

POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL REPORT

REPORT TO:	Environment and Community		
DATE:	12/10/16		
TITLE:	Grass Cutting Review		
TYPE OF REPORT:	Post Implementation Review		
PORTFOLIO(S):	Councillor Mrs Nockolds, Culture, Heritage and Health		
REPORT AUTHOR:	Sarah Moore		
OPEN		WILL BE SUBJECT TO A FUTURE CABINET REPORT:	Yes/No

REPORT SUMMARY/COVER PAGE

PURPOSE OF REPORT/SUMMARY:

Following the implementation of the new grass cutting regime in the cutting season of 2016, the report is a review of the new regimes performance.

The report includes detail on the recent survey and responses, as well as the level and nature of complaints received regarding grass cutting borough wide, and presents options and recommendations for a new change of regime.

KEY ISSUES:

1. Implementation to a reduced grass cutting regime has given rise to a number of complaints.
2. A survey has been developed and issued to Ward Members and Parish Councils to gauge the reaction to this year's grass cutting regime.
3. Changes to any regime will have some form of impact on the Grounds Maintenance Special Expense charges relating to each area.
4. The council currently cut some grass on the behalf of Norfolk County Council. Irrespective of the number of cuts that the borough carries out on NCC's behalf, NCC only pay for 5 cuts.
5. That any regime developed or changed needs to be operationally manageable.

OPTIONS CONSIDERED:

1. To keep the current grass cutting schedule
2. To alter the regime to one of the following:
 - Increase frequency to 12 Cuts
 - Increase Frequency to 8 cuts
 - Increase to either 8 or 12 Cuts, and keep NCC to 5 Cuts

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Panel identifies which option would continue to provide an adequate grass cutting service, which would help to reduce the level of customer dissatisfaction and complaints.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

To respond to the high level of complaints received over this season.

1 Background

- 1.1 A request was made for savings to be made within the grounds maintenance service area. As previously both annual bedding and hedge cutting had been reduced, attention was focussed on reducing the grass cutting across the borough.
- 1.2 The aim was to identify savings with a reduced regime of grass cutting which balanced both the requirement for savings with the provision of an adequate service.
- 1.3 The grass cutting season runs on average from mid- march through to October each year equating to approximately 35 weeks. This can change from year to year slightly depending on the weather conditions.
- 1.4 There was some disproportion in the grass cutting regimes, depending on the size of the area to cover and the number of staff working within the team.

2 Overview of Changes made 2016 season

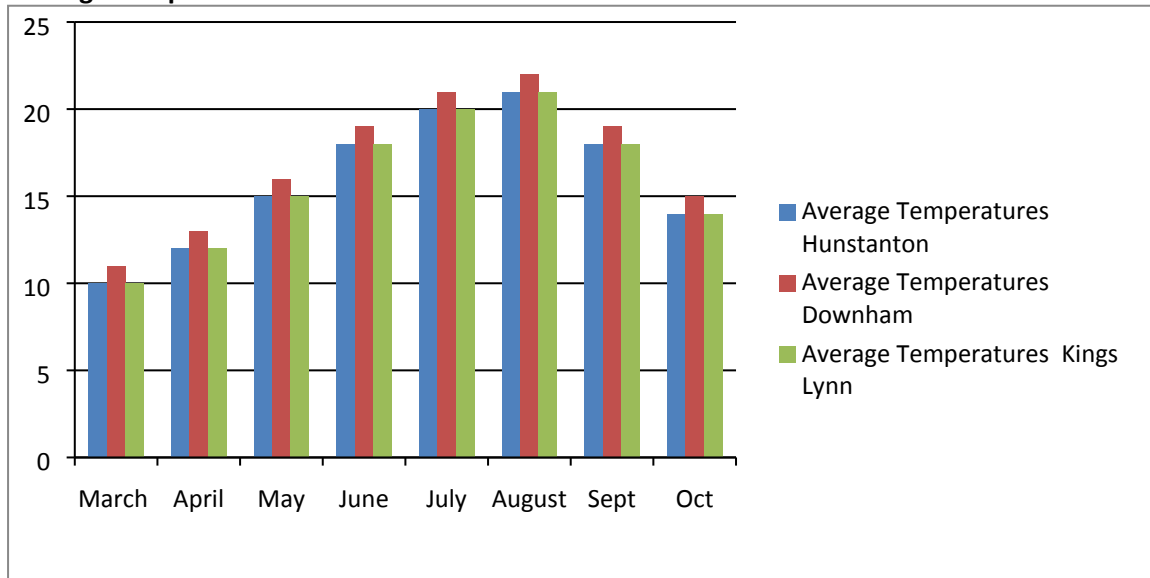
- 2.1 Options for changes to the grass cutting regime were presented to Cabinet, E & C Panel and KLACC in January 2016.
- 2.2 To aid the operational management, it was conceived that a regime of 18, 12 and 6 cuts, would be the best way to exercise a reduction in cutting.
- 2.3 18 cuts equates to a cut every 2 weeks, 12 cuts to a cut every 3 weeks and 6 cut equates to every 6 weeks.
- 2.4 The high profile areas would continue to receive a high standard of cut at a rate of 18 cuts per season, the lower profile areas would be split between 12 and 6 cuts. This also applies to NCC land, which the council cut on their behalf.
- 2.5 NCC only pays for 5 cuts, regardless of the actual number of times this service is carried out.
- 2.6 On the ground this meant that, every second time the operatives visited an area/parish they cut the full complement of grass. In summary the new regime looked like this:
 - High Profile Parks and Gardens – 18 cuts
 - Highway splays and built up residential – 12 cuts
 - Highway splays not immediately interfering with views of road – 6 cuts
 - Land immediately adjoining frontages of properties – 6 cuts
- 2.6 Implementation included a change from the fleet of cylinder mowers (Ransome 2130, Iseki SF240), to the Ransomes Meteors which are designed to cope with longer grass.
- 2.7 The Property Services contract for Grounds Maintenance was brought back in house and taken on by the Open Spaces team.

3 Grass Growth and Weather Patterns

3.1 It is universally recognised that the grass is Downham Market, grows at a quicker rate than that of Kings Lynn or Hunstanton.

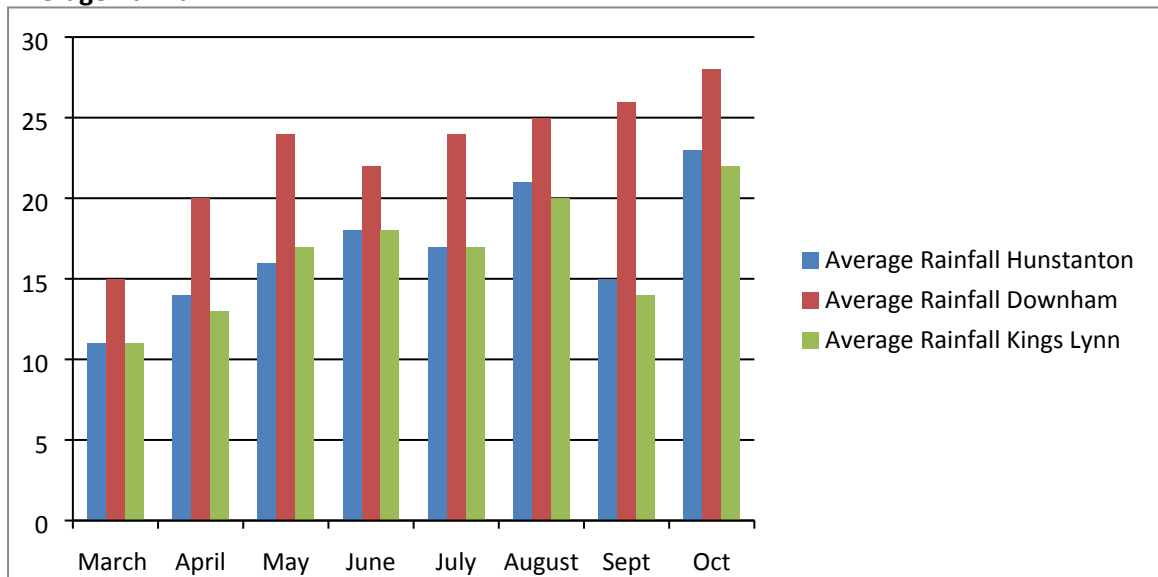
3.2 It appears that this is largely due to the favourable grass growing conditions that are in that area. To demonstrate this, data has been collated on the average temp and rainfall in these areas:

Average Temperatures in Celsius



(Data Source – World Weather Online)

Average Rainfall in mm



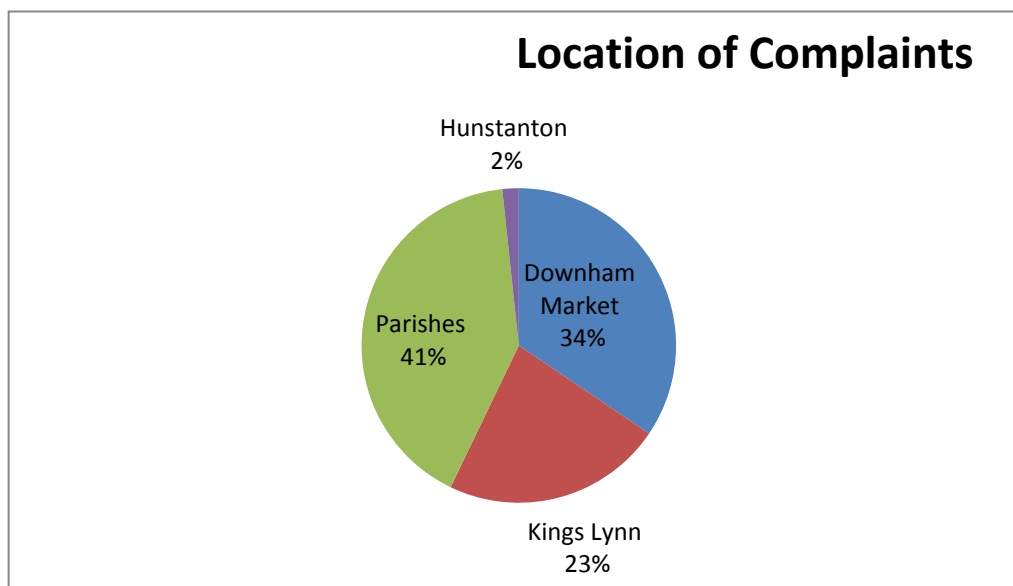
(Data Source – World Weather Online)

3.3 These show that the conditions are warmer and wetter in Downham Market than in the other towns, which provide the ideal growing conditions for grass. This is clearly a major contributing factor and provides an explanation of why the grass grows quicker in Downham Market.

4 Complaints

4.1 Over this first season of changes, there was a small rise in the level of complaints relating directly to grass cutting. Overall there were 119 complaints received via the CLEANUP line.

4.2 This shows the areas that the complaints have come from:



4.3 The 41% of complaints that originated from Parishes equates to 49 actual complaints, and of these 16 came from parishes within the southern district of the Borough, which have similar environmental conditions to Downham Market.

4.4 This shows that the main areas of dissatisfaction are located in and around the area of Downham Market. This appears to be an operational and staffing shortfall, which is being addressed in readiness for the next cutting season.

4.5 The complaints were categorised into types in order to prioritise the issues raised.

Main Issue	No of Complaints
Requesting Information on the New Schedule	45
Asking why the grass is being left so long between cuts	38
Following cuts – Mess has been left behind	13
Complaint about visibility Splays – NCC Land	10
Asking why only the edges of areas have been cut	10
Grass cutting schedule differs from the website	1
Edges of areas not strimmed	1
To ask us to 'Please leave the grass long '	1

4.6 Evaluating the complaints shows that the majority of complaints were about the changes to the schedule, and that the schedule was not frequent enough.

- 4.7 There is also a clear misunderstanding between the NCC land that the Borough cut and the roadway verges that are maintained by NCC direct.

5 Survey

- 5.1 A survey was recently sent out to all Ward members and Parish Councils to assess the general feeling about the seasons grass cutting.

- 5.2 The results were as follows:

Q1: Are you happy with the grass cutting service provided?

Respondents : 46 Yes: 6 No: 40

23 respondents provided a reason for their dissatisfaction:

Reasons provided	No
Too long between cuts	16
Visibility Splays – NCC	3
Quality of finish	1
Other	3

Q2: How frequently should the grass be cut?

Respondents: 43

Choice	No
Leave as is	15
Increase schedule	28
Decrease Schedule	0
Stop and pass to individual Parishes	0

25 respondents provided a reason for their choice:

Reasons provided	No
Not carried out often enough	10
Could we increase cuts to 8 per season	7
Include more flexibility in schedule	3
Discuss with Parish	2
Other	3

- 5.3 These results have been used to formulate some potential options for next year's grass cutting schedule.

6 Options

- 6.1 There are a number of options that could be adopted to improve the service provided next season, which could reduce the level of complaints.

6.2 Option 1 – Continue with current schedule.

- Remaining on the current schedule will not address the shortfall of the grass cutting required in the Downham Market area.
- There may still be a significant level of complaints from this area.
- There is the potential for complaints to fall as people become aware and begin to accept the level of service provided.
- The only change to Special Expenses would be raise in accordance with inflation

6.3 Option 2 – Increase frequency to 12 Cuts

- Increase grass cutting to a frequency of 12 cuts over the 35 week average season.
- The increase in frequency would result in an increase of the special expense charge.
- The Borough Council are only paid for 5 cuts on NCC land
- Who will fund the additional 7 cuts? BC or Special Expenses?
- The financial impact is shown in section 7.

6.4 Option 3 – Increase Frequency to 8 cuts

- Increase grass cutting to a frequency of 8 cuts over the 35 week average season.
- This option appeared to be popular amongst the respondents of the survey.
- The increase in frequency would result in an increase of the special expenses charge.
- The Borough Council are only paid for 5 cuts on NCC land.
- Who will fund the additional 3 cuts? BC or Special Expenses.
- The financial impact is shown in section 7.

6.5 Option 4 – Increase to either 8 or 12 Cuts, and keep NCC to 5 Cuts

- Increase grass cutting to a frequency of either 12 or 8 cuts over the 35 week average season.
- The increase in frequency would result in an increase of the special expenses charge.
- The Borough Council are only paid for 5 cuts on NCC land.
- Limit the number of cuts on NCC to match the payment received.

7 Financial Implications of Each Option

7.1 The following tables show the differences in the Grounds Maintenance Special Expense charge for each of the options outlined. The costs shown include all the grounds maintenance carried out, and is not limited to grass cutting alone.

7.2 These comparisons do not include any of the NCC grass cutting as it is not yet known if the council are legally permitted to add the costs of the additional NCC cuts to special expenses.

7.3 The tax base used to demonstrate this is the current years, and is likely to vary for the actual charges in 17/18.

7.4 Total potential grounds maintenance charges for Parishes currently receiving 6 Cuts:

Parish	Tax base 16/17	Current overall Charge	Current charge per household	Overall Charge for 8 Cuts	Overall charge per household	Overall Charge for 12 cuts	Overall Charge per household
Fincham	183	£419.62	£2.30	£511.59	£2.80	£695.54	£3.81
Grimston	656	£918.30	£1.40	£1028.21	£1.57	£1248.03	£1.90
Walsoken	471	£248.87	£0.53	£323.84	£0.69	£473.79	£1.01
Wiggenhall St Mary Magdalen	218	£41.95	£0.19	£55.93	£0.26	£83.89	£0.39

7.5 Total potential grounds maintenance charges for Parishes currently receiving 12 Cuts:

Parish	Tax base 16/17	Current overall Charge	Current charge per household	Overall Charge for 8 Cuts	Overall charge per household	Overall Charge for 12 cuts	Overall Charge per household
Gayton	458	£251.80	£0.55	£244.83	£0.53	£251.80	£0.55

7.6 Total potential grounds maintenance charges for Parishes currently receiving mix of 6 and 12 cuts:

Parish	Tax base 16/17	Current overall Charge	Current charge per household	Overall Charge for 8 Cuts	Overall charge per household	Overall Charge for 12 cuts	Overall Charge per household
Walpole	528	£828.75	£1.66	£666.84	£1.26	£1000.27	£1.89
Feltwell	657	£1018.74	£1.55	£816.61	£1.24	£1117.71	£1.70
South Wootton	1615	£5185.29	£3.21	£4858.34	£3.01	£5824.14	£3.61

7.7 In terms of the variation the costs per household from in any of the examples given, the largest increase is within the Parish of Fincham. If the option of cutting 12 times is chosen Fincham will see a rise of £1.51 in their charge, equating to £0.02 per week.

7.8 At present the council are still cutting NCC grass at a higher frequency than NCC pay for. It is not known if the costs of the additional cuts that are carried out can legitimately be added to the Special Expenses charge. This is still under investigation.

7.8 Should it transpire that this is a possibility; the table below demonstrates the potential costs that could be included in the special expenses charge.

7.9 Norfolk County Council Grass Cutting

Parish	Taxbase 16/17	Costs of 3 cuts	Potential Charge Per household	Costs of 7 cuts	Potential Charge per household
Feltwell	657	£996.23	£1.52	£1,513.93	£2.30
Fincham	183	£17.45	£0.10	£40.72	£0.22
Gayton	458	£43.66	£0.10	£101.86	£0.22
Grimston	656	£321.28	£0.49	£749.66	£1.14
South Wootton	1,615	£1,166.75	£0.72	£3,449.02	£2.14
Walpole	528	£16.04	£0.03	£37.44	£0.07
Walsoken	471	£216.75	£0.46	£92.89	£0.20
Wiggenhall St Mary Magdalen	218	£42.05	£0.19	£98.11	£0.45

8 Questions to consider

- 8.1 Which of the options presented would be favoured by the panel, based on the information of the current grass cutting performance, the level of complaints and customer satisfaction, and the costs of increasing the service frequencies?
- 8.3 If there is no legal reason that the costs of additional NCC cuts cannot be added to the Special Expense charge for Grounds Maintenance, is this an approach that the Borough Council would wish to pursue?