

Brighton & Hove City Council

Agenda Item 114

Cabinet

Subject: City Parks Service Standards 2025/26

Date of meeting: 05 December 2024

Report of: Cabinet Member for Sports & Recreation

Contact Officer: Name: Corporate Director for City Services

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Key Decision: Yes

Reason(s) Key: Is significant in terms of its effects on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more electoral divisions (wards).

For general release

1. Purpose of the report and policy context

- 1.1 The city's parks and green spaces are a key part of the city's identity, as well as destinations for residents and visitors for a wide variety of leisure activities. Seven parks received Green Flag awards in 2024 celebrating the maintenance regime and facilities on offer, and we aim to increase the number of these awards in future years.
- 1.2 It is vital that to deliver the objectives set out in the Council's corporate plan A Better Brighton and Hove For All, under "a city to be proud of", the natural environment looks and feels clean, tidy and safe for residents and visitors, and that our green spaces enable active lifestyles for communities.
- 1.3 As part of our Net Zero commitments our parks and green spaces need to offer a range of habitats for protecting nature and wildlife, and we need to deliver a strong and dynamic vision to ensure we meet our biodiversity objectives.
- 1.4 There is currently a Service Transformation review being undertaken to fuse Culture, Tourism and Sport with Cityparks in line with the longer-term corporate plan vision and objectives. This is an opportunity to agree the longer-term vision and to modernize, making efficiencies and improvements to the service. This work is underway and will set out a longer-term vision agreed with communities and Members, and a service delivery structure that is appropriate for delivering on this vision. This work will culminate in Spring 2025 and a further report will be brought to Cabinet to agree a longer-term approach to service standards.

1.5 In the short-term, this cabinet report sets out a revised interim approach to key service standards for 2025/26 and proposes four wider areas for improvement.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Cabinet approves the proposed interim approach to service standards for 2025/26 as set out in sections 3.15– 3.35, and supports the wider improvements as set out in sections 3.36-3.45.

2.2 Cabinet delegates authority to the Corporate Director- City Services to procure the works referenced in sections 3.29-3.32 of the report where budget can be allocated from current core budgets.

2.3 Cabinet notes the need for additional budget to deliver to the tree basal works, additional GIS mapping works and the development of a proactive communications campaign as referenced in sections 3.28, 3.42 and 4.3 of the report.

2.4 Cabinet notes that a further report will be brought to Cabinet to outline the longer-term approach to Cityparks Vision and delivery in 2025.

3. Context and background information

City Parks Service Standards Report

3.1 This report provides an outline of solutions to protect and conserve the city's green open spaces, a vital part of the city's identity, the health and well-being of the public and species, flora and fauna as detailed in the Open Spaces Strategy 2017-2027 in appendix 1. The council wants to ensure that our green spaces look and feel neat and tidy, are well maintained and promote a welcoming and attractive city in line with the ambitions set out in our corporate plan, as well as to support inward investment as referenced in the new economic growth plan.

3.2 It is essential that we protect and enhance the natural environment, restoring biodiversity and reaching net zero targets. Three key elements identified in this report, are the ways in which we manage verges, trees and grass cutting. This report seeks to find a balanced approach to how we can achieve this in 2025/26.

3.3 In March 2022, the Environment Committee agreed a three-year program for service standards for verges (2022/23, 2023/24, 2024/25). This now needs renewing in line with the current Administration's priorities. This report looks to learn from the approach in the previous three years and sets out interim service standards for 2025/26. See Appendix 4.

3.4 This report additionally recommends developing the use of technology, creating a dynamic communications plan with all our stakeholders, ensuring a learning culture and seeks approval for the further exploration of new solutions for equipment maintenance and renewal.

- 3.5 The strengthened Biodiversity Duty placed on the council by the 2021 Environment Act requires the Council to conserve and enhance habitats on our land. These requirements were updated in the Environment Act January 2024 requiring that all decisions made by the council consider the climate and biodiversity crises, protect and enhance the natural environment and conserve and manage habitats and spaces where plants and animals can thrive and biodiversity is restored.

The Current Approach - Verge Cutting

- 3.6 Brighton and Hove is home to 441km of verges of which 25 are protected as part of the “wilder verges” no cut project. Verges are cut six times per year with a summer gap in May in line with the “No Mow May” campaign to allow flowering.
- 3.7 When the verge cutting policy was changed in March 2022 to allow flowers to seed in the no mow period, it was introduced for a three-year period after which it was to be reviewed. This review is now due, and members are keen to look at a wider area for grass cutting to be included in an updated policy.
- 3.8 The “No Mow May” campaign has faced several issues some of these include slips, trips and falls on verges, obstructions and complaints around unkempt city streets.

The Current Approach - Grass cutting

- 3.9 Brighton and Hove Council has 147 parks including heritage parks, playing fields and green spaces, 50 playgrounds and a section of the South Downs National Park. Grass cuts vary from 1-60 per year depending on factors such as usage, accessibility and green flag status.
- 3.10 There are issues currently with the lack of working equipment and procurement processes causing delays in productivity.
- 3.11 There is also an issue around staffing capacity which has led to deploying contractors at the last minute to cut long grass which has proved costly.

The Current Approach - Tree Bases

- 3.12 The council has 8,000 trees and stumps in hard surfaces. Currently the treatment of basal growth is dependent on resources being available after elm disease work which has had a significant impact on the ability of the team to prioritise other work. As a result, the majority of tree bases are overgrown with weeds, look untidy and in some places, the low growth from trees is partially blocking pavements and cycle paths.
- 3.13 There is a need to manage tree bases to improve look and feel of the city and improve safety for residents and the requirement to fit more onto the highway, in particular cycle paths, has meant that growth is particularly

problematic in some parts of the City. Currently weed management is a shared responsibility across Highways, City-clean and City Parks.

Proposed Future Principles

- 3.14 The current delivery of city parks operations is based on a specification drawn up in 2004 and does not account for new factors such as climate change, capacity-restrictions, cost, new technologies and the proliferation of tree disease amongst other changes. The future approach for 2025/26 will follow four key principles:
- ✓ Biodiversity driven “making space for nature”
 - ✓ Improving the look, feel and safety of the city
 - ✓ Driven by best practice and use of new technologies
 - ✓ Refreshed policies well communicated with members and residents

Proposed Service Standards for 2025/6

Proposal for Verge Cutting

- 3.15 The service will learn from the last three years maintaining a balanced approach between look and feel and restoring nature. The service will move away from a one size fits all approach and target key areas for growth and cutting.
- 3.16 We will drop the ‘no mow’ period in 2025/26 for the majority of highway and housing verges and maintain six cuts evenly spaced from March to November.
- 3.17 There are several verges that are currently managed for biodiversity, including those within the Wilder Verges project (appendix 3). These will be maintained with the view to expanding the number of sites.
- 3.18 We will set up further trials to test and inform how we can manage a range of verges across the city eg Housing, Highways and Sports fields. This will help us to understand how we can reduce carbon emissions and protect species and habitats as well as make cost efficiencies.
- 3.19 We will learn from our GIS Mapping trials on the Rights Of Way programme and commission further GIS mapping across green spaces to inform our work planning, as well as to be able to more transparently communicate with Members and residents. This will need additional funding.

No Mow May Campaign

- 3.20 We will recalibrate our approach to “No Mow May” for 2025/26 by continuing to promote this national campaign for residential properties and gardens, as well as agreeing a more targeted approach to nature restoration for our parks and open spaces.
- 3.21 We will develop a communication plan to share information, ensure transparency and improve our storytelling about spaces where long grass

will be cultivated e.g. in cemeteries, on banks, around the edges of parks and gardens under tree canopies countryside.

Grass cutting

- 3.22 A clear specification will be put in place through 2025/26, that outlines delivery across all green spaces managed by the service, including the schedule of cuts across the year in specific spaces eg recreation grounds, Major Parks, Sports Pitches, Banks, Gardens, Lawns, etc.
- 3.23 We will use GIS mapping to identify the locations and rationale for the cutting schedule, including how the space is used, and to support biodiversity benefits.

Tree Bases

- 3.24 We will commit to create a new service standard for reducing and removing growth from trees in hard standing areas on highways, with a commitment of up to 2 cuts per year. This commitment will require additional funding.
- 3.25 Ground level tree sprouts (basals) and lower tree stem growth (epicormics) around tree bases (including stumps) on footways and pavements, will require cutting and removing twice a year during the growing season for the tree pits to be kept clear and to increase accessibility along pavements.
- 3.26 Not all tree pits will contain tree basals and epicormics, but it is expected all will contain weed growth requiring removal twice a year.
- 3.27 Given the direction towards limiting the use of Glyphosate across the city, the proposal is to focus on manual removal of weeds around tree bases.
- 3.28 In 24/25 an additional investment of up to £100,000 was allocated to tackle this problem in the more dense growth areas of the city. Further additional investment will be required in 25/26 to take forward further work.

Procurement

- 3.29 We will start procurement of contractors before Christmas, to ensure advance planning is underway to supplement current in-house delivery for cutting grass post “No Mow May”.
- 3.30 We will also develop a revised specification to ensure additional support for cutting of cemeteries on key dates, such as, Mothering Sunday, Easter and other national holidays.
- 3.31 We are reviewing current contracts for Parks and Highways Trees cutting, to identify additional resource required. In 2025/26 we will access regional tree frameworks to enable a dynamic response to contracting the additional work required. The size and scale of the additional tree cutting work would require a separate contract to achieve the best value.

- 3.32 Coordination will continue with annual tree maintenance on street trees given the removal of tree basals and epicormics are part of this continuous program city wide.

Service Level Agreements with Housing and Cemeteries

- 3.33 We will continue to deliver the specification of 10 cuts for housing, excluding any areas specifically identified by housing for conservation management. In cemeteries the specification of 10 cuts per year has not been changed. Various areas have been set aside for less frequent cutting to encourage biodiversity.
- 3.34 All lawn graves to be cut as per the SLA at 10 times per year.
- 3.35 With the older cemetery spaces we need to find new solutions to the time-consuming and high hand-arm-vibration process of strimming that is necessary in areas with full kerb sets. We propose is to test sheep grazing in a small section of Hove Cemetery South as a test and learn. This will not take place on/across graves. It is anticipated that the sheep will keep the grass short, but we will need to monitor and manage the public reaction.

Wider Improvements 2025/26

Digital Transformation and Innovation

- 3.36 The team has started to adopt new technologies in key areas and has a wealth of knowledge and ideas on how to improve systems, data collection and digital delivery.
- 3.37 We will maintain the Rights Of Way GIS mapping that is already underway and learn from this to instigate additional GIS mapping across trees and green spaces to inform work planning and the wider communications plan. Through the mapping of allotments, parks, gardens, playgrounds and nature reserves, we can develop an up-to-date specification and management plan to spatially show how sites will be developed over time. This powerful tool will provide a visual guide to all stakeholders on the incredible assets we have in the city. Mapping will also inform the new city plan (Green infrastructure plan).
- 3.38 In addition, other areas of work proposed to commence next year are to install a new allotments IT system and to develop and implement a new arboriculture system to take away the manual input of data and improve efficiency. We will seek investment to move these programmes forwards.
- 3.39 A proportion of staff have had limited access to BHCC IT systems, which is currently being rectified by installing Wifi in mess rooms, ensuring that all staff have log on details for the internal systems and access to laptops. This will provide greater engagement with the organisation working as one council and provide better access to the training offered online.

Communication and engagement

- 3.40 Given the level of interest from all stakeholders on green spaces, biodiversity and the significant benefits they bring, the council has a big opportunity to lead a dynamic engagement campaign on the development of our green spaces.
- 3.41 We have a captive audience to share information through a range of mediums such as social media, press, signage and through engagement events to both inform our future strategy and build ownership of how we work together to conserve and futureproof the city's incredible assets.
- 3.42 To do this we recommend the council prioritise a strategic communication and engagement plan to better inform all stakeholders, encourage ownership and to inform the future longer-term vision of BHCC's green spaces. This will require additional investment.
- 3.43 For this period of engagement with the public, we propose bringing in some short-term communication support to design a campaign to communicate more clearly and in advance across multiple channels and to produce a publicly available list of verges and maps and share biodiversity plans, city parks principles and approach to engagement.

Equipment and maintenance regimes

- 3.44 Work across departments is underway to improve systems around winter maintenance of equipment and in-season purchases and repairs. Given the nature of the business and the technical specifications required to complete the cutting regimes, the team are seeking approval to start to explore alternative options for maintaining and renewing equipment from a specialist parks vehicle and equipment supplier to save costs.

Learning Culture

- 3.45 In 2024/25 a learning and development plan has been commissioned alongside our Health and Safety Action Plan. This sets out a range of training options to both ensure we meet our compliance requirements around H&S, enable our teams to be better engaged with corporate values and behaviours, and can benefit from continuous job specific learning and development in horticulture and the environment, which will motivate and connect our staff.

4. Analysis and consideration of alternative options

- 4.1 In the situation where the additional budget cannot be found and is therefore not approved for these recommendations, we would have to explore alternative approaches. This may impact timelines for delivery.

4.2 Basel Cuts

For the Basel cuts, the arboriculture team would need to work alongside the Highways and City Clean teams to find a way of delivering elements of this

work in partnership. This would require a clear communications plan with the public so that they are aware of the plan.

4.3. GIS mapping,

For the GIS mapping we would need to be informed by the right of ways mapping and seek some additional funding from sources such as Natural England.

4.4. Communication campaign

For the communications plan, we would need to work with the in-house council communications team and other partners to explore what is possible to deliver within current resources. Ensuring we deliver proactive public communications especially for verges, grass-cutting, base cuts and the no mow may campaign.

5. Community engagement and consultation

5.1 We have gauged public response via correspondence, press, public meetings and conversations with volunteers via the green spaces forum and the development of the Open Spaces Strategy and we intend to start engagement to develop a new Open Spaces Strategy for 2026/27 at the start of 2025. This will be linked to the engagement on the service transformation program.

5.2 We continue to work closely with colleagues in other departments specifically Biodiversity, food growing and planning and we are developing a new Green Infrastructure Plan to help with future planning. As detailed above in section 3.72 we propose a short-term investment in developing a public campaign to further enhance the relationship with all stakeholders.

6. Financial implications

6.1 Recurrent pressure funding of £0.100m has been requested as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process. If approved as part of Budget Council this will support the Tree Bases 25/26 service standard where costs will need to be managed within the approved budget from 2025/26 onwards.

6.2 Additional funding above the already requested service pressure will need to be considered by Councillors as part of budget setting to support GIS Mapping and the Communications Campaign as these are not considered service pressures, but would instead be a commitment to an increased service level.

6.3 Should additional funding for these elements not be agreed, City Parks should not implement the proposal as budgets would not be in place. Any significant variations to budget will be reported as part of the council's monthly budget monitoring process.

6.4 Development of the allotments IT system and arboriculture system will need project funding identified in order to implement.

Name of finance officer consulted: John Lack Date consulted 15/11/2024

7. Legal implications

7.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Name of lawyer consulted: Siobhan Fry Date consulted (19/11/24)

8. Equalities implications

8.1 This report is primarily about how we plan on improving the service standards for our green spaces to better meet the needs of residents and the biodiversity agenda.

8.2 The equalities implications of these proposals will be positive for all residents as they will improve access to parks, make green spaces safer and more welcoming, provide better information about parks and future plans will be shared, and ensure more residents are involved in the development of our green spaces through a dynamic and ongoing engagement exercise with all stakeholders through our Service Transformation.

8.3 Ensuring an open and transparent approach to providing opportunities for our communities to get involved in shaping the future parks strategy, will improve inclusivity and help ensure we are listening to and delivering against the diverse needs of residents across the city.

8.4 The Council has a duty under the Equalities Act to ensure the needs of anyone with mobility concerns are considered when designing and installing street furniture and trees as outlined in the street scene policy (appendix 4.)

9. Sustainability Implications

9.1 Currently the operations teams use electric for smaller hand tools however the length of the battery is short which can reduce productivity. This should be considered when reviewing the future maintenance and purchase of equipment and longer-term the use of hydrogen is a sustainable option especially for ride-on machines.

9.2 The green travel plan at Stanmer includes installing bike racks for staff and maintaining the number 78 bus. A roll out of this plan to other areas of the business would further support sustainability.

9.3 The Stanmer road replacement selected a supplier that used a low carbon approach over traditional methods and we would look to replicate this approach for future contracting.

9.4 The parks operations team have strong partnership with Plumpton College which has provided a steady stream of apprentices. This supports a local organisation, provides a future staffing solution and provides cross-fertilisation of skills across the team.

- 9.5 This proposal supports urban draining solutions through the development of the wilder verges project as longer verges will intercept and hold more rainfall. The parks operations team has already reduced irrigation as we have relinquished bowling green management.
- 9.6 The move away from using herbicides will further reduce the environmental impact of the work we do.

10. Health and Wellbeing Implications:

- 10.1 By making the pavements and cycle ways more accessible we encourage pedestrian and cycle travel.
- 10.2 There are benefits to health, safety, wellbeing and local communities of continuing and extending the wilder verges project. These are outlined in the Wilder Verges Project report attached to this report in **Appendix 3**.

Other Implications

11. Procurement implications

- 11.1 Corporate Procurement will facilitate any type of procurement required for this City Parks Service Standards commission. The lead member for Procurement and the lead service member will need to review the report before its laid before Cabinet and offer comment, on Contract management and KPI's.
- 11.2 If the service chooses to go to market before 25th February 2025, which is the plan should the recommendations be approved, this procurement will be covered by Public Contract regulations 2015, if the service chooses to go to market after the 25th February 2025 then this procurement will be covered by the new Procurement Act 2023. There are several routes to market available such as nationally recognised frameworks like CCS, or ESPO that can meet the service's needs.
- 11.3 The commissioning officers will need a full specification of requirements and decide what is in scope such as the mentioned verge grass cutting and tree basal cutting, and incorporating no mow may and working within the service level agreements in place with our Housing and cemetery departments and have a full list of any TUPE requirements. This new contract of the services required will address the lack of working equipment. The service will need to supply a schedule of works, and the new contract will provide management information to track delivery, outcomes and KPIs on this new contract. The new contract will address complaints around length of grass. A new contract will address the need to engage ad hoc contractors who have been deployed to cut long grass at the last minute, as mentioned this way of working with contractors has proved costly.
- 11.4 We will include social value and sustainability requirements in our contract evaluation criteria at 10% each of the technical capability requirements.

11.5 The service will be required to include Key performance indicators that are meaningful and proportionate to the service contracted requirement, our lead member for procurement will meet the commissioning officers to discuss which KPI's are appropriate to include.

12. Crime & disorder implications:

12.1 We do have a significant issue with vandalism and theft in parks operations that will need to be prioritized. This is not addressed in this report but the review will be picked up in the longer-term transformation work underway.

13. Conclusion

13.1 The recommendations in this report are needed to improve the look and feel of the city, ensure safety for residents and improve access to our green spaces. There is also a pressing need to improve the understanding of our approach to managing green spaces and protecting natural habitats to deliver on our Net Zero commitments, via more proactive public engagement and clear, planned communications

13.2 Approval is required for the change in Service Standards to be implemented for 2025/26.

13.3 Further budget will be necessary to fund a Comms Campaign, GIS Mapping and Basal cutting of Trees. Funding options to be discussed and approved with Cabinet Members in line with budget setting for 2025/26.

13.4 Parks and Open Spaces continue to be vital for the health of residents, to our net zero ambitions and in making Brighton and Hove a fair and inclusive, and better place to live, work and play.

13.5 Officers will ensure that all service standards as set out in this report will be the focus of the approach in the 2025/26 season and work hard to test and learn from new ways of working. This will be monitored carefully via conversations with colleagues in other departments, partners and stakeholders and members.

Supporting Documentation:

Appendices:

Appendix 1 [Open Spaces Strategy](#)

Appendix 2 [Wilder Verges Project Report](#)

Appendix 3 [Street Scene Policy](#)

Appendix 4 Environment Committee Report 2022

