommendations had been actioned.</p> <p>Set out in the report is progress against each of the specific recommendations. As members will see from this report actions have been progressed and indeed officers valued the review as it has led to a better working relationship with the county council who hold the verge maintenance contract.</p> <p>Work will continue to be undertaken on the outstanding matters. Where the actions are ongoing these recommendations have been embedded into working practices.</p>
Recommendations	To consider progress against the recommendations and identify any issues where the committee have concerns that recommendations are not being progressed as planned.
Financial implications	<p>There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Note that the financial subsidy in the 2013/14 approved budget for Highways Agency Verges and Trees is £112,500</p> <p>Contact officer: Des Knight, Temporary Accountant GO Shared Services Finance</p> <p>des.knight@cheltenham.gov.uk, 01242 264124</p>

1. Background

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee set up a task group looking at verge maintenance. The working group involved officers in the discussions so that there was a consensus on the approach which was outlined within their report and considered by Cabinet in December 2012. The working group were mindful of the current financial situation and their recommendations were framed in this light.
- 1.2 The council does contribute to the maintenance of the verges which is a highways authority responsibility. In accepting the recommendations from the O&S it was on the assumption that the council could for the foreseeable future continue with the financial subsidy.
- 1.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on 26 November 2012 indicated that they wanted to see a progress report brought back to them. Set out below are the recommendations and the progress to date along with other issues which may have arisen since the original work was undertaken.

2. Progress against the recommendations

2.1 Ubico should continue to cut grass where feasible in wet weather.

2.2 *At the time of drafting the report the weather has been relatively fine which has enabled grass cutting and weed control to be undertaken as planned. Ubico are currently on their ninth grass cutting cycle of the year, throughout the town, with the aim of achieving fifteen grass cuts per annum.*

2.3 Monthly contract management meetings between Gloucestershire County Council and Ubico should commence as a matter of urgency

2.4 *Officers from Ubico, CBC and GCC now meet on a monthly basis. These meetings have been productive as they enable issues to be resolved quickly and for all parties to share plans and report progress. They have been seen as a positive outcome from the review and there is now a better understanding between all parties.*

2.5 *Monthly meetings with CBC, GH and Ubico are progressing with positive outcomes. The current contract with GCC/Atkins has been retendered with a commencement date of 01 April 2014. Tenders have been received from Amey, Ringway, Balfour Beattie and Skanska (Atkins) and are currently being evaluated with a decision on the successful company being known early November.*

2.6 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.

2.7 *Discussions are taking place with GH/CBC/Ubico for the sowing of wildflower mixes on larger grass verges and focus is being given to gateway entrances to the town such as the A40 Golden Valley, Benhall areas, Arle Gardens and Coronation Square. An officer from the green space development team is taking this forward*

2.8 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.

2.9 *Developers are increasingly including areas of wildflower planting in their landscape proposals and the areas are usually more extensive than verges. There are some maintenance implications when planting wildflowers in grass verges. However, in some locations it might be appropriate, both in terms of visual amenity and providing food for wildlife.*

2.10 *Due to other work commitments the green space strategy is not yet reviewed but officers are aware of the importance of grass verges and the role that they play*

2.11 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.

2.12 *In addition to the existing Green Space Strategy, there is an emerging Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy for Cheltenham being developed as part of the Joint Core Strategy. Green Infrastructure encompasses all elements of the landscape in both public and private ownership, whereas the Green Space Strategy concentrated on the amenity value of open spaces in CBC ownership.*

Examples of GI include:

- *Public parks, open spaces and urban squares*
- *Private gardens and grounds*
- *Watercourses and water features*
- *Green roofs/ Roof gardens*
- *Green walls*
- *Sustainable urban drainage systems*
- *Living components of the townscape such as street trees, hedges, grass verges. Roundabouts, if appropriately managed, could also contribute to GI.*

One of the purposes of green infrastructure, in general, is to increase biodiversity by providing a network of habitats and food sources for wildlife. It is often referred to as being 'multifunctional space' e.g. a sustainable urban drainage system can aid flood alleviation and also provide amenity space and wildlife habitat. It is within the broader context of GI that management of the grass verges should be considered.

Within the JCS area the GI strategy also seeks to provide amenity value along green connections within and between settlements, focussing principally on links along watercourses. Its overarching aim is to link the Cotswold AONB in the east with the River Severn and its washlands in the west. An aspiration of the strategy is the creation of a regional park around the River Severn and its washlands.

2.13 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

The regular meetings with the GCC lead officer has lead to more effective communication with regards to highways adoption.

2.14 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.

Resources are being used flexibly and discussions are held with the lead officer from GCC at the monthly meetings. At the time of drafting the report discussions have yet to be held with regards to the 2014/15 arrangements.

2.15 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

2.16 *The county council have confirmed that the contract with Apcoa enables enforcement to be taken where vehicles are parked on grass verges adjacent to restricted parking shown with double yellow lines.*

2.17 The web site is updated as a matter of urgency to ensure that the service standards are specified and that during periods of service disruption that the website is updated accordingly

2.18 *The website has been updated. For a period of time the information was not available but once alerted to this matter the appropriate links were re-established so that the information was available to the public.*

2.19 Quality audits should be arranged to ensure the full coverage of the town

2.20 *Quality audits are being undertaken by Environmental Maintenance Officers on a random monthly*

basis throughout the town.

Report author

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