

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, 21 MARCH 2024

Report Title	Grass Cutting and Memorial Plaques			
Purpose of Report	To seek approval for an alteration to the grass cutting regime in the district and to formalise a process for the installation of memorial plaques.			
Decision(s)	The Committee RESOLVES to: a) Agree the alterations to provision outlined in the report. b) Give delegated authority to the Community Services Manager, in consultation with the relevant stakeholders, to alter the grass cutting regime in specified areas and in line with the rationale outlined in the report.			
Consultation and Feedback	SLT were briefed on 20 th February 2024 and officers from Community Services have been working with the Strategic Lead for Nature Recovery and Biodiversity to develop these plans.			
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Options	Members could choose to reject the proposals, but this would hamper the councils drive to enhance biodiversity and nature recovery.			
Background Papers	None			
Appendices	Appendix 1 – Pages 56-58 of Annual Satisfaction Survey Appendix 2 – Equality Impact Assessment - Grass Cutting Appendix 3 – Equality Impact Assessment - Memorial Plaques			
Implications (further details at the end of the report)	Financial	Legal	Equality	Environmental
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

1. Introduction / Background

- 1.1 Ubico undertake grounds maintenance work on behalf of SDC, predominantly cutting grass in the growing season and undertaking hedge cutting, leaf collection, back edging and other 'winter works' in the off season.
- 1.2 Almost all of the grass areas SDC manage, have been cut the same way for the past decade or more.
- 1.3 The district has around 90 square kilometres of SDC maintained grass. 30 square kilometres that is mown 4 times a year and almost 60 square kilometres that is mown 10 times a year.
- 1.4 These areas are owned and managed by 3 main stakeholders:
 - Community Services; managing all recreation and amenity land.

- Housing: managing all Housing owned land
 - Gloucestershire County Council; managing GCC owned verges which SDC cut, by agreement.
- 1.5 With new nature recovery obligations and a keenness to illustrate best practice, now is a good time to review and alter operations, changing grass cutting to something more sustainable.
- 1.6 Section 4 of this report also recommends a change to a formal offer for memorial plaques. This will allow more residents to feel a sense of ownership towards our public open space and help contribute towards consistent improvement.

2. Proposal Grass Cutting

- 2.1 Cutting grass lessens biodiversity and its value as a habitat. This results in:
- fewer flowering plants
 - less moisture retention
 - less shade
 - less fauna variety
- 2.2 By changing how we manage our grassland and reducing grass cutting, we can positively aid nature recovery and help reduce our carbon emissions produced in their management. This will encourage growth of wildflowers, a valuable food source for pollinators and create habitats for invertebrates, small mammals, and reptiles, within the grass itself.
- 2.3 However, any change needs careful consideration. Grass cutting can be polarising. The Annual Satisfaction Survey (pages 56-58; Appendix 1) illustrated that whilst 89% of respondents supported initiatives like 'no Mow May', a small majority supported a continuation of our existing grass cutting provision.
- 2.4 Therefore, it's important to note that the majority of grass cut by SDC will remain under the same regime. As part of this proposal, up to 25% of grassland will be managed differently.
- 2.5 Initially and with immediate effect, we propose grass will only be cut around the base of any tree, once per annum. The benefits of this are twofold:
- To improve tree health; lessening soil compaction and unintended abrasion, reducing long term maintenance costs.
 - To improve biodiversity and habitats for wildlife.
- 2.6 We have approximately 1500 trees in scope and a minimum ring of 1m radius around each tree, would create a conservative 18,000sqm of enhanced habitat. That's as much as 3 football pitches.
- 2.7 Furthermore, Ubico will begin to plant spring bulbs and wildflower seeds at the base of each tree on a rolling programme. This will further help aerate the soil and increase biodiversity, by introducing plants favourable for pollinators, whilst adding a splash of colour and brightness to the district.
- 2.8 Thereafter and on a phased basis over the next two years, we'll be looking to identify appropriate areas of grassland for rewilding and reduced mowing.
- 2.9 The vast majority of these new areas would be cut once per annum, although border cuts will be undertaken more regularly, to ensure a degree of care and management, as well as

maintaining good access for hedge and fence lines. Where size is suitable, pathways and resting areas will be mown in, to allow the space to still be used by residents.

- 2.10 Factors such as recreational use, proximity to housing and visibility lines will be taken into account and agreement will be sought, either via resident consultation, or in collaboration with town and parish councils, for general recreation and amenity land.
- 2.11 Not all our grass will be suitable for this change. However if we were to change just 25% of it, we will have created approximately 22.5 square kilometres of additional habitat, from areas with little to no ecological value.
- 2.12 In addition to creating new habitat, it will also create a time saving for grounds operatives. Initially this will be negligible, but upon achieving 25% change, we anticipate an approximate saving of 15-20 operative hours per week. This saving, from April-August each year, will be re-invested into service delivery across the district, allowing areas that are overlooked, or currently under managed during the summer months, to have the required resource. Borders, hard standing areas, and overgrowth of hedges are among those that will be positively impacted, for the betterment of the district.
- 2.13 Between September-October when lots of the annual grass cutting will take place and November-March, when winter works are carried out, there will be no change to resourcing.
- 2.14 The summertime savings will also enable a degree of additional litter picking, should the changes increase litter levels.
- 2.15 As well as time there will be a small financial impact. Mowers will be used less, equating to savings on fuel costs and vehicle maintenance.

3. Associated Communications

- 3.1 Working with our Communications Team, we'll advise residents of the changes in advance and reinforce the positive reasons for introduction.
- 3.2 We'll also invite residents to join us on our journey and consider re-wilding areas in their own gardens for example.

4. Memorial Plaques

- 4.1 Currently there are seven memorial benches on Selsley Common, each of which has been identified as needing to be repaired, or replaced.
- 4.2 Historically residents were given permission to site a bench, granted by the controlling officer. These permissions were given on an ad hoc basis, with no formalised agreement.
- 4.3 The clear issue is that demand has not been met and many requests haven't been able to be accommodated.
- 4.4 Siting benches allowing up to twenty-two chargeable memorial plaques to be affixed, will offer all families an opportunity to buy a lasting memorial. The scheme will be self-funding and create an additional revenue stream to be re-invested in public open spaces. Benches will initially be sited at Selsley Common, replacing the dilapidated benches and within Stratford Park.
- 4.5 Each plaque will cost £250. This includes engraving and fitment, for a 10-year period. After the 10 year period the customer will have the option to either renew for another 10 years at the same rate, or the plaque will be removed for collection. The full costings are illustrated in Table 1 below.

- 4.6 Officers have benchmarked other services on offer. Westonbirt Arboretum currently charge £305 for a similar scheme. Tyneside Council are charging £200 and Elmbridge Borough Council are charging £330 for the same service.
- 4.7 Community Services officers will reach out to existing bench owners, where we retain contact details, and a complimentary plaque will be offered to families.
- 4.8 No additional resourcing will be required; Ubico will install the plaques to the benches and any additional administration will be absorbed into the Community Services Team.
- 4.9 Customers will be able to book the plaque through an online ordering system to minimise officer handling times; this service will be managed by the Community Services team.

Table 1 – Table to illustrate costs and potential revenue (per bench)

	Bench* (including installation)	X22 Plaques (supply, engraving and installation)	Total
SDC Costs	£467.85	£550	£1,017.85
Potential Revenue			(£5,500.00)
Net Revenue			(£4,482.15)

*Benches will be made of recycled rubber, which is weather and rot resistant; benches come with a minimum 25-year life expectancy.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 This report sets out proposals for a change to both grass cutting and memorial provision.
- 5.2 The grass cutting proposals represent a significant step towards improving biodiversity and will help to ensure SDC sets best practice in the field.
- 5.3 The proposal for memorial plaques offers greater choice for residents, offering a service in beautiful locations around the district. Furthermore, a small revenue stream is likely to be generated, which will be reinvested into public open space provision.
- 5.4 Officers have no reservations in recommending the proposals to members.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial Implications

There are financial implications within this report. Grass cutting decision will be to agree alterations to the provision, which if adopted will result in a small positive impact on the budget (p.2.15). Memorial plaques will attract a nominal outlay but will also generate a small revenue stream which will be reinvested into the open spaces provision. (Table 1 & p.5.3).

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6.2 Legal Implications

The charges to be levied for the plaques represent the cost to the council for the purchase and engraving of the plaque and the right for the plaque to be sited on the bench for a hire period of 10 years. One Legal can assist in the preparation of hire terms and conditions.

One Legal can also assist in the preparation of a contract change notice to the Ubico contract for the variation to the grass cutting regime.

One Legal

Email: legalservices@onelegal.org.uk

6.3 Equality Implications

An EIA has been carried out by Officers in relation to the decision made in this report and due regard will be given to any implications identified in it.

6.4 Environmental Implications

The report sets out details of significant implications in relation to grass cutting [2.1-2.16]. *In addition and in relation to memorial plaques, it should be noted:*

- A number of benches are currently located near, or on SSSI land. Replacement benches will be fitted onto the same locations, minimising any additional impact to the common.
- By utilising recycled rubber, the benches will have a lower carbon footprint over their lifetime, than timber benches.