

WEST SWINDON PARISH COUNCIL

Planning & Environment Committee

Grass Cutting & Re-wilding

1. Weed Spraying – Borough Wide

- 1.1 West Swindon Parish Council has a legal agreement with Swindon Borough Council to cut public verges, open spaces and parks a minimum of six times per year.
- 1.2 The purpose of regular grass cutting is to ensure that there is visibility, accessibility and that the local area is clean and tidy.
- 1.3 In previous years, the Parish Council has been tied to a contractor which has largely dictated the quality of grass cutting. In 2020, grass cutting frequency was impacted on the reduction of the Contractor workforce due to Covid 19. Three ride on mowers were deployed regularly, the 5 gang was operational intermittently and the tractor mowing ceased. In 2021, providing the machinery is maintained in full working order and staff are available, there is the opportunity to provide more consistency in the grass cutting programme than in previous years.
- 1.4 The biggest contribution to climate change can be achieved through tree planting. This is a separate area of work and will be brought to a future meeting of this committee.

2. Detail

- 2.1 The decline in insects and birds across the UK has been well documented. Pollinators, in particular, are suffering due to decline in habitat. Bird species are declining through reduction in nesting areas and their food sources of seeds and insects. It has been reported that a number of local authorities and parish councils are making provision for re-wilding and long grass as a contribution to climate change initiatives. Commonly areas of parks and open space are selected for re-wilding and long grass and remain uncut for the majority of the cutting season. Generally residential verges and highways retain routine grass cutting.
- 2.2 The Parish Council has introduced non-cut meadow areas on Shaw Ridge and Toothill Park and Freshbrook (Edgehill). These designated areas are uncut during the cutting season, then flailed and baled at the end of the season. Volunteers are involved in planting and maintenance. Where possible, a machine width edge is cut to keep the edges clear from the footpath.
- 2.3 The Parish Council may wish to consider undertaking a parish-wide consultation before significantly changing standards in service delivery

2.4 For Parish grass cutting, there are four main options:

1. cut all grass less frequently
2. cut grass as per existing cycle but with grass cut at higher heights
3. designating areas that are left uncut for long grass
4. designating areas for cultivation of wildflower meadows

1 Factors to Consider: cut all grass less frequently

- 1.a. Generally the cycle of parish grass cutting is on a 2-3 week basis. Frequency of cutting is determined by weather conditions and staff/machine availability. When there have been long spells of hot dry weather, grass has grown slowly and frequency has been reduced accordingly. The Parish Council should cut at least six times per season (monthly) to comply with the legal Deed agreement with Swindon Borough Council.
- 1.b. Generally, the mowers used by the Parish Council can cope with up to four weekly cuts, longer than this can cause stress on the machines and reduce the quality of the grass. Longer cut grass is more likely to leave thatch on the grass surface or be tracked on to footpaths.
- 1.c. In the past, when there have been instances of long grass, the Parish Council has often received complaints from members of the public and Councillors.
- 1.d. Parks and open spaces generally support use for sports, leisure and play when they benefit from shorter grass.

2. Factors to Consider: cut grass frequently but with grass cut at higher heights

- 2.a. In order to maintain a standard of service that meets the expectations of many residents, it is the team's preference to cut more frequently. This year, the Parish Council has greater control over its mowing machinery and as a result can complete the grass cutting cycle in close to two weeks (previously three to four). The team can raise the height of the cut to 2+3 inches to ensure that low growing wild plants can re-flourish between cuts. Not cutting grass as short allows grasses and other plants such as plantain to seed and provide food for birds. The RSPB recommends that we

increase the minimum height of your grass to between 3.5 cm and 5 cm (1.5 and 2 inches). Longer grass helps to retain humidity and soil moisture. This will benefit both wildlife and the grass itself.

- 2.b. This year, the Parish Council opted out of the chemical spraying of highway furniture and obstacles. This is new and it is not yet known what the impact will be on the appearance of the local environment, and,

what if any additional resources will be required. Maintaining frequency of grass cutting should minimise any perceived negative impact.

3. Factors to Consider: designating areas that are left uncut for the cultivation of long grass

3.a. Local authorities have considered the introduction of spaces, that would be appropriate to be left uncut. These are commonly where there is limited foot traffic or proximity to highways or residential areas. Long grass provides somewhere for invertebrates to shelter and breed and for their eggs or pupae to survive the winter. Some species of moth and butterfly, as well as crane flies and sawflies, find this valuable. These provide a source of protein-rich food for mammals and birds, and are particularly important for the survival of young chicks.

3.b. In the West Parish, areas that could have designated stretches of uncut long grass include

- Kiln Park edges to Whitehill Way
- Bodiam drive bank edges alongside Great Western Way
- Middleleaze footpath behind Camton Road
- Saltway field
- Shaw village centre surrounding green areas
- Russley Close backland
- Eastleaze field off Whitehill Way
- Shaw Forest park

3.c. In terms of regular communication to the Parish office, residents' expectations are that all grass is cut. There are occasional requests for less grass cutting however more frequently, areas of long grass are often not well received, particularly by dog walkers. In areas that are prone to flytipping and litter, long grass can be seen as a contributing factor. Long grass can be perceived as being unkempt. The Parish Council would need to choose any uncut areas carefully as the decision is difficult to reverse.

3.d. Once an area is left uncut, it can be very challenging to restore the grass to a 'regular' state. Even if left uncut, it will most likely require at least one cut a year with specialist machinery or hand tools to retain a level of renewable grass cover.

Hedgerows

3.e. It has been proposed that where verges are wider, that the immediate frontage close to hedgerows are left unmown e.g. 1-2 metres. Key considerations for this are that these sections would quickly thicken with bramble and nettles and similarly to that stated above would require strimming or hand work to take down during the summer and at the end of the season.

4. Factors to Consider: designating areas for wildflower banks/ meadows

4.a. The Parish Council has a number of wildflower meadow areas however these rely on volunteer involvement to add planting and assistance with the removal of grass at the end of the season. Long grass meadows can provide similar outcomes. Grass provides huge benefits to wildlife including; providing seed heads, pollen, shade, areas to hide/hunt/reproduce and areas maintaining moisture which is important for amphibians.

4.b. The wildflower and long grass meadow areas take time to establish and can be misunderstood. More awareness raising work needs to be undertaken so that the purpose and benefit can be more widely understood.

Improving Planters

4.c. The Parish Council has a number of stand alone planters. These have been well regarded by many residents and have commonly been filled twice a year with standard bedding plants. Moving forward, the Parish Council can seek to optimise the planting opportunity by adding plants that would be more bee friendly including blue bedder echium, marguerite daisies, lobelia, calendula and snap dragons for summer planters and primrose and crocus in the spring planters.

3. Financial Implications

3.1 Changing grass cutting routines can necessitate new or additional machinery in order to deal with annual cuts. The Parish Council currently invests around £2,000 expenditure on cutting and baling expertise for the wildflower meadow areas (Shaw Ridge and Toothill park). Extending existing areas is more likely to generate economies of scale in the overall charge than separate areas. It is possible that the Parish Council could hire equipment for the tractor to manage long cuts that do not need to be removed. It is likely this could be accommodated by the existing budgets for the maintenance of open spaces.

3.2 Reducing the frequency of cutting could reduce the Parish Council's use of seasonal temporary staff for mowing and could result in a financial saving (c.£6,600 at 12 weeks). This may be offset if additional staff resources are required for strimming or hand cutting.

4. Recommendations

4.1 For the Committee to review the options and make a decision on the frequency of grass cutting and/or designation of uncut areas. Cutting frequently but at a longer length is the preferred recommendation from the Operations Supervisor as it will achieve a more consistent and sustainable result.

Paula Harrison, Parish Manager