

## **Minutes of the Landscaping Task and Finish Group (TFG) meeting held on Tuesday 22 December 2015 at 6.30 pm**

- Present:** Councillors Brackenbury (via weblink), P Geary (Chair), Lewis, McPake and Webb
- Apologies:** Councillor Geaney, John Price
- Officers:** A Hudson (Head of Environment and Waste), R Ward (Business and Liaison Manager – Public Realm) and E Richardson (Overview & Scrutiny Officer)

### **Minutes of Previous Meeting – 24 November 2015**

These were agreed as a correct record of the meeting held on 24 November 2015.

TFG agreed that the identification and adoption of small pockets of land needed to be addressed as and when new developments took place so that the current situation of there being areas of land across MK which no-one was sure who owned them did not continue.

### **Reporting Landscape Maintenance Issues to the Council – R Ward (RW)**

R Ward gave a short presentation to the TFG which explained how the public could report landscaping issues to the Council, and how the Council dealt with such reports once received. He also circulated copies of screen shots of the on-line process to illustrate the points he was making, together with data on the number and type of reports received.

During the presentation the TFG noted that:

- The Council was able to use the website to provide consistent and up to date information about landscaping and maintenance programmes. The same information was available to the Council's call centre so that anyone reporting a landscape issue by telephone could have the same information conveyed to them;
- Information on the website included the schedules for grass cutting, shrub pruning etc. Working to the published schedule was the most efficient way of minimising issues as the schedules could now be easily and quickly checked by the public;
- The "Report It" mechanism was embedded in the pages of the Landscaping Section on the Council's website and had been refined from 6-7 pages to 3 pages;
- Anyone wanting to report a problem could click on the relevant issue, which took them to a mapping page with flags which showed if someone had already reported the same problem. This reduced having to handle multiple reports of the same issue;
- If the issue had not already been reported, the correspondent would then be directed to the third page where they could add in extra detail about the nature of the problem, location etc;
- The "Report It" mechanism had been updated recently as part of the Customer Service end to end project. A focus group had looked at the process and

identified the automated responses as not being particularly helpful. These had now been changed so that different situations received different responses;

- The website also encouraged the public to report emergencies, such as a fallen tree across a road or footpath, by telephone, rather than via the website;
- The data from the last 3 years showed seasonal spikes, with most reports being made between April and October. There had been a significant spike in reports of incidents involving trees during the summer of 2015, as there had been some unseasonably high winds at that time;
- However, reports relating to grass cutting and shrub maintenance were falling, due to the adherence by the contractor to the planned maintenance schedules;
- Some councillors found the existing system limiting as it was not possible to copy in others (such as ward colleagues or the resident they were acting for) to show that they had reported an issue, and much preferred to e-mail an officer with the problem. Although easier for councillors, e-mails were not necessarily quicker for staff;
- Both the Council and its contractor were making changes in the way in which they received information on landscape issues by installing a new front end systems, "Firm Step" at the Council and "White Space" at Serco which interacted with each other;
- AH reported that he thought the new Firm Step system would alleviate the need to use e-mail. It was being hosted by the supplier, not MKC, and should be much quicker. Other local authorities were already using Firm Step and reporting their satisfaction with it. It should also be easier to track the progress of reports and anyone reporting an issue would get a proper response, not a standard 'one size fits all' answer;
- The new system would also allow councillors to be e-mailed information about work starting in their wards. It should also be able to produce a regular bulletin for inclusion in the *Councillors' News* weekly newsletter;
- In current communications about landscaping issues the reference numbers were not particularly helpful. When an initial report was made there was space to put a title in, but this never came back in the acknowledgements/updates. Responses such as "Ticket X has been resolved" did not explain what had been done to solve the problem and this could be frustrating for councillors who needed to update residents in a positive manner;
- AH reported that this way of responding would be disappearing, as First Step allowed staff in the Landscaping Team to edit and update responses; it was no longer just an IT process;
- The Council wanted to encourage people to use the "Report It" mechanism and the new system should make it a lot easier to use for both the public and councillors;
- There were issues with building the mapping facility into the new First Step programme, but these were being worked on;
- The difference between "Request It" and "Report It" were also being phased out and everything would be dealt with under the "Report It" tag;

- The First Step system would be much more user friendly for residents, councillors and officers alike, as it had much more functionality than the current system, and could be edited appropriately to suit individual cases;
- The new system was due to commence on 1 April 2016; First Step worked almost exclusively with local authorities and understood their needs;
- The Council was paying a fixed price for 2 years, which also included any extra development work which may be required in that time. There was an users' group where local authorities already using the system could exchange ideas and discuss updates. If an update was developed for a particular local authority it was automatically offered to all the other local authorities;
- The First Step system was also compatible for use on mobile 'phones, tablets, laptops and standard PCs. It would be possible to attach photographs to any reports and send them straight through, enabling councillors, and the public, to report issues immediately whilst they were out and about;
- Due to confidentiality / data protection issues, it may not be possible for councillors to interrogate the system on the progress of any issue on behalf of residents who might not feel that progress is being made fast enough, although the development of some form of progress check could be considered;
- Training on using the new system would be offered to councillors after the elections in May 2016.

The TFG thanked RW for his report and recommended that a review of the new First Step system be carried out once it had been operating for 6 months.

### **Overview, Analysis and Preparation of Report**

Any recommendations the TFG might wish to make needed to be meaningful, actionable and achievable:

- Strategic recommendations would be referred to Cabinet;
- Recommendations for further scrutiny would be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee;
- Any operational recommendations would be referred to the Chief Executive to be passed down to the relevant Service Groups;
- Any recommended amendments to contracts would be subject to a Delegated Decision (depending on the value of the work).

#### 29 September 2015

This was a learning session which explained how landscaping work was managed by the Council and the contractor under the new contract.

#### 27 October 2015

Recognised that The Parks Trust was an integral part of landscape maintenance in MK and that the Council could learn lessons from how they did their work.

Parks Trust still employed its own workforce for more complicated and specialist works and saw the value in using small, local contractors for routine works, whereas for the Council the value was in one large contract.

Also raised the issue of trees in MK, both the Council's and The Parks Trust's, being a perfect storm waiting to happen. TFG needed to support a thinning programme,

possibly on a 10 year cycle, at budget level and encourage the Council to look at increased commercialisation of tree crops.

There was also benefit from harnessing the enthusiasm of local volunteers / community champions and parish wardens.

#### 10 November 2015

Presentations from the parishes were very interesting and informative and that although different approaches to landscape maintenance were being used by the parishes, they all seemed to be working successfully for them and proving to be very positive in their local areas. It was a good example of localism working.

Alternatives included a group of parishes working together to provide a joint landscaping service. Any changes to parishes taking on responsibility of local landscaping would have to be done when the Council renewed / retendered its current contract. However, discussions between the Council and parishes about this needed to start now. West Bletchley PC and Olney TC speaking to the Parish forum about their experiences would be useful in progressing this.

Also consider developing a toolkit for parishes about how they go about setting up their own landscape maintenance services.

Weed killing kept coming up.

#### 24 November 2015

Serco – different views were important and contract seemed to be working well from their point of view.

Removal of some shrub beds could be beneficial in delivering both savings and improvements, but needed to be on a case by case basis and what was best environmentally as a blanket change from shrubs to grass would not necessarily be right in all areas.

Contractor didn't really see the advantages of letting different areas of grass grow longer although there were environmental and ecological advantages to this in some areas.

Possibility of one-off funding for parishes / community groups to bid for shrub-bed removal – necessary to local buy-in to the process eg Heelands – how repeatable is Heelands across the borough?

#### 9 December 2015

Working relationship between Planning Team and Landscape Maintenance Team not as close as it could be – links need to be stronger.

New landscaping needs to be planned properly right from the start, with work done on appropriate planting schemes, sight lines for traffic etc.

Adoption of landscaping areas by MKC needs to be properly recorded.

Audit trail of certified list of what has been planted, what is specified, and planting methods to prevent root disturbance of hard landscaping.

Replacement of wrong type of trees and a proper strategy for thinning existing trees required. AH reported that business case being worked on.

Watercourse (not necessarily right terminology) maintenance is important. List of banks for which Council was responsible needed; amendment to existing contract (?)

developing a strategy for the most urgent work, and then be absorbed into seasonal maintenance.

### 22 December 2015

Introduction of new "Report It" system a wait and see situation. However, should be reviewed (with the developers) during the autumn of 2016 to see how it is working.

Training for councillors on new system important; councillors possibly have "read only" access as might not need to access whole system.

Need mechanism to refer issues onto other responsible bodies, such as The Parks Trust. Maps need to be accurate to show who owns what. AH advised that the Council did try to keep the maps on the GIS system as up to date as much as possible.

### **Future Meetings**

- 9 February @ 6.30 pm in the Conservatory (apologies from AH)  
Main meeting to finalise the report and then minor changes by e-mail  
PG & ER try and put something together by end of January and review with AH before 5/02 for sense checking.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 8.25 PM