

SCRUTINY COMMISSION

16TH FEBRUARY 2010

Report of the Director of Leisure and Environment

ITEM 8 GROUNDS MAINTENANCE REVIEW - PROGRESS REPORT

Purpose of the Report

To provide a progress report on the Grounds Maintenance Review.

Policy Context

The Council's Corporate Plan makes a commitment to improving the quality of the places that we live and the surrounding environment. The Council recognises the importance of the quality of green spaces and has made a commitment to this including some projects such as maintaining Green Flag status for Queen's Park and the Outwoods and entering Loughborough into the Britain in Bloom competition.

Background

At its' meeting on 17th July 2008, Cabinet agreed to create specialist interim management support in grounds maintenance and agreed the establishment of the Future of Grounds Maintenance Key Project with the Director as Project Executive and Lead Member representation on the Board.

The report identified that the Service had been facing a number of pressures and changes:-

- verges and roundabouts transferred to the County Council service,
- Structuring of the work
- in the administrative / budget management process
- CNH giving early notice that they propose to terminate Service Level Agreement and test the market for grounds maintenance on housing land
- Tendering Environmental Services Waste Contract and inclusion of litter picking of all green spaces and emptying of litter and dog bins

At its meeting on 6th November 2008, Cabinet received an exempt report and agreed a revised structure for the reorganisation of the Grounds Maintenance Service within Leisure and Environment Services. The draft exempt Cabinet Report was submitted to Scrutiny Commission on 4th November 2008 for consideration and discussion.

The Cabinet report of the 6th November 2008 identified a range of issues in relation to quality of service delivery and productivity and both at the point of assessment were found to be below the expected level. This was as a result of a combination of problematic causes including organisational structure, inadequate leadership within the grounds maintenance service and an inability to manage performance and information / data, customer relationship management, operational methods, lost time / productivity / work rate, workplace culture, motivation and capability.

A programme of review and continuous service improvement has been ongoing since December 2008 and this report provides Scrutiny Commission with an update on the progress to date.

Progress to date

Implementation of the new Green Spaces Operations structure,

The new structure agreed at cabinet on 6th November 2008 was implemented during December 2008 and January 2009. There were some delays relating to difficulties in recruiting skilled staff into some posts and the freezing of four posts for six months by the Managed Vacancy Panel. These were the Queen's Park Head Gardener, the Open Spaces Operative, the Senior Technical Support Officer and the Sports Turf Team Leader. This had an impact on the management of service delivery but has been mitigated by teams /staff being moved around to meet priority needs and more integrated working between Green Spaces Operations and Green Spaces Development Teams.

Following the freezing of the Senior Technical Support Officer all tree issues have been undertaken by the Wildlife Officer, and sports pitch letting and co-ordination has been taken on by the Green Spaces Development Officer in addition to their current duties. This has allowed the need for the vacant Senior Technical Support Officer post to be reconsidered in the light of closer working between Green Spaces Operations and Development Sections. Other duties related to this post are being shared between the Manager, the Horticultural Officer and the Admin Officer. In general, despite a range of difficulties, there has been a significant measurable improvement in service quality and a reduction of costs to the Council as outlined below.

Transfer of Litter and Bin Emptying Duties

The duties of litter collection and bin emptying on green spaces were included as part of the new Environmental Services Contract. These duties were transferred in August 2009 to the Council's new Environmental Services Contactor, Serco. A member of staff and a vacant post were transferred to Serco without any interruption to the continuity or quality of the service. Although these duties were included in the Environmental Services Contract the result was an overall reduction in costs of the Environmental Services Contract across the Borough of £1.25M per annum.

Green Spaces Operations Manager Post

A recruitment and selection process, earlier in 2009, failed to produce a suitable candidate for this post and has subsequently been re-advertised in December 2009. To ensure continuity and improvement the existing Interim Manager has continued to manage the service, the costs of which have been contained within existing service budgets. Following interviews on the 28th January 2010 an offer of appointment has been made, subject to satisfactory references and medical clearance, with a proposed start date for the new Green Spaces Operations Manager of the 1st March 2010.

Learning and Development (Training) Programme

A staff training programme for Green Spaces Operations staff has been implemented to address the issue of improving the skills base of the existing workforce. This has included

Leadership training for seven team leaders, plus National Proficiency Test Council pesticide spraying and Institute of Cemetery Management cemetery operations courses being completed successfully by a six members of staff within the service.

Fifteen members of staff have been assessed for the Skills for Life programme and all staffs training requirements have been identified as part of the Performance Development Review process. In parallel a skills audit has been undertaken to identify the service needs compared with the skills of the existing staff. A training plan for 2010 has been developed and is being implemented. This will include complete familiarisation with new plant and equipment, chipper training, first-aid, chainsaw skills, pesticide spraying, sports pitch marking and risk assessment training. The programme will ensure an increasingly multi-skilled workforce, which will be able to tackle a wider range of operations before the need to call on outside contractors.

The progress against the training plan will be monitored on an ongoing basis. The expected outcomes of upskilling the workforce will be improved quality standards of green spaces and increase in performance. This will be monitored through the ongoing integrated inspection process as outlined below in the Green Spaces Operations Output Specification section.

Winter Work Programme

The winter work programmes have taken place in 2008/9 and 2009/10, the latter of which will continue until the end of February when the mowing season and bird-nesting season starts again. All sites, over 700, have been targeted to be visited over a three-year period for a site “overhaul”, with shrubs and hedges pruned, beds edged-off, forked over, weeds removed and generally tidied up. To date the green spaces larger key sites and housing areas have been prioritised as these were the sites that needed the most improvement.

This winter the work has been co-ordinated with the Council’s Environmental Services Contractor, Serco, to ensure maximum effect in site cleanliness by removing litter and flytipping etc as part of this operation. The programme intends to ensure that completed sites are then maintained to the Green Spaces Operations Output Specification standards, especially during the mowing season. In previous years, during the mowing season, little other works other than mowing took place on the majority of sites. Due to increases in efficiency in mowing performance it has now been possible to incorporate general site maintenance tasks to provide a whole site maintenance regime all year round.

Mowing Season Performance

Staff performance over the 2009 mowing season was much improved with excellent performance and real commitment from teams and their team leaders. Mowing team productivity doubled from an average of around 7,000m² per day to over 15,000 m² per day from the 2008 mowing season with most staff now achieving commercially competitive rates. In addition there was a large reduction in mowing-related complaints from 43 in summer 2008 to 7 in summer 2009.

This has meant that the quality of mowing has improved to achieve the required Green Spaces Operations Output Specification standards on the majority of sites. This increase in efficiency has enabled additional improvement work, such as weeding, forking, pruning

where possible, removal of self set trees, edging of beds etc, to be carried out during the mowing season, which has not normally been undertaken in previous years.

This has been achieved by undertaking a comprehensive review of the grass mowing routes and revising them to ensure that they are being undertaken in the most efficient way, and that the most suitable type of mowing equipment is used for each site. In addition a performance management system has been introduced to record the daily productivity of all teams, including recording and measurement of daily problems and fleet downtime (an example of which will be provided at the meeting). Daily rounds of around 15-17,000m², arranged in the most efficient route order have been allocated to each team, with a target of a 8/9 day cycle. Teams of two or three staff, each with its own van, ride-on and pedestrian mowers plus strimmers and blowers maintain grassed areas. Specialist teams are responsible for sports turf, cemeteries etc.

In addition, by restructuring the teams with designated team leaders who are responsible for delivering these daily targets, real accountability has been ensured in all areas of the service.

Awards

The Green Spaces Operations Service has made valuable contributions to the successes of the Green Flag Award for Queen's Park and Loughborough in Bloom. This has included, amongst others, the stripping and replanting of the Granby Street shrub borders, the complete upgrade of all CBC flower beds including soil improvement, the refurbishment of Priory and Ashby Road flower beds, Parish Church site improvements and Town Hall planter improvements.

The Green Flag scores, which include the standard of maintenance in Queen's Park, have improved from Overall Bandwidth 66-69 in 2008 to Overall Bandwidth 70-74 in 2009. By achieving this score it means that Queen's Park only needs to be inspected by Green Flag Judges biannually rather than on an annual basis.

Green Spaces Operations Output Specification

The draft Green Spaces Output Specification, which sets out the target maintenance standards for all green spaces managed by the Council, was put out for consultation on the Council's website, circulated to all elected members and stakeholders, from February to April 2009.

The Output Specification is now in use, with relevant feedback from the consultation process incorporated, and a similar version relevant for housing areas (all standards where relevant are identical) has been adopted by CNH as part of their Service Level Agreement with the Council.

It should be pointed out that the Output Specification is not a fixed document but it would be expected to be refined, amended and added to following feedback from customers and stakeholders and in response to changing demands and standards, or changes in legislation, or to include any additional elements. Estate Walkabouts, inspections and customer consultations, for example, are likely to highlight important local issues and remedial action / improvements and changes to service specifications and standards can be made where appropriate.

The associated integrated inspection system has been implemented and will track the continuous improvement of the Green Spaces Operations Service in delivering the specification standards on all sites throughout the year. Early inspection results show a significant improvement in service quality delivery, and these are evidenced in before/after photographs (to be provided at the meeting).

The inspection process will provide evidence of the extent to which progress is being achieved and continuous improvement of all sites will be tracked quarterly. There are key indicator sites which will be inspected quarterly and all other 600+ sites will be batch sampled (ISO 9001 based) and inspected quarterly. Inspection results will be compared with those done in baseline assessments carried out since autumn 2008. Continuous improvement of these scores will be tracked as per key sites.

As an example of how this will work, since the start of the CNH contract in December 2009 some of the larger, problematic CNH sites have been given a “overhaul”, and these have shown considerable improvements. Of the 30 Key Housing Indicator sites, as selected by CNH in October 2009, not a single site was found to be satisfactory in the October 2009 baseline assessment inspections (which included Housing Officers) 11 were considered satisfactory by January 2010, with works continuing in this area. This is also evidenced as a photographic record with before/after photos.

Early indications, for non housing area key sites and batch sampling, shows consistent improvement in scores achieved for all sites inspected.

Fleet Replacement

Following a comprehensive review of the requirements of the service, the replacement of the fleet including vans, mowing machinery, tractors and horticultural equipment is on target and will be completed in time for the 2010 mowing season. These include 4 Crew cab vans, 4 utility vans, 4 triple ride-on mowers, two 5-reel ride-on mowers, 1 medium and 1 compact tractor plus associated implements, 1 dumper etc. The new contract has made a saving to the Council, including a direct saving to the Green Spaces Operations Team of approximately £40,000.

The replacement of the fleet should ensure increased effectiveness, as much of the old fleet, especially mowers, were near end of life expectancy, and constantly in need of time consuming repair, which added to service downtime. New fleet should ensure that the amount of service downtime is considerably reduced.

In addition, all vehicles, including ride on mowers, will be fitted with tracking devices which will enable the service to monitor productivity and enable real time assessment of scheduling.

Trees

The responsibility for management of trees in the Council's ownership has been passed, temporarily, to the Wildlife Officer in addition to his existing portfolio of duties. He is developing an integrated approach to tree management including a Woodland, Tree and Hedgerow Policy, Strategy and Action Plan. A first draft is expected to be available by late 2010.

An Interim Tree Management Policy has been adopted to give guidance until the full policy is developed and approved (a copy has been available on the Council's website since adoption and copies will be available at the meeting).

Until this point, trees / hedges were being managed on an adhoc basis, with problems being dealt with as and when they arose. The implementation of a survey / inspection and associated work programme will ensure that tree / hedge works are being managed in a proactive way, with all priority works being identified and targeted for action.

The Welland Partnership (Charnwood Borough, Melton and Harborough District Councils) procurement forum has let a contract for the surveying / inspection of trees which has allowed CBC to buy-in and implement a phased five-year survey of council trees, which commenced in December 2009. This survey aims to identify, provide data, map and inspect the condition of all trees in CBC ownership, with a view to prioritising work requirements, including urgent health and safety works.

The early findings of the first phase of the survey have resulted in a programme of priority tree / hedge work, which should be completed before the end of February 2010, which is the cut off date for the start of the bird nesting season. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 prevents any works being undertaken where birds are nesting.

The Welland Partnership is also letting a tree works contract, with a view to selecting a single preferred service provider who will also be available to the borough council to utilise at commercial / market-tested rates. This will ensure best value, competitive pricing of tree work whilst putting an end to the current protracted procurement requirement of a minimum of three quotes for each piece of work.

Charnwood Neighbourhood Housing SLA

Charnwood Neighbourhood Housing has agreed a new 5-year Service Level Agreement, having recognised that there has been a considerable improvement in the service recently, with an improvement in site quality and an increase in compliments from housing tenants.

CNH welcome closer working with our service, especially in developing a robust integrated inspection framework and developing relationships with Tenant and Residents Groups and Housing Officers.

Green Spaces Service Business Plan

A joint Draft Service Business Plan for Green Spaces Operations and Development Sections is being developed to set out the complete service improvement programme over the next 3 years. It will define these Services' shared vision, aims, values and key business objectives and shows how these are linked to delivering the Council's Corporate Plan and the Leisure Services Team Plan. It is anticipated that the joint Draft Service Business Plan for Green Spaces Operations and Development sections will be completed by May / June 2010. It is proposed that this document will then be published on the Council's website.

This plan will further strengthen improved working arrangements between the two services by providing clear objectives, many of which require collaborative working to achieve desired outcomes.

Performance Management

The above Green Spaces Business Service Plan will form part of an emerging integrated performance management system which will ensure that robust targets, performance indicators and inspection regimes are developed for all service functions within the Green Spaces Services. These include mowing operations, hedge cutting, marking out sports pitches etc. Results will be benchmarked against standard and performance results in similar parts of the green spaces sector, and will be made available as appropriate.

As outline above, a performance management framework, has been introduced and the development of the Joint Green Spaces Business Service Plan will enable this to be further developed in a co-ordinated way.

Way Forward

The Green Spaces Services will be jointly working to ensure that the policy and strategic context in which they operate is brought up to date. This will include an updated Green Spaces / Open Spaces Strategy, a Woodland, Trees and Hedgerow Strategy, an Allotment Strategy and an Action Plan for Nature. These will guide the services in ensuring that operational service delivery and development is focussed on priority needs and areas. Stakeholders and customers will be consulted in this process.

The proper use of the Service Plan will ensure that the appropriate resources are allocated to each key objective to ensure, and evidence, real progress and improvement.

Financial and Legal Implications

There is an ongoing drive to reduce the cost of the Green Spaces Operations Service. During the 2009/10 financial year ongoing direct savings of £88,600 have been achieved, these include both fleet, staff and efficiency savings. These have been offset by an increase in Support Service costs, loss of Parish income and renegotiation of the CNH Contract.

There will be a continued drive in 2010/11 to identify further efficiency savings that can be made without affecting the level of service provided.

Risk Management

The risks associated with the service and proposed actions to mitigate those risks are set out in the table below.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Measures to address risk
Failure to deliver the service	Low	Medium	Rigorous ongoing management of staff and resources
Failure to improve performance and value for	Low	Medium	Test the market with various aspects of the

money			service, together with the use of benchmarking information from green spaces sector
Failure to meet ongoing service targets	Low	Medium	Interim management arrangements taken so far and performance targets set for the team

Background Papers: Cabinet Report – 6th November 2008 Minutes 108 and 108E
Scrutiny Report – 4th November 2008 Minutes 45 and 45E

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