

**HIGHLAND COUNCIL**

Agenda Item	8
Report No	ERA-10-20

**Committee:** Easter Ross Area Committee

**Date:** 20 August 2020

**Report Title:** Amenity Service Update

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place

**1. Purpose/Executive Summary**

1.1 This report provides an update on how Amenity Services have performed during the Covid-19 Pandemic lockdown in Easter Ross.

**2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 i. Members are invited to note the information provided in this report on the Amenity Service update on the response to the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown.
- ii. Members as asked to note that disruption to the service will continue for the rest of the season.

**3. Implications**

- 3.1 Resource. Due to the pandemic the Service experienced a 35% reduction in permanent staff being at work and 50% less seasonal staff being recruited due to budget pressures. This has meant that work schedules and standard have not been met. Our permanent workforce are now back at work.
- 3.2 Legal. Playparks were closed at the start of lockdown, and no routine maintenance or safety inspections were carried out. Following Scottish Government guidance, this position changed on the 29<sup>th</sup> June, and play parks are in the process of being inspected and essential maintenance is being carried out prior to reopening.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural). Until the start of June there was a reduction of accessible amenity grass areas. This was due to grass cutting being restricted, resulting in long grass in many areas. By the middle of June the vast majority of areas were back to a condition that walkers could use the areas as intended while maintaining physical distancing.

There was a good understanding of our situation during the initial lockdown within communities and complaints were very infrequent. This changed when we started cutting grass, as the standard of finish achieved during the first few cuts did not meet our usual standards.

In some areas volunteers undertook grass cutting of cemeteries parks and various other areas, this had a significant positive impact on the areas, and gave our teams an important benefit when the limited grass cutting operation commenced, and resulted in a much better finish of the cut grass.

- 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever. Grass areas that had to be set aside and left uncut had an unintended benefit in that wildflowers and various other plants flourished. Bees, butterflies and various other small wildlife quickly populated these areas.
- 3.5 Risk. Our work must remain COVID compliant, adhering to physical distancing. To achieve this, we have had to bring in additional transport and change the way the teams operate. Teams have had to be smaller, and mainly work in isolation.

These working arrangements and having a reduced workforce have forced us to prioritise our works, and we have not been able to maintain a large proportion of low amenity areas that are normally strimmed. This is a potential risk to our reputation.

- 3.6 Gaelic. There are no implication arising from this report.

#### **4. Background**

- 4.1 At the start of lockdown on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 most of the services delivered by the amenities function were suspended as new Government restrictions on the movement of people and new definitions of essential service were enforced. Approximately 35% of permanent staff were absent due to shielding and COVID-19 related concerns.

- We suspended all non-essential works i.e. grass cutting, weed control, flower shrub bed maintenance, tree maintenance, lair levelling, fence and wall maintenance;
- All play parks were required to close, and inspection regimes suspended;
- Staff focus was on supporting the burial service;
- The recruitment of seasonal staff was suspended; and
- All activities had to be risk assessed, including travelling to jobs, staggering start/stop times and break times, to ensure compliance with COVID guidance.

- 4.2 In some areas volunteers undertook grass cutting in cemeteries, parks and various other areas. This had a significant positive impact on the areas and gave our teams an important benefit when the limited grass cutting operation commenced and resulted in a much better finish of the cut grass.

Capturing the benefits of working with volunteer groups and working with them to establish a longer-term relationship will support the Service and communities going forward.

#### **5. Grounds Maintenance**

- 5.1 On 30 April permission was granted to start a limited grass cutting service. At this point our equipment contractor was on furlough, and no seasonal staff had been recruited. It therefore took time to mobilise staff and equipment to get the grass cutting up and running.

By this point the grass was between 300mm and 500mm long in places and it took significantly longer than normal to cut the grass. Due to previous reviews of grass cutting, and implementation of reduced standards, we no longer have equipment to cut and lift grass. This resulted in sites being left with long clippings and complaints being received about the standard of work.

Permission was given to recruit approximately half of the normal seasonal staff, for Ross-shire 8 seasonal staff were recruited compared to 16 in other years. Work continued to support HC staff to get back to work but the team operated at significantly reduced number from May and this will continue for this season.

Overtime is only permitted for essential works such as Burial duties, and more recently for inspections and maintenance necessary to reopen Play Parks.

During this limited grass cutting service we have prioritised the areas we cut. The highest priorities being maintained are: -

- Parks and large open spaces;
- Town and village centres;
- Active burial grounds;
- War Memorials; and
- Amenity areas within Council housing estates.

The following non-essential grounds maintenance were not re-introduced to comply with lock down and because of staff absence, and these are: -

- Strimming of all areas. This is a labour-intensive activity which can take 50% of staff time, so we concentrated on mowed areas;
- School grounds would not be maintained as long as they remained closed;
- Maintenance of any rough-cut areas;
- Maintenance of shrub & flower beds;
- Litter picking of Amenity areas;
- Maintenance of old burial grounds which are no longer used for burials;
- Maintenance of older unused sections of the burial grounds which no longer will be used for burials; and
- Grass cutting of roadside verges out with the Roads teams.

This limited ground maintenance service is likely to continue throughout this season, and it is our intention to cut and tidy up all the areas not attended to at the end of the season when the growth rates allow. This will allow for as normal as possible a start to the 2021 season.

## **6. Weed Control**

6.1 On 14<sup>th</sup> May the Political Gold group agreed that due to staff shortages and following a vote, to temporary lift of the partial ban on weed control products containing glyphosate to undertake limited preventative maintenance. The conditions of its use were:

- it would not be used in play areas;
- its use is to be preventative only – i.e. to avoid infrastructure damage;
- ensuring proper attention to H&S requirements in its application; and
- as part of a limited grass cutting service only (not business as usual).

The temporary use of Glyphosate in restricted areas ceased after the Council meeting on the 25<sup>th</sup> June when Members agreed the resumption of Council approved policies and services to pre-Covid arrangements. i.e. at dangerous junctions and to control invasive species.

This prevents its use in cemeteries, housing estates, parks, around trees, within shrub beds, schools, play parks and general amenity areas.

Alternatives to glyphosate were identified last year but are not yet tested for effectiveness or costs quantified. This work stalled along with the amenities review. Staff resources are limited and focused on mowing grass and the safe re-opening of play parks. A comprehensive review of alternatives to glyphosate will take place in the autumn. The amenities review will also be restarted.

## **7. Play Parks**

- 7.1 On 18 June the Scottish Government published its updated Route Map to reflect the move to Phase 2. It gave the approval for play areas to open from Monday 29 June; however, this offered very little lead in time and the guidance was circulated only the day before on Sunday 28 June.

This brought further challenges to the team in Highland:

- The scale of the task - 436 play spaces and 336 with equipment to check, signage to organise and with some repairs expected;
- The technical challenge of undertaking safety checks and repairs and in compliance with standards and good practice; and
- The capacity within the team – the 11 staff with the appropriate qualifications to undertake safety inspections were tasked on grass cutting. The external contractor had been stood down following approval that the Service would move to in-source the work but lockdown had halted recruitment.

In Ross-Shire there are two qualified play park inspectors, one in the west, and one in the east, between them they have 74 equipped play areas to inspect and repair. Within the Easter Ross area there are 33 play areas to inspect and repair.

It was approved to offer overtime to re-open play parks, prioritising higher use parks and parks with new equipment first to mitigate risk to children and the Council.

Within a week in Highland the team had opened 112 play parks and continue to inspect and repair and open all other play parks unless the repair requirements are excessive.

At the date of writing this report (4<sup>th</sup> August) In East Ross 11 play parks are now open.

- 7.2 A presentation was made to Resources Governance Board in February 2020 to insource several amenities activities, for example arbour work and playground inspections. Recruitment has just taken place for the Senior Technician Play post and an appointment made. The 3 inspector posts will now be advertised internally. This will provide a more robust approach to managing our playgrounds.

## **8. Insights**

- 8.1 The Service has had to adapt to unique circumstances and the team have modified what they do and how they do it. Our communities have been understanding and supportive,

and volunteer groups have made a difference in their local areas. We will take the learning from this and build on it as we restart the amenities review.

Designation: Amenities Manager North

Date: 4 August 2020

Author: John Mackay

Background Papers: Grounds Maintenance Member Briefing 13 July 2020, Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place

## Grounds Maintenance Member Briefing

13.7.20

### Service disruption

The grounds maintenance service has been significantly disrupted this year. This is because we have complied with all the national guidance on service changes, faced significant workforce challenges and now have significant budget pressures.

The nature and causes of the service disruption are described below.

#### Services suspended

At the start of lockdown on 23<sup>rd</sup> March the service was suspended as new Government restrictions on the movement of people and new definitions of essential service were enforced.

We suspended all non-essential works i.e. grass cutting, weed control, flower shrub bed maintenance, tree maintenance, lair levelling, fence and wall maintenance.

All play parks were required to close and inspection regimes suspended.

We halted work on the amenities review as the method involved workshops with staff, Members and community views around specific localities.

We continued to carry out only urgent or safety works that pose danger e.g. dangerous headstones and trees.

In bereavement services we suspended preparing foundations for head stones. We reduced the service around burial grounds to remove old wreathes when we could. Attention was re-focused to deal with additional deaths planning.

#### Re-prioritised services: additional deaths planning

Pandemic preparations require additional deaths planning. Our team planned across services and with partners to make sure we would not be in the same position as reported in other countries resorting to common graves and all the additional grief that places on bereaved families.

From the end of March into early May the grounds maintenance team focused on the advance preparation of burial lairs and trained several more staff to operate the Crematorium. The additional deaths modelling we were working with at that time required us to plan for potentially 360 additional Covid deaths in Highland by the end of June.

Projections were refined as time passed and after preparing around 200 lairs in advance of need it became clear that there was more compliance with lockdown than modelled and this kept more people than expected safe from the virus. To date we have responded to more deaths than the same period last year, including 52 Covid related deaths registered in the region.

#### Limited grass cutting service re-start

By 30<sup>th</sup> April we had approval to undertake a limited grass cutting service. This was negotiated with our Environmental Heath Team and Police Scotland as essential works, because we could make the case that it would prevent detriment to the amenity during lockdown, prevent infrastructure damage and avoid extra cost from hiring additional

machinery. This was subject to scrutiny at the Political Gold Group meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> April. The limited service meant we would undertake only:

- essential maintenance on the roadside, roundabouts and verges where it can be demonstrated it is required for road safety and the “crucial to the wellbeing of society”. We generate income from advertising on some roundabouts so they would be included where possible;
- some level of grass cutting in parks to enable individual exercise and otherwise they would be costly to recover;
- some level of grass cutting in burial grounds to allow lairs to be identified more easily, excavated more easily and cause less distress for bereaved families attending burials; and
- some level of grass cutting in Council housing estates to help with local amenity.

Grass cutting would be limited to mowed grass. School grounds would not be maintained for as long as they remain closed and would have less priority than the sites above.

The following non-essential grounds maintenance were not be re-introduced to comply with lock down and because of staff absence (described below):

- strimming activities. This work can take up more than 50% of staff time, so efforts need to be concentrated on maintaining mowed grass areas;
- maintenance of any rough-cut areas;
- strimming back of daffodil beds;
- maintenance of shrub & flower beds, unless it is with herbicide for weed control;
- litter picking of Amenity areas;
- maintenance of old burial grounds which are no longer used for burials;
- maintenance of older unused sections of the burial grounds which no longer will be used for burials; and
- grass cutting of roadside verges out with the Roads teams.

This was communicated to the public through press release and social media as set out in Appendix 1.

By introducing the limited grass cutting service we needed to ensure staff and workforce practice complied with social distancing and enhanced hygiene. This meant adjustments to fleet and machinery use, start and finish time and attendance at depots.

#### Workforce size and capacity

Significant disruption to the workforce was experienced because:

- early Government guidance required staff to self-isolate if they received a letter from NHS to shield or if they had other health conditions which made them more vulnerable to Covid. This included people who were aged over 70, with asthma, diabetes, pregnant or with some other health conditions. It also applied to people living with others in these categories of vulnerability. This led to initial absence of 35% in the permanent workforce of around 70 full time equivalents (FTE);

- At the start of lockdown, we had recruited only 35 seasonal workers out of the usual 80 recruited each year. 17 were deployed temporarily to support the waste and burials services.

By the end of May/early June all staff had been supported to return to work safely, apart from 3 people either shielding or vulnerable to Covid.

### Weed killing

On 14<sup>th</sup> May the Political Gold group agreed that due to staff shortages and following a vote, to temporary lift of the partial ban on weed control products containing glyphosate to undertake limited preventative maintenance. The conditions of its use were:

- it would not be used in play areas;
- its use is to be preventative only – i.e. to avoid infrastructure damage;
- ensuring proper attention to H&S requirements in its application; and
- as part of a limited grass cutting service only (not business as usual).

In some locations Members expressed concern about glyphosate use particularly on road verges.

This temporary use of glyphosate ceased after the Council meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> June when Members agreed the resumption of Council approved policies and services to pre-Covid arrangements. From then glyphosate has been authorised only for use in places where the Council motion from June 2019 gave express permission to apply the herbicide; i.e. at dangerous road junctions and to control invasive species.

Alternatives to glyphosate were identified last year but are not yet tested for effectiveness or costs quantified. This work stalled along with the amenities review and we do not have staff resource to undertake this while our service is limited to mowed grass cutting and the safe re-opening of play parks. We will be able to take stock of the impact in the autumn.

### Play parks re-opening

On 18 June the Scottish Government published its updated Route Map to reflect the move to Phase 2. It gave the approval for play areas to open from Monday 29 June; however, this offered very little lead in time and the guidance was circulated only the day before on Sunday 28 June.

This brought further challenge to the team because of:

- the scale of the task - 436 play spaces and 336 with equipment to check, signage to organise and with some repairs expected;
- the technical challenge of undertaking safety checks and repairs and in compliance with standards and good practice; and
- the capacity within the team – we have only 11 staff with the right qualifications to undertake safety inspections and they were tasked on grass cutting. The external contractor had been stood down as we moved to in-source the work but lockdown had halted recruitment.

In consultation with Administration leaders we agreed to offer approved overtime to re-open play parks, prioritising higher use parks and parks with new equipment first to mitigate risk to



children and the Council. We are also recruiting a further 7 seasonal staff to assist the team overall.

Within a week the team has opened 112 play parks (as at 10<sup>th</sup> July) and will continue to inspect all other play parks unless the repair requirements are excessive. Public messaging was issued on 6<sup>th</sup> July as set out in Appendix 2. The [website](#) is updated daily with information on parks re-opening.

### **Ongoing disruption**

We will not be able to return to normal service this year. This is because:

- our budget position prevents us from recruiting more seasonal staff this year;
- we have around 50% of the seasonal workforce we would normally rely on;
- the workforce we have need to rest, especially those staff who have worked through without Easter leave and many working through since Christmas. We have agreed with the Trade Unions that all staff should take 10 days leave by end August to ensure our duty of care to them and to avoid having significant absence later in the year;
- we need to make sure our workforce practice is covid compliant and that makes operations more complicated in terms of fleet use, staggering start and finish time times and reinforcing social distancing;
- with schools re-opening in August, staff will be required to attend to maintaining ground around schools;
- the team will continue to prioritise burials over grass cutting; and
- we may experience further absence or lockdown arrangements should any groups be affected by the Test and Protect regime or any localised Covid outbreaks.

### **Community offers of help**

There have been many offers of help from community groups and individuals to maintain the amenity of their areas. We are extremely grateful for their assistance this year.

Normally in working with a group the local Amenity Officer/Foreperson would undertake a site visit and once work is agreed, we would offer support for risk assessments, Hand and Arm Vibration Syndrome (HAVS) monitoring, collection of any debris and then finally checking the work completed is to the agreed standard. We have not been able so far to offer this but hope to resume as soon as possible and create a new package of supports (see below).

### **Learning from the disruption**

Some areas have merged for us to learn from in reviewing amenity services. So far, they are:

- how to make it easier for community groups and individuals to tend to public space in their community. We want to know what we need to do differently to be able support and encourage others to help so there is less need for us to recruit seasonal staff in the future. We are hoping to hear from the experience of community volunteers in Caithness at the Communities and Place Committee in August and we are going to engage directly with those groups offering their help to us to find out what we need to do differently;
- areas we have not maintained this year because of the service disruption described above have seen more wild flowers and probably supported wildlife better. We'd like

to understand the environmental benefits and how this can influence set aside and practice going forward;

- weed control has been problematic this year and we will use the evidence in reviewing options including alternatives to glyphosate going forward;
- the ability to deploy staff more flexibly this year across teams and functions within teams along with staff willingness to take on new roles. This provides insight into staff capabilities and can help with service change going forward; and
- vulnerability in our workforce, especially among our older workers has been evident this year and should influence our workforce planning.

## **Contact with Members**

Members are often the first to receive complaints and concerns from their constituents.

Members' queries will be responded quickly if they are directed to their local amenities officers. Officers in the North are:

- Evan Sinclair, Caithness and Sutherland
- Douglas Miles, Ross and Cromarty, Skye and Lochalsh
- Ingrid Jamieson, Ross and Cromarty, Skye and Lochalsh

Officers in the South are:

- Peter Kelly, Inverness
- David Lamont, Lochaber
- Sean Malone, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey

If Members need Manager attention please contact the Operations Manager for the area, either John Mackay for the North and Debbie Sutton for the South. Escalated concerns can be sent to Caroline Campbell as Head of Service. Caroline is covering this Head of Service area in the interim.

Members may know of community groups or individuals willing and able to help with grounds maintenance. It would be helpful if Members can continue to encourage them and let us know what we can do to help it further.

Members can help answer constituent and local group queries by explaining some of the challenges we have faced this season already and that we expect to see them continue for the rest of the year. We thank people for their patience in our public communications (appended).

The Council Leader and Cllr Henderson, as Chair of the C&P Committee, plan to write jointly to all Community Councils thanking them for their community response during lockdown and we can update them on some service issues too, including the challenges we face with grounds maintenance this year. We will copy the letter to be Members for information.

It would be really helpful if Members could share their views on lessons learned on grounds maintenance and how that might inform service change going forward. Please contact Carron McDiarmid or Caroline Campbell with and information and ideas to share.

**Public communications on the limited grass cutting service this year**

## **Limited grass cutting to resume in Highland with adherence to physical distancing**

Highland Council has announced it is to begin a restricted grass cutting service across the region.

Despite significant challenges in terms of staffing, the local authority is pleased it is in a position to deliver a limited service at this time.

All work will be carried out in adherence to the national guidelines on what are essential services, and with strict social distancing measures in place.

By commencing this limited service members of the public should not interpret this as any lifting of the lock down requirements. The services permitted focus mainly on mowed grass and include:

- Essential maintenance on the roadside, roundabouts and verges where there may be a road safety
- Grass cutting in parks to enable people to take their daily exercise. Play parks are to remain closed.
- Limited grass cutting in burial grounds, areas of Council housing and in some other open spaces.

The following non-essential grounds maintenance cannot be undertaken at this time:

- Strimming activities.
- Maintenance of any rough-cut areas.
- Strimming back of daffodil beds.
- Maintenance of shrub & flower beds, unless it is with herbicide for weed control.
- Litter picking of amenity areas.
- Maintenance of old burial grounds and unused sections, which are no longer used for burials.

Vice Convener of Highland Council, Councillor Alan Henderson, said: “The Council is grateful to communities undertaking grass cutting and strimming works to prevent deterioration of the amenity in their areas. This is appreciated now the growing season is underway, of course communities must assess the risks of carrying out this task, and adhere to Scottish Government COVID-19 guidance at all times particularly on social distancing.”

11 May 2020.

### Public communications on the reopening of play parks

The Highland Council is planning to [re-open play areas](#) across the region throughout summer. Advice was provided by the Scottish Government on 28 June as to the safety measures that should be applied.

The Council has 436 play spaces of which 336 are equipped play areas with 2011 individual items of play equipment. Since the lockdown, these play parks have been closed, and have not been inspected, or had any maintenance work carried out.

Before reopening, all Council play parks have to be in a safe and serviceable condition. To do this a full inspection and maintenance programme must be carried out, this is a significant undertaking, and will take time, so needs to be done in a phased, prioritised manner due to staff shortages.

This phased approach focuses initially on:

- high quality destination sites;
- locations wherein social distancing is possible; and
- new or recently refurbished sites requiring minimum input.

During this process, the play parks will be signed advising whether they are open or closed. Additional signage will be provided in relation to COVID guidance.

We expect to begin opening sites from this week onwards and the Council's website will be updated with the list of the sites re-opening first across the region at <https://www.highland.gov.uk/playareas> (external link) This web page will be updated as sites are reopened.

We ask all park users to use the facilities safely, observe social distancing, apply enhanced hygiene and to keep the parks tidy by taking their litter home with them.

The Council's Amenities Service is operating at a much-reduced capacity with less than 50% staff compared to previous years. Many communities have supported the Service during the pandemic with grass cutting, strimming and generally maintaining sites in their areas. We would like to

encourage community volunteers to assist us with the grass cutting in play areas, as long as they have carried out a risk assessment and adhere to social distancing.

Cllr Allan Henderson, Chair of the Communities and Place Committee said: “We are receiving a lot of guidance about the phased reintroduction of services and activities. We are very pleased to be able to begin a phased reopening of Highland Council play parks from today. This will be a gradual process as the Council has to ensure that checks and safety inspections of the play equipment and infrastructure are carried out within the available staffing levels of the council. We ask everyone to bear with us as not all play parks can reopen at the same time and signage will be erected indicating whether they are safe to use.”

Chair of the Highland Council’s Recovery Board, Cllr Alasdair Christie added: “This will be great news for families to be able to get their children out to play in their local communities – but we have to ensure that it is as safe as possible for them to do so. Therefore, all work will be carried out in adherence to the national guidelines, and with strict social distancing measures in place.”

People must continue to take responsibility for themselves while using the play parks and do so at their own risk, following Government guidelines on social distancing. Signage will also be erected at all play parks to remind people to wash their hands and or use sanitiser as appropriate.

Highland Council thanks everyone for their patience and understanding during this time.

6 July 2020