

Consultation with Town and Parishes on the grass verge cutting agreement with Devon County Council

Cabinet Member: Cllr Neal Davey

Responsible Officer: Head of Housing and Property services

Reason for Report: To set out the Council's arrangements for 2016/17 in providing the grass cutting service on Devon County Council's highway verges.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

- 1) To note the changes with the provision of cutting highway verges for Devon County Council following the consultation with Town and Parish Councils.
- 2) To reduce the grass cutting team by one full time equivalent as detailed in 4.5.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: Environment – Priority 4

Financial Implications: The revised 2016/17 income from Devon County Council was set at £15,310 per annum. The budget was set prior to the final results of the consultation.

Legal Implications: The Council will be signing an Urban Highway Grass Cutting Agreement with Devon County Council for one year that will be legally binding and was sent with the original report dated 24th November 2015.

Risk Assessment: Devon County Council will inform Mid Devon District Council of any changes with the areas of grass verges in each Town and Parish that are to be cut in line with the Tough Choices specification. This will reduce the risk of a highway traffic accident being attributed to the length of grass and poor visibility, failure to ensure that this in place would make Mid Devon District Council responsible for making the decision. Site specific risk assessments and safe systems of work will be updated to reflect any changes.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Mid Devon District Council (MDDC) has provided a grass verge cutting service on behalf of Devon County Council (DCC) for over 20 years and has been receiving contributions from DCC to provide this service. The cutting of the rural and urban highway verges is a requirement of the highway authority in order to maintain a safe environment for all users of the highway. As a minimum this entails the cutting of visibility splays at junctions, on corners and also the cutting of a one metre wide swath cut along the remaining highway verges, all in accordance with Policy and the recommendations set out in 'Well Maintained Highways-Code of Practice'. The residual height of rural cutting is 100mm and urban cuts 40mm and the use of grass growth retarder is not permitted.

- 1.2 It is recognised that the appearance of our Town and Parishes is important to Mid Devon District Council and our residents, as well as to the local economy to continue to attract businesses to our District.
- 1.3 The DCC 'Tough Choices' consultation resulted in the decision to reduce the specification on cutting grass verges on land owned by DCC across our District, to maintain visibility at road junctions and to restrict the width of the grass that is cut on the roadside verges to approximately one metre from the 1st of April 2015. This decision resulted in reduced funding for grass cutting verges in the 2015/16 year and a funding gap of circa £30k. The Cabinet approved to meet the funding gap of £30k imposed by DCC from our own budget for the 2015-16 financial year. This enabled the Council to maintain current standards across the District and to allow time to consult with Town and Parish Councils.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Consultation letters were sent to all of the Town and Parishes where MDDC maintain the grass verges for DCC. The letter set out the current situation and explained the 'Tough Choices Decision' that DCC has made. The letter detailed the estimated cost to our service for cutting grass verges whilst the Grounds Maintenance team are already mobilised and in the Parish attending to our own Estate. This calculated to be £3.51 per 100 m², based on the original area of 282,027 m².
- 2.2 A financial analysis on the cost for grass verge cutting for each Town and Parish has been carried out to assess the total cost to the Council for the cutting of highway grass verges. The grass verges are cut whilst our grounds maintenance team are already mobilised in the Town or Parish cutting grass on our own estate. The Council does not have a dedicated grass cutting team for cutting the Devon County Council highway verges, therefore calculating the true cost to the authority is challenging.

3.0 Annex A

- 3.1 Column A lists the Town and Parish Councils that will continue to have grass verges cut by MDDC, which has been put in alphabetical order.
- 3.2 Column B shows the revised area for each Town and Parish.
- 3.3 Column C details the level of contribution from each Town and Parish Council. The amount of contribution varies depending on the number of cuts per annum in each Parish, from a minimum of four cuts to a maximum of eight cuts as some parishes have resolved to increase the number of cuts per annum and have contributed additional monies to cover the increase that will result in an improved appearance for residents.
- 3.4 Column D details the breakdown of contribution from DCC.

- 3.5 Following the consultation exercise, the revised area is 108,282 m². Prior to the consultation exercise the original area cut on behalf of DCC was 282,027m². This is a 61% reduction on the area of highway grass verges that we cut on behalf of DCC.
- 3.6 The total amount of income for the grass cutting of Devon County highway verges that includes contributions from Town and Parish Councils is £29k.

Annex A

Option 1 -Town and Parish Councils to provide funding to MDDC to continue maintaining grass verges on land owned by DCC to the current standards.

A	B	C	D
Town/Parish Council	Revised Total Grass Verge m2	Town/ Parish Contribution	Total amount of DCC contribution
Bow	4,842	£679.82	£569
Burlescombe	4,206	£1,033.41	£443
Chawleigh	586	£123.41	£147
*Copplestone	3,707	£160.00	£252
Crediton	15,547	£3,274.20	£810
Culmstock	2,241	£556.35	£92
Hemyock	3,214	£866.41	£242
Holcombe Rogus	740	£181.82	£75
Morchard Bishop	64	£22.46	£50
Morebath	1,354	£237.63	£99
*Sampford Peverell	7,208	£1,012.00	£801
Silverton	6,759	£1,660.69	£379
Tiverton	57,814	£12,175.63	£3,268
TOTAL	108,282	£21,983.83	£7,227

****Sampford Peverell subject to Parish approval.***

****Copplestone grass cut to minimum standard.***

4.0 Financial Summary

- 4.1 Based on the original area of 282,027 m² and to continue with the grass cutting standards would cost the service an estimated total of £60k per annum.
- 4.2 Prior to the DCC Tough Choices consultation for grass verge cutting and for the 2014/15 financial year, the DCC contribution was set at £50,650.
- 4.3 The 2015/16 financial year was when MDDC first received a reduction in the level of income for grass verge cutting.
- 4.4 In order to evaluate the impact on the service, applying the same number of cuts per annum as per previous years. The reduced area of 173,745 m² has an estimated monetary value of £36k.
- 4.5 To address the shortfall detailed in 4.4, it is recommended that the grass team for Estates, Highways and Parks is reduced by one full time equivalent to realise a saving of £21k. This position is currently being filled by agency staff and therefore redundancy figures are not applicable.
- 4.6 The 2016/17 income from DCC was set at £15k, this figure was set prior to the final results of the consultation that is now shown in Annex A. The amount of income from DCC has reduced by £8k, however with the Town and Parish Council contributions included (£22k) the final budget income position has increased by £13,900 to £29,210.
- 4.7 Including the increase in income of £13k and the additional £21k saving improves the budget position by £34,900.

5.0 Grass Cutting Teams

- 5.1 The Grounds Maintenance service operates three grass cutting teams.
- 5.2 Sheltered Housing – x2 Grade 4 FTE (full time equivalents)
Cost = £42k.
- 5.3 Play Areas and Town roundabouts –x 2 Grade 4 FTE
Cost = £42k
- 5.4 Estates & Highways and Parks – x 6 Grade 4 FTE
Cost = £126k
- 5.5 Total number of grass cutters – 10 FTE
- 5.6 All grass teams come together once every two weeks to cut the two cemeteries in Tiverton and Crediton.

- 5.7 Additional works team has two staff, that provide assistance for the estates & highways team to cover holidays and sick leave and also available for anything else such as grave digging, hedge maintenance and additional work requests.

6.0 Service Review

- 6.1 A full service review on grass cutting will be carried out during 2016/17 to ensure best value for money for Mid Devon residents and to identify future income opportunities.

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Circulation of the Report: Management Team, Cabinet member