



Grass Cutting OSSP Report

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Darren Harding

Senior Contract Manager Veolia

Contents

Introduction	1
Grass Cutting	2
Other Contributing Factors	2
OSSP Questions	3
How are the grass cutting regimes determined?	3
How does Veolia respond to weather conditions? What capacity is there for spikes in demand?	3
How do Veolia plan for peaks in visitors to the parks?	4
What are the processes for ensuring grass cutting and litter picking work well together?	4
What were the main challenges faced this summer and how are WBC and Veolia responding?	4
Forward Planning	4
What activities do the Veolia (parks) team undertake to invest in the local community?	5
How effective are they/what impact do they have for Watford residents?	5
What is planned for the future?	6
Conclusion	6

- **Introduction**

The first two/three months of the 2018 grass cutting season were extremely challenging, however this was an anomaly as the fundamentals that have been used in previous years have not changed and are still in place.

The situation was caused by a number of factors that individually would not have been a concern however the combination resulted in much longer grass. The main factors can be summarised as follows:

- The weather
- Rate of vegetative growth
- Equipment reliability
- One off events

Following a concerted effort throughout May and June, the parks team were able to quickly catch up, and were back on target by early July. Measures have been identified to avoid a recurrence in future.

Given the events that have occurred this year the OSSP seeks to review 'grass cutting' and in particular answer the following questions:

- How are the grass cutting regimes determined?
- How does Veolia respond to weather conditions? What capacity is there for spikes in demand?
- How do Veolia plan for peaks in visitors to the parks?
- What are the processes for ensuring grass cutting and litter picking work well together?
- What were the main challenges faced this summer and how are WBC and Veolia responding?
- What activities do the Veolia (parks) team undertake to invest in the local community?
- How effective are they/what impact do they have for Watford residents?
- What is planned for the future?

This paper will address these questions, but will firstly discuss the events that occurred and causal factors.

Veolia self-deliver/perform the grass cutting service to the Parks and Open Spaces whereas the highway grass verges are cut by an external contractor, a contract that was novated to Veolia from WBC in 2013.

- **Grass Cutting**

At the start of this season, preparations were made as usual for a planned start early April. The weather is always an issue but this year was extremely wet. March saw frequent rain and snow during the month with 48.9mm of rain recorded and only 9 dry days, with 8.1mm falling on the 30th March alone. The wet weather continued into April where a further 46.2mm of rain was recorded and only 12 dry days. The net result was that the ground conditions were far too soft to deploy the tractor and mowers. Whilst it was possible to cut with lighter equipment with care, the vast majority of park locations are cut with the tractor mounted Trimax, therefore by the time it was possible to deploy the tractor in mid-April the first cut was delayed. In addition to the wet weather, there were also unusually high temperatures recorded during parts of April. This combined with the moisture in the ground created perfect growing conditions that resulted in exceptional grass and weed growth. Evidence for the rate of growth this year can be seen in the kerbside green waste figures, which shows a 45% increase in tonnage collected in May compared to the same period last year. The impact of the wet weather was not just felt in Watford, as there were social media reports of issues with grass cutting across the UK, such as in Stevenage, locally and across Birmingham.

The grass was growing strongly by mid-April and due to the late start to the first cut (weather), the cutting team were behind. By mid-May the team were catching up and getting on top of the service until the tractor mounted Trimax cutting deck failed and halted progress.

The Trimax suffered a mechanical failure in late May and was initially fixed but unfortunately failed again. Once it was clear that there would be a wait in completing a repair, arrangements were made to bring in a replacement cutting deck. The replacement deck was available by the following week and deployed immediately. It would have been preferable to have replaced the cutting deck sooner which is a lesson learnt, but at the time we believed a quick and permanent repair was possible. A cutting deck was sourced from another contract to use while the Trimax was under repair. Once the Trimax was back on the road, progress throughout June was very good and the team were back on target. Although the quality of cut suffered initially due to the length of the grass, the quality quickly improved once the grass was at a normal length at the time of cutting.

- **Other Contributing Factors**

While the weather has had a major impact, there are other factors that have contributed to the overall situation.

The grass cutting equipment has been an issue with an apparent increase in the number of failures this year compared with previous years, however this may be explained by general wear and tear due to the age of some of the equipment, (such as the Timax for example). A replacement programme is being considered going forward.

Maintenance of horticultural equipment is a specialised field and skilled fitters are difficult to recruit and train. This has been addressed by employing an external company that specialise in fixing horticultural equipment and they now regularly visit and undertake repairs and provide routine maintenance.

'One off' issues such as the unprecedented amount of litter and waste left in Cassiobury Park and other parks following the early exceptionally warm and sunny May bank holiday weekend. The clear up that took place required the redirection of staff from other locations to assist.

Another issue this year was the need to prepare for six Green Flag Award inspections (two sites in April and four in May), which in the light of the rapid grass and weed growth experience this year did prove challenging, despite the additional seasonal operatives agreed for this year. It is essential that sites look their best on the day of inspection therefore it was necessary to divert staff from their normal duties to achieve this. The number of Green Flag applications has increased from 3 at the start of the contract to 12 this year. I am pleased to report that all 12 sites received their green flag status this year, which reflects the hard work that we have carried out within these locations.

The traveller incidents in May and again in June also had an impact in that they required Management staff to be diverted from their normal duties to assist in the clear up.

• **OSSP Questions**

How are the grass cutting regimes determined?

The parks contract specification is performance orientated as opposed to stipulating frequencies, however to achieve the standard expected, Veolia have scheduled a cut every two to three weeks. The successful execution of this schedule will depend on the prevailing weather conditions at the time of cutting, as too much rain can mean the ground is too soft to allow cutting, or at the other extreme during periods of drought grass growth stops and therefore the frequency is reduced. Under normal conditions a two/three week frequency is sufficient.

Fine turf, such as croquet courts or bows greens are cut weekly or twice weekly in order to achieve a playable surface.

How does Veolia respond to weather conditions? What capacity is there for spikes in demand?

The weather conditions will always have an impact on the grass cutting operation as moisture, sunlight and warmth determine the rate of grass growth. The ground conditions, whether firm or soft are also an issue as was the case early in the season this year, however Veolia will always seek to respond by deploying extra staff and equipment as may be required. To combat a similar weather event and growth burst in future, extra equipment will be deployed sooner to ensure a quicker recovery.

The current equipment deployed include the tractors, Trimax cutting deck, two out front rotary mowers, one out front flail (ideal for long grass), trimmers and blowers.

How do Veolia plan for peaks in visitors to the parks?

The busiest time for parks visitors is during the summer holidays and public holidays, or when there are large events. Planning is only normally necessary for Cassiobury Park, where large crowds are attracted to what is a regional destination park that has seen substantial investment in new facilities. There is in peak season an operative on duty over the weekends, however Veolia with agreement from the WBC have agreed to deploy an additional operative in the park during peak periods. Two operatives are usually sufficient, however the management of waste seen following the early May bank holiday was unprecedented. There was a much greater number of visitors than expected and this is likely to be due to it being a public holiday, the unusually warm sunny weather and the attraction of upgraded park facilities. Cassiobury Park was not the only site to experience increased waste, many public parks and open spaces up and down the country were also affected. This event caused a rethink with regards to staffing on bank holiday weekends and for the late May bank holiday weekend a third operative was deployed, and waste management worked much better.

To cope with large volumes of waste expected during busy weekends Veolia have also placed wheeled bins at hot spot locations to increase bin capacity as required.

What are the processes for ensuring grass cutting and litter picking work well together?

All park locations are subject to regular litter picks at the same time bins are emptied, reducing the risk of litter being cut up; but operatives are required to litter pick before they commence cutting. Manned sites such as Cassiobury Park and Woodside Playing Fields are litter picked daily.

What were the main challenges faced this summer and how are WBC and Veolia responding?

The main challenges have been set out above and the following section outlines Veolia's response to these.

• Forward Planning

Veolia have put in place measures to mitigate against a similar weather event next year. The main measures are as follows:

- The Weather – to combat a similar weather event and growth burst in future, extra equipment will be deployed sooner to ensure a quicker recovery.
- Grass Cutting – Grass cutting equipment is now being maintained by a specialist external company to ensure timely maintenance and repairs.
- By client agreement extra staff are to be deployed during busy periods, such as summer holidays, bank holidays and during large events.
- Keep resource requirements needed to maintain Green Flag Awards sites under review.

- To reduce the risk of traveller incursions, Park security has been upgraded where possible with new high security locks (including boxing around locks to protect them, and other features such as bollards).
- A parks equipment replacement programme to be reviewed with WBC.

What activities do the Veolia (parks) team undertake to invest in the local community?

Due to its large number of parks and green spaces Watford benefits from many dedicated Friends Groups and volunteers who are always keen to provide a helping hand by organising community clean ups, conservation activities, and general support in parks maintenance. To support WBC's and Veolia's objectives to retain current green flags, obtain more in years to come, and to show the commitment to supporting communities and creating social value the Parks team has always been working closely with Friends Groups and other community groups by providing support and resources. In 2017 Veolia launched Veolia FIGS scheme (Veolia Friends in Green Spaces) to support local community groups and volunteers by providing:

- Funding; Park Rangers are able to support friends groups with funding where required. £500 allocated per each Village area (Woodside, Cassiobury and Wiggenshall)
- Equipment and training; The Parks team can support groups with equipment and training where required.
- Resources; Park Rangers and other employees take part in activities when needed, and can provide plants, seeds and bulbs to groups.

How effective are they/what impact do they have for Watford residents?

The aim of the FIGS project is to support WBC's Parks and Green Spaces objectives, help empower volunteers to be more active on regular basis, connect different groups with one another to share best practices, and help form more new friends groups.

Since its launch the project has been promoted by the Park Rangers Team, Horticultural Manager and Communications, Education and Outreach Team through leaflets, social media posts. Up to date only one funding application was considered towards 9000 flower bulbs for Watford Residents Association, however, under the scheme, Veolia has supported many community events and groups by providing litter picking equipment and delivery of educational sessions such as bulb planting with Watford's primary schools. Since the start of the contract Veolia's Parks and Outreach Team delivered bulb planting session to over 3000 children. The bulb planting activities are aimed to give children an understanding of the hard work that goes into maintaining public spaces, and hopefully make them appreciate and look after Watford's beautiful parks maintained by the council and Veolia. Along with bulb planting with local schools, last year Veolia Watford supplied 24,300 bulbs to local communities under FIGS scheme. Each spring bulbs/flowers planted by the children, community groups and Veolia brighten up Watford's green spaces and are enjoyed by many.

The Parks Team also works closely with the Communications, Education and Outreach Team to support community clean ups in Watford's parks and green spaces by providing community litter picking kits and free collections of bags after clean up events. In 2018 alone Veolia provided litter picking kits to 17 community groups and organised rubbish collections after the events.

What is planned for the future?

The plan for the future is mainly to concentrate on promoting the FIGS scheme further. It has been agreed that in 2018/19 we will be focusing on promoting the scheme through press releases, social media and the website. Veolia's Communications Manager has been working closely with council's Communications Team to promote the scheme further.

Veolia also support the Green Gym and Community Connections. The Green Gym is active along the Colne and Cassiobury Park and now seeking to extend activities into Garston Park. Community Connections volunteers, led by Sandy Belloni undertake multiple tasks along the Colne and in Oxhey Park.

• Conclusion

Veolia recognise the importance of high quality parks and streets and acknowledge that standards this year have unfortunately fallen below expected levels for a short period of time. A number of factors, some of which have been beyond Veolia's control, have combined to cause this anomaly, and the measures being put in place have made a difference and will ensure that standards are maintained.