

Report of the Executive Director

GRASS CUTTING IN CEMETERIES1. Purpose of report

To ask members to consider a review of the grass cutting regime in designated areas within the Borough's cemeteries. This is part of the Climate Change and Green Futures Programme.

2. Background

The Council is responsible for managing and maintaining five cemeteries; Beeston, Chilwell, Eastwood, Kimberley and Stapleford.

The current grass cutting frequency is eleven cuts in the period April to October. The spacing of these cuts varies slightly according to workload and the weather.

Feedback from visitors when visiting graves is that they like to see the areas clean and tidy with the grass cut on a regular basis. This allows easier and safer access to graves. This year however, during spring and early summer, there were requests for a more relaxed approach to grass cutting from some visitors to the cemeteries at Kimberley and Stapleford.

From previous experience changes to the grass cutting regime will not be universally welcomed as complaints are received if the grass gets long in the cemeteries. The comments of the Grounds Maintenance and Arboricultural Manager, the Cemeteries Officers, the Cemetery Grass Cutting Team and the Conservation and Green Spaces Development Manger relating to any changes are included in the appendix.

A more relaxed approach to grass cutting does however have environmental benefits and is in line with the Meadow Planting and Wildlife Corridors strand in the Climate Change and Green Futures Programme. Options for each of the five cemeteries are considered further in the Appendix.

3. Financial implications

Whilst a large amount of the additional costs to cut and collect the grass areas later in the season are offset by the number of reduced cuts there is an additional cost for the proposals as detailed. This has been estimated at £3,000. This can be contained within the additional funding previously allocated in the revenue budget for Meadow Grassland Management.

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to CONSIDER the revised grass cutting proposal General Principles and changes to the grass cutting frequency at designated areas within the cemeteries as detailed in the report with a review of the situation in 12 months and RESOLVE accordingly.

Background papers: Nil

APPENDIX

As part of the review it is important to consider some general principles, these are detailed below.

Revised Grass Cutting Proposal – General Principles

- There will be no change to the grass cutting regime within the areas of the cemeteries known as “lawn sections”. This is where the headstones are all in regular lines and no kerbstones are permitted.
- In areas where a more relaxed approach to grass cutting takes place, in order to maintain a “cared for” appearance, grass will be cut at the regular frequency adjacent to the main paths and to allow access to any regularly attended graves.
- Leaving grass areas for environmental benefits does not mean leaving alone. If left to their own devices grass areas will be overtaken by scrub and invasive plants and weeds. To maintain floral diversity, the grass needs to be cut and collected once a year.
- Any areas where the frequency of cut may change will be selected based on where wildflowers are known to be and where the layout of the cemetery allows. The focus will be on larger open areas with no significant shading from trees which affects grass and wildflower growth and only a smaller number of headstones.
- Signage will be erected on all sites explaining the reasons behind the revised maintenance regime.

Comments from Officers involved in the Management and Maintenance of Cemeteries

Grounds Maintenance and Arboricultural Manager:

The previous change to the grass cutting frequency on the banks at Kimberley Cemetery was met with opposition from local councillors and grave owners. They were unhappy with long grass growing around family graves. This, together with the cost and difficulty of cutting and collecting the long grass on the banks, resulted in the scheme being revised back to two areas adjacent to the chapel. Comments are still received about the lack of visual impact of these areas after the first flush of wild flowers. The current levels of grass maintenance within the cemeteries given the budget available are, I feel, appropriate. However, members of the public dispute this given the complaints received when grass cutting targets are not met. Relaxation of grass cutting will not go down well with all visitors and will lead to complaints. Already we have visitors bringing hand shears and other grass cutting equipment to cut and collect the area around their family grave. The safety of people visiting graves over uneven grounds where long grass is present may also be compromised. The end of season grass cutting will need to be undertaken using hand operated grass cutting equipment which can be time consuming.

Cemetery Officers:

Grass cutting in the Cemeteries is a very emotive subject and when the grass gets long complaints are received from visitors to relative's graves. Requests are received from visitors to the lawn sections of the cemeteries for more frequent grass cuts and not less. We have graves where visitors bring their own equipment to cut the grass. One of the principles of the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management is to keep Cemeteries clean and tidy. There may be scope in some of the closed churchyards but this would need careful liaison with the respective churches.

Cemetery Grass Cutting Team:

Uncut grass areas, after the initial flush of growth, look untidy and attract complaints from the public. There is potential for long grass to obscure gravestones and headsets creating a potential trip hazard. Cutting and collecting grass in restricted areas around headstones is difficult and the risk of damage to the headstones is increased when cutting long grass and they cannot easily be seen. As a general rule more compliments are received when the grass has been cut and more complaints received when the grass is long.

Conservation and Green Spaces Development Manager:

Areas within the older parts of the cemeteries contain some of the most botanically rich grasslands to be found on any of our sites. These are a result of historic maintenance where the ground was not cultivated and some contain species which in many areas have disappeared.

Appropriate maintenance to benefit these wild plants would have a positive effect on pollinators, birds, bats and other wildlife, but it is important that we do not appear to have abandoned areas and we must consider the needs of people visiting graves. Mowing of surrounds and access routes would help show the areas are still cared for and good signage with interpretation would help explain any changes.

By finding the right balance in maintenance we could still show respect for the deceased. The backdrop of wild flowers, butterflies and birds could provide an appropriate setting for quiet contemplation and reflection, but if problems arise adjustments to maintenance could be implemented.

Options for the five Cemeteries

- Beeston Cemetery

The largest and most visited of the five cemeteries. It is divided into 14 distinct sections separated by paths and roadways. The attached plan shows an area close to the entrance to the right of the main access road that offers potential for a revised approach to grass cutting. This area only has a relatively small number of headstones compared with the rest of the site.

- Chilwell Cemetery

The smallest of the five cemeteries but with a new extension to allow for Muslim burials and to allow for additional burials when Beeston Cemetery is full. As all of the cemetery is laid out as a lawn section there are no obvious options to change the frequency within

the old cemetery. The area allocated for a further future cemetery extension is currently grazed by horses. This management regime does allow for a diverse species of grass and flowering plants and works well in helping promote biodiversity for the site. No further changes are proposed here at the present time.

- **Eastwood Cemetery**

This is divided into two distinct sections. The old section to the north/west of Cemetery Walk is divided into various areas divided tarmac and gravel paths. The old section of the cemetery also has the Lawrence family grave. This area is regularly visited and for this reason is excluded from the areas to be considered. The new cemetery to the south/east of Cemetery Walk is made up of six sections. One of these is at present unused and as an alternative approach, could be cultivated and sown with a dedicated wildflower mix. This would provide a diverse range of species and avoid the risk of areas being dominated by grass/weeds and the complication of mowing around headstones.

- **Kimberley Cemetery**

Again this cemetery is divided into old and new sections. The old section has the chapel at the top of the hill and has some very steep banks. The new cemetery adjacent to Knowle Hill is regularly visited and is not considered appropriate for a change in grass cutting frequency. The old cemetery already has two areas adjacent to the chapel that have been managed for wildflowers for a number of years as part of the Blue Butterfly Scheme. This is a scheme that was introduced by Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust some years ago to demonstrate why areas were being managed to improve wildflowers. As referenced by the Grounds Maintenance and Arboricultural Manger these areas have been scaled back following complaints

The changes proposed here would look to extend the existing areas in line with the grass cutting general principles focusing on areas that have been identified as having the highest value in terms of species diversity. The steep slopes which are difficult to cut and collect and were the source of previous complaints will not be included.

- **Stapleford Cemetery**

A large cemetery and in line with other sites is divided into old and new sections separated by a central pathway. The section to the north of the central path has 2 large and distinct areas with few graves and two designated locations within these areas offer potential. The southern (newer) section is laid out as a lawn cemetery.

- **Closed Churchyards**

The Council also maintains ten closed churchyards at various locations throughout the borough. These are all regularly visited and whilst there may be options to consider a similar review of these sites in the future working with the Parochial Church Council and the vicar's/church wardens at each of the sites, this is something to be considered having first reviewed the changes in maintenance within the Borough's cemeteries.