

Agenda Item	7
Report No	RDB-03-24

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

<b>Date:</b>	<b>28 March 2024</b>
<b>Report Title:</b>	<b>Redesign Board - Amenities Project Update</b>
<b>Report By:</b>	<b>Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Purpose/Executive Summary</b>
1.1	The report provides the Redesign Board with an overview of progress in the months since the formal closure report was presented to the Strategic Improvement Board in September 2023.
<b>2.</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	The Redesign Board is asked to note and comment on the ongoing progress.
<b>3.</b>	<b>Implications</b>
3.1	<b>Resource:</b> There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.
3.2	<b>Legal:</b> There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.
	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.
	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.
3.3	<b>Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural):</b> Equalities impacts, and the Fairer Scotland Duties are considered when planning amenities activities, as is community involvement and proposals for further involvement, supporting our place-based approach.

3.4	<b>Climate Change / Carbon Clever:</b> Consideration of the implications for the Council's carbon footprint, links to the Councils Net Zero Strategy, and other environmental impacts, particularly on biodiversity are part of the decision-making process within the function.
3.5	<b>Risk:</b> There are no direct risks arising from this report.
3.6	<b>Health and Safety</b> (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) The recent investment of £500k for small plant and equipment will contribute towards a reduction in noise and vibration for operators. The use of glyphosate is licenced to 2025, and safe working practices and training are in place to ensure the safety of operators. Glyphosate is used within the parameters of the partial ban implemented in 2019.
3.7	<b>Gaelic:</b> There are no specific Gaelic implications arising from this report. All projects delivered by the function will ensure the Council's bilingual policy is appropriately applied.
4.	<b>Background</b>
	<p>The amenities review consisted of 6 project objectives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In- house service delivery: clear standards, demonstrate efficiency and continuous improvement, understand our assets (property/people/finances) and savings to be delivered;</li> <li>2. Insourcing: in-sourcing work, review commercial opportunities and review all service level agreements;</li> <li>3. Shared partnership in Lochaber: shared partnership will be tested in Lochaber with transferable learning identified;</li> <li>4. HLH: review working relationship with HLH and service level agreement;</li> <li>5. Community Involvement: new approach to play areas, community engagement through community food growing, staff and customer engagement; and</li> <li>6. Biodiversity: identify practical ways to support the Council's biodiversity objectives, review the use of glyphosate and trial alternative products with costs quantified so that recommendations can be made.</li> </ol>
5.	<b>Updates to each of the 6 project objectives are detailed below.</b>
5.1	<b>In house service delivery: clear standards, demonstrate efficiency and continuous improvement, understand our assets (property/people/finances) and savings to be delivered.</b>
5.1.1	Service standards and output specifications are embedded in service delivery, covering the work we do in general amenities spaces as well as for internal customer via service level agreements.
5.1.2	<p>A considerable amount of work has gone into preparing the tender for the new ground's machinery contract. This is a 5-year contract and will run from 2025 – 2029. The current value of the contract is £550k per year and a like for like replacement would cost more than £1.3m. To minimise a budget pressure, managers have been focused on keeping the estimated contract prices as close to £550k per year as possible.</p> <p>The entire service has been reviewed, including numbers and types of equipment, areas and routes covered, and staff. We have reduced the mower fleet from 94 grass machines in 2019 to c70 going forward into 2025, with a reduction in summer hired fleet of 3 pickup vehicles.</p>

	The tendering process closed on 4 <sup>th</sup> March at 12pm and at this time we do not know the value of the bids submitted.
5.2	<b>Insourcing: in-sourcing work, review commercial opportunities and review all service level agreements.</b>
5.2.1	The closure report confirmed that the play area inspections team and Arbor team had been insourced. The Service has not identified nor does not expect any further insourcing to take place in the medium term.
5.2.2	The closure report stated that following research by the project manager, looking for commercial opportunities was not viable at this time. That remains the case, however if there are small scale opportunities that can be fitted around current work plans, that would be considered.
5.2.3	With regards to Service Level Agreements, it was recognised that full cost recovery was not achieved. The review of SLA with Education, Housing and HLH is complete. To ensure the SLA accurately reflects the asset base, as this can change over time, and current costs versus budgets, SLA will have a light touch review each October with a more significant review in 2028 to align with the preparation for the procurement of grounds machinery equipment.  Other SLA will require to be developed. These include Roads and Common Good Funds during the next financial year.
5.3	<b>Shared Partnership in Lochaber</b>
5.3.1	The Service remains enthusiastic about opportunities to work with partners. Following the Lochaber trail, we continue to carry out work for 2 local partners and they carry out work for the Council. Whilst not a commercial opportunity, it has resulted in all partners being able to reduce travel to maintain small pieces of land.
5.4	<b>HLH: review working relationship with HLH and service level agreement.</b>
5.4.1	This outcome was achieved and a new SLA is in place. There is an annual 'light touch' review to ensure accuracy of assets versus activity and costs. A fuller review will take place in 2028 to align with the prepararion for the grounds maintenance machinery contract.
5.5	<b>Community Involvement: new approach to play areas, community engagement through community food growing, staff and customer engagement; and</b>
5.5.1	The Play Park Strategy was approved by Communities and Place committee in November 2023 and sets out the Council's ambition until 2033 subject to funding being available.  The Play Strategy Officer has been active in setting up relationships with communities and partners, promoting local involvement, decision making and fund raising. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with over 30 different groups across the region</li> <li>• Aviemore Burnside playpark is near design phase completion. Consultation with the School will be next, explaining play value aspects of each piece of equipment and asking children to vote on their favourite design. Full community involvement.</li> <li>• Quite a few more playparks are close to being ordered or awaiting installation.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with communities to fund raise for new play equipment.</li> <li>• Whin Park progressing and tender for mini competition being issued in March to request returns for the design and provision of play equipment.</li> <li>• A Child Version of Playpark Strategy is complete and will be sent to Schools, Community Councils, Council Departments and Suppliers, as well as being available on the Councils website.</li> <li>• External groups such as International Play Association, Educational Psychology, Play Highland, Greenspace Scotland are very interested in our Strategy especially the Literature Review, Child Consultation, Inclusivity and Environmental aspects.</li> </ul> <p>A report will be taken to Communities and Place committee in November 2024 reporting on progress over the year.</p>
5.5.2	<p>Encouraging communities to get involved with food growing remains a priority and is done in conjunction with the Community Support and Engagement team. As part of the restructure of that team, food growing is contained in the remit of the Community Support Officer post.</p> <p>The Food Growing Officer presented a report on <i>Growing Our Future: Allotments Policy and Rules and Regulations for Allotment Sites on Council Land</i> to Communities and Place Committee on 6 March 2024. Members approved the recommendations.</p> <p>An update to the <i>Food Growing Strategy</i> will be presented to Community and Place Committee in May 2024.</p>
5.6	<p><b>Biodiversity: identify practical ways to support the Council’s biodiversity objectives, review the use of glyphosate and trial alternative products with costs quantified so that recommendations can be made.</b></p>
5.6.1	<p>Areas set aside, with less frequent management, or different types of management, continue to be identified and benefits seen. An example of this is the water voles found in Bothwell Park for the first time. Signage indicating that an area has been left for environmental benefits has been well received</p> <p>Less management of areas helps the service contribute towards carbon emissions targets. Work is being undertaken with climate change colleagues to identify areas for increased or different types of planting with consideration for climate change.</p> <p>Amenities Managers have been discussing with the Council’s Greenspace Officer some options of where sites might be adapted or reduced grass land management implemented to increase their biodiversity.</p> <p>Planting Sites across the Highlands have been identified and planting projects are being implemented with planting of native trees being completed by mid April 2024. These sites include Bignold Park and Wellington Avenue Park in Wick, Torvean Park and Merkinch Nature Reserve in Inverness, Thurso Roads Depot and Riverside Park in Nairn, with further planting sites identified for planting in 2024/25 winter season.</p> <p>In addition to planting sites the Greenspace Officer and Amenities Officers have been in discussion to identify set aside sites across the highlands. Alongside this school grounds have been identified suitable areas for biodiversity enhancements including orchards, set aside areas, some food growing and native tree planting. Some schools have been in contact with the Greenspace Officer to explore options and enhancements will begin to</p>

occur within winter planting season 2024/25. These schools include Culloden Academy, Balloch Primary, Teanassie Primary, Chareleston Academy, Auchtertyre Primary, Cauldeen Primary and Hilton Primary where enhancement options are currently being explored. A continuation of all this work is hoped to be explored in further years.

The Council increased the areas of set aside by 92,247m<sup>2</sup> in the 2022 season and by a further 150,194m<sup>2</sup> in 2023. This will continue into 2024 as we have worked with other departments such as Housing and Education to identify further sites for reducing grass cutting and enhancing biodiversity.

The Amenities Manager, South has recently presented to the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) Scotland Parks, Grounds and Streets Advisory Group on our approach to rewilding and was very well received.

5.6.2

Weed control should be considered as a part of a wider environmental approach of which chemicals, including glyphosate is only one method. Significant progress has been made to develop a more holistic approach.

In August 2023 Amenities hosted a Pesticide Policy, Compliance and Enforcement Workshop and brought together a group of Council cross service representatives, with a responsibility for weed control (Amenities, Roads, Education, Waste, Housing, Health and Safety, and Environmental Development). The workshop was used to

- Improve our understanding of products available and regulations around their use
- Get an update on latest from the HSE on their regulations and their Pesticide Enforcement Officers
- Discuss the potential use of a weed control decision matrix
- Get collective agreement on the need for an integrated weed control strategy and policy and how we could all work together on an integrated plan for the management of weeds. Amenities always tend to be at the front line when customer services get in touch or when people ask about anything related to weeds but essentially this is a corporate responsibility which we are all involved with
- Establish a working group to develop the actions and demonstrate we are being proactive rather than reactive with our management of weed control

The weed control working group is now established and meets regularly. The group first focused on reviewing the inventory of current chemical storage, doing some housekeeping including controlled disposal of old stocks, checking training of operatives and PPE issued. A focus for the group was to look at integrated weed control. To assist with the implementation of this we have developed a decision matrix, allowing a consistent approach to weed control across all Areas and Services.

In addition to this an Integrated Weed Control Strategy and Action Plan is being drafted to be presented to IE&E committee in November 2024. This is a cross Council approach owned by the Environmental Development Team.

Glyphosate remains licensed in the UK until December 2025 and is used by Council staff and contractors in line with the partial ban agreed in 2019.

Currently, alternatives to glyphosate are less effective and more costly. Various trials have taken place and Amenities will continue to reduce the amount and types of chemicals used, as well as the areas treated.

The Amenities Manager, South has recently presented to both the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) Parks Seminar and Biosecurity Seminar on our approach to weed control and management of invasive species. The presentation was well received.

6. In 23/24, the function received a one off £500k capital allocation for the procurement of new equipment. This investment is welcome and has had a positive impact on the morale of the team.

The Service has taken a considered approach about how best to invest this one-off capital allowance. This includes:

- considering the SLA requirements and service standards included in those
- the impact of potential significant cost pressures from the grounds maintenance machinery contract and how best to mitigate
- how best to transition to more environmentally friendly handheld equipment that produces less emissions and supports a change in management of areas set aside.

This capital investment has allowed us to purchase much needed equipment to maintain and enhance our estate, not only in the manner that the public expects of us, but it has also demonstrated to our Members and staff that Amenity Services is fully committed to the Highland Councils environmental ambitions.

The list of equipment we are purchasing (below) shows how we care about the Health & Safety and welfare of our staff, by investing in the most up to date and operator friendly equipment we can obtain.

#### Battery Powered Hand Tools

We have already procured a range of battery powered hand tools, such as strimmers, leaf blowers, mowers hedge cutters and chainsaws.

Not only is this equipment more environmentally friendly, its free from emissions and is cheaper to run compared to its petrol counterparts, but it is also very quiet, and can be used early in the morning in housing estates and pedestrian areas without disturbing the public. When using in school grounds, it is particularly good in that it does not disturb teaching, or pupils sitting exams, and in some schools, we have pupils who cannot tolerate loud noise. This equipment allows us to accommodate school needs without any difficulty.

A tendering exercise is taking place to purchase small mowers and Equipment to supplement the large machinery contract. This will ensure smaller areas can be maintained in the most effective manner, and it also allows Amenity Services to create and manage areas of set-aside for biodiversity.

#### Robotic Tracked Mower and tool carrier

These machines allow maintenance of previously untended areas, it allows safe cutting of steep embankments, and annual cutting of rough and uneven set-aside areas which normal mowers are unable to access.

This is a multi-tool unit, with a variety of accessories, which reduces the requirement for lots of different machines, and can carry out tasks such as mowing, flailing, scrub cutting, tree stump grinding, sweeping, wood chipping and snow clearance.

#### Ride on Rotary Mowers with Grass Collectors

These mowers allow for large areas of set aside to be managed for the enhancement of biodiversity. They can cut and lift clippings from areas of longer grass. This is essential in the creation of naturally occurring native wildflowers and wildlife.

This is achieved by uplifting grass clippings which slowly reduces the nutrients in the ground, resulting in a dramatic effect on the plant growth. Nitrogen hungry plants such as grass, nettles and docs are reduced, allowing native wildflowers to grow and dominate, which transforms the area, not only visually, but wildlife flourishes, and restores the natural balance, where the population of butterflies, bees, bugs, and the resultant predators such as mice, voles, hedgehogs, and a variety of birdlife, including predators thrives in this environment.

**Pedestrian Mowers**

These mowers are used in difficult to access areas such as old cemeteries, shallow embankments, uneven ground, sites with narrow accesses such as path edges around housing estates and other areas inaccessible to larger mowers.

Maintaining these previously inaccessible sites, increasing our biodiversity, and having the tools to manage it appropriately will have a lasting positive impact on our estate, not only improving the fauna and flora, but it also demonstrates Highland Councils ambition and commitment to enhancing our environment, and our drive towards NetZero.

Designation: Head of Community Operations and Logistics

Date: 3 March 2024

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Background Papers: Closure Report, Strategic Improvement Board in September 2023.

Appendices: