

Minutes of the meeting of the ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT SELECT COMMITTEE held on WEDNESDAY 30 JULY 2014 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Geary (Chair)
Councillors Bint, Cannon, Clifton, Green, McPake (Vice-Chair), Petchey and Wilson

Witnesses: Cllr Legg (Cabinet Member), R Riekie (Parks Trust), M Sturgeon (Serco), T Draper (Serco), R Clark (Serco), A Hudson, J Price, R Trowse (Project Manager) and F Bower (Overview and Scrutiny Officer).

Apologies: Councillor L Gifford

Number of Public: 2

ET03 MINUTES

RESOLVED -

1. That the Minutes of the Select Committee meeting held on 11 February 2014 not be approved as a correct record, as none of the current Committee had been present;
2. That the Minutes of the Select Committee held on 11 June 2014 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

ET04 DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

Councillors Wilson and P Geary disclosed personal interests in Item 5 (Landscaping/Grasscutting Contract) as Members of Woughton Community Council and Olney Town Council, respectively.

ET05 LANDSCAPING/GRASS CUTTING CONTRACT

The Committee considered a presentation by the Head of Environment and Waste, the Landscape Contracts Manager and the Programme Manager on how the Council would work with its chosen contractor, Serco, noting that Serco had offered the second lowest price and the best overall quality. The start time for the contract, in November, was advantageous, in that it was at the end of the grass cutting season and the beginning of the winter maintenance programme.

Representatives from Serco explained that they would be the prime contractor, managing a number of local small and medium partner companies. Capital investment with partners would be about £1 million, and a new depot would be provided. There would be a joined-up approach to services, with staff being cross-skilled and having dual responsibility for street cleansing and landscaping.

Members asked the representatives of Serco whether qualified advice on wildlife would be available to residents and noted that a team would be built around their already extensive experience. Environmental protection was taken seriously, and the company would like to involve community volunteers in improvement schemes. The Council's Landscape Contracts Manager reported that it had experts that would work with Serco to ensure that work near birds' nests was carried out at appropriate times.

Members commented that it would be important to recover litter from deep water professionally and were told by the Serco representative that clear, freely flowing waterways would be a high priority.

Members also commented that public use of landscape features should be properly planned for, or there could be problems as with the angling/dipping platforms where no parking or toilets had been provided. They noted that the Council received feedback from Serco in weekly meetings with client side officers, who then fed back to the relevant Council service area.

Members also noted the following in relation to landscaping in Milton Keynes:

- The figure of 30% of in-house work to be devolved to parishes by the Council referred to the amount of public open space, excluding sport and recreation grounds, bereavement services and arboriculture;
- Persistent problems such as parking on verges would be addressed by the Council and Serco together, by means of products designed to reduce the wear or by reducing the parking itself;
- Failings in the current Environmental Helpdesk were recognised, and new auto-responders were being trialled;
- The contract with Serco required education of the public about any works that could be misconstrued, as with coppicing that was taken to be serious damage to trees;
- Better information, like that already provided by the Parks Trust, would inform the public about planned replacement of plants or pruning;
- A survey of trees and needed arboriculture was needed to plan the work for the next 20-30 years;
- It would be the Council's decision whether to replace horse chestnuts in the central reservations or plant one for each tree removed;
- The Council's evaluation of trees by means of a points system was being reviewed;

- Grass-cutting preferences were partly cultural and allowed for grass to be left longer, where preferred for aesthetic or environmental reasons, especially far from houses; however, shorter grass was needed in some places, for example where ball games were played.

The Cabinet Member reported that cross-party policy development was taking place and that a review of grass-cutting two years previously had moved away from the regime requiring 12 cuts whatever the need.

The Committee also received a presentation from the Head of Operations at the Parks Trust on how the Council would be working in partnership with the Parks Trust, noting the following:

- The Parks Trust had been in existence since 1992;
- It had charitable status, with commercial enterprise providing income;
- It had responsibility for 4,500 acres of land, across a broad spectrum and including that associated with grid roads and between estates;
- It did not have responsibility for central reservations, roundabouts or the edges of grid roads and Redways, because these were closely associated with highways;
- 60% of the organisation's operational budget was spent on landscaping, with trees being managed separately;
- Contracts were 3-6 years long, and monitoring was based on performance, for example length of grass;
- The organisation shared Geographical Information System data with the Council and worked closely with its crash barrier inspection and utilities team. It was often the first contact in cases of fly-tipping;
- Public complaints were sometimes referred to the Parks Trust erroneously when the land in question was not its responsibility.

Members thanked officers and partners for their attendance at the meeting and presentations. The Committee was encouraged by their assurances of engagement of stakeholders and their professionalism, as evidenced by Lantra and Investors In People.

Members noted the move to an outcomes-based contract rather than an activity-based one and hoped that it would bring about the changes it was designed to achieve

RESOLVED –

1. That officers be requested to publish a public-facing explanation of the move to an outcomes-based contract in .pdf form with contacts to whom issues may be reported.
2. That the Contract Management Team be requested to provide Members of the Committee with a report before Christmas on what the contract had delivered in its first month.
3. That Officers be requested to clearly identify in the Council's online mapping land in the ownership of the Parks Trust, Milton Keynes Development Partnership and the Housing Revenue Account.
4. That the Committee receive an update on the Open Access Project setting out progress, timetabling and better filtering of incidents at the point of logging them.
5. That officers be requested to provide Councillors with written feedback, at least annually, on planning policy changes arising from issues experienced.
6. That the responsible Cabinet Member be requested to consider explicit Member discussions on any possible moves towards less manicuring of public spaces and any move towards having smaller areas of higher quality public spaces.
7. That the Cabinet and officers be requested to develop a protocol to enable better public communication and prior information for Ward Councillors on any forthcoming work that might distress the public.
8. That the Cabinet be requested to develop and adopt a Tree Strategy for Milton Keynes, including Central Milton Keynes.
9. That officers be requested to publish a schedule of landscaping work and ensure that Ward Members are informed before any works start.
10. That officers be requested to develop a system of mapping landscape work.

ET06

ESTABLISHING AN ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT SUB-GROUP – HIGHWAYS CONTRACT

The Committee considered the establishment of a sub-group to scrutinise issues relating to the Highways Contract.

Members noted that this was not intended to be a 'task and finish' working group but would meet on a regular and ongoing basis, potentially once a month. It was instigated by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee but could report back to the Select Committee. Its focus should be more qualitative than contractual.

RESOLVED -

1. That a Sub-Group to scrutinise issues relating to the Highways Contract be established on a 1:1:1 basis;
2. That Members comprise: Councillors L Gifford (Labour) and Cannon (Liberal Democrats) plus one Conservative.

ET07

ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its Work Programme for the remainder of the 2014/2015 year and noted that it had been discussed by the Planning Group.

RESOLVED -

That the Work Programme be approved.

ET08

RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee considered responses made by Cabinet or the responsible Cabinet Member to recommendations by the Committee and its review groups.

RESOLVED -

That the responses be noted.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 9.10 PM