

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY 23 MARCH 2004 AT 10.00 AM**

Agenda Item No.

**4**

**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 a follow-up to a report presented in January 2003 and, in particular, to examine the success of the new performance standard for highway grass cutting.

**2. Summary**

The report looks at how the grass cutting service has been delivered this year through Hertfordshire Highways and, in particular, at the effectiveness of the new method of specifying the service. It also looks at the current agency arrangements with the various district and borough councils and at possible changes in these arrangements.

**3. Conclusion**

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.

#### **4. Background**

- 4.1 A detailed background on the provision of the grass cutting service was provided in the report to the Scrutiny Committee in January 2003. A brief outline is provided here but Members may wish to refer to the previous report.
- 4.2 Hertfordshire has over 15 million m<sup>2</sup> of grass verges in its highway network and the cost of maintaining these verges came to nearly £1.3m in 2002/03 of which £850,000 was spent on grass cutting.
- 4.3 Final costs for the service in 2003/04 are not yet available. However, the overall cost will have risen ahead of inflation due to factors such as the move to the performance based specification (due to transfer of risk to the contractor and an improvement of the specification) and the addition of significant areas of grass to the inventory. For instance the former trunk roads handed over to HCC in May 2003 added over 500,000 m<sup>2</sup> of grass verges to our network - all on roads that require extensive traffic management arrangements each time the grass is cut.
- 4.4 Highway grass cutting in Hertfordshire is provided by a number of different organisations. All district and borough councils, except Three Rivers, undertake some highway grass cutting on behalf of HCC. The extent of this service varies from district to district; in some areas it is limited to the old highway agency area (generally urban areas only) in other districts the arrangement covers virtually all roads although high-speed roads are generally cut by Herts Highways. Some parish councils also cut grass on our behalf although these arrangements are generally very limited in scope. Hertfordshire Highways cuts the remainder of the grass (approximately 3,500,000 m<sup>2</sup>) using a dedicated subcontractor for the task.
- 4.5 The grass cutting service is summarised in Appendix A, a copy of the leaflet "Keeping Hertfordshire's grass in trim" which is published by Hertfordshire Highways and available to the public through the usual outlets.
- 4.6 The directly provided grass cutting service is examined in section 5, below. Section 6 looks at the service delivered through the district councils.

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

- 5.1 All grass cutting secured by HCC is done through the Highway Works Contract (HWC) which came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2002. Members may recall that this provides two different methods of ordering the grass cutting, the traditional method and a performance-based specification.
- 5.2 Traditionally HCC has instructed its contractors to cut the grass a specified number of times each year and paid them accordingly. For 2003/04, however, the decision was taken to move to the alternative, performance-based specification where the contractor has to cut the grass as frequently as necessary to keep it within the specified lengths. These specifications are discussed in more detail in Appendix B.
- 5.3 The new grass cutting service, starting in March/April '03, suffered from a number of teething problems in the early months. These included new operatives involved in the service, who needed to become familiar with the area, and significant new

areas of grass added to the service one month into the operation when the de-trunked roads were handed over to HCC. This meant that, in the early months of the operation, the service provided fell short of expectations. These early difficulties were compounded by warm, wet weather in the early season, which meant that grass grew rapidly in the spring and early summer.

- 5.4 However, these factors were independent of the change in the method of specifying grass cutting and resulted from the type of disruption often associated with such a significant organisational change. It is likely that the same levels of disruption would have been experienced had the alternative method of specifying the service been used.
- 5.5 After the first few months, most of the initial problems had been overcome and the service delivery improved markedly, assisted by a period of relatively dry weather. This slowed the rate of growth of the grass and allowed the operation to eliminate the backlog that had built up as a result of the earlier difficulties.
- 5.6 Despite the disruption, the new method of specification offered some clear advantages. In particular, the operation was being directed by the contractor who was obliged to bring in additional resources as necessary to bring the grass within specification and keep it there. Under the previous specification, HCC would have had to monitor the situation and order (and pay for) additional grass cutting to cope with periods of high growth.
- 5.7 The coming season will provide a fairer test of the new specification since there should be less disruption and the performance will therefore be easier to judge. However, it should be noted that there may be further changes to the service as a result of changes in some district arrangements (discussed in section 6.3, below) and the possible de-trunking of the A10, which may happen during the grass cutting season.

## **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 A although, because of the recent changes to the provision of highway related services, some of these arrangements are interim or under review.

### **Arrangements under review:**

- 6.3 Negotiations are currently continuing with Dacorum, North Herts, St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield with a view to modifying the grass cutting service they provide for HCC.

- 6.4. In the case of Dacorum, the proposed changes amount to a rationalisation of the existing arrangements, with Dacorum BC taking responsibility for some of the 'urban' grass that HCC currently cuts directly and with HCC taking over some of the 'rural' grass currently managed by Dacorum. Negotiations are well advanced but not yet finalised; the revised arrangements may be in place for the forthcoming year.
- 6.5 In Northern Hertfordshire the district council is looking to take on all highway grass on our behalf. Negotiations here are well advanced and it is likely that the new arrangements will be in place for the following year.
- 6.6 In St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield, the district councils are looking to take on most of the highway grass that they do not already manage but will leave certain elements, such as high-speed roads, with HCC. These negotiations are less well advanced; Welwyn Hatfield may be ready for this year, St Albans is unlikely to be ready for the coming season.
- 6.7 The arrangements above are all still under negotiation at the time of writing. If there are any significant changes to the situation, they will be reported verbally to the Committee.
- 6.8 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 method now operated by HCC although the standard is different. The district councils also effectively provide a management service: running the contracts, resolving problems and handling enquiries and complaints.
- 6.9 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.
- 6.10 Where district councils wish to continue to pay for enhanced service standards this has been accepted since it offers better standards of service and clarity of service delivery for the local community. The County Council would look to preserve and extend such arrangements as long as they continue to provide tangible benefits.

## **7. Access to Service Implications**

- 7.1 The choice of a performance-based specification has no implications for access to HCC services although further changes to the service (such as the transfer of delivery between HCC and the districts or the addition of further de-trunked roads to the network) may cause further periods of disruption to the service in the future.
- 7.2 Closer links with the district councils on the grass cutting service have a number of positive benefits. The district councils often have a more easily accessible local presence, they will also be in a position to enhance and tailor the service to local needs while still maintaining HCC's standard of service as a baseline requirement.

## **8. Financial Implications**

- 8.1 Future changes to the service, such as the addition of further de-trunked roads (most notably the A10 in the east of the county) will add to the cost of the service. However, this will be covered by the specific grant that will be received from the Department for Transport for de-trunking.
- 8.2 Negotiations with the districts have proceeded on the basis that HCC is prepared to contribute what it would cost to run the service direct but will not pay for any further enhancement. The transfer of grass between HCC and districts or vice versa would therefore be cost-neutral.

## **9. Conclusion**

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*

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## **Appendix B – 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 by which HCC managed its highway grass cutting prior to 2003 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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.

1.2.6 Additional cuts can be ordered if necessary, for instance if the grass grows more rapidly one year due to favourable growing weather. The contractor is paid accordingly so costs increase in line with the extra work done.

#### **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 1.2

1.3.6 Under this method, the contractor bears the risk since no further payment is made for extra cutting due to faster than normal growth; additional cuts necessary under this method are included within the price.

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 in the contract are as follows:

1.6

<i>Overseeing Organisation's Ordered Method</i>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Quantity*</b>	<b>Rate (£)</b>	<b>Cost (£)*</b>
Urban grass cutting	m <sup>2</sup>	2,081,736	0.012	24,980.83
Rural (visibility)	m <sup>2</sup>	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>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Quantity*</b>	<b>Rate (£)</b>	<b>Cost (£)*</b>
Urban grass cutting	m <sup>2</sup> per annum	346,956	0.090	31,226.04
Rural (visibility)	m <sup>2</sup> 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 gutting 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.*

*Note also that the rates given above are as per the original contract. For 04/05 an inflationary increase will be applied to these rates as to other rates in the HMC.*

1.7 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.

1.8 The first method, outlined in Section 1.2 above, conforms to HCC's previous grass cutting practice up to 2002. For 2003 there was to the performance-based standards (as set out in Section 1.3) in line with the improvement plan.