



CABINET

Tuesday 3 September 2019

GRASS CUTTING – A CONSERVATION APPROACH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Grounds Maintenance services for East Suffolk Council is provided by the council's partner, Norse. The remainder is managed by a combination of Parish, Town, Suffolk County Council, Coastal Management and private landowners. In total, as a District, East Suffolk Council has responsibility a significant area of open space, all of which is managed by Norse.

Public opinion, the recent declaration of the Climate Emergency, the Suffolk Business Plan and our Environment Policy all suggest we should be reviewing in greater detail our grounds maintenance programme. Specifically, concerns have been raised in some localities about the environmental impact of a regular cutting regime (for example, in terms of carbon emissions) and dialogue has commenced between the District and some parish councils to explore alternatives to the current regime.

A number of trials are therefore proposed for 2020, identifying where it may be possible to:

- Reduce the need to spray herbicides
- Promoting wildlife diversity
- Supporting insect populations
- Saving money and divert to other projects

Reducing the carbon footprint, increasing bio-diversity and promoting a greener environment are the key outputs of a revised grounds maintenance programme if successfully delivered.

This document is intended to seek agreement, in principle, to further review the possibilities of a revised grounds maintenance programme to deliver against the above objectives. This document shall outline how we:

- Manage our open spaces currently
- How a new conservation based approach could look like
- What could be our strategy
- How is this aligned to the ESC Business Plan

The request is to approve a small number of pilots, where alternatives to the current cut/trim/ spray programme can be evaluated, in conjunction with Norse, expert bodies, our residents, Parish and Town Councils to promote a greener and more environmentally friendly

grounds maintenance programme. This would be initially trialled over the course of a year to 18 months in a few test locations. The results of which would determine the overall District wide strategy that would be employed.

These small changes that we can make now will make a big difference over time.

Is the report Open or Exempt?	Open
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Wards Affected:	Southwold, Saxmundham
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Cabinet Member:	James Mallinder
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Supporting Officer:	Kerry Blair – Head of Operations Simon Gilbert – Commercial Contract Manager
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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Norse, the Council's delivery partner, has been providing grounds maintenance services in its current form for a considerable number of years with little variation service (apart from land divestments).
- 1.2 In a climate where increased scrutiny is brought to bear on the environmental impact of the council's activity the council should be looking, where possible, to amend the maintenance schedule to promote greater bio-diversity and reduce our carbon footprint.
- 1.3 Other Local Authorities and indeed Town Councils, including within this District, have amended their grounds maintenance schedule to be further supportive of a more bio-diverse environment.
- 1.4 One of the contentious points is the use of herbicides which amongst other factors has become more prevalent over time.
- 1.5 All of the above shall be explored in further detail below:

2 CURRENT MANAGEMENT OF OPEN SPACES – AN OVERVIEW

- 2.1 **Grass cutting:**
- 2.2 In general, depending on the weather, grass cutting on public open spaces in East Suffolk typically will start around mid-March and continue until the season ends (usually October).
- 2.3 The first cut of the season will typically take slightly longer, particularly if grass has remained active during the winter period with the first cutting cycle largely completed around mid-April. If the location is one which is cut at the end of a monthly cycle (as part

of scheduled planning) it will receive its final cut of the year that much later; using the monthly cycle, all areas receive equal attention.

- 2.4 The planned schedule involves dedicated teams focussed on areas throughout the growing season. These teams also undertake occasional urgent works in addition to the schedule.

It should be noted that in recent years the growing season has lengthened with warmer year-round temperatures, there have been occasions where cutting has been carried out earlier and later than the above schedules. Any additional operational consideration for excess growth is undertaken within existing resources.

- 2.5 Norse also carries out grass cutting on behalf of Suffolk County Council on its highway verges within Towns and Parishes, with the majority of additional cuts paid for by East Suffolk Council to “top up” the County set frequency. Highway grass on trunk roads and areas outside of the main towns is generally carried out either by Suffolk County Council or Highways England and will generally be cut less frequently than those in urban areas.

2.6 **Churchyards / Cemeteries:**

- 2.7 Where East Suffolk has responsibility for Churchyards, the grass is cut four times per year, spread over the growing season. This was reduced in recent years as part of an approach which aimed to promote churchyards as areas that could support wildlife.
- 2.8 Some Churches raise additional funds to increase the number of grass cuts, whilst others have used the lower frequency to provide an attractive and more biodiverse enclosed space. In the majority of cases within Cemeteries, burials take place within ‘Lawn sections’ which mean the grass will be maintained approximately every two weeks. Currently herbicides are not utilised around memorials as it is believed this can detract from a cemetery’s overall appearance.
- 2.9 Where areas of grounds in cemeteries have been set aside from a cutting regime, information has been provided on signposts to draw visitor’s attention to why the grass is not being cut, and what types of wildlife and insect life this approach protects.
- 2.10 Due to the restrictions in space, during the process of grass cutting, arisings (cuttings) can sometimes be distributed or blown onto memorials. This is, where possible, kept a minimum and while unavoidable, is less intrusive than using herbicides.
- 2.11 In older sections of cemeteries where burials still take place, cutting is less frequent than ‘Lawns’ but they are still cut on a regular basis.
- 2.12 There are also some areas which by their very nature lend themselves to being managed for the benefit of conservation. These areas will appear longer in order to allow the plants and insects the full benefit to this approach.
- #### 2.13 **Herbicides:**
- 2.14 Herbicides, and more specifically Glyphosate, are currently employed by Norse across the district in a number of locations, for example around lamp posts on a highway verge, around park benches, buildings / structures which can dramatically reduce the amount of strimming required. This allows more time to be spent on mowing the verge, and / or allowing resource to be allocated elsewhere and importantly eliminates the damage that strimming could otherwise cause.
- 2.15 Norse are only able to use products which comply with Government legislation and all staff that undertake such operations are licenced to do so.
- 2.16 A number of English councils have banned the application of Glyphosate in its parks and open spaces such as Croydon and Bury Council. The London Borough of Hammersmith

and Fulham are now pesticide free and others such as Hampshire CC are re-examining its use.

- 2.17 Some parishes in East Suffolk have requested that the use of herbicide spraying is kept to a minimum – for example, alongside roads and paths.
- 2.18 **Maintenance Routine:**
- 2.19 In general, depending on the weather, grass cutting for ESC will start around mid March and continue until the season ends (usually October). This provides in the region of 7 – 8 cuts per year across the district and frequency being dependent on weather and growth.
- 2.20 The first cut of the season will typically take slightly longer, particularly if grass has remained active during the winter period with the first cutting cycle largely completed around mid-April.
- 2.21 Before the first cut (typically February) the once and only application of Glyphosate is carried out. (Glyphosate is not used within Cemeteries and Churchyards)
- 2.22 Norse also carries out grass cutting on behalf of Suffolk County Council on its highway verges within Towns and Parishes, with the majority of additional cuts paid for by East Suffolk District Council to “top up” the County set frequency. The existing 3 cuts per year have been reduced to 1 cut per year.
- 2.23 Highway grass on trunk roads and areas outside of the main towns (A & B roads) is generally carried out either by Suffolk County Council or Highways England and will generally be cut less frequently than those in urban areas.

3 A NEW MAINTENANCE ROUTINE

- 3.1 The council is seeking to identify ways in which it’s grounds maintenance programme can sit alongside a responsibility to act as a steward of the local environment. This is important in East Suffolk, where the quality of the natural environment is important for residents and visitors. The following points give some examples of what this commitment looks like in other locations.
- 3.2 **Southwold:**
- 3.3 This year the Town Council, with ESC and the Southwold Common Trust has sought consultation with Norse (whom they have a direct contract with for Town Council assets) to re-profile the grounds maintenance schedule in line with promoting a more bio-diverse environment, for the reasons mentioned above.
- 3.4 Each managed area / site within Southwold has been assessed for possible alternative maintenance routines such as reduced grass cutting from the standard to 2 cuts per year,

introduce volunteer only maintenance (and as such would be less intensive), cuts to be restricted to certain areas leaving other areas to grow as nature intended.

3.5 A consultation shall now take place to decide on the approach, seek fresh ideas and once agreed trial the new maintenance schedule for a year. Any savings would then be re-invested into plants and shrubs for the town.

3.6 **Rotherham Borough Council:**

3.7 For over 3 years Rotherham BC has adopted a more bio-diverse grass cutting schedule. This has resulted in a 'Green Apple' award for Environmental Best Practice and over 250 compliments from the revised scheme.

3.8 The Council's new planting scheme and management of these areas benefits:

- Rotherham's wildlife
- Supports the delivery of the Rotherham Biodiversity Action Plan
- Reduces the level of maintenance required

3.9 The meadow-type habitat of native wildflowers and bulbs with the addition of selected non-native flower species provides nectar, flowers and seeds and food sources for many insects, birds and even some mammals.

3.10 Savings have also been achieved in the region of £23k over a 2 year period for an 8 mile long stretch of road. The primary purpose was not to save money – however this has been a secondary benefit.

3.11 **A New Vision – how could these approaches be translated to East Suffolk?**

3.12 The Plantlife campaign for improved roadside verge management:

<https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/our-work/publications/good-verge-guide-different-approach-managing-our-waysides-and-verges>

have produced a document which provides for alternative and (importantly) measurable targets for flora on verges which could be employed for East Suffolk. Included are also some suggested management prescriptions set out in the document which we could look at adopting (page 12-13). The organisation is currently running a roadside verge campaign including verge management for wildlife:

<https://plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/roadvergecampaign>

3.13 In combination with the above a number of other measures should be executed in parallel:

- Agree a Trial Area for a revised programme. A Saxmundham representative has expressed an interest in an alternative maintenance scheme with Felixstowe and Woodbridge having declared a local Climate Emergency. These areas could be tested, subject to their agreement to see what really could be achieved
- The trial area would have a detailed re-assessment of maintenance requirements and to include potentially certain other land management techniques e.g. the deployment of 'Flying Flocks' of grazing sheep might be appropriate to aid natural management, the use of woodchip as an alternative to herbicides. Where the maintenance is carried out in parks and public open spaces a suggested technique could be to maintain short grass on any playing surface and perimeter thereof (e.g. that of a football pitch) to maintain utility for sports, and the perimeter of the wider area together with meanders through to

maintain utility for pedestrians and dog walkers, whilst permitting much of the remainder to grow wild with a single cut once in late summer to create meadow areas.

- Critically the engagement with the Town and Parish Councils is not be underestimated in its importance. They have the lists of land ESC manage and they can liaise with the local community to decide what land they want cutting less and with ESC deciding what is viable. A local volunteer task group, and as mentioned elsewhere, should be established to perform ad-hoc maintenance i.e. littler picks. Parish and Town councils could also perform an audit of wildlife prior to the change in the cutting regime and then on a agreed cycles for 12 - 18 months later. Parish and Town councils would be the first connection with residents explaining the reasoning of change in policy (working along

side the Green Print Forum - education and engagement will certainly be an important factor in the success of this programme).

- All grass to be cut less, unless so required.
- Other factors such as miles driven, fuel consumed, flora and fauna monitoring, public feedback etc. would be recorded.
- In conjunction seek consultation with residents, Town Councils, Parish Councils etc. and local support groups such as Greener Growth.

www.greenergrowth.co.uk

The trial should run for a full growing season (March 2020 to October 2020) with clearly defined and measurable outputs. Importantly we should as well be prepared for:

- a) Failure
- b) Accidents

If successful, the council may wish to extend the revised grounds maintenance strategy throughout the District. This would only be done with the support of Town and Parish Councils and a majority of local residents.

4 HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO THE EAST SUFFOLK BUSINESS PLAN?

4.1 The East Suffolk Business Plan has a Vision –

“Maintain and sustainably improve the quality of life for everyone growing up in, living in, working in and visiting East Suffolk”

And to enable

“...our residents to be healthy and to enjoy our coast and countryside; our history, art and culture”

The delivery of the Plan has a three-pronged strategy. This strategy includes ‘Enabling Communities’ of which Grounds Maintenance can provide a positive input to help deliver against the Strategies objectives. Two of the key strategies are:

- Healthy and engaged people;
- Communities looking after their land, food, water, energy, services, jobs and housing

4.2 The East Suffolk Business Plan has a number of Critical success factors -

One of those is the Green Environment. As per the ESBP:

‘Protecting, enhancing and making sustainable use of our environment, including managing the effects of our changing coastline’.

Having a Grounds Maintenance scheme that seeks to meet or pro-actively support the meeting of this objective should be a consideration for us all.

4.3 East Suffolk also has an Environmental Policy with a clear ambition of Suffolk being ‘The Greenest County’

4.4 The objectives of this Policy can be again be met somehow by an amended grounds maintenance scheme as this document is promoting for consideration.

Within the Policy there a number of Actions, each one a distant activity with a specific outcome / evidence. If we decide to proceed with an amended grounds maintenance programme this is where it could be tracked, monitored and hence recorded.

5 FINANCIAL AND GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Expenditure on grounds maintenance is in the region of £1.8m annually across the District. This paper does not propose any reduction in this as part of the pilot process.
- 5.2 Any findings and changes to policy as a result of these pilot studies would need to be cost neutral in their implementation.

6 OTHER KEY ISSUES

- 6.1 A consistent approach must be adhered to and types of species agreed. There are lots of species which could benefit from amended maintenance regimes, but to an extent what they are will depend on where the locations are. Particular beneficiaries would include flora, invertebrates (bees and butterflies) and reptiles (such as common lizard).
- 6.2 Alternatives to herbicides – for example, a woodchip mulch around tree bases – should be explored as part of this trial
- 6.3 Monitoring of data will be important as part of this trial. If a volunteer network is employed to help with the conservation goals e.g. raking - were established they could also be trained and deployed to monitor for key indicator species. Another benefit would be that volunteers, as part of the data gathering, could see for themselves the effects of

their efforts and reinforce support for this new approach. Existing volunteer networks could be consulted as part of this trial.

- 6.4 Safety is paramount and regard must be given to ensuring that vegetation does not obliterate visibility at junctions or obscure mandatory traffic signs so regular cutting to maintain visibility will remain essential.
- 6.5 Equipment and machinery: Less frequent grass cutting could indeed become more onerous when ready to be cut due to the additional length and weight etc. Additional or alternative cutting machines may have to be employed.

7 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 A public consultation should be offered, as has started in Southwold, initially for the trial programme and it would require all applicable and then district wide Cllrs to support.

8 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 8.1 This document is to seek a decision in principle to investigate in further detail an alternative grounds maintenance programme. If so granted other options may become apparent throughout the evaluation process.

9 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 The council needs to identify where meaningful responses can be made to the Climate Emergency, the ESC Environment Policy, and general public opinion .
- 9.2 That the decision is made on the basis that safety of the general public is paramount: that we will only cut grass and / or retain the existing grounds maintenance programme where there is a reason to do so e.g. formal parks and where there is a safety issue.
- 9.3 That we will only do this in consultation with Town and Parish Councils.
- 9.4 These small changes we can employ now will make a big difference over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That East Suffolk Council run pilot schemes through the 2020 growing season in Southwold and in Saxmundham, where a less intensive cutting approach is trialled and results monitored by the ecology team.
2. That consultation is carried out with Town and Parish Councils to identify areas where local residents may support a less intensive cutting schedule
3. That these pilots are cost neutral -with neither an increase or decrease in the grounds maintenance budget.
4. That the ecology team at East Suffolk are engaged in these pilots to monitor and report on any positive effect of reduced cutting on wildlife populations.
5. That East Suffolk explores how to move towards a 'no spraying' policy as standard across the District, and further identifies ways in which this change can be made cost neutral.
6. That work is carried out through the Green Print Forum to identify volunteer groups who may be prepared to take on the work of monitoring and maintaining areas of natural space on behalf of their local community

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Southwold's Open Spaces press release

BACKGROUND PAPERS - None

