

Minutes of the Landscaping Task and Finish Group (TFG) meeting held on Tuesday 10 November 2015 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillors Brackenbury, Geaney, P Geary (Chair) Lewis, McPake and Webb

Officers: A Hudson (Head of Environment and Waste), J Price (Landscape Contracts Manager), E Richardson (Overview & Scrutiny Officer)

Also Present: L Costello (Olney Town Clerk), H Hupton (Clerk, West Bletchley Council), J Nicholas (Chair, Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council), K Geaney (Chair, Planning and Environment Committee @ Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council)

Minutes of Previous Meeting – 27 October 2015

These were agreed as a correct record of the meeting held on 27 October 2015.

A View from the Parishes

West Bletchley Council

Helen Hupton, Clerk to West Bletchley Council, presented a prepared summary which is attached as Annex A to these minutes.

Having agreed to take on devolved responsibility for local landscape maintenance, West Bletchley Council had decided to tender for an external contractor to carry out the works, rather than employ a direct workforce. The agreement with Milton Keynes Council was for 3 years, with an option to extend it for a further two years, which West Bletchley Council was already interested in doing.

The biggest difficulty so far was the lack of previous maintenance on local trees, many of which, in the West Bletchley area, were more mature than in other parts of Milton Keynes. The ultimate aim was to establish a 5 year cycle of maintenance on the trees, but, initially, it could take longer than that to carry out the outstanding works.

West Bletchley Council had already carried out its own survey of the trees in Rickley Park and had been pleased to note that these trees were in good condition.

Major works to trees, where they were severely diseased, unsafe or impacted on someone's property, were carried out by the Council's tree surgery contractor. However, minor works, such as low or overhanging branches were being dealt with by West Bletchley Council. Where major works, beyond the scope of West Bletchley Council, had been reported to Milton Keynes Council, they had been dealt with satisfactorily.

Initially, West Bletchley Council had been reluctant to take on devolved responsibility for local landscape maintenance, but it had been clear that local residents were very keen for them to do it. They had looked at both the direct labour option and the contracted out option and financially there had not been a lot of difference between the two. Having decided to go for the contracted out option, which was working very well, Ms Hupton thought it unlikely that West Bletchley Council would in future, revert to the direct labour option.

Between 90-95% of the landscape work carried out in West Bletchley was now planned, with only a small proportion of the work being reactive. Of the requests for

remedial landscape works received by West Bletchley Council, about 50% were passed onto their contractors for action; small scale jobs were dealt with in-house.

West Bletchley Council was also undertaking some additional works, such as the removal of old tree stumps, which were not part of the devolved arrangement, but which improved the amenity value of the landscape.

Although West Bletchley Council used a contractor for landscape maintenance work it was able to co-ordinate litter clear-ups to ensure that they carried out before an area was scheduled to be mown.

Looking to the future, West Bletchley Council would like to see the transfer of all Milton Keynes Council owned land assets in the West Bletchley parish area, including parks, play areas and other open spaces, transferred to its control.

Olney

Liam Costello, Olney Town Clerk, explained that the Town Council was already owned the parks and open spaces in Olney before the Council's new landscape maintenance arrangements came into force. Therefore it already had a landscape maintenance team and equipment in place which meant it was able to deliver local landscape maintenance in house.

This approach was working well in the local context and the public response was good. In Olney, the biggest challenge was shrubs and hedges which had been under-cared for in the past.

Olney also had a 3 year contract with an option to extend for a further 2 years, which they were already interested in doing.

Olney Town Council had a dedicated e-mail address which residents could use to request landscape maintenance works. The Town Council aimed to react to requests and have the work completed within 24 hours, rather than just reply to the request within the time limit.

As landscape maintenance was done in-house it was easy to co-ordinate a litter clear-up of those areas to be mowed before the grass was cut.

Looking to the future and the possibility of the further devolution of services by Milton Keynes Council to parish / town councils, Olney Town Council expressed an interest in being able to carry out local street cleaning operations.

Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council

Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council was a large parish area, covering 8 grid squares, with lots of small pockets of open space / amenity land, although it was not always clear who owned them.

Jean Nicholas, Chair of Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council explained that it had decided on more of a half-way house option. This involved passing on to the Council information about what work and where, needed to done in the parish. The Parish Council employed a part time Landscape and Allotment officer who liaised with the Council and there were now plans for her to have more direct contact with the Council's contractors, particularly in relation to the winter shrub maintenance programme.

Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council also had two neighbourhood wardens who were trained to carry out minor pruning works. The Parish Council owned the Shenley Brook End ponds, together with some other patches of landscape in the

parish area and had been doing work on these to bring their own property up to scratch as a learning curve as the Parish Council was definitely interested in taking up devolved responsibility for landscaping in the future.

The Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council reporting mechanism for landscape issues linked straight to Milton Keynes Council.

The TFG then had a general discussion about parish landscape maintenance and noted that:

- A third of the open spaces in Milton Keynes were already being maintained and looked after by parish / town councils.
- It might be possible for a group of parishes to work together to provide landscaping services across a wider area to benefit from economies of scale or for a larger parish to undertake landscape services for smaller parishes;
- For many parishes taking on devolved responsibility for local landscape maintenance was a leap in the dark and some parishes would have been wary of this commitment if they did not have a clear understanding of what it might involve of the benefits of doing so;
- A way forward would be to develop a toolkit to enable other parishes to explore the options around devolved landscape maintenance and assist them to take up the option in future;
- Another possibility would be for parish / town councils that were already responsible for landscape maintenance to give a presentation to the Parishes Forum on how they had gone about establishing a local service it, how it was working in their areas and the advantages;
- The grant offered by the Council to parishes to undertake devolved landscape works was at the same rate at which the Council could undertake the work and West Bletchley Council had thought that it had been a very fair offer;
- There were two Single Points of Contact in the Landscaping Team so that parish and town councils had a clear idea of who they should be contacting at Milton Keynes Council – one for those parishes north of H4 and one for those south of H4.
- Uncertainty about what would happen when the devolved agreements were up for renewal might have deterred some parishes from accepting the offer. There may also have been a fear that the funding offered by the Council would reduce year on year, as a way of saving money, leaving parishes to pick up the shortfall;
- In reality, the devolved agreements were contractual arrangements with the level of funding guaranteed for the duration of the agreement. However, sensitive negotiations between parish / town councils and the Council would need to take place well in advance of the contract renewal date;
- From the evidence received, it was clear that devolving landscape maintenance to those parishes that wanted it was working and that there may be opportunities to devolve other services, such as local street cleansing/litter picking, to parishes;
- It would be possible to novate the existing contract to allow other parishes to take on responsibility for landscaping works but using the Council's current contractor, although there could be difficulties with the scheduling of work as the contractor would have still have contracted obligations elsewhere in the borough.

The Chair, on behalf of the TFG, thanked Ms Hupton, Mr Costello and Ms Nicholas for their attendance at the meeting and contributions to the discussion which had been most helpful.

Value for Money

The Head of Environment and Waste explained that when looked at as a whole, there was a 'mixed economy' in relation to the delivery of landscape maintenance services. There could be a local determination as to what was Value for Money and 'value' was not just about price, but also the quality of service delivery; the current contract had been let on a 50-50 basis between quality and price.

This was the first time that the Council had let a landscape maintenance contract across the whole of the borough (apart from where it had been devolved to parishes / town councils) and this had given significant economies of scale. The Council had managed to reduce its annual bill for landscape services from £5m to £1.9m pa. The group considered whether Milton Keynes was now paying for the benefits of landscape; the environmental benefits of lots of greenery and open spaces had to offset against the rising cost of maintenance.

Councillors reported that their perception was that the number of complaints they were receiving about landscaping issues, mainly about bushes, shrubs and trees, were rising, despite the work being done as part of the new contract. It was possible that this was because a lot of the initial planting schemes in Milton Keynes were starting to mature and needed more attention. The other possibility, as discussed at the previous meeting on 27 October, was that the wrong type of shrubs may have been planted in certain locations.

Up until 2009, the Council had surveyed every tree every year, but now they were only inspecting the larger trees. Using modern survey software, the Landscape Team were proposing to create a data base of the Council's tree stock and develop a maintenance plan for the trees.

Actions

1. That the Landscape Contracts Manager produces a brief paper on tree thinning for the meeting scheduled for 9 December.
2. That Philip Snell (Project Manager [Public Realm]) be invited to attend the meeting on 9 December to discuss the programme he was leading to replace inappropriate planting across the borough.
3. That the Council's new Senior Landscape Architect also be invited to the meeting on 9 December to talk to the Group about how areas of amenity landscape are included in the plans for new developments in Milton Keynes.
4. Councillor McPake had produced a briefing note on the Council's responsibilities in relation to watercourse maintenance which did not appear to be covered by the current contract. It was agreed that the Task and Finish Group would look at this in more detail at a future meeting.

Future Meetings

Future meetings were agreed as follows:

- 17 November @ 6.30 pm in the Conservatory
 - A View from the Parishes 2 (TBC)
 - Report It / Request It
- 24 November @ 6.30 pm in the Conservatory
 - Serco
- 09 December @ 5.30 pm in the Conservatory
 - Landscape in Urban Design

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 8.10 PM

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MILTON KEYNES COUNCIL LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE TASK & FINISH GROUP

Meeting on 10th November 2015

Information from West Bletchley Parish

- **Currently delivering devolved landscape services** (under GPOC)
Agreement for 3(+2) years commencing 1st June 2014
- **Services provided through contractor (RTM Ltd)** (in accordance with a contract specification agreed by MKC – following European tendering process)
- **WBC Officers** (including a professionally qualified Parks & Environment Officer) **monitor and manage the landscape function** (working with local residents and other agencies to ensure service is delivered in accordance with local needs and priorities achieving local synergies and added value)
- **Total Services Costs = £216,904** (MKC Grant = £180,500 per annum, WBC funds overhead costs = £36,404 in current financial year)
- **Value for Money is achieved through:**
 - **Economy** – resources are optimised – factors include trained staff with in depth local knowledge, high spec tools and machinery, fast response times, focussed monitoring and planning (short, medium and long term) supported by wider presence and involvement in the local community
 - **Efficiency** – WBC considers that it is achieving a higher level of service than previously provided (in Feb 15 – 43% of residents considered that standards had improved). More has been achieved with the resources available eg. Tree works and stump removal.
 - **Effectiveness** – In addition to exceeding the terms of the agreement and improving resident satisfaction WBC has secured the ownership and participation of local residents and groups – in caring for and helping to maintain the local environment. (this is seen as being key to improving VfM in the future eg. Reviewing priorities and securing alternative sustainable solutions)
- **Examples of local initiatives include:**
 - Retaining Green Flag status of Chepstow Park
 - Meadow and tree planting with local schools and organisations
 - Woodland management projects with local organisations and residents
 - Educational walks
 - Pond works with The Conservation Volunteers and local residents
 - Promoting Biodiversity eg. Providing benches and pathways using wood and bark chippings from tree works.

- **WBC wishes to continue to maintain and improve standards of landscape maintenance within the parish in the future.**
- Its key actions to help achieve this will include (in the short term):
 - Pressing for the transfer of additional MKC owned land assets, including Parks, Play areas and other open space.
 - Improving resident engagement and involvement with the service
 - Pressing for tree survey and relevant actions.

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