



## **Overview Scrutiny Committee**

# **Review of Grass Cutting and Horticulture Topic Review**

**Report – November 2018**

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## Foreword

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The Overview Scrutiny Committee felt it would be beneficial to explore the horticulture and grass cutting service following increased comments from members of the public about the long length of the grass and overgrown shrub areas across the borough but particularly within housing funded areas. The Committee wanted to understand where the resources were being directed and whether the current resource level was sufficient to provide what is a core service to residents of the borough.

This topic review has identified a number of potential improvements that can be made to the way in which the horticultural service is delivered across the borough.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the officers involved in the review for their time and assistance in providing comprehensive information which has enabled Members to discuss, debate and identify potential improvements for consideration.

Cllr John Burden  
Chair of the Sub-group

## Introduction and Summary of Recommendations

- 1.1 In October 2018, the Overview Scrutiny Committee selected the subject of Grass Cutting and Horticulture for a topic review. The terms of reference for the review focused on objectives to:
- Review and understand which areas of land are GBC's responsibility for horticulture and grass cutting and which are KCC's responsibility including the removal and replanting of trees.
  - Investigate different horticultural practices to manage some grass areas across the borough in different ways to increase biodiversity such as wild flower areas or wildlife strips.
  - Undertake a review of the resources and equipment currently used and determine whether these meet the expectation of the service.
- 1.2 Throughout the review, Members of the sub-group have been provided with a significant amount of information to review and analyse. The information provided prompted numerous questions from Members and in-depth discussion about the way in which elements of the grass cutting and horticulture service are provided across the borough.

### Summary of Recommendations

- 1.3 In summary, the Scrutiny Topic review of Grass Cutting and Horticulture has identified five recommendations for Cabinet consideration

	<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>	<b>Report page</b>
<b>1.</b>	<p><b>Improved training for all horticultural operatives on machinery usage techniques</b></p> <p>To train operational staff on the effective use of horticultural equipment especially when using strimmers to avoid getting grass cuttings on windows/paths and to keep areas clean and tidy once the work has been completed.</p> <p><i>Timeframe for actions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>3 months as part of annual spring training programme ready for the new cutting season.</i></li> </ul>	Page 7
<b>2.</b>	<p><b>Review current tree operating procedure</b></p> <p>Update the current tree operating procedure in conjunction with the Kent Tree Strategy with a view to adopting a '2 for 1' replacement programme for any trees that are felled on GBC</p>	Page 7

RECOMMENDATION	Report page
<p>land. Wherever possible the trees should be sourced/grown within the UK.</p> <p><i>Timeframe for actions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 months</li> </ul>	
<p><b>3. Planning guidance on appropriate trees and shrubs</b></p> <p>Produce a guide to assist planning applicants in selecting and planting the appropriate type of tree for the type of development and to encourage the planting of the correct type of blossom and deciduous trees in any given location</p> <p><i>Timeframe for actions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 months</li> </ul>	Page 8
<p><b>4. Explore additional sites where the practices of ‘set-aside’ areas or wildflower meadows can be adopted and to ensure clear explanatory signage is used to detail why an area has been set-aside or a wildflower meadow has been established</b></p> <p>Locate additional sites where this practice can be adopted and provide clear signage to explain to residents / visitors why an area has been set-aside or a wildflower meadow established explaining the benefits to the environment of this technique of land management in a specific location.</p> <p><i>Timeframe for actions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify suitable sites with immediate effect, prepare and start to establish the relevant land management technique and provide an update in two years on process. Existing and future sites to have clear signage giving an explanation on the relevant land management use technique used for the specific location.</li> </ul>	Page 10
<p><b>5. A new two person grounds maintenance team should be set up to carry out increased levels of grounds maintenance on Housing owned sites especially sheltered housing communal areas to improve the local environment for residents</b></p> <p>An additional two person grounds maintenance team should be set up so maintenance of Housing owned land can be increased especially sheltered housing communal areas. The new team will carry out more frequent grass cutting and shrub</p>	Page 11

## RECOMMENDATION

Report page

maintenance plus other tasks such as weed spraying to improve the local environment for residents. The additional revenue cost of establishing a new grounds maintenance team would be £53,380 with an initial capital outlay of £18,000 for a new van and associated equipment. The new team would be funded from ongoing salary savings within the HRA budget as the team would be working exclusively on Housing owned land.

### *Timeframe for actions:*

- April 2019

- 1.4 Further information to support these recommendations is contained within the body of the report.

## 2. Review Findings

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### **Workstream 1 – Review of Borough / County Council responsibilities**

- 2.1 Members of the group were interested in reviewing and understanding which areas of land are GBC's responsibility for horticulture and grass cutting and which are KCC's responsibility including the removal and replanting of trees. It was agreed this review would consider the levels of maintenance expected, the quality of work required, the use of the voluntary / community sector and the maintenance of future green spaces at new housing estates.
- 2.2 The horticultural responsibilities of both Gravesham Borough Council and Kent County Council were explained to the members of the working group. It was established that there is detailed information on both authorities' websites which includes maps showing the land that each authority is responsible for maintaining.
- 2.3 Members of the committee raised the issue of disputes regarding landownership. It was noted that there are a very small number of occasions arising where it is not known who owns the land but these issues are resolved promptly by officers as they come up in consultation with Kent County Council. In some cases, this highlighted that land had not been adopted meaning land registry searches were conducted in conjunction with Kent County Council to find the responsible party. As a result the accuracy of the records is always improving.
- 2.4 Members felt that the number of cuts for grass and shrubs undertaken by GBC was an area of concern in particular in relation to GBC Housing-owned areas such as sheltered housing units. It was explained that with current resourcing levels, the grass across the borough is

cut eight times a year except for parks where the grass is cut 12 times a year whilst all shrubs receive one visit per year during the winter to 'cut back and tidy'.

- 2.5 Members raised the issue of grass cuttings being sprayed onto windows and paths in some instances when strimmers are used to cut the grass edges. There is a certain technique that should be used by grass cutting staff where they should angle the strimmer away from windows or paths. When strimming where grass cuttings have sprayed onto windows or paths then a hand blower should be used to remove the cuttings to leave the area clean and tidy.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 1**

##### **Improved training for all horticultural operatives on machinery usage techniques**

To train operational staff on the effective use of horticultural equipment especially when using strimmers to avoid getting grass cuttings on windows/paths and to keep areas clean and tidy once the work has been completed.

- 2.6 The Council's tree operating procedure was provided to Members of the working group. Members wanted to establish why some trees were pruned and some were not. It was explained that some species of trees could be pollarded every 3 to 7 years depending on the species and location of the tree. This technique allows large trees to be retained in densely populated urban areas by limiting the tree canopy size. However, it was highlighted that some trees were not suitable for this management technique and this supported the need for proper consideration to be given to selecting appropriate trees for each location.
- 2.7 The Council responds to every call about trees by sending out our tree officer to inspect and assess the problem. After weighing up all the factors, a decision is then made as to whether any works are required to deal with the particular issue raised.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 2**

##### **Review current tree operating procedure**

Update the current tree operating procedure in conjunction with the Kent Tree Strategy with a view to adopting a '2 for 1' replacement programme for any trees that are felled on GBC land. Wherever possible the trees should be sourced/grown within the UK.

- 2.8 Members asked whether guidance was provided to developers to ensure that the right trees were planted in the right place to prevent future maintenance problems being created for the landowner or the Council. It was also requested that a list of suitable blossom and deciduous trees should be established as part of planning guidance available to planning applicants to assist them in selecting appropriate trees or shrubs for their development. Guidance will also be obtained from the Royal Horticultural Society's website

### RECOMMENDATION 3

#### Planning guidance on appropriate trees and shrubs

Produce a guide to assist planning applicants in selecting and planting the appropriate type of tree for the type of development and to encourage the planting of the correct type of blossom and deciduous trees in any given location.

- 2.9 Members were interested to know whether the voluntary / community sector could be used to increase the extent and quality of grounds maintenance at some sites around the borough. The Council already has a number of community groups that maintain certain sections of land particularly in relation to sheltered housing units. Information was provided to Members to outline the process that the Council follows, including training and risk assessments required to ensure that maintenance carried out by the volunteers is carried out safely.
- 2.10 Appendix 1 provides more detailed information on the objectives outlined in workstream 1 including an explanation of GBC/KCC grounds maintenance responsibilities.

#### **Workstream 2 – Alternative horticultural practices**

- 2.11 Members wanted to investigate the different horticultural practices used to manage some grass areas in different ways across the borough to increase biodiversity. In particular Members were interested in practices such as the use of wild flower areas or wildlife strips in specific locations.
- 2.12 Further information was provided to Members to explain why and how the two horticultural practices of ‘set-aside’ and wildflower meadows would be used in various locations around the borough
- **Set-aside** – We currently practice a set-aside approach at a number of GBC parks and open spaces. Sites include Camer Park, Culverstone Open Space, The Warren and The Dell area of the Riverside Leisure Area.

This management technique is simple to adopt and essentially means leaving designated areas of grass that we previously cut at a high frequency to grow long. These areas are then flail cut once a year at the end of the summer once any wild flower seed has set.

#### **Advantages**

- Promotes increased plant diversity which attracts insects and other invertebrates (including butterflies, bees, spiders and millipedes), birds and mammals.
- Flowering species add colour, change the feel, and introduce a sound and sensory experience to an otherwise bland and uniform open space. This approach significantly enhances the aesthetics of the area and has been well received by the public.
- Maintenance liability for the area is reduced from 12 cylinder mowing cuts down to



just 1 rear flail cut per annum. This saves staff time and reduces our carbon footprint.

#### **Disadvantages**

- If not managed correctly, by using short mown grass paths in-between long grass areas together with appropriate signage to inform and educate the general public, the perception can be that the council has failed to maintain the area properly.
  - Experience has shown that in some urban areas, the long grass can act as a litter trap. Short mown grass is easier to litter pick and keep clean and tidy.
  - Some dog walkers complain about grass seeds getting in their dog's ears leading to unnecessary vet's bills.
  - Can lead to increased complaints about dog fouling as it's not picked up as consistently as it is in areas where the grass is long.
- **Wild Flower Meadows** – We have trialled wild flower meadows in a number of areas across the borough but experience has shown us that careful consideration needs to be given to choose the most appropriate locations for this practice. Sites include The Dell area, Gordon Gardens, Northfleet Cemetery, St Andrew's Gardens and a former formal bedding display bed at the junction of Earl Road and St Margaret's Road in Northfleet.

This management technique is very popular and can be really effective in creating aesthetically pleasing displays with the added benefit of enhancing biodiversity.

#### **Advantages**

- The significant increase in wildflower species attracts insects and other invertebrates (including butterflies, bees, spiders and millipedes), birds and mammals.
- Aesthetically these areas can look absolutely stunning at certain times of the year with vibrant contrasting colours.
- For short periods, these areas can look as attractive as formal bedding displays and can be achieved at a fraction of the cost as the plants do not need to be replaced year or year.

#### **Disadvantages**

- When compared to set-aside or high frequency amenity grass, these areas can be expensive and labour intensive to maintain.
- Every year, wildflower meadows require a herbicide application to remove perennial weeds and grasses, rotorvation, raking and levelling, seed purchasing and sowing and in dry seasons irrigation during the germination phase.
- At certain times of the year, these areas can look untidy and unloved and can sometimes lead to complaints from the public and a perception that we aren't doing our job properly.

2.13 It was recognised that a number of set-aside areas and wildflower meadows had been established across the borough and it was important that these land maintenance

techniques were used in the correct areas. However it is important that the reasoning behind these land use techniques is clearly explained so people do not feel it is down to a lack of maintenance. Members were keen to see these types of horticultural techniques used as widely as possible and were equally keen to see that appropriate signage is used to clearly explain the approach that is being used so that the public see that the approach used in each area has been a conscious decision and that it has environmental benefits.

- 2.14 Encourage the involvement of schools where possible to help select sites so the children can understand these land management techniques and also to see how these areas can be developed and improved.
- 2.15 If Members have particular areas they feel would be suitable for 'set-aside' or a wildflower meadow then these should be presented to the Horticultural Services Manager who will review the suggested area for its viability. Members asked that Kent Highways are encouraged to use these techniques on roundabouts within the borough.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4**

**Explore additional sites where the practices of 'set-aside' areas or wildflower meadows can be adopted and to ensure clear explanatory signage is used to detail why an area has been set-aside or a wildflower meadow has been established**

Locate additional sites where this practice can be adopted and provide clear signage to explain to residents / visitors why an area has been set-aside or a wildflower meadow established explaining the benefits to the environment of this technique of land management in a specific location.

#### **Workstream 3 – Review resources and equipment**

- 2.16 The service currently incorporates a Horticultural Manager, a Parks and Trees Officer, a Horticultural Supervisor, 18 Grounds Maintenance Operatives, (5 of which are seasonal) and 2 Park Rangers.
- 2.17 In addition to all of the standard horticultural maintenance tasks such as grass cutting and shrub maintenance, the horticultural staff also carry out the inspection and maintenance of the council's playgrounds, prepare and mark out 19 football pitches and carry out allotment checks.
- 2.18 Members noted that if all of the issues raised within the review were as a result of the level of resources available then as part of the Topic Review, additional resources should be identified and directed to key target areas. Members felt that this is a core service that could affect the public's perception of the Borough and was also a quality of life issue for residents and visitors to the borough.
- 2.19 Members highlighted a particular concern over the maintenance of Housing owned land and suggested an additional two person team could be set up so maintenance of Housing owned land could be increased especially in relation to sheltered housing communal areas. The new team could then carry out more frequent grass cutting and shrub maintenance plus

other tasks such as weed spraying to improve the local environment for residents. Officers have calculated that the additional revenue cost of establishing a new two person grounds maintenance team would be £53,380 with an initial capital outlay of £18,000 for a new van and associated equipment. Members of the topic review group unanimously agreed this proposal and suggested that funding for the team should be made available from the HRA as the team would be working exclusively on Housing owned land.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5**

**A new two person grounds maintenance team should be set up to carry out increased levels of grounds maintenance on Housing owned sites especially sheltered housing communal areas to improve the local environment for residents**

An additional two person grounds maintenance team should be set up so maintenance of Housing owned land can be increased especially sheltered housing communal areas. The new team will carry out more frequent grass cutting and shrub maintenance plus other tasks such as weed spraying to improve the local environment for residents. The additional revenue cost of establishing a new grounds maintenance team would be £53,380 with an initial capital outlay of £18,000 for a new van and associated equipment. The new team would be funded from ongoing salary savings within the HRA budget as the team would be working exclusively on Housing owned land.

- 2.20 The current level and make up of equipment was explained to Members. As part of the 10 year fleet renewals programme the equipment used by the horticulture department has been reviewed by the Horticulture Services Manager and the Transport Manager to ensure the equipment continues to meet the requirements of the service.
- 2.21 This review gave rise to a change from the standard cylinder ride-on style mower to a rotary deck mower which provides greater versatility when cutting both long and short grass. Further demonstrations and reviews led to the purchasing of a new set of gang mowers for the parks mowing instead of changing to a rotary mower for this type of work as the gang mowers give a better and more consistent cut. This new approach has led to more efficient and effective grass cutting across the borough.
- 2.22 The current horticultural fleet consists of 8 medium vans, 5 tipper vans, 2 small vans, a tractor, 10 ride-on mowers and various hand mowers, hedge trimmers and strimmers.
- 2.23 Members felt that the type and level of equipment was sufficient to carry out the operation, however it was felt that staff resources needed to be increased to provide a better quality of service within the housing owned areas and sheltered housing units.

# Appendices



## Workstream 1 – Review of Borough and County Council responsibilities

## Appendix 1

Authority	Gravesham Borough Council	Kent County Council		
<p><b>Who is responsible for what</b></p>	<p>Grass and shrubs are cut at the following sites across the borough</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gravesham Borough Council owned parks and open spaces</li> <li>• Gravesham Borough Council owned housing sites</li> <li>• Gravesend and Northfleet cemeteries</li> <li>• Churchyards closed for new burials</li> <li>• Some sites in Gravesend Town Centre</li> </ul> <p>A plan of GBC owned sites can be found at <a href="https://www.gravesham.gov.uk/home/street-care-and-cleaning/grass-trees-hedges/overview">https://www.gravesham.gov.uk/home/street-care-and-cleaning/grass-trees-hedges/overview</a></p>	<p>Kent County Council are responsible for the following</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural road side verges</li> <li>• Urban road side verges</li> <li>• Grass adjacent to road junctions</li> <li>• Shrub beds adjacent to the highway</li> </ul> <p>Plan of KCC responsibilities can be found at <a href="http://www.kent.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/report-a-problem">http://www.kent.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/report-a-problem</a></p>		
<p><b>What is the expected level of maintenance</b></p>	<p>Grass areas generally receive eight cuts a year between March and October. Operational issues and weather can impact on our grass cutting service meaning in some seasons there may be seven or nine cuts.</p> <p>Large grass areas in our main parks receive 12 cuts a year.</p>	<p><b>Location of grass</b></p>	<p><b>What we cut</b></p>	<p><b>When we cut</b></p>
		<p>Rural grass</p>	<p>We cut a 900mm (3 foot) strip next to the road edge using a tractor mounted mower.</p>	<p>A cut between May and September to maintain highway safety.</p>

	Shrubs receive one visit a year between November and February.	Urban grass	Grass located next to roads or footpaths, normally within the town or village centre and 30 mph limit.	<p>Cut between March and October (about once every 5 weeks) to maintain highway safety.</p> <p>In urban grass areas, we wait until 6 weeks after the flowering period before cutting spring flowers, such as daffodils, so they will grow the following year.</p>
		Visibility areas	Grass that is adjacent to a road junction and is within the sight line for drivers turning in or out.	Cut between April and October (about every 2 months) to maintain highway safety.
		Shrubs	Prune and weed shrub beds . Shrubs are trimmed enough to allow for next year's growth, and to ensure that the highway is safe to use. This includes cutting back	Prune and weed shrub beds during the autumn and winter months

			from kerb edges and nearby fences.	
<b>Quality of work required</b>	Litter clearance is carried out before grass cutting is undertaken. We do not collect cuttings following mowing, but cuttings should be spread evenly over the surface. Any cuttings on the footpaths or roads after mowing will be blown back onto the verge and obstacles such as bollards trimmed around.	<p>Do not collect cuttings following mowing, but they should be spread evenly over the surface. Any cuttings on the footpaths or roads after mowing will be blown back onto the verge and obstacles like streetlights trimmed around.</p> <p>This may not happen on the same day as a different team will do this. We do not collect cuttings due to extra costs of equipment and disposal.</p>		
<b>Use of voluntary / community sector</b>	<p>We currently run a scheme whereby residents of GBC owned sheltered accommodation can assist with the grass cutting and grounds maintenance on the communal gardens where they live. The process works as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resident(s) expresses wish to maintain communal garden area</li> <li>• Risk assessment is produced to identify main risks with particular site and machinery proposed</li> <li>• GBC Horticultural Supervisor carries out safety briefing with volunteers talking them through the risk assessment and control measures.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Grass cutting</b></p> <p>If you would like to cut the grass more often than we can, this is okay provided it can be carried out safely.</p> <p>Grass cuttings can be left evenly spread over the mown verge or disposed of with your lawn cuttings. Please do not pile them on the verge or leave them where they can block drains or ditches.</p> <p><b>Bulbs and wildflowers</b></p> <p>If you would like to plant bulbs such as daffodils and crocus in verges, please contact KCC beforehand. By telling us, we can try and make sure the verges are not cut until after the flowering period.</p>		

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only residents that attend the safety briefing can carry out the maintenance work. If other residents choose to garden, they do so at their own risk.</li> <li>• Residents decide how much they want to take on and are advised that the area can be handed back for GBC to continue maintenance at any time.</li> <li>• This is currently happening at Beatrice Gardens, Chinnery Court and St Gregory's Court.</li> </ul>	
<b>Future adoption &amp; maintenance of sites</b>	GBC do not adopt new sites for maintenance, these sites fall under the developer's responsibility to arrange for a management company to manage the sites and would be funded by residents of the site.	KCC do not adopt new roadside verges or trees. These sites would fall under the developer's responsibility to arrange for a management company to manage the sites funded by residents of the site.
<b>Maintenance of Trees</b>	<p>Trees are inspected by our tree officer on both a planned rotational basis and on an ad hoc basis when contacted by members of the public.</p> <p>Gravesham Borough Council <b>IS</b> responsible for the following trees:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trees on GBC Leisure land, including designated open space, e.g. Woodlands Park, Gordon Gardens, Windmill Hill etc.</li> <li>• Trees on GBC Housing land, e.g. St Patrick's Gardens and Fountain Walk communal garden areas.</li> </ul>	<p>Trees are inspected on a planned rotational basis by experienced and qualified professionals.</p> <p>When inspecting trees we assess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• condition</li> <li>• potential risks and hazards</li> <li>• width and height clearance required for the road</li> <li>• any required works.</li> </ul> <p>We do not deal with nuisance related issues, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• height and width of tree canopy</li> <li>• falling leaves, seeds and sap</li> <li>• insect or bird droppings</li> <li>• light and shading</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trees on GBC Estates land, e.g. parts of Springhead Enterprise Park.</li> </ul> <p>Gravesham Borough Council <b>IS NOT</b> responsible for the following trees:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trees on Highway land, e.g. trees on footways or in Highway verges. These are the responsibility of Kent County Council which has their own tree management programme.</li> <li>• Trees on Parish Council owned land, e.g. the green in Edmund Close, Meopham; these are the responsibility of the relevant Parish Council which should be contacted directly.</li> <li>• Trees in individual council housing gardens. These are the tenant's responsibility and enquiries need to be directed to the relevant Housing Officer for the area in the first instance.</li> <li>• Trees on private land or private gardens. These are the responsibility of the relevant landowner.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• branches overhanging private property</li> <li>• interference with television reception, telephone/power cables and solar panels.</li> </ul> <p><b>Tree Stumps</b></p> <p>If we must cut down trees, the stumps will be cut at approximately one metre in height. This is less likely to be a trip hazard.</p> <p>We aim to remove stumps from grass verges within three months. However, funds currently restrict the removal of stumps within a hard surfaces such as pavements, and these may remain for a number of years prior to removal.</p>
<b>Tree Planting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gravesham Borough Council's Horticultural Services Team carries out an annual tree planting program every winter in December / January.</li> <li>• The following table details the number of standard trees, (trees that are over 10cm in girth at 1.5m above ground level), other trees</li> </ul>	<p>We plant trees from early November to the end of March.</p> <p>We replant all trees that are protected by a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) within 2 years of removal.</p>

and whips that we planted in the last 5 years. The table also includes the number of trees that we felled during this period.

Year	Standard trees planted	Other trees planted	Whips planted	Number of trees felled
2017/18	12	18	0	25
2016/17	10	17	0	17
2015/16	13	12	0	17
2014/15	13	3	3900*	27
2013/14	10	5	420*	23

\*Whips were funded by Forestry Commission and the North West Countryside Partnership as part of the Big Tree Plant and planted in conjunction with Groundwork South.

Unfortunately, we are no longer able to facilitate a general tree replacement programme. However, we actively work with residents, councillors and voluntary groups who provide external funding for this purpose.

Further information can be found at <http://www.kent.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/what-we-look-after/soft-landscape-maintenance/trees>