

**Select Committee on the Environment - 17<sup>th</sup> September 2008**

**Report of the Director of the Urban Environment**

**Managing Green Care on Open Spaces**

**Purpose of Report**

1. To advise the Committee of the Council's responsibilities in respect of managing and maintaining the Borough's Green Open Spaces.

**Background**

2. Members of this Committee received a report on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2007 detailing the Council's responsibilities for grounds maintenance. The report highlighted the delivery of the service on Housing Land and Green Open Spaces through a 'Green Care' budget, managed directly by the Council's Green Care Section.
3. The report recognised that Green Open Spaces can be subject to a range of different programmes of maintenance which often vary dependant upon their use. For example, a town park may have many different features and a complex range of different maintenance activities whilst an informal open space/natural area may only receive minimal grass cutting activities.
4. At its meeting of 24<sup>th</sup> June 2008, Members of this Committee requested specific details of maintenance responsibilities for walkways on open spaces in order to ensure adequate access for members of the public. In particular, concerns were raised regarding pedestrian access along the Stour Valley Walkway and Butchers Lane, Halesowen. It is however acknowledged that there are similar walkways of this nature across the Borough.
5. The report seeks to advise Members of the current position regarding maintenance of these sites and the direct implications associated with increased maintenance provision.

**Maintenance of Open Spaces**

6. The Green Care budget is primarily based on land that has historically been maintained by the Council, previously identified for programmed maintenance and funded by the respective Committee responsible for its ownership.
7. Although new developments can result in section 106 Agreements and corresponding income for the Authority for a determined period of time, there are areas of land across the Borough in the ownership of different Council Committees that are not identified for regular maintenance.

8. These areas occasionally result in requests for maintenance work from local residents. Although the Green Care Section will consider the type, nature and cost of new work, its impact on programmed maintenance activities and service standards across the Borough must also be considered. Invariably, unless the respective committee responsible for ownership of the land funds the introduction of new programmes of maintenance on these sites, such requests are resisted.
9. In respect of walkways across rural and countryside areas, and in particular natural areas not subject to regular programmes of maintenance, pedestrian access is generally maintained by the Green Care Section through cutting of a walkway strip twice per year. This ensures access for the general public, but does not encroach on the local environment or wildlife.
10. Although arrangements are made each year to programme this works, the required time of cut can often vary dependant upon seasonal growing conditions.
11. In particular, the relatively cold and dry weather experienced in March and April this year restricted growth of the grass. However May resulted in a growth flush, approximately 4-6 weeks earlier than this time last year.
12. Compounded by a flush of grass in May and corresponding pressures on other areas of the service through the recruitment of temporary seasonal workers, some walkways received their first cut of grass later this year than last. This was delayed further along the River Stour Walkway to the rear of the Saltbrook Public House due to a fallen tree which covered part of the walkway.
13. Such instances cannot be planned for, but in general terms are isolated with very few enquiries received from the public regarding restricted access along walkways on open spaces in the Borough.
14. Equally, adjacent maintenance schedules on such walkways vary considerably dependant upon their location, whether across a park, an ornamental open space, a woodland or informal/natural area or indeed between two roads on an estate.
15. As such, no one maintenance solution fits all and any new requests for maintenance on such sites without corresponding revenue support are considered on merit and in consideration of any such detrimental impact on other programmed works.

#### Value for Money/Budgetary Provision

16. Whilst the Green Care budget is increased each year in accordance with inflation, new developments, landscape schemes and environmental enhancements have have impacted on the revenue budget, with new maintenance regularly accommodated from the existing budget.
17. The Green Care service actively participates in the benchmarking of its service against other Councils through APSE, (Association of Public Service Excellence) with recent figures confirming that the Borough offers good value for money.
18. Changing seasonal trends as a result of climate change are also increasingly impacting on service delivery, particularly in respect of high resource areas such

as grass cutting operations, which, over the last few years, has required additional resource earlier and later in the growing season.

19. Likewise, an increasing number of litter and dog bins on parks and open spaces impacts on resources in respect of their emptying and disposal. Whilst this element of provision is not a statutory requirement for the authority, it continues to be a popular request for local residents.

### **Finance**

20. The 2008/9 budget for Green Care (including work undertaken directly for schools) is £4,868,500, which provides for both Grounds Maintenance and Arboricultural works.
21. Maintenance responsibilities in respect of new developments or environmental schemes are currently met from the Green Care budget in the event of new revenue funding not being identified.
22. Where new revenue funding cannot be identified revisions to the scheduled programme on a cost neutral basis may be necessary to accommodate new growth.

### **Law**

23. The Council carries out its function of providing parks and public open spaces under various statutes, notably the Open Spaces Act 1906 and Part IV of the Public Health Act 1875.
24. Section III of the Local Government Act 1972 enables the Council to do anything that is calculated to facilitate or is conducive or incidental to the discharge of its functions, the care and maintenance of the green environment and tree stock being such an activity.
25. The provisions relating to works on the highway are contained in the Highways Act 1980.

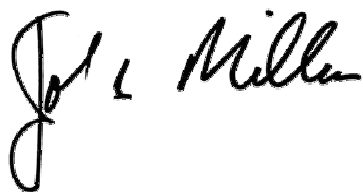
### **Equality Impact**

26. This report takes into account and acknowledges the Council's Policy in respect of Equality and Diversity in the delivery of the service.

### **Recommendation**

27. It is recommended that:-
  - The Committee note the management of the Green Care budget, providing pre-determined standards of maintenance across the Borough, with an emphasis on managing the Council's effectively manage the Council's priorities.
  - The Committee note the impact of climate change on the delivery of the Green Care service.

- The Committee note the actions of the Green Care section in considering requests for new maintenance on merit and in consideration of other service commitments provided for within the Green Care budget.



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### **List of Background Papers**

Managing Green Care on Housing Estates and Open Spaces – Select Committee on the Environment – 8<sup>th</sup> March 2007