

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:	Improving Places select Commission
2.	Date:	Wednesday 15th October 2014
3.	Title:	Grounds Maintenance
4.	Directorate:	Environment and Development Services

5. Summary

The report provides an update to members on progress against the (Grounds Maintenance) Action Plan from October 2012, discusses problems encountered in the 2014 grass-cutting season and the measures taken to mitigate them.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that the report is noted.

7. Proposals and Details

An action plan for Grounds Maintenance was developed in late 2012 following Scrutiny and Operational reviews of the service and reported to **Improving Places Select Commission** at its meeting on 27th March 2013; a copy of the plan is attached with updated comments.

Grass-cutting - The Grounds Maintenance service has sustained reductions in resources over successive years and the baseline service for grass-cutting has changed as follows:

Year	Frequency	No. of cuts/season
2010/11	2 weekly	15
2011/12	3 weekly	10
2012/13	3 weekly (April – June), then 5 weekly	8
2013/14	5 weekly	5

Since 2011/12, the Grounds Maintenance budget has reduced by about 50%; the number of staff employed during the grass-cutting season has reduced from 104 in 2011/12 to 71 in 2014/15; the number of ride-on mowers deployed fell from 18 to 13 over the same period.

Ride-on mowers are provided under a contract which has another year to run. In 2011 all of the ride-ons were cylinder mowers, which produce the best quality of cut **when the grass is short**; when the grass is long (as in this year) the cut is very poor. This year, in anticipation of the effect of the reduced frequency of cutting, we have moved to a mix of machinery as follows:

- 2 Flail mowers** – capable of cutting long grass leaving short cuttings
- 5 Rotary mowers** – capable of cutting long grass, but leave long cuttings
- 6 Cylinder mowers** – best quality on short grass, but poor on long grass

The 2014 grass-cutting season has been one of the most difficult for many years due to the impact of the weather (mild winter and a warm, wet spring); as a result growing conditions for grass have been extremely good. This, along with the much reduced frequency of cutting has seen many areas with growth in excess of 12"-15" before the grass was cut, and this made it difficult to achieve a good quality finish.

As the grass-cutting regime has reduced in frequency, there has been a shift from **requests** to **complaints** (see table below). The most significant change happened between 12/13 when 32% of contacts were requests and 13/14 when 77% were complaints.

	Complaints	Requests	Total
2011/12	192	422	614
2012/13	359	774	1133
2013/14	826	243	1069
2014/15	355 in April/May	26 in April/May	381 in April/May

In the first quarter of 2013/14, the period when most contacts are made, the only services which exceeded the count for grass-cutting were refuse collection and street cleansing (always the two highest); reports about potholes and street lights were at about the same level (as grass-cutting) when they have historically been higher.

In response to these difficult growing conditions we deployed an additional 5 ride-on mowers - 2 cylinder mowers, 2 rotary mowers and 1 flail mower which were brought in to increase the cutting frequency and improve quality over a 6-week period during June/July. The funding for this was provided from one-off (non-recurrent) savings achieved in other areas of Streetpride.

Additional HRA funding (up to £289k/year) has now been secured for 2014/15 and 2015/16 which has targeted additional resources on to 'housing land' including aged person complexes (bungalow sites). This funding has enabled us to release some of the additional resources which were being deployed onto bungalow sites (as a result of environmental improvements – gates, fences etc.) and use them to increase frequency of grass-cutting elsewhere. The impact of this additional funding is as follows:

- We have established two dedicated teams to maintain bungalow sites enabling grass-cutting to be done every two weeks;
- The additional ride-on mowers have been retained, and the frequency of general grass-cutting (e.g. open spaces and highway verges) increased to approximately once every 3 weeks;
- The grass-cutting season has been extended to 17th October, an additional 4 weeks;
- A pre-season cut has been scheduled for March next year.

This funding has been applied since w/c 4th August.

As a result of the actions taken, the quality of grass-cutting now meets the required standard right across the borough, and the number of complaints has reduced significantly.

As we have not spent all of the (2014/15) available funding, discussions are taking place with NAS to consider proposals to undertake further work around the bungalow sites. This work could include edging back, self-set removal, hedge-cutting and shrub bed pruning/removal. This additional work would only extend to 30 locations this year, over a 4-week period in Cotober/November).

Weed-treatment – The other element of the Grounds Maintenance service which has attracted the most criticism is weed-treatment. Prior to 2012 all adopted highways and footpaths were treated twice each year; budget savings agreed by Members for 2012/13 onwards reduced this to once a year. Weed-treatment is scheduled for completion by the end of August.

Integrating the activity within Grounds Maintenance (it was previously part of Street Cleansing) has enabled us to plan some additional 'hot spot'

treatments between now and the end of the year with follow-up 'grubbing-out' works to remove detritus planned for early next year.

Additionally, this year we have successfully trialled using a mechanical sweeper, working with a lengthsman, to remove detritus and dead weeds. There is no specific budget for this work (costs are about £1,200 per week), and it therefore has to be targeted to make sure that we get the most value from it when funds become available.

8. Finance

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

Grounds Maintenance, and more specifically grass-cutting, is a weather dependent service. If growing conditions are unfavourable, even the additional resources being deployed may not always achieve the desired standards.

The additional funding from HRA is only agreed for the 2014/15 and 2015/16 financial years; beyond that time Members will have to reaffirm that the funding will continue.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Grounds Maintenance is integral to meeting Corporate Priority 4: ***All areas of Rotherham are safe, clean and well maintained.***

11. Background Papers and Consultation

Improving Places Select Commission 27th March 2013 - Scrutiny Review of Grounds Maintenance

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