

## **Minutes of the Landscaping Task and Finish Group (TFG) meeting held on Tuesday 24 November 2015 at 6.30 pm**

- Present:** Councillors Brackenbury, Geaney, P Geary (Chair), Lewis, and Webb
- Officers:** A Hudson (Head of Environment and Waste), J Price (Landscape Contracts Manager), E Richardson (Overview & Scrutiny Officer)
- Also Present:** A Draper (Assistant Contracts Manager, Serco), R Clark (Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager Serco) and 1 member of the public
- Apologies:** Councillor McPake

### **Landscape Maintenance – The Contractor**

Representatives from Serco, the Council's landscape maintenance contractor attended the meeting to discuss their work with the members of the Group. During the presentation and following discussion the Group noted that:

- Serco and the Landscape Team at the Council enjoyed a good working relationship;
- That the detail provided as Item 5 of the agenda for this meeting was an accurate summary of what Serco was doing on behalf of the Council;
- The first 12 months of the contract had passed very quickly but they had been able to make some significant progress;
- Every area had some winter pruning done last year to tidy them up, but there were some areas which were in severe need of extensive works;
- Serco was also developing good working relationships with Parish/Town Councils, Residents' Associations and even individual residents;
- They were also working well with their sub-contractors, Frosts and Steve Dear the tree surgeon. Inclusion of Frosts had been part of the localism agenda inherent in the new contract;
- The Council had established a good set of realistic Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which Serco were able to work to and achieve;
- They had inherited a good calibre of staff from the Council as part of the TUPE arrangements in the contract and although there was some upskilling needed in some areas of the work, the staff were reliable and very willing to go the 'extra mile';
- Apart from the standard maintenance work, Serco was also involved in community projects, such as preparing the training pitch used by the Samoan and Fijian teams during the recent Rugby World Cup. They had also done a lot of work to bring the grounds at Cripps Lodge, a dementia day care centre, up to a standard which meant that they could be enjoyed by service users;
- Year 1 would be used as a benchmark; Serco was already hitting good targets and meeting national standards for local authority landscape maintenance;
- The depot at Bleak Hall had needed more work than initially expected to bring it up to scratch. Serco had invested in infrastructure in order to create a sustainable depot suitable for grounds maintenance work which would be an asset for the Council in the future. The cost of the works had been split 70-30 between Serco and the Council;

- A lot of work had needed to be done during last winter and a significant amount of work had been carried out in the key areas of Oldbrook and Fishermead, including clearing and opening up pathways and alleys.
- Serco was also the Council's Waste and Cleansing contractor and had therefore been able to successfully co-ordinate landscaping works, which very often exposed large amounts of litter, with their street cleansing teams;
- The transfer of some community assets had caused a few localised problems and confusion as to who was then responsible for care and maintenance of any landscape associated with the asset, but these issues were now being resolved and sorted out;
- There was a horticultural skills gap with some of the TUPEd staff, but Serco was planning to train staff over the next year and were pleased with the willingness of staff to learn new skills. Horticultural skills were particularly important in the care of cemeteries, where a high proportion of the work could be considered gardening, rather than just maintenance;
- Serco was tackling short term tree work but at the moment the budget was not there for long term tree care. A tree strategy and proper maintenance plan needed to be carefully planned so that costs did not spiral out of control in future years;
- At present, strong winds and gales always meant that a lot of emergency clear up and remedial work had to be done afterwards. If a proper tree maintenance programme was in place then everywhere would be a lot safer;
- Serco was helping the Council to deliver sustainable change and cost efficiencies going forward, moving towards a performance based programme of maintenance;
- There was very little room for manoeuvre with the grass cutting schedule or ad hoc works, but there was scope to make changes to the locations of some of the shrub beds, reducing the need for winter pruning;
- There were some locations where shrub beds could be removed and replaced with grass, which was easier and cheaper to maintain. In some areas, opening up the landscape by removing unwanted shrubs could discourage anti-social behaviour and make local residents feel safer;
- Analysis of shrub beds would be needed to decide if they were adding value to the local environment in their current locations? Decisions needed to be made as to whether they were in the wrong place or could they be replaced by other, more appropriate plants?
- Although in need of regular cutting, large areas of grass were easy to maintain and could be cost effective, saving as much as 50p per square metre as opposed to the costs of shrub maintenance;
- There were machines available which could remove shrubs, prepare the ground and plant new grass seed all at the same time. Investment in such a machine could be part of a spend-to-save programme, with spare capacity being hired out to other organisations / local authorities, ultimately becoming self-funding;
- Serco had found a very talented team of staff at the Council, who were doing an excellent job, but they had been spread too thinly and had been trying to do too much with too few resources. Serco staff were specialists who were able to concentrate on the specific issues relating to landscape maintenance;
- Serco was also very experienced at dealing with TUPE contracts, being prepared to invest in equipment and staff training in order to increase motivation;

- Bringing the local landscaping up to an acceptable standard had not been easy and was unlikely to get any easier in the future. However, joint collaborative working between like-minded people was proving to be very successful;
- November had been a good time to start the new contract as it had given everyone a chance to get settled before the spring. The mild winter had meant that Serco had been able to start on the grass cutting schedule in March;
- Complaints about encroaching and overgrown shrubs were one of the most common complaints councillors received from local residents and any measures that alleviated the issue were to be welcomed;
- Communication was key and any plans to remove shrub beds would need to be discussed with local residents;
- Serco was also the Council's contractor for street cleansing and refuse collection. The street cleaning teams were now equipped with secateurs to enable them to carry out minor trimming work along path edges. They were also expected to report any major landscaping issues they spotted in the course of their regular duties;
- The Council's 'Report It' system automatically sent requests for landscape maintenance action submitted by the public to Serco, generating a job sheet. However, before work was carried out a check needed to be made as to who owned the land and was responsible for its upkeep. Although reported via the Council, it could well be Parks Trust land, or even private property, where the owner would be responsible for maintenance. Once ownership was established, Serco worked out what needed to be done and fed this back to the Council;
- Different weed killers were used on hard and soft surfaces. A lot of the chemicals used in the past were no longer available and most modern weed killers were glyphosates, which needed at least 3 treatments a year;
- There was a gradual move away from chemical weed killers and Serco was trialling the use of a metal brush attachment on their road sweepers, whilst good results were being obtained by other local authorities using hot steam treatments. Environmentally, there was a need to reduce the amount of chemicals being used on the land, but alternative methods could be more expensive;
- When maintaining shrub beds, invasive species, including self-set trees, were being removed and staff were being trained to recognise these. There was also a focus on the benefits of wildlife diversity and pruning schedules were planned round the nesting season;
- Management of the local landscape was the responsibility of Council Officers; Serco then maintained it as instructed;
- No redesigning of landscaped areas had taken place yet; the current work was to try and contain the existing landscaping and bring it up to a proper standard. Improvements would not really show until years 3 or 4.
- Extensive landscape maintenance programmes cost money and between them Serco and the Council were trying to manage these costs whilst recognising the importance to local residents of a quality, life enhancing landscape.

On behalf of the TFG, the Chair thanked Mr Draper and Mr Clark for their attendance at the meeting, their presentation and contribution to the discussion.

## Actions

1. The team from Serco to provide the TFG with the estimated costs for removing unnecessary shrub beds and the projected savings that would accrue from this approach.

## Future Meetings

The next scheduled meeting was:

- 09 December @ 5.30 pm in the Conservatory
  - “Report It” Mechanism
  - Replanting Programme
  - Landscape in Urban Design

It was agreed that a further meeting needed to be arranged to pick up issues relating to watercourse maintenance responsibilities. The Chair and Overview and Scrutiny Officer would review the Committee Diary to see if it was possible to hold a further meeting before Christmas.

Due to commitments of 4 members of the Group (and of the Overview and Scrutiny Officer) to the Budget Scrutiny Committee in January, meetings during that month were unlikely. Further meetings would be arranged for February to review the evidence gathered and prepare the report for presentation to Cabinet on 14 March 2016.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 8.15 PM