

The Highland Council
Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee

27 May 2014

Agenda Item	11.
Report No	CS/19/14

Grounds Maintenance Programme

Report by Director of Community Services

Summary

This report details the arrangements for delivering Grounds Maintenance Services and the resources and budgets available.

Members are invited to approve the levels of grounds maintenance service and to note the on-going arrangements for managing the service for Caithness and Sutherland Area and for Members to review required service standards at Ward Business Meetings.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Council's Scheme of Delegation to Area Committees gives the Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee the power:

“to approve local levels of service for grounds maintenance within the strategy and budget allocated by TECS Committee.”

1.2. Community Services are responsible for a wide range of horticultural related activities, including the maintenance of grass in public open spaces, designing and planting of flower and shrub beds, pruning vegetation and trees, and also the inspection and maintenance of play areas.

1.3. This report details the arrangements for delivering Grounds Maintenance and the resources and budgets available.

2. Background

2.1. At its meeting on 18 November 2010 the Transport, Environmental and Community Services (TECS) Committee considered a report for the tender of the Grass Cutting across the Highlands in nine areas (Lots) for 2011/12 to 2013/14 and agreed the award of grass cutting for the Caithness/Sutherland Area to the Council's in-house Direct Labour Organisation. The contracting out of routine grass cutting has delivered a saving in the annual revenue budget for the Highlands as a whole. This information on individual lots is commercially sensitive and cannot be published; however, the total saving across the Highlands is £603k per annum.

The contract was extended for season 2014/15 by making use of the extension clause included in the original tender.

3. Budget

- 3.1. The annual gross Grounds Maintenance expenditure budget, excluding cremations, is £2.318M.

4. Activities

- 4.1. Grounds Maintenance activities include:

- Grass cutting to low, medium and high amenity standards
- Grass Area maintenance out with the growing season
- Grounds around War Memorials
- Arboriculture - the cultivation and management of individual trees, shrubs and other perennial woody plants
- Path maintenance including weed control
- In cemeteries the lifting of grave surfaces as they settle.
- Tending high amenity locations such as Bellfield Park, Cavell Gardens and bowling greens
- Floral displays and provision of hanging baskets
- Support for Special Events
- Burial Grounds and Internments
- Play Area inspection and maintenance

In addition the workforce supports the roads winter maintenance activities.

- 4.2. Across the Caithness/Sutherland Area there are 1,847,407 square metres of public open and amenity space spread over some 580 locations, with a wide variation of size, each requiring some form of grounds maintenance and regular cleansing of litter, broken glass and other debris.
- 4.3. These spaces are spread over all communities and they include some 37,854 items of work as summarised in **Appendix A**.
- 4.4. Activities are carried out to standards specified in the Grounds Maintenance Service Level Agreement (SLA) and the Grass Cutting contract specification which was based on the SLA. The requirements of these are, to all intents and purposes, the same. **Appendix B** provides details of the Grass Cutting Amenity Standards which are framed in terms of output requirements rather than frequencies of cut.
- 4.5. The contractor (other Areas of Highland) and the in-house operation (Caithness and Sutherland) are required to maintain grass areas within the set parameters irrespective of the rate of growth.
- 4.6. A copy of the SLA and a printed list of plots will be made available before the Committee meets.
- 4.7. The SLA and specification apply Highland wide and provide a consistent set of standards including methods for measuring compliance across the region. The introduction of a specified height of grass has permitted a uniform delivery. The grass cutting contract permitted areas to more accurately meet SLA standards and harmonise service delivery.

5. Asset Management

- 5.1. There is an on-going programme of refinement and improvement of the data required to manage the assets involved in Grounds Maintenance.
- 5.2. We have a large electronic database defining all the plots and relevant tasks and the plots are marked on some 150 or so paper maps and plans. These two elements will be brought together under one system to improve access to the information. Unfortunately it is not practical to provide Members with a copy of all the maps, but, when ready, they will be made available for inspection.
- 5.3. A mapping exercise is on-going to provide electronic maps of all the grass cutting areas and should be completed by the end of May 2014. The processing and production of finished maps will occur during the remainder of 2014. The maps will be produced in pdf format and will be placed on either the Council intranet or the website.

6. In-house Resources

- 6.1. Resources are deployed on a routine cyclical basis throughout the year, Monday to Friday 8am to 4pm generally and in overtime for additional activities associated with special and sports events.
- 6.2. They are managed by 2 Community Works Managers and 6 Community Works Officers who also supervise operatives working on road maintenance, winter maintenance, burials and public convenience cleaning.
- 6.3. Depots

The main bases for Grounds operations are the depots at Wick, Thurso, Brora and Lairg, with several smaller depots including Dornoch, Ardgay, Kinlochbervie and Tongue.

- 6.4. Labour

32 full time employees (inclusive of 5 used for Burials)
15 seasonal employees during heavy growth season.

7. Grass Cutting

- 7.1. Contract

In 2010 the Council awarded a contract for the cutting of grass in public open spaces and cemeteries within Caithness and Sutherland to its in-house Direct Labour Organisation. The DLO presently cuts all of the low, general and high amenity grass within the Area.

7.2. Contract Supervision

Overall contract supervision of the Contractor (Areas outwith Caithness/Sutherland) and In-House operations (Caithness/Sutherland) is handled by a pan-Highland team. This ensures that the Contractor and In-house delivery are treated equally across the Highland region. The team also supervises the public convenience cleaning contract and monitors the non-grass cutting activities as part of their daily work.

- 7.3. Contract supervision and monitoring for the Area grounds maintenance is provided with the equivalent of 1 Contract Supervisor/Inspector who also monitors Garden Aid, Weed Control and Arboriculture contract works on behalf of Housing and Property Services.

8. **Monitoring and Escalation Process**

- 8.1. The basis for all SLA or contract inspections is to determine if the site management, including sub-contracted services, is sufficient to maintain the service standard of the Service Level Agreement (SLA).

- 8.2. The first level of inspection is carried out as self-assessment by in-house delivery teams and Managers. This first stage assessment is independently validated by Contract Supervisors.

- 8.3. SLA inspection levels by Contract Supervisors are set at a minimum of 10% of the maintained area each quarter. The period of inspection is quarterly, unless there are valid reasons for increasing inspections such as: repeated customer complaints, sites not meeting SLA standards or re-inspection following issue of a Breached Standard notice.

- 8.4. When a location is inspected on more than one occasion, the lowest grade is recorded in all cases; this includes follow up inspections where a Breached Standard Notice is issued.

- 8.5. Inspections are graded:

- 0 - Very Poor
- 1 - Poor
- 2 - Unsatisfactory
- 3 - Satisfactory
- 4 - Good

- 8.6. An improvement request or informal notice is issued to the internal (DLO) or external (ISS) contractor respectively where a grade of 0, 1 or 2 is given.

- 8.7. Failure to return the site to the SLA standard within 48 hours results in an escalation and issue of a remedial notice.

- 8.8. A follow up inspection will be made on or after the agreed date; if satisfactory, no further action; if no improvement, a Nonconforming Service Report is issued to the Community Works Manager.

8.9. The Authority is entitled to recover its costs in respect of the issuing of a Default Notice and all losses which arise as a result of the deficient Services. Recovery of such costs has occurred in 2013, but within another Area.

9. Performance

9.1. For the grass cutting contract the number of breached standards issued to the in-house operation during 2013 are shown below:

Caithness & Sutherland 2013/14 <u>Grounds Maintenance</u> Breached Standards Report (Excludes Public Conveniences, Garden Aid & Street Cleaning)						
Month	Issued	Completed within 7 days	Percentage	Contract Inspections		Comments
				Number	Pass Rate*	
April	3	1	33%	9	67%	
May	14	14	100%	45	49%	
June	17	14	82%	10	0%	
July	13	8	62%	60	75%	
August	0	0	0%	7	100%	
September	3	1	33%	3	0%	
October	2	1	50%	6	50%	
November	0	0	NA	0	NA	No inspections due to mapping project, Housing Green & Grows projects and other duties
December	7	5	71%	50	84%	Failures relate to hard landscaping
January	0	0	NA	0	NA	No inspections due to mapping project, Housing Green & Grows projects and other duties
February	0	0	NA	0	NA	No inspections due to mapping project, Housing Green & Grows projects and other duties
March	0	0	NA	0	NA	No inspections due to mapping project, Housing Green & Grows projects and other duties
Totals	59	44	75%	190	53%	DLO Monitoring recommenced 1st May 2014
All Disciplines	166	132	80%			
Monitoring process reduced during off season over winter to prepare contact maps & re-measure sites						
*Some sites have more than 1 item per site inspected						

9.2. Overall 75% of all breached standards were rectified within the contractual limit of 7 days. Compared with the maintained area of 1.85 million square metres and the 37,854 annual tasks undertaken, the number of breached standards is low, and the percentage rectified within 7 days shows an improvement on the 30% achieved last year.

10. Required Standards and Consultation with Ward Members

10.1. Last summer Members were consulted at Ward Business Meetings when standards, resources, and processes were discussed.

- 10.2. Future engagement at Ward level is required to identify the appropriate standards at specific sites. Changes can be made that alter the designations between low/general/high amenity with the proviso that overall the change must be cost neutral. If one site goes up, another has to come down or a site be reduced in area. These are changes “within the budget and strategy allocated”.
- 10.3. Meetings will be arranged as more accessible and up to date maps are available to discuss required standards. Changes will be implemented as soon as is practical thereafter.

11. Other Work

- 11.1. The following are examples of the high profile work and support for communities that are regularly delivered by the in-house team.

- 11.2. Special Events Preparation - examples

Entertainment events such as local Galas and Harbour Days

Armistice Day

- 11.3. Flower and Motif Beds

Motif beds situated on the Riverside and Kirkhill, Wick and The Toll, Thurso, are provided using the skills of staff at the Nurseries in propagating the individual plants.

- 11.4. War Memorials and Communities

Supporting communities to tend war memorials with regular successes in national competitions run by The Royal British Legion Scotland.

12. Implications

- 12.1. There are no Resource, Legal, Equalities, Climate Change and Risk implications arising from this report.

Recommendations

Members are invited to:-

- (i) approve the grounds maintenance service for 2014/15, as set out in this report; and
- (ii) note the on-going arrangements for managing the grounds maintenance service for the Caithness and Sutherland Area and future engagement with Ward Members in relation to identifying the appropriate standards at specific sites.

Designation: Director of Community Services

Date: 10th May 2014

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Appendix A - Grass Cutting Maintained Areas and Annual Tasks.

Caithness/Sutherland Grounds						
Area Maintained	Square Metres		Contracted		In House	
Grass	1,688,302		0		1,688,302	100%
Planted	24,306		0		24,306	100%
Hard landscape	134,799		0		134,799	100%
Total	1,847,407		0		1,847,407	100%

Appendix B - Grass Cutting Amenity Standards

Amenity Standards for Grass Cutting					
Star Rating*	5	4	3	2	1
Grass Cutting	High Amenity		General Amenity	Low Amenity	
	<i>High Amenity (Sports Turf)</i>	High Amenity	General Amenity	Low Amenity	<i>Low Amenity (Verges and Watercourses)</i>
Minimum mowing height after mowing	20	20	25	50	75
Maximum mowing height after moving	25	25	50	75	100
Max. grass length permitted	50	60	100	200	450
Clippings Removed	Occasionally	Seldom	Rarely	No	No

Note:

* the Star Rating is cross referenced in the database of plots and tasks.