

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

TUESDAY 21 JANUARY 2003 at 10.30 AM

Agenda Item No.

4

THE PROVISION OF THE HIGHWAY GRASS CUTTING SERVICE

Report of the Director of Environment

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1. Purpose of report

This item was requested by the committee as part of its agreed work programme for scrutiny:

“To examine the degree of enhancement to highway grass cutting standards which each District contributes and the manner in which contract responsibility for highway and amenity grass cutting is currently handled, together with the relative financial implications arising. Comparisons will be drawn between the approach adopted by Three Rivers and other District Councils.”

2. Summary

The report looks at the different arrangements through which highway grass cutting is procured including directly through the Highway Works Contract and indirectly through the various district councils. It also looks at possible future developments including proposed service improvements included in the Highway Asset Management Plan.

3. Conclusion

Having considered the information contained in the report, the Committee will need to decide if and how, any further scrutiny of this issue should be undertaken. Further scrutiny could be undertaken by setting up a short term Topic Group

Other possible scrutiny methods include:

- questioning officers and Executive Members
- requesting a further report
- hearing evidence from relevant parties
- visiting relevant locations

4. Background

4.1. Hertfordshire has nearly 15 million m² of grass verges in its highway network and the cost of maintaining these came to nearly £1.6m in 2001/02 of which £1.1m was spent on grass cutting.

4.2 Table 1.1 (right) taken from the Highway Asset Management Plan, gives details of the amount of highway verge across Hertfordshire by district. This includes verges directly maintained by HCC as well as those managed by districts and other organisations.

Table 1.1 Verge Statistics

District	Area (m²)
Broxbourne	686,829
Dacorum	2,116,572
East Herts	2,468,541
Hertsmere	922,569
North Herts	2,654,259
St Albans	1,606,936
Stevenage	1,214,669
Three Rivers	1,096,290
Watford	393,319
Welwyn Hatfield	1,706,089
Totals	14,866,073

4.3 During the recent review of Agency arrangements most districts expressed the desire to continue providing some or all of the highway grass cutting service in the future, although arrangements vary. A list of current grass cutting agency arrangements is included at Appendix I along with details of the service standards provided by the various district councils.

4.4 The majority of districts enhance the grass cutting service beyond HCC's current standard, especially in urban areas, funding the enhanced service themselves in order to improve the aesthetic appeal of their towns.

5. Direct Delivery of the Grass Cutting Service via the HCC Highway Works Contract

5.1.1 All grass cutting secured by HCC will be done through the new Highway Works Contract (HWC) which came into effect on 1 October 2002. This provides two different methods of ordering the grass cutting. These are discussed in more detail in Appendix II but are summarised below.

5.2 Overseeing Organisation Ordered Method:

5.2.1 Under this method, the contractor is instructed to cut the grass a set number of times during the course of a season. The frequency and timing of the cuts is determined by the specification. This is the traditional method by which HCC has managed its highway grass cutting in the past and the specification reflects past practice.

5.2.2 Urban grass is cut six times a year and grass on bends or at junctions in rural areas is cut four times a year. For other areas of rural grass, a strip or 'swathe' 1.2m wide next to the carriageway is cut once a year.

5.3 Contractors Frequency Method

- 5.3.1 Under this method, the contractor determines the frequency of the grass cutting necessary to keep the length of the grass within specified limits. This is similar to the method operated by most district councils although their specification tends to be more onerous.
- 5.3.2 The new HWC specifies that urban grass is to be cut frequently enough to ensure that its maximum height does not exceed 150mm. Rural grass in vision splays and the 1.2m swathe is to be cut frequently enough to ensure that its maximum height does not exceed 250mm.
- 5.3.3 Under both methods the contractor is required to trim around posts and other obstructions and to clear grass cuttings from the footway or carriageway, usually by blowing or sweeping them on to the verge. Grass cuttings on the verge will usually be left in place
- 5.3.4 The first method, outlined in Section 5.2 above, conforms to HCC's current grass cutting practice. However, there is an intention to move to the enhanced County standards (as set out in Section 5.3) in line with the improvement plan, which is discussed in Section 7, below.

6. Provision of the Grass Cutting Service by District Councils

- 6.1 Nine of the ten district and borough councils in Hertfordshire currently provide some element of the highway grass cutting service in their area. In the past this has often been through a general highway agency agreement. All such agreements have now finished and any future grass cutting by district councils will be carried out under more limited agency arrangements. Additionally a small amount of highway grass cutting is also carried out by a few parish councils.
- 6.2 A summary of current agency arrangements is included at Appendix I although, because of the recent changes to the provision of highway related services, some of these arrangements are interim or under review.
- 6.3 The district councils cut the highway grass in conjunction with grass in amenity and housing areas in order to gain economies of scale. Since areas of highway and amenity grass are often adjacent, this also provides continuity of service and avoids neighbouring sections of grass being cut at different times and to different standards.
- 6.4 Most district councils cut their grass to a performance standard, rather than specifying a particular number of cuts. This means grass is not allowed to get above a certain height, 75-100mm being typical, and is similar to the Contractors Frequency Method option in the HCC Highway Works Contract (see 5.3 above), although the standard is different. These standards are detailed in Appendix I. The district councils also effectively provide a management service: running the contracts, resolving problems and handling enquiries and complaints.
- 6.5 Because of the standards they operate, the cost to the districts of providing the service is often higher than the contribution HCC makes, which has generally been limited to the cost of providing the service to our own specification. Consequently the district councils have often contributed to the costs of the highway grass cutting service in order to provide an enhanced standard that they specify.

6.6 Where district councils wish to continue to pay for enhanced service standards, we have accepted this since it offers better standards of service and clarity of service delivery for the local community. We would look to preserve such arrangements as long as they continue to provide tangible benefits.

7. Future Provision of Highway Grass Cutting

7.1 Hertfordshire's Highway Asset Management Plan 2001-2004 (HAMP) sets out the basic service standards for grass cutting; these are essentially the same as those discussed in Section 5.2.2 above. It also states that the condition of the verges should be monitored through the regular highway safety inspections and that reactive repairs should be undertaken where necessary, for example in response to damage from overrunning vehicles.

7.2 The HAMP also includes an improvement plan with specific changes to systems, procedures and activities. The main improvement identified for grass cutting is the desire to adopt a performance based height specification during the life of the plan. This would be achieved by moving to the Contractor's Frequency Method as discussed in Section 5.3 above as funding allows.

8. Case Study: Three Rivers

8.1 In June 2002 Three Rivers District Council's existing grass cutting contract came to an end. Until that point TRDC had been delivering all highway grass cutting in the district on behalf of HCC but to their own performance specification. HCC paid a contribution equivalent to the cost of providing the service to our own standard and TRDC covered the additional cost of enhancing the service to their specification.

8.2 The contract was re-tendered in early 2002 and the projected costs for highway grass cutting increased significantly. TRDC sought an increased contribution from HCC. At the same time the grass cutting rates for the new HWC became available and a comparison was done. HCC offered a contribution equal to the cost of delivering the service through the Contractors Frequency Method of the HWC (the more expensive of the two methods) but TRDC did not consider this sufficient and were no longer willing to continue to provide the enhanced grass cutting service.

8.3 Consequently, all highway grass cutting reverted to HCC from the end of June 2002 with TRDC continuing to cut grass for which they were responsible, such as amenity areas. The change of responsibility in mid-season inevitably caused disruption to the service as an interim arrangement had to be provided at short notice.

8.4 Three Rivers is currently the only district in which there are significant urban areas where highway grass is cut to the standard HCC specification rather than to an enhanced specification sponsored by the local district council.

9. Financial Implications

- 9.1 There will be a financial implication in moving from the current method of grass cutting to the performance-based specification. The costs given in Appendix II indicate an overall annual increase of approximately £23,500, which would have to be covered by efficiency savings elsewhere.
However this is based on the 2001 grass cutting areas and, due to changes to the service since then, most particularly in the Three Rivers area, there is now more grass cut directly by HCC, so costs would be proportionally higher.
- 9.2 There are also financial implications in the relationships with the districts. Like HCC they will, from time to time, under go Best Value reviews and similar exercises. It is therefore possible that, at some point in the future, one or more of the districts will decide that it no longer represents Best Value to undertake the highway grass cutting service or that they would require a greater level of funding from HCC. This could have a significant impact upon the services provided if HCC's costs are not to increase.

10. Conclusion

- 10.1 The Committee is invited to consider the report as a basis for the scrutiny of this subject and to make any recommendations to the Council, Cabinet or Chief Officers.

Background material referred to by the author while compiling this report:

Hertfordshire's Highway Asset Management Plan 2001-2004
Hertfordshire County Council Highway Works Contract

Table A1: Discharge of Functions of Hertfordshire County Council by District and Borough Councils as at 1 October 2002

District/Date of Original Agreement	Principal	Agent	Function	Present Position
Broxbourne	HCC	BBC	Highways Agency - non principal roads	Granted agency on basis of Schedule of Functions until 31/03/03 pending completion of legal agreement
Dacorum	HCC	DBC	Grass cutting	New temporary grass cutting agency until 31/03/03 to enable longer term agreement to be completed
East Herts 2001	HCC	EHDC	Grass cutting and verge maintenance - whole district except high speed roads	Terms agreed for revised grass cutting and verge maintenance agency arrangements (and joint working arrangements) - legal documentation yet to be signed.
Hertsmere	HCC	HBC	Highway verge grass cutting, weed clearance - urban areas only	Rolled forward existing until 31/03/03 to give time for completion of longer term arrangements.
North Herts 1999	HCC	NHDC	Grass cutting, weed clearance & tree maintenance - urban areas only and highway enforcement	Agency agreement completed 21/01/02

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District/Date of Original Agreement	Principal	Agent	Function	Present Position
St Albans 30/05/01	HCC	SADC	Grass cutting, verge maintenance, weed killing, and tree & shrub maintenance - urban areas only	Rolled forward for life of existing contract
Stevenage 31/10/91	HCC	SBC	Highways Agency - all non principal roads	Granted agency until 31/03/03 on basis of Schedule of Functions pending completion of legal agreement
Three Rivers	HCC	TRDC	Grass cutting	No agreement for grass cutting between TRDC and HCC
Watford 19/08/92	HCC	WBC	Highways Agency - all non principal roads	New agency until 31/03/03 re. Maintenance of trees and shrubs, grass cutting, hedge trimming and weed killing (all roads except A41, A405 and M1) to give time for completion of longer-term arrangements
Welwyn Hatfield 20/03/01	HCC	WHDC	Highway verge grass cutting, tree & shrub maintenance - urban areas only	Rolled forward for life of existing contract (until 31/12/03)

Table A2: Highway Grass Cutting Specifications of the District and Borough Councils as at 16 December 2002

District	Specification	min length/max length (indicative frequency)
Broxbourne	Performance specification: Fine grass: Standard grass: Rough grass: Country verge:	 10/20 (approx. 30 cuts per annum) 15/50 (approx. 16 cuts pa) 40/100 (approx. monthly in season) 50/200 (approx. 3 cuts pa)
Dacorum	<u>Frequency specification (currently):</u> Urban areas Rural (visibility) Rural (other) Note: Dacorum intend to move to a performance specification within the next year. Details are not available yet but the specification would be higher than the HCC performance specification set out in the HWC.	 15 cuts pa 4 cuts pa 2 cuts pa
East Herts	Performance specification: Urban verge Rural cuts (village areas) Rural cuts (visibility) Swathe cut	 35/120 (15 cuts pa as guidance) 4 cuts (length for guidance 50/150) 4 cuts (length for guidance 50/100) 1 cut pa
Hertsmere	Performance specification: General grass: Semi-rough grass: Rough grass:	 25/75 (approx. 12 cuts pa) 50/150 (approx. 6 cuts pa) 50/200 (approx. 3 cuts pa)
North Herts	Performance specification: General/amenity grass:	 25mm/60mm (approx. 15 cuts pa)

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St Albans	Performance specification: General/amenity grass: Country verges, visibility areas: Country verges, other:	25/75 (typically 12 cuts pa) 4 cuts per year 2 cuts per year
Stevenage	Frequency specification: Grass in the central reservations of dual carriageways All other highway grass:	6 cuts pa 10 cuts pa (may move to 12 cuts pa from 03/ 04)
Three Rivers	No highway grass is now cut by Three Rivers but up to June 2002 the specification was: Urban verges Rural vision Rural other	25/75 5 cuts pa 2 cuts pa
Watford	<u>Frequency specification:</u> All highway grass (all classified as urban)	18 cuts pa
Welwyn Hatfield	Frequency specification: Limited areas of town centre grass All other highway grass	30 cuts pa 14 cuts pa

Notes:

- 1) For performance specifications the requirements are given in the format x/y where x is the minimum height or the grass after mowing and y is the maximum height of the grass before mowing. In some cases this is followed in parentheses by an indication of the typical number of cuts this specification produces. The actual number of cuts will vary according to rate of growth of the grass.
- 2) For frequency specifications the number of cuts per year is given. Generally most or all cuts will be undertaken during the growing season.
- 3) All dimensions are in mm. 25mm is approximately 1"
- 4) Some districts use a combination of a performance specification for urban grass and a frequency specification for rural grass

Appendix II – The Highway Works Contract

1. Grass Cutting via the HCC Highway Works Contract

1.1 All grass cutting secured by HCC will be done through the new Highway Works Contract with Amey Lafarge, which came into effect on 1st October 2002. This provides two different methods of ordering the grass cutting.

1.2 Overseeing Organisation Ordered Method

1.2.1 Under this method, the contractor is instructed to cut the grass a specified number of times during the course of a season. The frequency and timing of the cuts is pre-set and determined by the specification. This is the traditional method in which HCC has managed its highway grass cutting in the past and the specification reflects past practice.

1.2.2 Grass is divided into three categories: urban, rural (visibility) and rural (other).

1.2.3 Urban grass is cut six times a year with the first cut completed by the end of April and subsequent cuts following at 3-6 week intervals, depending on the rate of growth.

1.2.4 Rural (visibility) grass – verges at junctions or on bends – is to be cut four times a year with the first cut completed by 15th May and subsequent cuts following at 1-2 month intervals, depending on the rate of growth.

1.2.5 Rural (other) grass is to be cut once a year between 15th May and the end of July. For grass in this category, only a swathe 1.2m wide next to the carriageway is cut, grass further back is not cut.

1.3 Contractors Frequency Method

1.3.1 Under this method, the contractor determines the frequency of the grass cutting necessary to keep the length of the grass within specified limits.

1.3.2 Grass is divided into urban and rural categories.

1.3.3 Urban grass is to be cut frequently enough to ensure that its maximum height does not exceed 150mm.

1.3.4 Rural grass in vision splays and the 1.2m swathe is to be cut frequently enough to ensure that its maximum height does not exceed 250mm.

1.3.5 The timing for the first cuts are the same as listed under 3.2

1.4 Under both methods the contractor is required to trim around posts and other obstructions and to clear grass cuttings from the footway or carriageway, usually by blowing or sweeping them on to the verge. Grass cuttings on the verge will usually be left in place

1.5 Payment for either method is made on the basis of a one-off payment for the whole season's grass cutting, based on the area of each category to be cut. The rates are as follows:

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<i>Overseeing Organisation's Ordered Method</i>	Unit	Quantity*	Rate (£)	Cost (£)*
Urban grass cutting	m ²	2,081,736	0.012	24,980.83
Rural (visibility)	m ²	1,415,116	0.017	24,056.97
Rural (other)	Linear metre	1,476,391	0.030	44,291.73
<i>Indicative Total:</i>				93,329.53

<i>Contractor's Frequency Method</i>	Unit	Quantity*	Rate (£)	Cost (£)*
Urban grass cutting	m ² per annum	346,956	0.090	31,226.04
Rural (visibility)	m ² per annum	353,779	0.071	25,118.31
Rural (other)	Linear metre per annum	1,476,391	0.041	60,532.03
<i>Indicative Total:</i>				116,876.38

**These quantities are those given in the contract for pricing purposes and may change if more or less grass cutting is delivered through the Highway Works Contract.*

Note that the actual areas of grass, based on the amount cut by HCC's contractor in 2000/01, are as given in the Contractors Frequency Method. For the Overseeing Organisations Ordered Method, these actual quantities have been multiplied by the required number of cuts to give the total quantity.

Note also that although the specification for all rural grass is the same under the Contractors Frequency Method, it is still divided in to 'visibility' and 'other' grass for measurement purposes.

- 1.6 The quantities given above are based on the area cut directly for HCC by our own contractor in 2001. Subsequent changes to the service mean that there is now more grass cut directly by HCC and, consequently the increase in cost in moving to the Contractor's Frequency Method will be proportionately greater.
- 1.7 The first method, outlined in Section 1.2 above, conforms to HCC's current grass cutting practice. However, there is an intention to move to enhanced County standards (as set out in Section 1.3) in line with the improvement plan.