

Landscape Maintenance Task and Finish Group Report March 2016

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**Membership: Councillor P Geary (Chair)
Councillors Brackenbury, Geaney, McPake, Lewis and Webb**

Overview & Scrutiny Officer: Elizabeth Richardson (Tel: 01908 252629)

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Introduction and Membership

The Landscape Maintenance Task and Finish Group (the Group) was established to review how well the Council's new Landscape Maintenance Contract, which began in November 2014, was operating, what the improvements and advantages were of the new contract and consider what further improvements could be recommended in order to ensure the long term sustainability of the green spaces in Milton Keynes.

The Group is composed of Councillors Ric Brackenbury, Maggie Geaney, Peter Geary (Chair), David Lewis, Vanessa McPake and Alan Webb. Elizabeth Richardson served as the Overview and Scrutiny Officer. Additional officer support was provided by Andy Hudson (Head of Environment and Waste) and John Price (Landscape Contract Manager).

The purpose of this report is:

- (i) to outline the work the Task and Finish Group has carried out to scrutinise how well the current Landscape Maintenance Contract is operating;
- (ii) to provide an assessment of the future long term sustainability and affordability of the Council's landscape maintenance strategy; and
- (iii) to present recommendations to Cabinet about future work programmes to ensure a continued high standard of maintenance and that low priority items, such as tree thinning, do not get overlooked or deferred indefinitely.

Councillor Peter Geary
Chair, Landscape Maintenance Task and Finish Group
March 2016

Task and Finish Group Summary

The Task and Finish Group met on a regular basis during the autumn and winter of 2015/16 and considered the following aspects of the Landscape Maintenance Contract:

Date	Topic
29 September 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of Scoping Document • MKC Approach to Landscape Maintenance
27 October 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landscape Maintenance at The Parks Trust • Landscape Maintenance and Milton Keynes Council – a Precis
10 November 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Parish View • Value for Money
24 November 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Contractor’s View – Serco
9 December 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landscaping in Urban Planning • Replanting Programme • Watercourse Maintenance
22 December 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council’s ‘Report It’ mechanism
3 March 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of Draft Report
9 March 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report presented to Scrutiny Management Committee

Work was then carried out during early 2016 to prepare this report on the work done by the Group and draft recommendations for improvements to how landscape maintenance is managed in Milton Keynes.

The draft report was presented to the Scrutiny Management Committee for comment on 9 March 2016 and will be presented to Cabinet in June 2016.

The agenda, reports, presentations and minutes for each of the above meetings are available on the Council’s website at: http://milton-keynes.cmis.uk.com/milton-keynes/Committees/tabid/62/ctl/ViewCMIS_CommitteeDetails/mid/572/id/1048/Default.aspx

Background

Humans have been managing their local landscapes for thousands of years; good landscape management is important as people feel better about their lives when they have access to a green environment.

Milton Keynes is renowned for its green expanses, with the Council responsible for maintaining a huge area, proportionately much greater than most other similar councils. The Council maintains around 1,100 hectares of grass, shrubs, hedges, trees and woodland and overall there are more than 2,500 hectares of landscaping in Milton Keynes – the equivalent of 3,600 football pitches. This work is carried out alongside The Parks Trust, which is responsible for a further 1,800 ha of landscape in Milton Keynes.

Recently the Council has devolved some landscape maintenance to parish and town councils, with the remaining landscaping maintenance services being undertaken by Serco, which also looks after local waste collections and street cleansing. The contract started in November 2014 and is provided in partnership with Frosts, a local landscaping contractor and with Steve Dear, a local specialist tree surgeon.

The current contract was subjected to an extensive tendering process and the final decision based on the quality of the bid as tenderers were asked to include innovative suggestions for the future maintenance of local landscapes and not just price. The contract specification is based on 4 basic types of measured works:

- Performance (P),
- Frequency (F),
- Schedule of Rates (S) and
- Day Work (DW);

Performance and Frequency works are regular tasks based on either an agreed standard of work or the number of operations per year. Schedule of Rates work covers ad hoc but predicted tasks and Day Works cover any additional work which cannot be predicted.

The contract is a “cap and collar” contract where regular works can be banked or borrowed across the duration of the contract. For example, in a very dry summer the frequency of grass cutting could be reduced and the unused cuts ‘banked’ for use later in the contract.

Executive Summary

The Landscaping Task and Finish Group (the Group) was established by the Council's Scrutiny Management Committee to look at the landscaping contract that had been let by the Council the previous year. The Group's remit was to look at the first year of implementation, the scope of the work and the way that the work is done. The Group also heard from parishes which were undertaking their own landscaping as a result of the contract to understand how they were finding the new arrangements.

The Group worked with a number of people including the Parks Trust, an organisation which is responsible for a similar amount of green space in Milton Keynes as the Council. The Parks Trust generally provides a good level of service with high satisfaction levels, as well as running a programme of engagement with people and the parks. It was able to provide some challenging insights which the Group was able to use in its approach to evidence heard at other meetings as well as providing ways in which it was able to save money. The Parks Trust was also able to share with the Group its view on some of the big landscaping challenges facing Milton Keynes.

As part of the landscaping contract, a number of parishes in Milton Keynes started undertaking their own landscaping services. In total this amounted to just over 30% of the land for which Milton Keynes Council was responsible. This was done through a number of ways and the Group heard from several of the parish councils with their experiences, which were on the whole positive.

As part of the evidence gathering process, the Group heard from the Council's current contractor, Serco, hearing what had gone well and also about the challenges experienced in its first year of operation.

The Group also heard from the team responsible for the reporting of landscaping problems and how the new reporting system would help in enabling the Council to be more responsive to people's concerns. The Group heard about the Council's role as the Strategic Flood Authority, noting how the landscaping contract needs to mesh with the Council's statutory responsibility as a riparian landowner, so that maintenance of the Council's own watercourses is done to reduce the chance of flooding.

Finally, the Group heard from members of the planning team as to how they worked with developers to ensure that the way that new areas of the city were planned so that, when they were adopted, the Council did not have to take over planting schemes that were inappropriate and costing the taxpayer in the long term to maintain, but which would still provide a pleasing local environment.

One member of the public attended one of the meetings.

This report contains a number of recommendations which the Group hopes will be taken forward in the coming years to both improve the environment in Milton Keynes, but also save the Council resources in the long term.

The Evidence

The Parks Trust

The Parks Trust (the Trust) in Milton Keynes is responsible for a similar amount of green space as Milton Keynes Council although the make-up of that space is slightly different. The Trust is funded from its own resources, having been endowed from its inception and having a strong trading arm that earns money to fund the Trust's work in the city. That said, the Trust still has to look at ways to save costs. The Trust also has to deal with the legacy of the original planting that was carried out over 40 years ago and is now coming to maturity in a similar way to the Council. The Trust has consistency of budgets, being self-funded, which is enviable for an organisation such as Milton Keynes Council. However, Milton Keynes is relatively unique with two groups undertaking landscape maintenance in the city and it seems obvious that both organisations can work together to offer benefits to each other.

The Parks Trust has usually undertaken its works via contractors undertaking term contracts. These were originally 3 years but have now generally increased to 6 years. This enables the contractor to invest in staff and equipment during the early years, which shorter contracts do not. Usually the contracts are a hybrid of performance and frequency, at least for grass mowing.

The team undertaking the management of the Trust's landscaping function is 16 strong and works well together. They are encouraged to think, coordinate and innovate. Many live in Milton Keynes and have done for many years; they know the city well and the way it works, which is vital for the unique way that Milton Keynes operates. The team is also able to ensure quality control across the contracts. On the whole, contractors are small to medium, locally based companies and experience has shown that this results in both quality and price improvements.

The Parks Trust has recently also taken on a small direct works team. On the whole, this small group of people carries out reactive works that are generally more expensive for contractors to undertake from a framework style arrangement. This has enabled significant savings on reactive works, as well as increasing customer satisfaction. This is working well for the Trust as it is accepted that on many of the term contracts this would not produce the same result.

Recommendation 1:

That Milton Keynes Council should consider employing a small direct works team to undertake small reactive works that are outside the scope of the landscaping contract. This should only be done once a business case has

been prepared after the reactive works have been analysed throughout the first year of the contract.

Recommendation 2:

That any future landscape contract renegotiation ensures that provision is made for any soft landscaping affecting street furniture is maintained and controlled.

The Parks Trust aims for 100% satisfaction rating but makes sure that if this is not possible, it maintains 90-95%. It became clear that if an organisation settled for any less then it would achieve far less.

This is helped by having very specific plans about what will happen in which places. These are for the contractors to follow. Despite having around 1800 ha to maintain, these plans are specific to almost the square metre, including individual trees. This is important to ensure that areas where spring flowers are planted are not mown or indeed trees where bats roost are not disturbed at the wrong time of year. Attention to detail has proved to be vitally important in achieving a high satisfaction rating, both in the preparation of the contract specifications and in the implementation and monitoring of the work.

The Trust also operates a number of lump sum contracts for works such as leisure route resurfacing which has shown significant savings over previous term contracts.

Grass Cutting

The Trust is constantly challenging itself on its grass cutting regime, both in the frequency of cutting and also the length of grass that should be maintained. Some areas are cut 15 times a year, others much less. Over the years it has been shown that leaving grass longer in the early part of the season both looks attractive and also has biodiversity benefits. That said, this has to be done selectively. Experience has been that correct implementation is crucial to this being accepted. For instance, grass should be kept short near to leisure routes and paths. If the edge is mown it demonstrates that the area is managed, with the cutting being graduated back further from the paths. Generally, grass nearer to housing should be kept shorter. Reducing the frequency of grass mowing can have biodiversity benefits as well as saving resources, and, if implemented carefully, this will not reduce, or sometimes even improve, customer satisfaction. The way in which this is implemented however is vital, including how the area is used currently; for instance an area used for play is not generally good with long grass. Some of the money saved here could be spent on increasing the cuts in areas of high importance, thus increasing customer satisfaction.

Recommendation 3:

That consideration is given to allowing grass to grow longer in some areas under the Council's management but this should only be done in a planned way, learning from experience and in consultation with local groups such as ward councillors and parish councils.

Recommendation 4:

That consideration is given to increasing the frequency of grass cutting in other areas.

Grazing

The Parks Trust manages a significant part of its estate by grazing with animals. This is not only a relatively cheap way of keeping the grass short but also adds diversity and generally makes a profit. While animals do have problems, this has and does work well for the Trust. It was not immediately apparent that the Council would have many areas where this type of management could be undertaken but it is thought that this should be kept under review if any areas are identified and a link up with the Parks Trust may be a way of undertaking this.

Recommendation 5:

That the possibility of grazing as an option for maintenance of certain areas is kept under review.

Shrub Management

Milton Keynes has a lot of shrubs. It is something that is a part of the way Milton Keynes looks. That said, these shrub beds need to be maintained, particularly where woody weeds, such as bramble and blackthorn, are prevalent. Poor landscape maintenance in front of houses, particularly of shrubs, can lead to an area seeming run down. The maintenance of these schemes is often labour-intensive and hence costly; but is important. Coppicing can also seem brutal but is important in maintaining the health of some shrubs; communication with local people is key when radical work is being undertaken.

The maintenance of sight lines is also important, as is the mix of plants to ensure colour is maintained. It should also be noted that shrubs do have a determinate life and eventually need to be replaced, so this should be budgeted for.

Recommendation 6:

That woody weed control, such as brambles or blackthorn, needs to be undertaken regularly to improve the overall look of areas. If radical work is planned, this should be communicated to local residents, parish councils and ward councillors, prior to the work commencing. Plants do need to be replaced from time to time and this should be budgeted for.

The Parks Trust has worked hard over the past few years to make efficiencies while not lowering its desire to maintain the satisfaction of local residents and has found a number of ways of doing this. This includes employing contractors directly, not allowing sub-contractors to be used which can lead to both profits and pricing for contingencies to be added to the cost of a contract a number of times. The grass cutting is left with specialist contractors who have invested in the right equipment as it is generally expensive. Quality is also an important factor in the selection of contractors. Using local, small and medium sized companies has improved the quality and price of the work that is done. If a company has a contract which is important to it, it will ensure the work is done well. Cost-wise, smaller firms generally have lower overheads and can work for less. This also has the advantage that people who are working here, also live here, and understand the way the city works.

Recommendation 7:

That letting more contracts to smaller companies, rather than just one large contract, is explored in the future.

Tree Plantations

Plantations are the "perfect storm" waiting to happen. In general, many were overstocked initially with fast growing species in order to get an almost immediate impact. This is not sustainable in the longer term as such plants tend to grow upwards in the search for light and become unstable. In addition, many of these schemes have not been thinned since they were planted, some over 40 years ago. The Forestry Commission recommends thinning on a 10 year cycle. This is rarely possible but is a target that should be aimed at. Apart from safety, the risks of not thinning include leaving a massive bill into the future, as well as seeing some areas having to be totally cleared and replanted.

Recommendation 8:

That Milton Keynes Council should develop a tree thinning policy and build funding into future budgets for this. The Council should aim for thinning on a 10 year cycle.

Trees are a significant part of Milton Keynes, with tree lined avenues being a part of what makes Milton Keynes the city it is. They are, however, getting larger and causing problems; the Group was given no assurance that plans were in place about how to manage this. These trees are well loved by many and management will undoubtedly be difficult. The Group learnt that the Parks Trust had developed a policy for the thinning of the London Plane trees that line the boulevards by Campbell Park. This is a 30 year strategy that has been consulted on, letting people know that this is in the best interest of the trees and is planned, not just done when problems appear.

Recommendation 9:

That a policy for managing the trees along the boulevards and main estate roads in Milton Keynes is developed and funded.

Boundary planting near to properties is also an increasing cause for concern across the city. The trees that were originally planted are becoming mature and this is creating problems for some properties, including causing subsidence. The Parks Trust has worked over the past few years to identify trees which could cause problems and is dealing with these by the removal of trees before problems arise. These works are often 2½ times more expensive than other works, but since the policy was implemented by the Trust two years ago, they have not had any claims for damage. It is noted that a budget saving was put in for similar work to Milton Keynes Council so this policy and its funding is important.

Recommendation 10:

That the appropriateness, including environmental factors such as local soil type, of some planting close to properties, boundaries and street furniture is examined.

Commercial Opportunities

The Parks Trust, in addition to the grazing of land has already been discussed, has also planted some cricket bat willow trees. These are both attractive whilst growing but also offer an income when at maturity. The same is true with fire wood, of which the Parks Trust generates a significant amount.. They have found that this "disappears" if it is not immediately moved, but this does also offer an useful income stream, even if it is small.

Recommendation 11:

That the opportunities for planting commercial species such as cricket bat willow, fire wood or indeed, other uses from the landscaped areas, should be investigated, particularly in developing areas.

Co-operation

The Parks Trust has a very similar role to the Council's Landscaping Section in looking after the city's green space in the future. The Group heard how there were some invisible lines, one side of which the Council was responsible for, and on the other side the Trust. Attempts had been made in the past to change this, but it has not yet been resolved. However, with two organisations doing similar things, there should be room for far more collaborative working to try to reach the common aim of improving the environment in the city. The same is true as Milton Keynes continues to grow. The Parks Trust is both keen to, and able to, take over the management of many areas new landscaping from developers as the land is adopted, with no recourse on the taxpayer for maintenance in future years. The Group also heard how the Trust worked with volunteers across the city

to assist with its management of green spaces. While the Council also did this, its process was not anywhere near so well advanced.

Recommendation 12:

That closer working between the Council and the Parks Trust should be encouraged.

Recommendation 13:

That the Parks Trust should be encouraged to adopt green spaces from developers when new areas are built.

Recommendation 14:

That the Council should look to develop a network of volunteers to help manage the landscaping and monitor the contract around the city.

Parishes

The Group invited parish councils to come along to a meeting to hear of their experiences and three parish councils took up the invitation: West Bletchley, Olney and Shenley Brook End. There were various models of delivery and the parish councils that spoke to the Group had each adopted a different model, but one which suited them best.

West Bletchley Council spends £216k on their landscape maintenance every year, £180k of which was provided from Milton Keynes Council, the rest was raised from the local precept. While this has an impact on local taxation, it is well received generally by residents and the Parish Council was keen to take over further management in the future, particularly the maintenance of parks. The Group heard how the Parish Council had paid to have 300 tree stumps removed; it considered that the local trees were generally poorly managed and wished to work to see this improved.

Olney Town Council operated on a different scale. It already owned its own equipment for doing its own work and has purchased some more, taking on another person to undertake the work. It also feels that this approach is working well, particularly as it is able to work within the budget that Milton Keynes has provided them with, just. It has been investing in getting local hedges and shrubs into shape as these have not had any routine maintenance for a number of years. This will offer savings in future years.

Shenley Brook End took a different route, operating the half-way house approach. They ran the contract on behalf of the Council with the Council's approved contractor. The Parish Council employs an Allotments Officer who was able to undertake much of the work; it felt that it was risky for them to take over such a large contract at this time; however, having heard from West Bletchley and Olney, they may well consider it in future. It does cost the Parish Council to do this as the Allotments Officer has to be paid;

however the Parish Council is in more control of what is happening and feels that it is worth the cost.

Tree work was generally kept as the responsibility of the Council, even in the areas where the landscaping had been devolved. This was due to the risks involved and the relatively high costs as this type of work could be very specialist. Most parish councils did not have access to the specialist contractors and it was therefore cheaper for the Council to have one contract. West Bletchley had done some tree work with smaller trees that the Council might not have done and it would be keen to take over the tree inspections in its area.

Planned Works

It was generally felt by both West Bletchley and Olney Parish Councils that over 90% of the works they undertook were planned, with the rest being reactive. Olney stated that it was usually able to deal with issues that arose within 24hrs - when they got a complaint they would dispatch a worker with tools to look at the issue. The worker was generally able to resolve the problem with one trip, giving a good service and receiving positive feedback. This is also far cheaper than the Council doing it as it would have to dispatch operatives from Milton Keynes on a 20 mile round trip drive. Shenley does some small works via their wardens. It was felt that while parishes were probably not generally doing much more; they were doing it differently, which was making a significant impact locally.

Olney did express an interest in taking over some work for neighbouring parishes in the future.

All three parishes felt community involvement was increasing, especially in West Bletchley.

Olney and West Bletchley also considered that the next tranche of work that would be ideal for them to take over would be weed treatment, as, in their view, weed treatment on estate roads and paths was not well done currently and that they would be able to do a better job. It was also felt that street cleansing may well be something parishes would wish to get involved in.

The Group heard very positive comments about the devolution of landscaping powers, however it did not hear from all the parishes involved and officers told us that there had been concerns from some parishes. While discussing why other parishes had not taken up the idea, it was thought that the risk of it going wrong was too great for some parish councils. If it went wrong, as the Council knew well, it sometimes went catastrophically wrong and that was a real concern for some parish councils. There was also the possibility that some were waiting to see how others got on and having seen the devolved responsibility work well elsewhere felt they might follow when the contract was re-negotiated.

Recommendation 15:

That prior to the landscaping contract being re-tendered or extended, that all parish councils are given the opportunity to either take over their own landscaping or relinquish their landscaping responsibilities, which would revert to the Council.

Recommendation 16:

That operatives, regardless of their employer, investigating landscaping complaints should be equipped with basic tools, so if at all possible, they can resolve the problem at the first visit.

Recommendation 17:

That the possibility of parish councils being offered the contracts to both control weeds on roads and paths and also to sweep the streets should be considered.

The Contractor: Serco

The Group heard that the contractor felt that the first year of the landscaping contract had gone rather quickly. The team from Serco had regular meetings with the Council's Landscaping Team and on the whole things had progressed well. Serco also had a good relationship with its main sub-contractors, Frosts and Steve Dear. Serco thought it had inherited some good staff from the Council when it took over the contract. It had, in the last year, faced a number of challenges, including initially during the winter maintenance programme, discovering that this was a significantly larger job than first envisaged, as in some areas maintenance had not been done for a number of years. The company was starting to get on top of this but it would take a few years to catch up completely. The strain of this extra work had been a challenge in the first few months.

An immediate challenge was not having a designated depot to take over, as the Council's Bleakhall Depot was almost entirely being used by the new highways contractor. However, Serco was proud of the fact that it had created a sustainable depot quickly from a standing start.

When undertaking the winter maintenance programme and other works, Serco had found hidden litter a problem but had worked efficiently with the street cleansing crews to deal with this. This was a challenge in the wooded shrubby areas where litter gathers and cannot effectively be cleansed until the area is cut back, leaving the area looking untidy.

Recommendation 18:

That where litter is exposed following landscape maintenance works, such as the pruning of shrub beds, the Council's contractor, who is currently responsible for both landscape maintenance and litter picking, ensures that

appropriate action is taken clear any such litter as soon as possible and at the latest within 5 working days.

The ability for parish councils to opt in or opt out of the contract has caused concern as Serco wanted to be able to plan ahead with the purchase of machinery etc which could be difficult if they were to lose part of the contract.

Serco acknowledged that although the staff they inherited were good, there was a horticultural skills gap. They could operate machinery well but knowledge of how to prune and garden properly was in need of improvement for quality work to be ensured.

The contractor understood the tree issues highlighted previously and independently raised the same concerns. It considered a 5 to 10 year action plan would be necessary to get fully in control of the situation and highlighted that trees falling over in high wind situations is both expensive to deal with and also dangerous.

Serco had worked with the Council to try to find budget savings and understandably felt that cutting back on the frequency of grass cutting would not save money, although the removal of some shrub beds would do so. It calculated that the removal of some shrub beds could save £0.50 per square metre per year. The Group felt that this would need to be done in a sympathetic way with the support of the local community and should not be done just to save money, but as one in a range of ways to change landscaping positively and offering overall savings. It also felt that the frequency of weed treatments was not enough for proper maintenance and that this was something that should be looked into.

The Serco representatives also stated that they had undertaken a number of extra projects, one at Cripps Lodge and others across the city, where Serco worked with the community to fundamentally change the way landscaping looks. Pictures were shown to the Group which were generally very positive and this was welcomed both by the Group and by individual ward councillors.

Recommendation 19:

That shrub bed removal could be a way of reducing costs but that this should be considered as part of a bigger picture of landscape improvements, not in isolation and not purely as a cost saving measure. This should be done in consultation with ward members, parish councils and local residents.

Recommendation 20:

That in any landscape redesign proposals providing high quality landscape should be as important as cost savings.

Recommendation 21:

That in any contract re-tendering process the skills of staff should be improved as part of the contract and that the contractor should be continually aiming to upskill its workforce.

Public Access

The Group heard from Rob Ward (Business and Liaison Manager) about the new public access system for reporting landscaping issues to the Council which was to be implemented in April 2016. The Group discussed their experiences of the current system, with some having worked well with it and others having found problems. It was expected that the new system would bring benefits to the reporting of landscaping problems. The Group was aware, however, that this was just a reporting mechanism and that some of the other work about how issues were dealt with was crucial if the system were to function effectively with people being notified when an issue was resolved. The Group was assured that the new "Firmstep" system would be better than the current system, particularly in the way it operated in the back office. The Group sought assurances that the system would be able to be customised to suit the particular needs of Milton Keynes.

Recommendation 22:

That the resources are made available to ensure that the new public access system for reporting landscaping issues can be fully customised to suit the needs of Milton Keynes.

Planning

From the outset, the Group had been concerned that the way in which new estates were designed was crucial to how well they could be maintained in the future. The Group heard from Elizabeth Woodhouse (Senior Landscape Architect) from the Council's Planning Division, who informed the Group about how the Planning Division worked to ensure that the landscaping, as well as other parts of the construction of Milton Keynes, was done correctly. The Group wanted to be certain that the newer estates were designed with the learning that had been gained from the older areas of the city in mind. This particularly came from the experience of the damage that tree roots could cause, which in some areas was substantial. Some discussion was held about the types of trees that should be planted and while the species of tree was stipulated in planning briefs, a specific variety could make all the difference in the actual final setting. It highlighted that the ways of ensuring that the specific type of tree requested had been planted before a landscaped area was adopted by the Council were limited and that some form of certification scheme might be a way forward.

There was also some discussion about tree pits and about new and innovative ways of trying to ensure that tree roots did not cause problems. There was some debate from officers about how effective some of the systems were but it was generally agreed by the Group that newer systems should be investigated if they could help prevent problems. It was also felt that perhaps there should be more communication between the landscape maintenance teams and the design teams to ensure that what was being recommended was what the maintenance teams would like to have to maintain, both from an aesthetic and an economic point of view. Although the teams used to be based close to each other they are now in different buildings, on different sites, but closer working between these teams was vital.

The Planning Team was also working on a consultancy basis with developers, helping them design the landscaping schemes for Milton Keynes. There was some discussion as to whether this could lead to officers feeling that there was a split between their responsibilities; however it was considered that working with developers at an early stage was a good thing.

In scrutinising the development planning of new areas of landscape, the Group was aware that it had exceeded its initial remit. However, it felt that the link between getting landscaping right at the planning stage and effective maintenance in the future was important as this would impact on how future contracts were managed, and therefore makes the following recommendations accordingly.

Recommendation 23:

That a method of checking the specified variety and types of trees and plants should be implemented to ensure the correct planting schemes are carried out in new estates. This may be through a warranty or licensing scheme.

Recommendation 24:

That more modern methods of stopping tree roots causing problems with infrastructure, both now and in the future, should be investigated and implemented if they are considered to be beneficial.

Recommendation 25:

That better working relationships are formed between the Planning Design teams and the Landscape Maintenance teams so that any future maintenance issues are taken into account at the design stage.

Drainage

As a landowner, Milton Keynes Council is responsible for the maintenance of a number of watercourses. The Group heard evidence that some of these were not being maintained as well as they should be, possibly running the risk of causing flooding unless this was resolved. The maintenance required

was generally trimming and weeding work and the Group felt that it this should be included in the contract.

Recommendation 26:

That the maintenance of those watercourses which are the responsibility of the Council should be incorporated into the landscaping contract.

Conclusion

The work of the Task and Finish Group was undertaken after just one year of a 5 year contract. There will no doubt be a number of other changes in the coming years that will alter the way that the contract works. It was felt that on the whole the contract was working well. The partnership with parish councils was also working, even if it had caused some complications in administration. The contractors have also worked well and have made some improvements across the city, as well as having introduced some different working practices to landscape maintenance which are to be welcomed.

The recommendations in this report are not onerous and are aimed at moulding the existing contract rather than fundamentally changing it. The benefits of working with The Parks Trust and others is quiet obvious. The need to balance the community benefits of good landscaping, as well as just cutting the bill, should also be self-explanatory.

The contract is due to be renewed in another 4 years and it was felt that a second piece of work before the contract was renewed, or indeed re-tendered, would be helpful in looking at how the contract should be restructured, such as whether smaller contractors should be used more or continue with one large organisation etc.

Recommendation 27:

That a Task and Finish Group is set up one year before contract renewal, to enable any changes that the group feel are necessary, to be examined.

Recommendations

All recommendations are offered to the Cabinet in the hope that they will prove useful in providing an assessment of the future long term sustainability and affordability of the Council's landscape maintenance strategy and about future work programmes, to ensure a continued high standard of maintenance and that low priority items, such as tree thinning, or watercourse maintenance do not get overlooked or deferred indefinitely.

1. That Milton Keynes Council should consider employing a small direct works team to undertake small reactive works that are outside the scope of the landscaping contract. This should only be done once a business case has been prepared after the reactive works have been analysed throughout the first year of the contract.
2. That any future landscape contract renegotiation ensures that provision is made for any soft landscaping affecting street furniture is maintained and controlled.
3. That consideration is given to allowing grass to grow longer in some areas under the Council's management but this should only be done in a planned way, learning from experience and in consultation with local groups such as ward councillors and parish councils.
4. That consideration is given to increasing the frequency of grass cutting in other areas.
5. That the possibility of grazing as an option for the maintenance of certain areas is kept under review.
6. That woody weed control, such as brambles or blackthorn, needs to be undertaken regularly to improve the overall look of areas. If radical work is planned, this should be communicated to local residents, parish councils and ward councillors, prior to the work commencing. Plants do need to be replaced from time to time and this should be budgeted for.
7. That letting more contracts to smaller companies, rather just one large contract, is explored in the future.
8. That Milton Keynes Council should develop a tree thinning policy and build funding into future budgets for this. The Council should aim for thinning on a 10 year cycle.
9. That a policy for managing the trees along the boulevards and main estate roads in Milton Keynes be developed and funded.
10. That the appropriateness, including environmental factors such as local soil type, of some planting close to properties, boundaries and street furniture is examined.

11. That the commercial opportunities for planting commercial species such as cricket bat willow, fire wood, or indeed, other uses from the landscaped areas, should be investigated, particularly in developing areas.
12. That closer working between the Council and the Parks Trust should be encouraged.
13. That the Parks Trust should be encouraged to adopt green spaces from developers when new areas are built.
14. That the Council should look to develop a network of volunteers to help manage the landscaping and monitor the contracts around the city.
15. That prior to the landscaping contract being re-tendered or extended, all parish councils are given the opportunity to either take over their own landscaping or relinquish their landscaping responsibilities which would revert to the Council.
16. That all operatives, regardless of their employer, investigating landscaping complaints should be equipped with basic tools, so that, if at all possible, they can resolve the problem at the first visit.
17. That the possibility of parish councils being offered the contracts to both control weeds on roads and paths and also to sweep the streets should be considered.
18. That where litter is exposed following landscape maintenance works, such as pruning shrubs, the Council's contractor who is currently responsible for both landscape maintenance and litter picking, ensures that appropriate action is taken clear any such litter as soon as possible and at the latest within 5 working days.
19. That shrub bed removal could be a way of saving costs but that this should be considered as part of a bigger picture of landscape improvements, not in isolation and not purely as a cost saving measure. This should be done in consultation with ward councillors, parish councils and local residents.
20. That in any landscape redesign proposals, providing high quality landscape should be as important as cost savings.
21. That in any contract re-tendering process the skills of staff should be improved as part of the contract and that contractor should be continually aiming to upskill its workforce.
22. That the resources are made available to ensure that the new public access system for reporting landscaping issues can be fully customised to suit the needs of Milton Keynes.
23. That a method of checking the specified variety and types of trees and plants should be implemented to ensure the correct planting schemes

are carried out in new estates. This may be through a warranty or licensing scheme.

24. That more modern methods of stopping tree roots causing problems with infrastructure, both now and in the future, should be investigated and implemented if they are considered to be beneficial.
25. That better working relationships are formed between the Planning Design teams and the Landscape Maintenance teams so that any maintenance issues are taken into account at the design stage.
26. That the maintenance of those watercourses which are the responsibility of the Council should be incorporated into the landscaping contract.
27. That a task and finish group is set up one year before contract renewal, to enable any changes that the group feel are necessary, to be examined.

Acknowledgements

The Group would like to thank all the witnesses who gave up their time to attend meetings, discuss their work with the Group and answer questions, for their cooperation with the work being done by the Group and the honesty and frankness with which they answered any questions put to them by the members of the group.

In particular, the group is grateful for the diligence and patience of Elizabeth Richardson in managing the Group through an intense workload, and to Andy Hudson (Head of Environment and Waste) and John Price (Landscape Contracts Manager) for their assistance in providing documentation and information for the Group during the course of its work.

Witness Attendance at Meetings:

29 September 2015

- Andy Hudson, Head of Environment and Waste, Milton Keynes Council
- John Price, Landscape Contracts Manager, Milton Keynes Council

27 October 2015

- Rob Riekie, Landscape and Operations Director, The Parks Trust

10 November 2015

- Helen Hupton, Clerk, West Bletchley Council
- Liam Costello, Town Clerk, Olney Town Council
- Jean Nicholas, Chair, Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council

24 November 2015

- Antony Draper, Assistant Contract Manager, Serco
- Roy Clark, Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager, Serco

9 December 2015

- Elizabeth Woodhouse - Senior Landscape Architect
- Philip Snell - Project Manager (Replanting Programme)
- James Williamson – Senior Planning Officer – Strategic Flood Management

22 December 2015

- Rob Ward - Business and Liaison Manager (Report It)

Annex A: Terms of Reference

1. To scrutinise the Council's current approach to landscaping and landscape maintenance.
2. To scrutinise the performance of the Landscaping Maintenance Contract based on value for money; reporting issues and enforcement, progress of low priority issues and any improvements that can be made to the contract as part of any future review.
3. To investigate complaints and comments from the public about the Council's current landscape maintenance service.
4. To consider the Council's policy of maintaining small areas of amenity land and the cost effectiveness of that policy.
5. To make recommendations in relation to any future landscape management policy with regard to amenity land, including design, planning and development issues.
6. To ensure future landscape management delivers a high quality environment for the people of Milton Keynes, is cost effective, sustainable and is part of thriving local communities.

Annex B: Scoping Document

LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE TASK & FINISH GROUP SCOPING DOCUMENT

Review Topic	
Landscaping / Landscape Maintenance	
Origins of Review Group	Review Group Membership
Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee	2:2:2 Cllr Ric Brackenbury (LD) Cllr Vanessa McPake (LD) Cllr Peter Geary (Con) - Chair Cllr Maggie Geaney (Con) Cllr Dave Lewis (Labour) Cllr Alan Webb (Labour)
Overview & Scrutiny Officer	Initial Scoping of Review
Lesley Sung (end of August 2015) Elizabeth Richardson	24 February 2015 Approved by Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee Planning Group on 10 March 2015 Finalised by the TFG on 29 September 2015
1. Purpose	
<p>To scrutinise the following aspects of the Council's current Landscape Maintenance Service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current approach by the Council to Landscaping / Landscape maintenance; • Performance of the Landscaping contract: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is it value for money? 2. How are issues reported to the Council and how is the contract enforced? 3. How can it be improved? 4. How are low priority issues progressed e.g. tree thinning? • Seasonal maintenance issues; • Policy on maintaining small areas of amenity land and whether it is cost effective; • Current and future policy / practice on design / management / retention and maintenance of small areas of amenity land and whether it is cost effective; • Landscaping of future planned development / tying in with planning policy; and • Sustainable landscape management, including encouraging wildlife habitats. 	

2. Rationale

- **What does the Review hope to achieve?**

An understanding of the Council's approach to landscaping and landscape maintenance and whether this approach has long term sustainability.

Develop recommendations about future work programmes to ensure a continued high standard of maintenance and that low priority items, such as tree thinning, do not get overlooked or deferred indefinitely.
- **Why is the Review taking place?**

The Council has recently begun a new way of managing its open spaces by the commencement of a series of smaller landscape maintenance contracts, rather than one large one.
- **What is the community importance and benefit?**

Residents of Milton Keynes value green and open spaces, which currently intersperse both residential and commercial developments in the borough as a vital public amenity. This needs to be offset against the current financial situation and landscape maintenance needs to be sustainable and affordable.
- **How does it fit in with the Council's corporate priorities / scrutiny priorities?**
 - **Living in MK:**

Ensuring people are satisfied with Milton Keynes as a place to live, and to support them effectively through the provision of high quality and efficient public services.
 - **World Class MK:**

The Council's ambition is to increase the international and national standing of Milton Keynes in several areas including our economic success, thriving communities and a high quality environment.
- **What are the opportunities to make a distinctive impact?**

This is an opportunity to ensure that management of the Council's landscape maintenance strategy is both sustainable and affordable into the future.

Any recommendations made by the TFG need to be realistic, achievable and affordable.
- **How will the review influence what the Council does?**

The findings of the review may affect the way in which the Council manages its landscape strategy in the future.

3. Proposed Outcomes

1. An assessment of the future long term sustainability and affordability of the Council's landscape maintenance strategy; and
2. Whether the current landscape maintenance contract is delivering the expectations above.
3. Presentation of final report to Cabinet on 14 March 2016.

4. Background

The Council's approach to landscape maintenance was considered a priority at the Overview & Scrutiny Priorities Setting Workshop held in May 2014.

The Council has recently changed the way it in which landscape maintenance is carried out, with some responsibility for local maintenance being devolved to a

number of Town and Parish Councils. At the same time the Council's new landscaping contract started with Serco in November 2014 and this is an opportunity to review how these arrangements are working and whether the benefits promised are being delivered.

The review should provide an assessment of the effectiveness the Council's current policy and consider the Council's existing approach to landscaping and landscape maintenance.

The review group will consider the results of previous consultations and feedback from the Parish and Town Councils that have taken on the works themselves.

The review will also look at any gaps between provision and need.

5. Timetable

The Task and Finish Group will commence in September 2015 and aim to finish the review by mid-March 2016. It is likely that the Group will meet approximately every 2 weeks in October and November. Further meetings to be arranged later in the year, as appropriate.

Prior to its first meeting, the Group will have received a copy of the Landscape Maintenance Contract (hard copies on request) at a time that will allow sufficient opportunity for the Group to gain a full understanding of the current contract. At the first meeting, the Group will receive a brief presentation about the contract, current policy and approach.

6. Methodology / Approach

- Desk-based review of papers e.g. Current Landscape Maintenance Contract; Results of Consultations etc;
- Site visits / observations;
- Comparisons with other authorities, where appropriate – possibly looking at Peterborough Council and some County Councils;
- Interview officer colleagues;
- Calling witnesses to give evidence.

7. Evidence Sources

- Government guidance / legislation
- Service plans
- Performance Indicators?
- Evidence from other reviews e.g. result of consultations
- Feedback from the Parishes – possible questionnaire

8. Witnesses

The Task and Finish Group would like to hear from:

- Stakeholders / Interest Groups / contractors / Parks Trust / Milton Keynes Development Partnership;
- Officers – Head of Environment and Waste, Landscape Contracts Manager, Landscape Service officers;
- Cabinet Member – Community Services;
- Frontline staff;
- External partners;
- Parish Councils that have taken on local landscaping contractors.

9. Site Visits / Observations

There is a potential for site visits.

10. Public Meetings

Wherever possible it is Council policy to hold Task and Finish Group meetings in public.

11. Officer Support

- Overview & Scrutiny Officer:
Lesley Sung (until end of August), then Elizabeth Richardson
- Head of Environment and Waste
- Landscape Contracts Manager

12. Resource Requirements

Councillor availability during the day as there may be a requirement to carry out site visits during working hours.

Officer overtime for evening meetings.

13. Risk Assessment

Potential obstacles to an effective review could include:

- Limited councillor availability due to already busy workload;
- Lack of co-operation / availability of witnesses;
- Poor weather affecting outdoor site visits.

14. Terms of Reference

7. To scrutinise the Council's current approach to landscaping and landscape maintenance.
8. To scrutinise the performance of the Landscaping Maintenance Contract based on value for money; reporting issues and enforcement, progress of low priority issues and any improvements that can be made to the contract as part of any future review.
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Democratic Services

Overview and Scrutiny

Milton Keynes Council
Civic Offices
1 Saxon Gate East
Central Milton Keynes
MK9 3EJ

Elizabeth Richardson
Overview & Scrutiny Officer

T 01908 252629

E scrutiny@milton-keynes.gov.uk