

Minutes of the Landscaping Task and Finish Group (TFG) meeting held on Tuesday 9 December 2015 at 5.30 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 Woodhouse (Senior Landscape Architect [Development Manager]), P Snell (Project Manager [Public Realm]), J Williamson (Senior Planning Officer - Strategic Flood Management) and E Richardson (Overview & Scrutiny Officer)

Minutes of Previous Meeting – 10 November 2015

These were agreed as a correct record of the meeting held on 10 November 2015.

Landscaping and Urban Design – E Woodhouse (EW)

There were 2 officers in the MKC Landscape Architecture Team who received development applications as they were submitted to the Council in order to check that the developers' landscaping proposals were meeting the Council's requirements. They checked for quality, robustness and future maintenance plans.

Where possible, the LA Team tried to influence developers to improve the public amenity aspect of any landscaping plans submitted. Hopefully the Council's comments were considered and taken on board, but the final decision on what was submitted was with the developers.

During the presentation the TFG noted that:

- Issues in relation to appropriate planting on corners which could affect sight lines for traffic was not unique to MK;
- EW checked that the species proposed for any development were appropriate for the location and worked with the Highways Team on whether sight lines would be affected;
- Visibility splays were not shown on plans and it had to be a matter of professional judgement as to what was appropriate;
- Anything below 600cm was a bush, whilst any trees planted, needed to have a base canopy which was above the visibility height of vehicles;
- Historically, developments in MK had allowed for areas of very green buffer planting but there was now a new pressure to squeeze more housing into the remaining development spaces, which meant that areas for amenity landscaping were limited;
- The higher density of dwellings required meant that it was becoming more difficult to get sufficient landscaping into new schemes;
- However, some of the historic planting was now maturing and causing problems, particularly with trees too close to property boundaries causing trouble with tree roots;
- EW agreed that some of this was due the use of inappropriate species for the location, combined with a lack of adequate maintenance in the past;

- Boundary planting was still important for its amenity value and to soften built-up areas, but it did need to be the right species;
- There was a trade-off between the planting of bushes which would suppress weeds and add interest but required maintenance or just putting areas down to grass, which was easy to maintain;
- Wild flower and bulb planting in some areas had proved very successful, although in order to continue to look attractive, wild flower areas needed quite a high level of maintenance;
- MKC provided design codes and planning briefs for landscaping to developers which allowed the Council to influence the inclusion of green spaces in new developments;
- The MKC Landscape Design Team, for a fee, worked with developers to advise on planting schemes;
- Appendix L3 of the Local Plan gave quotas for recreational space, such as play areas;
- In some instances in urban areas, a consistent hard boundary could look better than soft landscaping which individual residents could 'chop about' piecemeal, rather than waiting for the Council to carry out any scheduled pruning / maintenance work;
- Amenity landscaping in MK ranged from very green areas in some of the more mature estates to quite hard landscaping, particularly in the new Western and Eastern Expansion Areas;
- Developers needed to create the right engineering environment underground, including barriers to stop tree roots spreading and the use of proper 'tree soil' for planting;
- In future fewer trees would be planted, but they should go into a better quality environment so that they did not become a nuisance;
- A greater co-operation with developers was required so that the Council could inspect new landscape areas to ensure that they had been planted correctly, particularly trees;
- Ease of maintenance was also as important as the initial installation costs;
- James Williamson reported that drainage schemes were not always detailed in developers' plans and sometimes these were not always suitable for the particular type of landscaping being installed;
- With much of the new development in Milton Keynes still being done on 'green field' sites the Council should be able to do more initial work with developers before their plans were submitted to the Development Control Committee for approval.

The TFG was of the view that the Council's maintenance and urban design teams needed to work more closely with each other, as joined up working would ensure that everyone was involved at the right stage of the process.

The TFG thanked EW for her attendance at the meeting and the information she had supplied.

Replacement Planting Programme – P Snell (PS)

Philip Snell updated the TFG on the Council's current Open Space Management Framework, during which it was noted that:

- The older landscaping in the more mature areas of MK represented how people lived at the time the estates were first developed and some areas now needed updating;
- Some designs were never completed properly, even 30-40 years ago;
- The cost of replacing or redesigning existing landscaping was £58 per square metre for shrubs and £10 per square metre for grass;
- Wildflower planting, although popular with residents, actually required a lot of maintenance to remain looking effective, particularly in small areas;
- Good quality public spaces were important as residents were more likely to stay in the area and look after their own properties;
- A trial re-landscaping project had recently been completed in Heelands which had been very positively received by the local residents;
- The work had been extremely positive, but a very robust business case was needed for each area ear-marked for similar improvements, as well as the support of ward councillors and parish councils;
- The trees in the area had matured and created a continuous canopy, where they were all vying for space;
- There was a balance between how much maintenance should be done because it was nice for residents and improved an area and how much would prevent longer term problems in the future;
- The costs to the Council to correct subsidence caused by tree roots could be as much as much as £70k for each incident, whereas proper and timely maintenance would only have cost £13k;
- The Council had to assess what the effect over time would be of having too many trees in one area. Every day that routine maintenance was put off increased the cost of any remedial work which will be needed in the future;
- The Landscape Maintenance Team was mapping those areas where there were the most claims against the Council arising from problems with trees. As well the reports attached to claims, they were also using aerial photography to analyse tree canopies and spot potential problem areas;
- They were also working on a business case for tree maintenance that was separate from the maintenance plan for shrubs, in order to get costs down, reduce the number of insurance claims and prioritise those areas in most need of work;
- Litter catching in shrub beds added to the cost of maintenance programmes, attracted vermin and made areas unsightly and unloved by residents;
- AH reported that the Council was currently charged an average price for the clean-up of litter as part of the landscape maintenance contract, but the Council could try to renegotiate a new deal now or wait until the contract was up for renewal;

- The Trees estate which was developed in the 1960s, had much wider pavements than those in newer developments, therefore the trees were much further away from the houses. The corners were also wider and the shrubs were further away;
- Removing shrub beds and putting areas to grass would change the landscape maintenance contract straight away;
- However, there was merit in doing work now to save money next year but any changes to an area needed consultation at the planning stage with residents, councillors and parishes in order to get a buy-in to the proposed changes.

The TFG thanked PS for his contribution which had been very useful.

Watercourse Management – J Williamson (JW)

JW explained that his role was to look at development projects in the area to ensure that they included measures to prevent flooding on the Great Ouse and Ouzel rivers. He was also working on a long term project to improve maintenance along rivers in the area.

During JW's presentation the TFG noted that:

- The Council had a role as the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA);
- It was a riparian landowner in its own right;
- Was a member of the Regional Flood and Coastal Committee and the Buckinghamshire and River Ouzel Internal Drainage Board (IDB);
- The IDB monitored small streams and brooks and generally there was no regular or routine maintenance programme currently in place. Any maintenance was made more difficult as ownership of river banks varied from section to section;
- There was also the issue of "grey land" ie no record of who owned the land can be found, meaning that MKC may have to take responsibility for maintenance along those stretches;
- As the LLFA and a riparian landowner, MKC needed to take a lead, and be seen to be doing so, on watercourse maintenance as it could not enforce maintenance actions on other landowners if it was not taking its own responsibilities seriously;
- Water Eaton Brook was designated as a main river, which meant that the Environment Agency was responsible for some maintenance, and had recently cleared a section, but the Council needed to enforce maintenance by local landowners;
- Annual maintenance is not generally necessary, but it should be done on a regular basis, such as a 5 year rotation. This allowed for problem areas to be prioritised for more frequent work if necessary;
- Two years ago MKC allocated £30k per year as a starting point to develop a programme of watercourse maintenance on a priority basis.

TFG further noted that work need to be done to:

- Work out what was the scale of the problem;
- Find out what risks would result from a lack of regular maintenance;
- Consider how this issue could be addressed effectively;
- Develop a strategy to ensure that the work was done;

- Consider whether this needed to be the subject of a specialist contract.

The TFG thanked JW for his help in clarifying the Council's position with regard to watercourse maintenance.

Actions

1. EW to provide the TFG with an example of landscape design brief.
2. PS to circulate the OpenSpace Management Framework 2013-2023 document and the Heelands Landscape Action Plan.

Future Meetings

Future meetings were agreed as follows:

- 22 December @ 6.30 pm in the Conservatory
 - "Report It" Mechanism" – R Ward
 - Review & Report Writing

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 7.20 PM