GROUND MAINTENANCE REVIEW

Report of the Head of Neighbourhood Services

Cabinet Member: Councillor Glen Sanderson, Environment & Local Services

Purpose of Report

To review the performance of the grounds maintenance programme undertaken during 2017/18 and identify improvements to service delivery that will be delivered in 2018/19 to ensure that we achieve the best possible outcomes for our communities with the resources available to us.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the committee:-

a. Notes the overall good performance of grounds maintenance activity this year, as demonstrated by the Northumbrian in Bloom results and Green Flag awards.

b. Notes the significant improvement in verge cutting from 2016/17 to 17/18 and supports adopting this improvement as a new higher standard of baseline service.

c. Supports the implementation of the actions outlined in this report, which aim to improve the performance of weed control in 2018/19.

Key Issues

1. The core grounds maintenance service achieved its key targets this growing season and overall performance was good.

2. Highway verge maintenance and weed control were both areas of public dissatisfaction during 2015/16 and 2016/17.

3. In 2017/18 a significant improvement in verge cutting performance was achieved by additional hiring of staff, tractors and other equipment and increasing the use of agricultural contractors.

4. In 2017/18 a modest volume of additional weed control activity was delivered in addition to the contractual arrangements that were already in place from the previous year.
5. Given the context of on-going financial pressures, it is necessary to continue to develop collaborative arrangements with key stakeholders such as town and parish councils and community and voluntary groups to help target activity where it has the most impact.

6. No reductions in grounds maintenance service standards are proposed as part of the Council’s revenue budget savings for 2018/19.

7. An investment of £60,000 revenue (subject to approval of the council budget) will be made to mainstream the temporary verge cutting improvements delivered in 2017/18 and permanently adopt these improvements as the new base line service. The baseline service for highway verge maintenance will now be that all strategic and all non strategic routes (except those agreed with environmental groups) will be cut before the end of July and from August selective junctions and strategic routes will be cut for a second time.

8. An investment of £120,000 revenue (subject to approval of the council’s budget for 2018/19) will be made to improve the quality of weed control services and bring the majority of that activity back in-house. This resource will be allocated equitably across each Local Council Area and result in an increase in staff and equipment in each area allowing NCC staff with the appropriate skills and local knowledge to deliver this service.

**REVIEW OF SUMMER GROUNDS MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME 2017/18**

1. **BACKGROUND**

1.1 Neighbourhoods Services engage seasonal staff each year for a 26 week period ranging from April/May to end of Sept/October in order to provide an adequate staffing resource to undertake regular grass cutting and grounds maintenance works over the spring/summer ‘growing season’. This year a total of 53 seasonal staff (29.09 FTE) have been employed to undertake grounds maintenance activities over the growing season at a cost of £540k.

1.2 The overall standards of grounds maintenance have been very good this summer, demonstrated by the excellent results achieved in the Northumbria in Bloom competition, and the winter work program is currently on target.

1.3 The main grounds maintenance activities and details of performance this year are summarised below.

**Grass Cutting Activity**

1.4 The standard level of service for amenity grass cutting is to achieve a minimum of 10 cuts during the season (usually beginning in mid-March through to October). We have achieved our minimum standard of 10 cuts for amenity grass in all areas of the county this year.
1.5 In those areas where the County Council is paid to provide an enhanced grass cutting service by Town and Parish Councils and social housing providers (such as Homes for Northumberland and Bernicia), we have also met our obligations.

1.6 Across the 5 main service enhancement partnership areas in SE Northumberland we have delivered a significantly enhanced grass cutting service this year.

1.7 A project to digitise and digitally map all grass cutting plots took place in 2017/18. This enables all grass cutting teams to be equipped with handheld devices with Total Mobile software on so that they can log in real time their progress against work schedules.

1.8 This will facilitate improved performance management and reporting to stakeholders for grass cutting activity in 2018/19. The solution will also allow us to more accurately capture productivity information and allow us to dynamically schedule and reschedule work, which is particularly important in a service that can be affected by changing weather conditions.

Highway Verge Cutting

1.9 In 2016/17 all strategic and non-strategic verges were not cut until late October, improvements made in 2017/18 ensured that all of this work was completed before the end of July.

1.10 Every year diverse views are offered by the public on our highway verge cutting program. Views tend to be from opposite ends of the spectrum, those who want us to cut more verges, quicker to improve visibility and visual amenity for road users and those who want us not to cut verges, or not cut them until much later in the season to improve biodiversity and encourage more wildflowers.

1.11 Improving visibility and safety for Highway users has to be our top priority and the focus on improvements in 2017/18 reflected this.

1.12 However, we are exploring with Natural England, North Pennines AONB and the National Park Authority areas in the county where we can work together to improve biodiversity, especially in rare habitats through selective approaches to verge maintenance.

1.13 The maintenance approach suggested by these groups cannot be achieved on a large scale without compromising road safety or incurring unsustainable costs. However, we are currently in productive dialogue with them and have agreed a list of their priority verges that we will not cut until much later in the
season, along with other measures designed to improve biodiversity in key areas.

1.14 These verges, all currently non-strategic verges, will be redesignated as ecology verges and arrangements including crew/contractor instructions and on site designation signs will ensure that these verges are cut much later in the season to maximise biodiversity in these areas.

1.15 A combination of tendering works and increasing the in house resource in 2018/19 and future years will achieve a full cut by the end of July and a secondary cut of some key junctions later in the season, effectively replicating and mainstreaming the successful approach taken this year.

Weed Control

1.16 Effective weed control in public spaces is challenging due to a number of factors and it is not possible to ‘cure’ weed growth in these areas. There is a fundamental issue in that we need to accept an amount of weed growth before it can be treated. Planning treatments can also be problematic, as rain or wind can both stop the operation from taking place effectively.

1.17 In recent years it was ascertained that, nationally, decades of use of residual weed killers - which by their nature are highly toxic - had led to a build up of these chemicals in rivers and watercourses, with the potential that they could make their way into drinking water supplies and the food chain. As a result, European Union (EU) rules and legislative changes in the UK meant that residual herbicides were withdrawn, leaving local authorities with the option of using only ‘contact’ treatments, so we only use authorised products that are predominantly glyphosate based and which are only effective on actively growing plants.

1.18 Weed control is essentially split down into two main areas, around obstacles on soft landscape areas and footpaths, kerb edges & other hardstanding. In some areas both were contracted out but prior to 2015/16 the predominant arrangement was that selective spraying of soft landscape areas was undertaken by in-house teams and a complete blanket spray of footpaths, kerb edges & other hardstanding areas was undertaken by specialist weed spraying contractors as part of a county wide tendering exercise.
1.19 Tendering this work does allow existing teams to concentrate on other key activity such as grass cutting and planting, and the use of contractors can bring greater flexibility in responding to weather conditions.

1.20 However, the quality of different providers can vary significantly and even on lower specification, lower cost contracts in recent years the difference in provider's performance has been tangible leading to a lack of consistency in the quality of service provided to parts of the county.

1.21 As weed control operations are so time critical, rectifying failures of poor performing contractors can be unachievable within an acceptable time scale, and managing their performance across large geographical areas is very challenging.

1.22 It is considered that improvements to the quality and consistency of weed control services can be achieved by bringing the majority of this activity back in-house, whilst also ensuring we have more timely and robust management information on progress against work schedules. It is still intended that we retain some flexibility for use of contractors in some rural towns and villages where local providers with good track-records of performance may be able to deliver the required standard of service more cost effectively.

1.23 In order to deliver the improvements to weed control we therefore intend to increase our operational resources on the ground through the recruitment of two additional seasonal employees in each of the five Local Area Council areas and one additional fully equipped quad bike in each of the five Local Area Council areas. These will enable ‘core’ NEAT staff already trained in the use of herbicides to be deployed on weed control activity, with their grass cutting duties being backfilled by seasonal staff (many of whom return regularly each year to work for NCC and therefore require minimal training and induction).

1.24 As part of the weed control activity we will be adding a blue dye indicator into the herbicide used to spray hard landscape areas. This is a non-toxic, non-staining colourant designed to be used with herbicides. It provides visual assurance of where the chemical has been applied, that it is uniformly applied, and that no areas are missed. The dye breaks down over time and is then no longer visible. This approach has been used successfully by Durham County Council for the past 5 years and whilst initially it had a mix of positive and negative reactions, it is now widely accepted.
**Tree Works**

1.25 Within the Neighbourhood Services structure there are 4 Tree and Woodland Officers that are responsible for undertaking a programme of countywide tree inspections to ensure public safety. These staff are also responsible for investigating and responding to public complaints relating to trees (such as cutting out light, root growth causing damage to property and so forth), as well as managing and supervising 4 specialist teams of arborists who undertake the actual works. The table below shows the 'running total' for outstanding tree works as at Dec 2017.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Works response time</th>
<th>Outstanding cases Oct 2016</th>
<th>Outstanding cases Dec 2017</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Priority 1 – Urgent public safety work</td>
<td>Within 7 days</td>
<td>North - 0 West – 0 South East - 1</td>
<td>North - 0 West – 0 South East - 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Priority 2 – Non urgent, but essential safety work</td>
<td>Within 12 months</td>
<td>North – 48 West – 71 South East - 232</td>
<td>North – 54 West – 41 South East - 169</td>
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<tr>
<td>Priority 3 – Non essential, but desirable work</td>
<td>As resources allow</td>
<td>North – 1125 West – 930 South East –1979</td>
<td>North – 978 West – 878 South East – 1772</td>
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1.26 All priority 1 works are routinely being completed within 7 days and good progress continues to be made in keeping on top of the priority 2 ‘non-urgent but essential’ safety work. However, there remains a significant backlog of ‘non-essential but desirable’ priority 3 work that generates significant complaints and frustration from residents who are adversely affected by the presence/condition of a tree, and where we are unable to resolve the problem within a shorter time-frame.

**Floral Planting**

1.27 Northumbria In Bloom results were announced in September with another impressive tally of awards for Northumberland. Notable among these were Seaton Delaval who won the award for most improved entry, Morpeth who won the Best Town, and Ord who won the best Large Village category. Ponteland and Seaton Sluice won gold awards in the Small Town category, and Alnwick won gold in the Town category.

1.28 There were also a host of Silver Gilt, Silver and Bronze awards across the county.
1.29 Yet again our parks performance was outstanding with Ridley Park winning gold and ‘Best Park’, and gold awards also being awarded to Castle Vale Park in Berwick, Carlisle Park in Morpeth and Hexham Parks, and a Silver Gilt awarded to Alexandra Park in Cramlington. Of the 9 parks that received awards in the Northumbria region 5 were Northumberland County Council Parks. The full ‘In Bloom’ results for Northumberland are included as an appendix to this report.

1.30 Neighbourhood Services staff have supported local town and parish councils and ‘in-bloom volunteers’ to deliver what has been another very successful outcome for the county.

1.31 In addition to the ‘In-Bloom’ competition, the council was also successful in achieving the national Green Flag Award for 8 parks this year. The awarded parks were: Alexandra Park in Cramlington, Ridley Park, Dr Pit Park, Carlisle Park, Hexham Park, Berwick Parks, Bolam Lake Country Park and Plessey Woods Country Park.

**IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT**

**Policy:** Maintaining the local environment to a high standard so it is visually appealing to both residents and visitors is a key priority for the Council. Whilst the overall standard of grounds maintenance this summer has been good, there have been problems with weed control for which improvement action plans are being progressed.

**Finance and value for money:** The overall ‘NEAT’ budget of £6.2m covers all street cleansing and grounds maintenance activity across the whole county, undertaken by a team of 186.19 FTE staff as part of an integrated environmental service. It is considered that the successes achieved in the Northumbria In Bloom competition and Green Flag accreditations, low levels of customer complaints and on-going positive relationships with Town & Parish Councils demonstrate that the visual appearance of the county remains at a high standard.

**Human Resources:** It will be necessary to amend some of the operational arrangements for grounds maintenance staff in order to better align their working arrangements to the demands on the service and to recruit and train some additional seasonal staff to
enable the new weed control arrangements to be implemented in 2018/19.

**Property:**
Additional quad bikes for use in weed control activity will be procured for the 2018/19 season.

**Equalities**
(Assessment attached) N/A
A high quality environment helps improve residents sense of well-being. Clearance of weeds/vegetation from footpaths and clearance of overhanging shrubs/branches also provides a safer environment for people with impaired vision and/or mobility.

**Risk Assessment:**
The introduction of new legislation for traffic management controls when undertaking works on the highway will result in additional cost pressures being faced by the Council when undertaking routine maintenance activities such as verge cutting, verge litter picking and gully cleansing.

**Crime & Disorder:**
A high quality environment promotes social inclusion and engenders a sense of civic pride, both of which help reduce anti-social behaviour.

**Customer Considerations:**
The main area of complaints and dissatisfaction with grounds maintenance in 2017/18 has been in relation to weed control, particularly in urban areas. Actions are proposed that will improve customer satisfaction for 2018/19. The use of ‘Total Mobile’ to track completion of grass cutting activity will enable better performance management of this service area.

**Sustainability:**
We are committed to working with conservation groups to tailor the nature and timing of grounds maintenance activities where practicable, so that it pays due regard to biodiversity issues, for example by agreeing to certain verges being left uncut to promote greater biodiversity, avoiding hedge cutting activity during nesting periods and using native flower mixes in planting schemes that support pollinators.

**Consultation:**
The Cabinet Member for Local Services has been consulted on the content of this report.

**Wards:**
All wards in the County would be affected by any changes to this ‘universal’ service.

**Background papers:**
None

**Report sign off.**

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<th>Role</th>
<th>Initials</th>
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<tr>
<td>Finance Officer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Officer/Legal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Resources</td>
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<td>Procurement</td>
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<td>I.T.</td>
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<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>PJ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portfolio Holder(s)</td>
<td>GS</td>
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**Author and Contact Details**

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Appendix

NORTHUMBRIA IN BLOOM 2017 MAIN AWARDS AND RESULTS

MOST IMPROVED ENTRY

SEATON DELAVAL

“This is a developing entry and they have enthusiastically taken on a number of neglected areas for development. We were informed about a lot of good projects and ideas in the pipeline. The central roundabout seasonal displays are of a very high standard. The Bloom group has also achieved an excellent transformation of the old “Cat Corner” Public Conveniences. The herb wall displays on the bus shelter are very innovative. The new “Art in the Landscape” tree stump feature is showing great promise. The Council and Bloom group are to be congratulated on all of their hard work and vision this season for Seaton Delaval and we look forward to their continued success in the coming years.”

East Hartford – Silver

VILLAGES

Lesbury – Silver Gilt

LARGE VILLAGES

Winner ORD

“An attractive village in North Northumberland with a strong sense of history and community, Ord has an active and enthusiastic team involved in Northumbria in Bloom. The village throughout is pristine with many residents obviously taking great pride in keeping their neighbourhood spotless as well as caring for the many tubs and planters.”

Holywell – Silver

New Hartley – Silver

Ord – Silver Gilt - Winner

Seghill – Bronze

SMALL TOWNS

Ponteland – Gold

Seaton Delaval – Bronze

Seaton Sluice – Gold

TOWNS

Winner MORPETH
“Morpeth’s colour themed displays gave a bright and pleasing blaze of colour throughout the Town. The Chamber of Trade continues to encourage the Trade people to support the In Bloom entry. The New by-pass road planting scheme is developing well and will enhance the journey for its users.”

Alnwick – Gold
Bedlington – Silver
Berwick upon Tweed – Silver Gilt
Hexham – Silver Gilt
Morpeth – Gold - Winner

**LARGE TOWNS**

Blyth – Silver
Cramlington – Silver Gilt

**URBAN COMMUNITY**

**GROWING TOGETHER FOR SCHOOLS**

Tweedmouth West First School, Berwick – Gold

**SPECIAL CATEGORY AWARDS**

**Best Business Park**

Ponteland, Prestwick Business Park – Gold

**Best Care/Residential/Convalescent Home, Hospice or Day Centre**

Bedlington, Chester Court – Gold
Blyth, Tynedale House, Sensory Garden – Gold
Corbridge, Windsor Court – Gold
Cramlington, Jubilee Lodge – Gold
Hexham, Carntyne Care Home – Silver Gilt
Morpeth, Benmar House, MS Research & Relief Fund – Gold
New Hartley, Hartley Court – Silver Gilt

**Best Religious Establishment**

Alnwick Cemetery – Silver Gilt
Blyth, Cowpen Crematorium – Silver Gilt
Hexham, St Andrew’s Cemetery – Gold
Morpeth, New Christian Life Centre – Silver

**Best Commercial Premises**
ORD HOUSE COUNTRY PARK, Berwick – Gold
Corbridge Garden Room – Silver
Morpeth, Heighley Gate Garden Centre – Gold

**Best Pub/Hotel**
Alnwick, The John Bull Inn – Silver Gilt
Berwick, Maguire’s Bar – Silver Gilt
Corbridge, The Black Bull – Silver Gilt
Cramlington, John the Clerk – Gold
Hexham, The County Hotel – Gold
Holywell, The Milbourne Arms – Silver
Lesbury, The Coach Inn – Silver Gilt
Morpeth, The Black and Grey – Gold
Ponteland, The Blackbird – Gold
Seaton Sluice, Astley Arms – Silver

**Best Conservation**
Alnwick, DEFRA, Lion House – Gold
Corbridge, Tyne North Bank Improvements – Silver Gilt
Hexham, Wydon Flood Defence Scheme – Gold
Morpeth, River Wansbeck – Silver
Ord, The Nature Walk – Silver Gilt
Seaton Sluice, Holywell Dene – Gold

**Best Bus/Metro/Railway Station**
ALNMOUTH RAILWAY STATION – Gold
Berwick Public Transport Interchange – Gold
Hexham Railway Station – Silver Gilt  
Morpeth Bus Station – Silver  

**Best Park**  
RIDLEY PARK, BLYTH – Gold  
Berwick, Castle Vale Park – Gold  
Cramlington, Alexandra Park – Silver Gilt  
The Hexham Parks – Gold  
Morpeth, Carlisle Park – Gold  

**Best Shopping Precinct, Arcade, Town Centre or BID**  
Cramlington, Manor Walks – Silver Gilt  
Hexham Town – Silver Gilt  
Morpeth, Sanderson Arcade + Morpeth & District Chamber of Trade – Gold  

**Best Grounds of a Hospital, University or Public Building**  
THE PARISH HALL GARDEN, CORBRIDGE – Gold  
Cramlington, Surveyors House – Silver  
Hexham General Hospital, incorporating the Fire Station – Gold  

**Best Sports Ground**  
BERWICK BOWLING CLUB – Gold  
Alnwick, Willowburn Sports and Leisure Centre – Silver Gilt  
Hexham Golf Club – Silver Gilt  
Ponteland Bowling and Tennis Club – Gold  
Seaton Delaval, The Bowling Green – Silver  
Seaton Sluice Bowling Park – Silver Gilt  

**Best Residential Community**  
Alnwick, Robert Adam Court – Silver Gilt  
Berwick, Spittal Village – Silver Gilt  
Blyth, St Cuthbert’s Court – Silver Gilt  
Hexham, Tanners Row – Gold
Ponteland, Peel House – Gold

**Best Allotments**

Alnwick, St James’ Allotments – Silver Gilt
Berwick, The Lion Allotments – Gold
Corbridge, Aydon Road Allotments – Gold
Holywell, Coppergate Allotments – Silver
Morpeth, Tommy’s Field Community Garden – Silver
Ponteland, Prestwick Allotments – Silver
Seaton Sluice, Beresford Road Allotments – Silver Gilt

**Best Tourist or Visitor Attraction, or Country Estate**

Alnwick Garden – Gold
Cramlington, Northumberlandia – Gold
New Hartley, Pit Memorial Garden – Gold