

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	5
Report No	BSAC-08-25

Committee: Badenoch and Strathspey

Date: 28 April 2025

Report Title: Amenities Grounds Maintenance and Future Operating Model

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides Members with details of the upcoming Amenities Review to develop a future operating model for the Service, which will present proposals on grass cutting and grounds maintenance operations to ensure a long-term resource allocation is in place.
- 1.2 The report also provides information on the current resource levels for the ground's maintenance operations in Badenoch and Strathspey and plans for maintaining the area in the upcoming season.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to **note** the contents of the report.

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - he resource allocated to Grounds Maintenance in Badenoch and Strathspey for 2024/25 was £207,100. The budget allocation for 2025/26 is to be confirmed.
- 3.2 **Legal** - There are no known implications arising from this report.
- 3.3 **Risk** - There are no known implications arising from this report.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** - There are no known implications arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** - There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4. Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is a monitoring report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5. Background

- 5.1 The original Amenities review commenced in 2021 and had six key themes, as detailed below, all of which were delivered by 2024.
- 5.2 In- house service delivery; the Service developed clear standards, demonstrated efficiency and continuous improvement, reviewed all asset information appointed a dedicated GIS officer, and established information on routes, timings and costs which were then developed into unit rates, to assist with recharging and pricing commercial works.
- 5.3 Insourcing: identifying opportunities to in-source some of the work contractors previously delivered, assessing commercial opportunities and reviewing all service level agreements (SLAs) with other departments such as Education and Housing. Two new teams were created, one team of three (which has recently increased to six) for maintaining and inspecting play areas and one team of three to carry out Arbor work. This was done by using revenue funding previously spent on contractors and converting this into posts.
- 5.4 Shared partnership in Lochaber; developing a partnership approach with the local Estate and Factors. The project allowed for the purchase of a robo mower for Lochaber to work on steep slopes, with the areas seeing the benefits through a reduction in litter and residents taking more pride in their area.
- 5.5 Highlife Highland SLA updated and appropriately costed for full cost recovery.
- 5.6 Community Involvement: approval of the Play Park Strategy in November 2023 and setting out the Council's ambition until 2033. The Play Strategy Officer has established relationships with communities and partners, promoting local involvement, decision making and fundraising. Working with over 50 different groups to assist with consultation and fundraising for new play equipment. We also developed a child version of Play Park Strategy and have been working with external groups such as the International Play Association, Educational Psychology and Greenspace Scotland. Encouraging communities to get more involved with food growing and working with local groups such as Incredible Edible to identify areas which can be used for this, including in some shrub beds and within play areas.
- 5.7 Biodiversity: identifying practical ways to support the Council's biodiversity objectives, reviewing the use of glyphosate and trialling alternative products with costs quantified, in order to make recommendations on options of alternatives.

- 5.8 The review saw the team win the APSE Striving for Excellence award at their annual event in Aviemore in May 2024 and many of the actions taken have been recognised nationally as best practice, such as the Play Park Strategy and work on the draft integrated weed control strategy.

6. Current Season Resource

- 6.1 The current resource allocation for Badenoch and Strathspey is one Amenity Officer, one Foreperson, 8 Community Works Operatives (4 at HC04 and 4 at HC03).
- 6.2 Amenities rely on a regular allocation of seasonals to supplement the full-time workforce to deliver all grass cutting operations from March to October. The allocation of seasonals has been reduced over the years.
- 6.3 The table below shows the reduction in seasonals Highland wide since 2018, when the grass cutting was brought back in house from external contractors, these have been reduced from 83 in 2018 to only 46 in 2024.

Area	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Badenoch and Strathspey	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Caithness	8	8	8	8	8	8	6
Inverness	27	27	24	24	22	19	11
Lochaber	9	9	5	5	5	5	5
Nairn	4	4	8	8	8	6	2
Ross and Cromarty	18	18	15	15	13	13	11
Skye	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
Sutherland	10	10	6	6	6	6	5
TOTAL	83	83	73	73	69	64	46

- 6.4 The areas of grass to be maintained and the amenity level for each in Badenoch and Strathspey is shown in the table below.

Amenity Type	M ²
Sports Grass	0
High Amenity	63,504
General Amenity	229,291
Low Amenity	27,957
Set Aside	22,504
TOTAL	343,256

- 6.5 Highland wide Amenities are responsible for over 8.8million meters square of grass.
- 6.6 Due to the issues identified during the 2024 season a budget proposal was presented to the recent Full Council meeting for investment in Amenities, (INV/11), this was accepted, and an additional £450k will be invested into grass cutting operations Highland wide for 2025/26.
- 6.7 This is in addition to the recommendation to Housing and Property Committee on 29 January 2025 as part of the Revenue Estimates for 2025/26, to revert to the funding level from 2022 (£807,500 for grass cutting and £159,300 for weed control) which was agreed.

- 6.8 The increase in funding from the HRA will allow reinstating the standards achieved in 2022, enabling more regular strimming and mowing, and being able to carry out chemical weed control at sites agreed upon instruction from Housing.
- 6.9 The additional revenue budget will allow delivery of an improved service with significantly more seasonal operatives. In addition, seasonals will be retained for an extra month into November, with these operatives being able to reintroduce strimming and hand mowing and additional weed control, where the partial ban allows for it.
- 6.10 The intention is to continue maintaining already established rewilded areas and to try and increase the amount of set aside areas as part of a planned programme of re-wilding greenspaces. By creating more set aside areas, only cutting paths through larger greenspaces, reducing verge cutting, and creating wildflower and wildlife corridors between green spaces the Service are contributing to the Councils overall aims for Net Zero.

7. Future Operating Model Redesign Project

- 7.1 The intention is to develop a model that is based on reviewing the end-to-end processes within functions to identify commonality and synergies that will deliver a cost effective and responsive grass cutting service, regardless of which function carries it out.
- 7.2 There will be catch up costs for reintroducing sites which were not maintained in previous years. There will need to be a consideration regarding sports pitch maintenance. The review should look to maintain the assets correctly which will be more than just grass cutting, to include recovery of the asset, which will take a 4-to-5-year programme of recovery to embed.
- 7.3 To develop a new operating model a redesign project will be established with a project management resource; one project manager and a team to support them, with representatives from each affected service. The project will define the future operating model.
- 7.4 The model will be place based, review service specifications (using existing SLAs to determine Services requirements), promote cross Service working between Amenities, Housing, Roads, Education, HLH and CCFM for example having Facilities Officers carrying out grass cutting and weed control in Schools and Nurseries, confirm a collective resource, present full time employment opportunities (flexibility of off season works for operatives) and identify commercial opportunities.
- 7.5 There is a need to dispense with historical practices and for the Service to be driven by the agreed outcome specification, which must be equally applied to all areas, as a baseline to then make variations by usage and local issues, site specific (rain, excess growth etc). There is a need for equitable distribution of resource, and to work as flexibly as possible.
- 7.6 The redesign project will be done in stages; to confirm asset data by type (grass, shrubs, hard landscaping etc), maintenance category (high, general, low, off season) and landowner, budget holder and maintainer. To determine plot sizes, number of plots, linked to machine types and travel distances from depots.

- 7.7 Consideration will be given to current challenges such as silo processes, reliance on seasonal workforce, new machinery contract, biodiversity and set aside and how to build in resilience to our service delivery.
- 7.8 Preparing the new operating model will involve; identify synergies, confirming the collective resource, identifying priority areas, agreeing changes to practice, reviewing current strategies and policies, considering all stakeholders (Amenities, Housing, Roads, Education, CCFM, HLH and Members), preparing for transition and communicating with a view to implementing from March 2026. Monitoring of performance will be completed and governance provided from the redesign board.
- 7.9 The review will also consider our future goals which are workforce development and succession planning, through training and development and with assistance from our colleagues in HR and employee development. Proposals will also be identified to increase areas of set aside, the procurement of an asset management system and to develop an integrated weed control strategy and action plan.
- 7.10 A full redesign of the operating model will allow for a more efficient and cost-effective Service across the Place cluster.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

Date: 31 March 2025

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Background Papers: None

Appendices: None