

Bristol Parks Forum – Meeting 17th October 2020

Responses to request for information from Groups on 2020 grass cutting

In July and August 2020 the Bristol Parks Forum became aware from some groups of concerns about how grass cutting was being carried out on some sites.

A request for information on what the issues were, was made in the Parks Forum update No 281 on 6th September and groups given until 20th September to respond. The short timescale was due to the need to potentially meet with groups and the Council before the Forum meeting on 17th October.

The purpose of this document is to collate the responses and provide an analysis of them. The information can then be used to inform discussions about how to improve the situation.

11 groups responded to the request. The ability of groups to respond may have been affected by the timescale; and constraints related to the Covid 19 pandemic.

Details of the responses is provided in Annex A, while the table below highlights which group raised what points. Comms = Communication; while M Plan = management plan.

Area	Source	No Issues	Hay Cut early	Lack of Cuts	Over cutting	Gave Pinpoint info	Pinpoint V Reality	Comms problems	Comms positive	Conflict M Plan	Other points
Stoke Park – one group	Email 8/9										
Kings Weston	Email 17/9										
Old Sneed Park	Email 19/9										
Badock's Wood	2 Emails										
Manor Valley Wood	Email 23/9										

Area	Source	No Issues	Hay Cut early	Lack of Cuts	Over cutting	Gave Pinpoint info	Pinpoint V Reality	Comms problems	Comms positive	Conflict M Plan	Other points
St Andrews Park	Email 22/9										
Victoria Park	Email 20/9										
Brandon Hill	Email 20/9										
Castle Park	Email 14/9										
St Georges Park	Email 13/9										
Troopers Hill	Email 13/9										
Northern Slopes	Email 22/9										
Total		3	3	3	3	2	3	5	5	2	4

Points which have arisen from discussion with City Council about issues:

These points were provided by the Council during the consultation period so groups would not have seen this information.

- Hay cuts (with cut and remove) are outsourced. All other cutting (including cut and drop) in house. The reason for this is the Council doesn't have the equipment or storage facilities to do this. This situation is kept under review.
- Hay cuts are let under open, competitive tendering.
- Hay cuts are more expensive than one cut per year and cut and drop.
- Hay cuts are used where:
 - it has been done for a considerable time,
 - species richness and variety depend on it, or
 - the site has a particular ecological value which is protected and enhanced through a hay cut.

- The timing of hay cuts is July to September. There are two cutting windows the first (most sites) mid-July to mid-August. The second mid-August to mid-September. The latter are usually sites that are more species rich and have later flowering species, or good colonies of butterflies that need the grass to complete their lifecycle.
- On hay cuts contractor removes the hay and uses it as they wish. The Council sets the preferred sequence of cutting, but actual timing depends on weather. Hay from urban areas may have litter and other contaminants. Current contractor uses the material for bedding, rather than feed due to quality issues.
- Weather really important as some years there is no suitable time in the summer and early autumn when the ground is not wet. The longer the cut is left the fewer nutrients are removed from the grass, and there is less benefit from removing the cut material to the grassland.
- If we had to cut all of our grassland in September, that may not work if September itself is wet; plus there would be a need to get multiple contractors involved to do that in the time available.
- If there were benefits to increasing the area which is hay cut, would have to be balanced against increase costs.
- Changes in government support for agricultural payments (Countryside Stewardship Grants) from 2021 onwards, which are currently used to offset some costs, may affect this further.
- If grass is cut less, it would grow longer, and would be managed by cut and drop which is cheaper than other cuts – but this can affect users on some sites. In some situations where cutting affects users, cutting goes back to more frequent cutting.
- Some areas have changed over to one cut with cut and drop per year.
- In the light of climate and ecological emergencies Parks discussing options, such as “one cut every three years” to help invertebrate populations – but not let the area develop into scrub.

The table here shows the areas of green space cut using cut and drop and hay cut. The information does not cover amenity cuts; or the cutting of natural green space or tall herb areas:

One cut per year (cut and drop)	838,000 m2
Floral meadow (need to clarify whether cut and drop)	14,000 m2
Hay cut	1,900,000 m2

Analysis and Conclusions:

Three replies had no concerns about grass cutting this year. Other replies had a varying number of issues.

Four replies took the opportunity to express wider concerns about management of sites than the points analysed.

Very few groups with issues replied with Pinpoint information, even though a request was made to do so. It could be that group resources are a constraint.

Across the concerns registered, the most frequent issue reported is communication. Five groups have issues with Council “communications” and five groups reported positive communications with the Council. Two groups reported changes for the better.

Concerns were also raised about whether the Pinpoint information reflects current Management Plans; and cutting regimes.

In an ideal world it would be better for cuts across all parks and green spaces to be flexible in timing and method so that they are sensitive to changes between and within years – and within a site. This is unlikely to happen due to current and potential future constraints that the Council are under; and the practicality of doing so. The question is whether there is a way of allowing some flexibility in the regime?

As grasslands (and other habitats adjacent to grasslands) are changing over time, how are plans or mapping going to be accurate over a medium to long period of time (eg: over 5 years)? Or respond to climate change? Is there a way of allowing plans and mapping to be more adjustable and more able to inform appropriate management regimes?

Annex 1 – Points raised by groups.

The text here seeks to provide an accurate representation of points raised.

Area	Source	Issues
Stoke Park – one group	Email 8/9	<p>Grass cutting is excessive – making quality of grass worse. Needs flexibility in hot weather.</p> <p>Height of cutting on woodland edges took out lots of plant being used by butterflies and bees. Need to recognise this diversity.</p> <p>Forms submitted to Council but they are not responded to.</p> <p>Various issues around fishing lake – night fishing – checking of trees after storm and other safety issues.</p> <p>Communication with public on cattle grazing needed</p> <p>Surface of new paths</p> <p>Pond dipping platform needs repair</p> <p>Only 1 multi use bin – far fewer than other parks</p> <p>Implications of use on ancient woodland during lockdown – and in the future</p> <p>Implication of open fires in forestry school areas</p>
Kings Weston	Email 17/9	<p>Genuine frustration and dissatisfaction with current mowing and maintenance.</p> <p>Encroachment by brambles and scrub is worsening – even though issue raised in 2014 Management Plan. Needs more consistency. Plans sent showing areas where consistency is necessary – no response so far.</p> <p>Management Plan largely ignored.</p> <p>Issues with hay cutting – but no luck with contractor changing when issues passed on</p> <p>No strimming of anti-traveller banks around Shirehampton Rd car park.</p> <p>Lack of maintenance on avenues and margins woodland/grassland.</p> <p>Differences between Pinpoint and actual management listed.</p> <p>Increasingly difficult to get response from officers – even from last year, including ongoing requests for meeting.</p> <p>It feels that responsibilities of officers vague and unclear?</p>

Area	Source	Issues
Old Sneed Park	Email 19/9	<p>Hay cut is late August/September Management Plan 2019 to 24 modified in order to accommodate city wide contract. Machinery unable to access two of the sloping fields. Last year two fields uncut – now one field and part of other cut by BCC to help contractors. Part of field to be cut on 3-year cycle, to help with overwintering wildlife, but there are plenty of those areas already. This will cause further loss of wildflower areas and encroachment of bramble and scrub. Raking of fields to be done by Friends and volunteers. This year better than last. Machinery too big for the job. If BCC is serious about ecological crises, then wildflower meadows are the most precious and fragile should be managed properly as a priority, meaning further cut in October and removal of cuttings; or consideration of grazing system. Is it time to consider sowing seeds of some species to help the grassland? Fundamental issue is that contracts not being given to those who can do the job – and compromises are being made that mean loss of meadows to bramble.</p>
Badock's Wood	Email 20/9 and 23/9	<p>Generally satisfied with cutting regime, but with exceptions. Recognise financial constraints the Council is under. Do not want less mowing. Pinpoint does not reflect what is done or what is needed – eg on the bronze age Mound. Areas are now not being mowed – or being mowed less eg: Path edges and original wildflower meadow. Scrub invading. Other areas mowing is more frequent. 2017 Mowing regime – not sure how this relates to Pinpoint or actual mowing. Not clear whether Council has taken on board the site Management Plan – which recommends spring meadow cutting, which has sometimes happened with AWT and volunteers. Could volunteers help with raking? Need to know general principles and policies before talking to the Council – eg: what is an early hay cut? Who decides who is early – and who is late? Is the cutting the same every year – or does it alternate (eg: 1 year in 3 is early)? What factors influence how and when Council contractors undertake hay cut? What happens to the hay once removed? What is the effect of Climate change – how does it affect meadow management?</p>
Manor Valley Wood	Email 23/9	<p>The large flower meadow was mowed much too early. In previous years it was always cut in mid to late September. We would like this changed to a late cut. Lack of prior information about changes does not help.</p>

Area	Source	Issues
St Andrews Park	Email 22/9	Pinpoint does not reflect current mowing regime. We are very fortunate to have a Park Keeper. Through negotiation with officers several areas remain uncut. Hoping to negotiate more changes so that more areas are uncut in the future.
Victoria Park	Email 20/9	Happy with current arrangements.
Brandon Hill	Email 20/9	No issues with grass cutting regime.
Castle Park	Email 14/9	Park is overmanaged – but we are told that because of its location and heavy use by picnickers that this is necessary – we don't agree, but we are outnumbered. Some areas not often used by picnickers which could become wildflower areas. Regular discussions with officers about park management.
St Georges Park	Email 13/9	Ok with current regime at present. Will review as part of management plan ongoing at the moment.
Troopers Hill	Email 13/9	Most doesn't need grass cutting as soil is so poor. No issues with timing or extent of cuts on the Field. One area of hay cut – AWT and BCC have cut and collected this area. Road verge part of LNR cut ok. We let BCC know if it is too long and causing a hazard. Troopers Hill field – larger area left longer and due to be cut and dropped – based on sketch of the area to be left sent in. Would like it to be cut and remove.
Northern Slopes	Email 22/9	Schedule of issues provided to the Council in February – discussions yet to occur. Bommie – cutting has improved over the year after very slow start and discussions held. Needs a few more tweaks and we are there. Glyn Vale – early hay cut at the end of July on two fields wasn't expected and felt to be too early and cut swathes of flowering plants down. Could it have been delayed by a couple of weeks? Cycleway also an early hay cut to be cut shortly. Kingswear meeting held with officers on ways to cut this area better using Council and volunteers. Hopefully some solutions found. Novers – amenity grassland had been regularly cut.

Len Wyatt 28 September 2020 amended 3 October 2020.