

Agenda Item	5
Report No	RDB/7/21

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Redesign Board

**Date:** 08 November 2021

**Report Title:** Amenities Project Update

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

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides Members with an update on the amenities project progress, the project last reported to the Redesign Board on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2021. During this time there have been 3 board meetings involving representatives from the Redesign Board. This report provides an overview of the project objectives at section 4 and an update on progress against the project objectives at section 5.

### 2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- (i) **NOTE** the 6 project objectives and the progress made to date across all workstreams;
- (ii) **NOTE** the Scottish Government's allocation of funding for play park renewal for financial year 2021-22, options on the apportionment of the funding across Highland will be presented to Communities and Place Committee on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 2021 along with a proposed approach to developing a Highland play parks strategy, with updates to be provided to the Redesign Board; and
- (iii) **AGREE** the schedule and timeline set out in section 5.8.2 of this report, for place-based workshops/engagement sessions to support Objective 5.3 – (community involvement – place-based approach) with follow up actions facilitated through Ward Business Meetings.

### 3. Implications

3.1 Resource implications – The project will consider all the resourcing issues including workforce, plant, materials, income generation and community capacity for sustainable proposals to be developed for Members to consider. The project will look to identify

areas of spend currently outsourced that could be delivered through in-sourcing/in-house via the Amenities Services. Additional/new work in-sourced could lead to greater service demand and increased workforce requirements to be off-set against new income streams or savings with business cases to be developed. Alternatives to Glyphosate continue to be considerably more expensive. The partial ban continues and some alternative methods of weed control have been trialled and costs quantified. Costs include product and plant costs as well as the number of staff needed for an increased number of applications, if all other grass cutting and maintenance standards remain at the same level.

- 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.
- 3.4 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 control products. Any changes to current practice will incorporate the appropriate control measures. Glyphosate use is licensed only until December 2025. A Scottish Government review may emerge from data gathered by Scottish Government’s pesticide survey in 2020. The survey was used to gather data to understand the importance of herbicides in amenity settings, and to what extent local authorities are adopting integrated weed control approaches.
- 3.5 Play areas are not a statutory service; however, where they are provided, we must comply with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Occupiers Liability (Scotland) Act 1960 for employees and members of the public attending play areas. We must also comply with our duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Fairer Scotland Duty. Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to relax and play, and participate in a wide range of cultural, artistic and cultural activities.
- 3.6 Community implications (Equality, Poverty and Rural) – the project will consider equalities impacts and the Fairer Scotland Duty. The project will also consider workforce implications, including groups of staff with relatively low pay. The project would also consider known community involvement and proposals for further involvement, supporting our place-based approach.
- 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever implications – the project will consider the implications for the Council’s carbon footprint and other environmental impacts, particularly on biodiversity. It will contribute to the Transformation Project for Climate Change through the work package on community food growing.
- 3.5 Risk implications – the project will ensure that the Council’s exposure to legal and reputational risk is addressed and that the range of amenity services provided are affordable and sustainable.
- 3.6 Gaelic implications – there are no known Gaelic implications.

## **4. Project Objectives**

- 4.1 Objective 1 – (services delivered in-house)

4.1.1 Where services are delivered in-house, they will articulate clear standards of service, demonstrate efficiency and continuous improvement, based on an understanding of our assets (property/people/finances) and savings to be delivered. Proposals on how the amenities function can support the Council's objectives of jobs and career paths will be developed.

4.2 Objective 2 – (in-sourcing and commercial opportunities)

4.2.1 Commercial opportunities, including in-sourcing work, will be explored with business cases developed to identify how to generate more income and to market Council services more widely. We will also review all current service level agreements.

4.2.2 Project objective 2, will be divided into 3 workstreams with separate work packages created for the workstream:

1. in-sourcing;
2. commercial opportunities; and
3. service level agreements.

4.3 Objective 3 – (partnership)

4.3.1 Shared, partnership or integrated service delivery will be tested initially in Lochaber with transferable learning identified.

4.4 Objective 4 – (Highlife Highland - HLH)

4.4.1 The working relationship and resources involved with HLH will be documented along with an understanding of the amenity services HLH provides. This will help us to understand whether our working relationship with HLH delivers Best Value for amenity services and the Council and whether work on a Council owned company for amenity services should be explored further.

4.5 Objective 5 - (community involvement)

4.5.1 For community involvement in the range of amenity services we will focus on localised solutions working with local Members, staff and community bodies. This will include identifying the supports required to incentivise and sustain volunteer effort in maintaining and improving local amenity. We will also seek to agree a transparent offer of service that is sustainable. We will also support community food growing, contributing to climate change and community planning objectives. We will also learn from:

- a. where this already works well;
- b. our Covid experience;
- c. the new approach to play areas; and
- d. new connections with community bodies and volunteers.

4.5.2 Project objective 5, will be divided into 3 workstreams with separate work packages created for the workstream:

1. community involvement – play areas, implementing the Council decision in January 2021 and with local discussions underway since March 2021;
2. community involvement – community food growing, linked to the Transformation Project on climate change; and

3. community involvement – supporting our place-based approach.

#### 4.6 Objective 6 - (biodiversity)

- 4.6.1 We will identify practical ways to support the Council's biodiversity objectives. This will include learning from Covid on areas set-aside, working with biodiversity forums and the ecology and climate change team. This will also identify where demand for amenities services can be reduced or adjusted. Up to date information on alternatives to glyphosate use will be reported. This will include latest national guidance and any new national direction expected or reported. It will also involve some trials of alternatives with costs quantified so that recommendations on weed control can be made.
- 4.6.2 Project objective 6, will be divided into 2 workstreams with separate work packages created for the workstream:
1. weed control; and
  2. biodiversity.

### 5. **Project Objectives – progress update**

#### 5.1 Objective 1 – (services delivered in-house)

- 5.1.1 The project has experienced difficulties recruiting a GIS resource to develop the maps required for the project. The team has also experienced software issues which has resulted it taking longer than anticipated. A sub-working group has been established, the group's role is to lead on the review of amenities maps within the Council's GIS system and associated datasets; understand the Services requirements; update existing maps and datasets; and develop place-based maps as part of Project Objective 5: Community Involvement. Work is underway to consider how best to attract GIS skilled staff to the Council to ensure business continuity. To date graduate internships have not proved successful.
- 5.1.2 The Service has reviewed the current equipment breakdown and monitoring procedures, procedures have been revised, along with a breakdown monitoring workbook. The information will be used to monitor performance against contract terms and conditions and reviewed at monthly contract management meetings with the supplier.

#### 5.2 Objective 2.1 – (in-sourcing)

- 5.2.1 The established Arboricultural Services Team covers Inverness and Ross-shire. The team responds to requests by other services within the Council. The team's operational processes currently align to the Council's draft Tree Strategy 2014, which is led by Infrastructure & Environment, Forestry Team. A review of the Tree Strategy has been incorporated into the project, the Forestry Team are supportive of the review and were updated on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 2021 on the research work underway with APSE. The Forestry Team have reported receiving an increasing number of complaints relating to trees since the first lockdown, this could be due to people spending more time at home and in their local areas.
- 5.2.2 Research is underway into what provision other Councils have in-house for Arboricultural Services including examples of team structure and works undertaken: programme of work or demand lead, this information request is being facilitated via an information request to APSE. The information will help to:

- inform a review of the Tree Strategy. Amenity Services will work alongside Infrastructure & Environment, Forestry Team on the review and where required additional Services input will be sought; and
- Consider whether there is a business case to extend the service and team based on income generation potential (internally and externally).

5.2.3 All future infrastructure developments need to incorporate ongoing ground maintenance costs as part of the development's whole life costings, understanding the revenue consequences of capital projects. If ground maintenance is to be undertaken by Amenities a budget needs to be provided as part of the project costs, otherwise it builds in budget pressure resulting in a reduction in service elsewhere or reduced service standards. In order for the Amenities Service to be sustainable long-term as a service provider delivering grounds maintenance services to internal customers, ongoing maintenance costs need to be budgeted for by internal customers.

5.2.4 The project will identify lead officers on future infrastructure developments and work with them at the early stages of future developments to provide advice on planting schemes and maintenance costs.

5.2.5 Similar work is already taking place between Amenities and Housing engagement has improved with Amenities involved at an earlier stage on housing developments. Amenities staff are contributing to space layout designs and planting schemes to reduce maintenance costs. Housing have confirmed that new housing developments will either include factoring or a budget code will be provided for initial cost of maintenance.

### 5.3 Objective 2.3 – (Service Level Agreements - SLAs)

5.3.1 The review of SLAs is underway, it consists of a full review of all documentation, development of new documentation and revised operational procedures. The review includes the alignment of documentation operational changes: steep banks, redundant play areas, Community Asset Transfers or change of use. The review has identified gaps in performance monitoring, a structured performance monitoring programme will require to be agreed with processes developed and implemented.

5.3.2 Amenity Services should have formal SLAs in place with their customers and prices agreed. At present there is no formal SLA in place with Housing although some works are funded. The project team met with colleagues in the Housing team to agree the format and key requirements from an SLA. Where there is current documentation that could support an SLA, it will be reviewed and used to support the formation of the SLA and a review of service provided based on funding agreed. The teams will continue to work together on the development of the SLA for areas of land associated with Council housing.

5.3.3 The Housing Service is currently undertaking estate-based reviews "rate your estate" visiting estates and engaging with tenants. The rate your estate reports will be shared with Amenities to review feedback on amenity areas to identify areas for improvement.

5.3.4 The review of SLAs with other Services (internal customers) has not yet commenced, this will follow the work completed for the Housing SLA.

### 5.4 Objective 3 – (partnership)

- 5.4.1 A partnership approach to managing areas of Lochaber is currently being piloted. Amenity Services and the other service providers have shared asset maps of the areas they maintain and their maintenance standards. The team have worked with Jahama Highland Estates to identify pilot areas in Inverlochy and Kinlochleven, with agreement that Amenity Services will undertake grass cutting in Inverlochy for Jahama Highland Estates.
- 5.4.2 Work is continuing to look at opportunities to share resources and in areas of commonality, standards to be agreed.
- 5.4.3 The Amenities Officer for the area held a demonstration event of a robotic mower, Members were invited to attend. The demonstration has been recorded; the recording could be shown to other areas considering the purchase of one.
- 5.5 Objective 4 – (Highlife Highland)
- 5.5.1 A review of the current SLA in place with Highlife Highland for ground maintenance services is underway. The current asset list has been shared with HLH for comparison against HLH's records.
- 5.5.2 The project team met with HLH to agree the format and key requirements from an SLA, at the meeting it was agreed all the current documentation requires to be revised. HLH find the current SLA documentation difficult to interpret, clearer documentation would be beneficial. HLH have requested an annual report on performance and financial monitoring that could be presented to their board.
- 5.6 Objective 5.1 – (community involvement – play areas)
- 5.6.1 The need for the replacement of play chip for play area surfaces was expected this year but there is no service budget for it (following budget reductions since the last round of play chip replacement around 5 years ago). To avoid the prolonged removal of some play equipment and closures of parks because of insufficient play chip, a bulk purchase of play chip was undertaken in advance. As well as speeding up the supply of play chip this also achieved a better price and secured supply. Work is underway to replace play chip at sites across Highland. Local budgets will be re-charged where play chip is deployed, in keeping with the Council's decision to devolve decision-making and budgets to Area Committees. Members locally can agree which of their discretionary funds they wish to commit to support play parks, including play chip replacement. A number of sites require pre-works including the removal of old play chip and clearance of area, before new play chip can be laid. Due to the extent of work required on play chip replacement, this has impacted on the annual inspections schedule. North Area annual inspections and play chip replacement is an ongoing schedule of works. South Area annual inspections are nearing completion, along with play chip replacement.
- 5.6.2 Amenity Services continue to work on quantifying the cost of play areas and play items where annual inspections have taken place. This information will be shared with Members through Ward Business Meetings to help inform decision making on refurbishment and rationalisation of play areas in return for better-quality play areas.
- 5.6.3 The Amenity Services Managers continue to attend Ward Business Meetings providing updates on play areas. In the South Area some site visits have taken place with Members and Amenity Staff attending. Some Wards have agreed to use place-based funding towards play area refurbishments, some are also seeking match funding to match place-based funding contribution. Since January 2021 Area Committees have

allocated £415,013 for play areas in their Wards from their local funds and some Committees are yet to consider their allocations.

- 5.6.4 The first allocation of capital funding to the Council from the Scottish Government's Play Park Renewal Programme is £234k for Financial Year 2021-22. Options on the apportionment of the funding across Highland will be presented to Communities & Place Committee on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 2021. All Area Committees can benefit from this additional devolved fund.
- 5.6.5 The Service is working on developing a community support information pack, this will include signposting on funding sources, guidance on equipment and inclusive play. A long-term strategy on play parks is to be developed, following the agreement at Council in September 2021 supporting the motion agreed at the recent meeting of the Caithness Committee. The approach to developing the strategy will be proposed to the meeting of the Communities and Place Committee on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2021, building on the earlier agreement by Council for play areas to be devolved to Local Committees. The development of the play parks strategy will be reported to the Redesign Board.
- 5.7 Objective 5.2 – (community involvement – community food growing)
- 5.7.1 The Food Growing Co-ordinator is now in post and met with Amenities, they will be providing support to the project and communities on community food growing. The work being undertaken through the review of SLAs may identify land which could provide opportunities for community food growing.
- 5.7.2 The Council has signed the Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration (the "Declaration"), following the passing of a Motion at a meeting of the Council on 24th June 2021. The Climate Change Working Group presented a paper outlining the next steps on the 18th August 2021.
- [https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/78586/6\\_glasgow\\_food\\_and\\_climate\\_declaration\\_-\\_next\\_steps](https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/78586/6_glasgow_food_and_climate_declaration_-_next_steps)
- 5.7.3 A report setting out the Council's draft response to the consultation by Scottish Government on their Local Food Strategy was presented to the Climate Change Working Group on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2021.
- [https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/78869/5\\_scottish\\_governments\\_local\\_food\\_strategy\\_-\\_draft\\_consultation\\_response](https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/78869/5_scottish_governments_local_food_strategy_-_draft_consultation_response)
- 5.8 Objective 5.3 – (community involvement – place-based approach)
- 5.8.1 The paperwork from the Caithness workshop is being reviewed, amendments to the place-based maps has been transposed to a change log and amendments are required to the maps within ArcGIS. Part of the Caithness workshop involved identifying a list of possible commercial/partnership opportunities, these require to be mapped in ArcGIS.

5.8.2 Similar workshops/engagement sessions to Caithness will take place in other areas. The proposed order of attendance and timeline is detailed below. The timing reflects staff capacity, the need to engage fully and the need to avoid the summer season given this is the busiest season for the team. Development and improvement in all areas is not dependent only on the place-based approach as other workstreams will be taken forward across locations throughout the period of the review.

Area	Timeline
Lochaber	Winter 2021-22 / Spring 2022
Nairn	Winter 2021-22 / Spring 2022
Ross & Cromarty (with work phased to focus on the four Area Committees: Black Isle; Dingwall and Seaforth; Easter Ross; and Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh)	Winter 2021-22 / Spring 2022 and Autumn 2022
Badenoch & Strathspey	Autumn 2022
Isle of Skye & Raasay	Winter 2022
City of Inverness and Area	Winter 2022-23 / Spring 2023
Sutherland	Winter 2022-23 / Spring 2023

5.8.3 Follow up actions from the workshops/engagement sessions would be facilitated through Ward Business Meetings.

5.8.4 Inverness and Nairn Area Committees have requested a bench-marking exercise against cities and towns of a similar size. The Transformation Service has contacted Local Authorities to research how they provide amenity services and how this is funded, the outcome will be reported back to the respective areas.

5.8.5 Amenity Services recognise the work done by volunteers who continue to complement the work of the Council. Recent examples are in: Latheron Cemetery, Strathaird Cemetery and in burial grounds in Skye.

[https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=10158858543499436&id=549294435](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10158858543499436&id=549294435)  
[https://m.facebook.com/BroadfordEnvironment/posts/4411325502258857?\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/BroadfordEnvironment/posts/4411325502258857?_rdr)

## 5.9 Objective 6.1 – (weed control)

5.9.1 The Service has been undertaking trials of alternatives to glyphosate-based products for weed control throughout the growing season and continues to research alternative products and methods. The Service continues to engage with APSE and other organisations to keep informed of any changes within the sector: new developments, policy, or legislation changes. An update on weed control and the findings of this season's trials will be reported to a Redesign Board Workshop at a later date.

## 5.10 Objective 6.2 – (biodiversity)

5.10.1 The Council in partnership with NatureScot are recruiting a Biodiversity Partnership Officer, to deliver biodiversity benefits to the Highlands. The project will need to work with officers in Infrastructure and Environment to support delivery of actions from the Biodiversity Action Plan.

5.10.2 In August 2021, the Scottish Government and Local Authority Leaders reached an agreement on the proportion of allocation of the newly established Nature Restoration



Fund (NRF) to Scottish Local Authorities. This constitutes £5 million of capital funding to be spent in financial year 2021-22 to support new, or to enhance existing, approaches to restoring biodiversity. The Highland Council secured an allocation of £258k, allocation of the fund is being taken forward by the Infrastructure & Environment Service.

- 5.10.3 In relation to steep banks a budgetary saving was approved in 2017-18 to reduce or stop cutting areas regarded as low amenity value. Banking, which is identified as unsafe to cut has ceased (gradients above 30 degree). This includes banking in residential areas and on some main roads. This would be mitigated by cutting a strip of around 4 feet / 120 cm around the top and bottom of these banks, which can act as nature strips/corridors. The exception would be high visibility areas or where Members requested additional cuts, additional cuts were to be offset with a reduction in cutting elsewhere in the area.
- 5.10.4 The project team require to review the list of steep banks and record where additional cuts are taking place. This work is required to help understand the current Service position and for comparison with SLA asset lists.
- 5.10.5 The project is working on identifying a list of possible sites that may be suitable for biodiversity. Through the place-based approach the project will also ask Community Councils to identify potential sites within their area, site checks will be required on the viability of sites identified.
- 5.10.6 The project would benefit from being kept sighted on the roads review, as this may include a review of road verge maintenance guidance.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place

Date: 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2021

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