

Committee: Planning, Highways and Transport

Date: 5 September 2023

Title: Grass Cutting in Ilminster

Purpose of Report

For Members to receive information regarding the current situation with grass cutting in Ilminster.

Recommendation:

Members to note the report.

Report:

1. As Members are aware there has been a great number of comments made on social media recently regarding the state of the verges and roundabouts in Ilminster.
2. As a result of emails with Somerset Councillor Osborne and telephone conversations with Somerset Councillor Keitch, a meeting was held with officers from various sections of Somerset Highways and Environmental Services.
3. It is very clear from the discussions held that currently they are in the throes of devising a new strategy policy for hedgerows and verges that will be implemented across the new authority in order that consistency of approach is delivered. It is hoped that this will be implemented across the authority at some point in the next year.
4. At the same time, it is hoped that there will be a new web interface launched which will allow members of the public along with Parish and Town Councils to see what cuts are planned and whether or not these have taken place. It was pointed out that whilst this is good for those that are “tech savvy”, it does not help those who are not. The need for looking at alternative methods for disseminating this information would be needed.
5. As part of the need to disseminate information more effectively the subject of “rewilding” areas came up. Specifically the need to understand what areas had been chosen for this and the reasons behind why they had been selected. Specifically areas such as the roundabouts and Canal Way were raised.
6. They were asked about the rationale over why areas such as Canal Way and the roundabouts had been selected. It transpired that a pressure group had contacted them and Senior Somerset Council Members and had requested that these areas be left. The group had led them to believe that they were a part of the Town Council and as such were speaking on behalf of the council! Rather than check this out the department went ahead and implemented the areas that had been put forward.

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7. It was pointed out that by doing this, it did undermine other sections of Somerset Council's strategy of trying to obtain advertising revenue on the roundabouts in Ilminster. Very few organisations or businesses were likely to pay money to advertise their business on something that looked so shambolic.
8. An undertaking has been received that they will contact the Town Council in future should anything like this occur. It was agreed that the key to a lot of the issues that were occurring was to establish a better line of communication with the council and that the meeting was a good step in the right direction.
9. The final main cuts of the year will take place shortly, and they will be cutting the verges and hedges over the winter periods much less frequently. Currently Highways verges are cut 6 times a year and the following areas which are managed by Environmental Services, between 8 and 14 times a year. It is hoped that the new strategy will be implemented next year when the schedules will then be published in advance.
 - a. West Crescent
 - b. Springfield Rd entrance
 - c. The Butts bank
 - d. West Street car park
 - e. Summerlands Park Drive
 - f. Higher Mead (this year included the area on the slope by no.31, the rest is under an annual 14 cut frequency as it's awkward to maintain)
 - g. The bank on Listers Hill
10. The possibility of setting up a Highways Steward in the area was discussed but it would appear that whilst this was successful in the Exmoor trial, it is highly unlikely to be rolled out any further at this point due to the cost limitations that are being faced throughout the authority.
11. It remains to be seen if something similar could be run by Ilminster in conjunction with either a nearby Town Council or even through the Local Community Network (LCN) scheme. If Ilminster and another town entered into a joint venture then it might be possible to recharge the smaller parishes on a cost neutral basis to assist them with any additional verge and parks cutting that they may wish to have carried out.
12. It maybe that the Town Council, in looking at the works that Somerset Council currently carry out and the frequency of the cutting under the new strategy when it comes out, may decide that in order to maintain a town that looks more neatly presented may wish to undertake additional cuts in certain areas.
13. If this was to be the case, then there would be a need to recruit at least one more permanent grounds worker and the staffing budget would need to be increased in the forthcoming budget setting process to reflect this.
14. With the potential acquisition of additional open spaces and the possible additional maintenance of hedges on the recreation ground this would be

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required anyway to support the already overstretched team. They have already absorbed into their work schedules the maintenance of the cemetery and this is receiving very good feedback on a weekly basis.

15. Members are asked to note the report.

**Mark Tredwin
Town Clerk
September 2023**