

Agenda Item	
Report No	

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: The Highland Council

Date: 31.10.19

Report Title: Review of Amenity Services

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Customer and Communities

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Council provides a range of amenity services to communities throughout the Highlands. These include maintenance of: open spaces; burial grounds; play facilities; and sports pitches. This maintenance includes weed control. Members agreed a motion in June 2019 to ban weed killing products containing glyphosate in certain areas and for a business case to be prepared on weed killing options.
- 1.2 It is proposed that a business case on weed killing is produced as part of a wider review of amenity services. This wider review would consider: service standards and performance; the scope for growing and marketing the service; increasing productivity (for example through more efficient machinery and route optimisation); in-sourcing some work; and engaging further with communities on their involvement. It would consider environmental impact as well as financial costs and opportunities and take stock of savings already achieved in the budget as well as new budget pressures expected. The review would engage with Members, front-line staff and Trade Unions.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 Members are asked to agree to the proposed review of amenity services, with the review overseen by the Redesign Board with recommendations made in time for planning for the 2020 growing season.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource implications – The total budget for amenity services is approximately £4.3m, of which £1.8 million is raised in income. A traditional service delivery model is in place, with grass-cutting in-sourced in 2017. Service standards and provision have reduced to achieve savings amounting to £402k over the past 3 years. New budget pressures are expected from new open spaces to be maintained. A review would consider all the resourcing issues including workforce, plant, materials, income generation and community capacity for sustainable proposals to be developed for Members to consider.

- 3.2 Legal implications – Ministers may make regulations for the management of burial grounds in the Burials and Cremations (Scotland) Act 2016 and these would be considered as part of the review. Out with burial grounds amenity services are not statutory. However, where they are provided, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Occupiers Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 are the principal legislation that needs to be complied with. The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 outlines control measures that the Council must take to protect the Health and Safety of its employees and members of the public when using chemicals such as weed killer. Any changes to current practice will incorporate the appropriate control measures.
- 3.3 Community implications (Equality, Poverty and Rural) – the review will consider equalities impacts and the Fairer Scotland Duty. The review will also consider workforce implications, including groups of staff with relatively low pay. The review would also consider known community involvement and proposals for further involvement.
- 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever implications – the review will consider the implications for the Council's carbon footprint and other environmental impacts, particularly on biodiversity. It is noted that the weather conditions this year enabled a particularly fast-growing season, bringing additional pressures on the workforce.
- 3.5 Risk implications – the review will ensure that the Council's exposure to legal and reputational risk is addressed.
- 3.6 Gaelic implications – there are no known Gaelic implications.

4. Service Context

- 4.1 The service currently has two operational managers for the region and six Amenity Officers. It employs around 80 permanent staff supplemented by around 70 seasonal staff. Some work continues to be contracted out in more remote areas.
- 4.2 Feedback on amenity services from the most recent national household survey shows satisfaction at 84.33%. This is a high score; but places the Council in the 3rd quartile of Scottish Councils (ranked 23/32). Comparable costs show we are in the top quartile (ranked 5th lowest cost) at £7,535 per 1,000 population.
- 4.3 Service performance will be considered as part of the proposed review.

5.0 Grass cutting

- 5.1 The grass cutting service is the most significant part of the service in terms of area maintained (approximately 900 hectares), cost and resource allocated. It was insourced in 2017.
- 5.2 Members will be aware that weather conditions this year created a particularly fast-growing season and pressures on the workforce.
- 5.3 The current service is delivered to a traditional specification based on frequency of grass cutting. Whilst savings have been delivered recently, an initial assessment has identified that further reductions are possible through:

- a. increases in productivity, though, for example the use of more efficient machinery and use of route optimisation;
- b. reductions in the overall area maintained by the Council by stopping maintenance in areas that would be more suited to encouraging biodiversity, have low amenity value, or are difficult to maintain. This would allow us to focus on areas that are valued by communities and participants; and
- c. further involvement of communities and community bodies in the design and delivery of services.

5.4

There may also be opportunities to grow the service by:

- in-sourcing work currently outsourced by other Council services, such as Garden Aid, tree surgery and verge maintenance; and
- providing the service commercially to other bodies or communities.

5.5

A review should also consider the work undertaken across different teams including roads staff, street cleaning staff, Facilities Management (FM) staff and commissioned through the Housing Service and core paths team.

6.0

Play Area Provision

6.1 The Council currently maintains 435 play areas. Independent inspections on the condition of our play areas were carried out in 2017. Obsolete equipment has been removed and a new repair and maintenance programme has been developed and implemented based on the findings of these inspections.

6.2 The budget for maintaining these assets has also reduced recently.

6.3 The proposed review can identify options for making the service more sustainable. This can include rationalising provision, supporting community asset transfers, prioritising repairs further and reviewing workforce arrangements.

7.0 Weed Control

7.1 At its meeting in June 2019 the Council agreed a motion to:

- a. immediately ban the use of weed killing products containing glyphosate in all sports recreation facilities / play grounds and schools; and
- b. prepare a Business Case for consideration at the next council meeting on options for a complete ban on the use of such products, except for invasive species control and at dangerous road junctions where its use will be risk assessed on a case by case basis.

This followed an earlier decision in September 2018, to review the policy on weed killing.

7.2 A business case requires consideration of costs involved. Initial work to identify the operational and financial implications of alternatives to glyphosate showed that whilst savings could be realised if chemical weed control was stopped or significantly reduced; there would be increased operational costs of the alternatives (for example, steam, foam or manual weed removal) plus the cost of repairing damage to infrastructure caused by weed growth. Further work is required to confirm the cost of all the options identified.

The Council spends approximately £0.5 million per annum on weed control. This function is carried out or commissioned across Council services including:

7.3

- a. amenity services;
- b. roads teams;
- c. FM;

- d. the housing service; and
- e. the core paths team.

This work is carried out to:

- 7.4 a. control invasive species;
- b. reduce reliance on the need for strimming the edges of paths and open spaces, thereby increasing productivity and minimising employee's exposure to hand arm vibration;
- c. protect structures and infrastructure from damage by uncontrolled growth of vegetation;
- d. ensure that carriageways and paths are not obstructed; and
- e. ensure visibility at road junctions.

7.5 The main herbicide used is glyphosate, which is the active ingredient in most of the herbicides used by the Council. Concerns have been expressed nationally and internationally about the risks of using this chemical; although conflicting studies and advice are found.

7.6 Glyphosate is regarded as safe to use by both UK and EU regulators, and had its licence renewed for five years at the end of 2018.

7.7 Other Councils are reviewing their use of glyphosate too. Understanding their approaches should be included in the review.

Undertaking the review

8. It is proposed that the review draws on work already begun in the Service. Given other demands for peer review teams, it is proposed that the review is undertaken within the Service, with:

- 8.1 • Change Programme Office support;
- advice from the conservation team in D&I;
- peer challenge from senior managers in Community Services; and
- additional officer scrutiny by the Change Board.

8.2 It is proposed that the review also gathers views and feedback from front-line staff involved in providing the services.

8.3 It is recommended that the review is overseen by the Redesign Board, for Member and Trade Union support and challenge and with recommendations made in time for the 2020 growing season.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Customer and Communities

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