

**LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE BEST VALUE PILOT PROJECT -FINAL REPORT**

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**1. Purpose**

- 1.1 To present the final report of the Landscape Maintenance Pilot Best Value Review which was undertaken to help develop an organised approach to best value reviews.

**2. Summary**

- 2.1 The Landscape Maintenance Best Value Pilot Project commenced in November 1998. A Lead Officer (Paul Robinson), who was independent of the service under review, and Lead Managers (Andy Hudson and Alan Prockter) were identified to oversee this project.
- 2.2 One of the first tasks the Lead Group undertook was to establish a Reference Group, comprising of internal and external stakeholders in the service, which would meet to consider the outcome of the different review phases.
- 2.3 Of the 30,869 hectares of land within Milton Keynes, this Council is responsible for the maintenance of 1,161 hectares. The grass area maintained is 657 hectares with 89 hectares of shrubbery. There are 96,070 trees and also woodland area covering 85,092 square metres.
- 2.4 Government advice on how to undertake Best Value reviews placed emphasis on the 4 C's: Challenge, Consult, Compare and Compete. These were taken into account throughout the review.
- 2.5 The landscape maintenance services has been subject to the Compulsory Competitive Tendering regime for 11 years. This has already provided service efficiencies such as improved quality and has driven down costs. Also, the service is very tightly defined in terms of the contract specifications. Therefore the opportunities for identifying further efficiencies and improvements to the service were limited. Nonetheless, during the course of the review a number of issues have been identified which will require further investigation.
- 2.6 The recommended actions are set out in **Annex G** to the report. The recommendations have arisen as a result of the conclusions of the consultant (employed to obtain further information as part of a benchmarking exercise and to scrutinise it), the Reference Group, the Citizens Panel and the Lead Officers.

3. **Recommendations**

3.1 That the recommendations set out in Annex G to the report be agreed.

3.2 That the initiation of the pilot scheme in partnership with Campbell Park Parish Council be welcomed.

#### 4. **Background**

- 4.1 The review team consisted of Paul Robinson (Lead Officer), Andy Hudson and Alan Prockter (Lead Managers).
- 4.2 From the outset it was agreed that this review would not cover the whole range of services undertaken by the Landscape Maintenance Department as this would be too wide ranging to enable a comprehensive review to take place. The list of the services which were covered by this review are attached to the terms of reference for this review (see **Annex A**).
- 4.3 Also, a Reference Group was established to consider the outcome of the different review phases. The membership of the Reference Group involved Lead Officers and Managers, external and internal stakeholders. A list of the Reference Group members is attached at **Annex B**.
- 4.4 Of the 30,869 hectares of land within Milton Keynes this Council is responsible for the maintenance of 1,161 hectares. The grass area maintained is 657 hectares with 89 hectares of shrubbery. There are 96,070 trees and also woodland area covering 85,092 square metres.
- 4.5 There are four contractors, including Synergy, who provide the majority of landscape maintenance services to the Council. They cover 10 contract areas and the contracts range from 5/7 years. There are also some additional specialist contractors engaged for specialists work such as tree surgery. On the Client side there are in total 10 staff.
- 4.6 When undertaking the review the following needed to be placed in context:
- (a) Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) - This service has been subject to the CCT regime for 11 years. This has provided service efficiencies and has arguably improved quality, but in the main the focus has been to reduce costs. Also, the service is very tightly defined in terms of the contract specifications.
  - (b) Quality Audit - The service was the subject of a Quality Audit Service Review back in 1991, which looked at many of the issues to be examined under a "Best Value Review". A similar consultation questionnaire to that used in 1991 has been used for the recent Parish and Neighbourhood Council questionnaire.
  - (c) Budgets - This service has had its budget steadily reduced, in real terms, for several years, despite large additional areas of work and responsibility being added through Local Government Reorganisation and the growth of MK. Standards of service have been reduced to match the budget. Area growth over the past five years has increased by 20.6% whilst the contract budget, in real terms has reduced by 22.6%. Also, commuted sums paid by the MKDC and CNT (total in excess of £8 Million) to pay for ongoing maintenance have been depleted.
  - (d) Heritage - The landscaping design is part of the "heritage" and original concept/vision of Milton Keynes. It is one, if not the major, reason why people

and businesses chose and continue to choose Milton Keynes as a place to live and work.

- (e) Comparisons with other authorities - it was accepted that each local authority performs in a different environment and that the data obtained might not be exactly comparable. It should also be recognised the way in which each authority compiles its data will differ and in some cases no formal recording is in place.

4.7 The Reference Group agreed the terms of reference for the review which were as follows:

- (a) what services are currently provided, including structures, methodologies and reporting arrangements
- (b) the current cost of the services
- (c) appropriate benchmarks to measure current performance
- (d) alternative methods of service provision
- (e) a user view of the service
- (f) current initiatives for performance improvement.

## 5. **Issues and Choices**

5.1 Government advice on how to undertake Best Value reviews placed emphasis on the 4 C's: Challenge, Consult, Compare and Compete. These were taken into account throughout the review as follows:

- (a) Compare

A benchmarking exercise was undertaken. However, whilst valuable information was received, it proved difficult in some areas to interpret as no two authorities provided the service in a similar way. The officers therefore decided to employ a consultant to obtain further information and to scrutinise it. A summary of the consultants report is attached at **Annex C**.

Site visits were made to other unitary authorities, Peterborough, Swindon and Telford and Wrekin, to ascertain how their Landscape Maintenance service was provided. The consultant visited these authorities and was accompanied by Dee Scarland (Newport Pagnell Town Councillor) of the Reference Group.

- (b) Challenge

The Reference Group challenged the way in which the Landscape Maintenance service is provided in Milton Keynes. It considered a range of possible options for the future provision of the service and identified those options it wished to see investigated in more detail. A list of those options is attached at **Annex D**. The consultant referred to above was asked to consider some of these options as part of his report.

It is pleasing to report that the Milton Keynes entry won the regional Thames and Chiltern Country in Bloom (Towns and Cities Category). This shows to some extent that the landscape maintenance general standards are at least as high, if not higher, than other areas within the Thames and Chiltern region. Informal comments from the judges also indicate that Milton Keynes also fair well nationally.

(c) Consult

A Citizens Panel was held on 15 July 1999 and a copy of the report of that Panel is attached at **Annex E**.

A questionnaire was sent to all Parish/Town/Neighbourhood Councils. 26 of the 43 Local Councils responded to the questionnaire, a summary of their responses is attached at **Annex F**.

(d) Compete

The landscape maintenance services has been subject to the Compulsory Competitive Tendering regime for 11 years. This has already provided service efficiencies such as improved quality and has driven down costs. Also, the service is very tightly defined in terms of the contract specifications. Therefore the opportunities for identifying further efficiencies and improvements to the service were limited. Nonetheless, during the course of the review a number of issues were identified which will require further investigation.

## 6. **Implications**

### 6.1 Environmental

It is recognised that there are a number of environmental implications need to be considered as part of any full review of the landscape maintenance service. However, in the light of the resources available, this pilot review was unable to consider these implications in detail. Some examples of the issues which need to be considered are:

- (a) Pesticides - when and where to be used
- (b) Wood and vegetation clippings - disposal, use for compost, mulch, biofuels
- (c) Plants used - wildlife value, safety, grown in non-peat based compost
- (d) Machinery used - types of fuel
- (e) Maintenance of sites - appropriate timing for wildlife etc.

## 6.2 Equalities

Equalities monitoring is an essential element of the Quality Management Framework and a means of ensuring service access and relevance.

## 6.3 Financial

Whilst the review process endeavoured to ensure the service is efficient and economic as possible, the scope was limited due to the service already being subject to the CCT process over a number of years and a result of the Quality Audit undertaken in 1991.

## 6.4 Legal

Detailed legislation will follow and further guidance is expected to assist in the process of developing Best Value.

## 6.5 Staff and Accommodation

The review has been resource intensive in that a lot has been done in a short space of time. It should be noted that the time spent on the review, both by the independent lead officer and service managers, does have an impact on the service they are able to provide in undertaking their normal day to day responsibilities.

## 7. Conclusions

7.1 In the light of the actions referred to above a number of conclusions have been reached. These have arisen mainly from the consultants report, the Citizens Panel and the Reference Group. In addition, the Lead Officer/Managers have also reached some conclusions. A list of the conclusions reached have been included in a schedule attached at **Annex G**. Included in this schedule is background information as to how these conclusions have been reached, together with a recommended course of action where appropriate.

7.2 There are some suggestions made by the consultant, Citizens Panel and Reference Group and Lead Officers which have not been included in the list of conclusions, this is either because they are matters that have been/are in the process of being addressed or they would be repetitive.

7.3 In summary, the general conclusions are:

- (a) that the general standard of landscape maintenance in Milton Keynes is perceived to be high;
- (b) that Milton Keynes' costs are broadly similar to those declared by the comparator authorities, with one exception;
- (c) in common with other local authorities studied, landscaping appears to have become a target for expenditure cuts;
- (d) standards of performance are broadly similar with those found in benchmark authorities;

- (e) without reducing standards further, there is little scope for further economies;
- (f) some data needs to be treated with caution;
- (g) Milton Keynes is the only authority which makes use of the Section 136 provisions;
- (h) further investigations are required as to why one authority claims much lower rates than the others in the group;
- (i) closer working with the Parks Trust and Local Councils require further investigation (see 7.4 below);
- (j) further information should be made available to the public on the landscape maintenance service and the level of service they should expect;
- (k) further contract monitoring is required, such as local citizens and Local Councils becoming further involved in an 'Environment Watch'; and
- (l) consideration should be given to releasing more of the inspectors time so that they may be more pro-active in the monitoring of landscape contracts.

7.4 Arising from the Reference Group's deliberations on alternative methods of service provision and performance improvement, the Lead Managers have initiated discussions with Campbell Park Parish Council on the South Central City contract that ends on 31 December 1999. A Best Value pilot contract is to be undertaken by agreement with the two adjacent contractors to that area, Vincent Landscapes Limited and Synergy, who are to work in a partnership arrangement with the Parish Council to deliver the services.

Background Papers: Agenda and Notes of Meetings of Reference Group