

Scrutiny review: Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing

Review of the Improving Places Select
Commission

November – December 2012

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Executive Summary

The aim of the review:

The review group was made up of the following members:

- Cllr Chris Read (Chair)
- Cllr John Swift
- Cllr Jenny Andrews
- Cllr Alan Atkin
- Cllr Sue Ellis
- Cllr Clive Jepson

Summary of findings and recommendations

The agreed objectives of the review were:

- To analyse the impact of budget cuts to the service
- To ensure that risk and impact assessments have been fully considered and are in place for the future
- To develop practical suggestions for improvement of the service within budget
- To consider invest to save options

An initial officer review was completed and was the focus of the early discussions held by the review group. This focused on Grounds Maintenance and looked at the areas of grass cutting, weed killing, shrub/flower beds and hedges and rural verges, considering each of the agreed objectives as listed above.

Members of the review group went to on to explore this paper in more detail and a key issue that arose was the integrated nature of the Grounds Maintenance Service and Street Cleansing services. For this reason, the review included issues and suggestions relating to both service areas.

Cabinet Members with relevant portfolios and other ward councillors were also consulted as part of the process. The resulting recommendations were specifically relating to each of these services, as well as some more overarching and general recommendations. There were three main themes emerging from these findings:

1. Flexibility of resources
2. Local feed back and support
3. Information sharing

The recommendations have therefore been grouped under these headings.

1. Flexibility of resources

- a. That the options put forward as part of the initial officer review (appended to this report) that have not been explored further as part of this review be supported in principle and subject to further detailed consideration for ways of improving services and reducing costs.
- b. That the areas detailed in section 5.1, and summarised below are subject to further detailed consideration and proposed actions reported back:
 - Use of spare capacity of green waste collection operatives on a Grounds Maintenance winter schedule
 - Urban gardening as an alternative to shrubs
 - Employment of member of staff to identify sites for alternative use/disposal
 - Waiver of legal fees for disposal of sites
 - Promotion of Streetpride's grounds maintenance service to schools
 - Opportunities for grass retardant spraying
 - Dealing with over grown rural junctions
 - Consortium for purchase of equipment
- c. That the Council considers the adoption of a Town/Village centre standard for Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing that focuses resources in these areas using the Parish Network where appropriate.
- d. That, subject to a positive full evaluation of the pilot, the Council purchasing further Billy Goat machines as and when resources allow.
- e. That the response times for racist and homophobic graffiti is changed from 4 hours to 24 hours, to allow greater flexibility of resources and ensure this target can be met.
- f. That a study is completed to identify the most effective use of diminishing staff resources

2. Local feedback and support

- a. That customer contact is improved by the following and that this information is used to inform the Town/Village Centre standard:
 - Recording contacts with geographical information to gather intelligence on trends and patterns.
 - Weekly lists of big works and schemes
 - Monitoring of standards and reporting back to customers who complain

- b. That ways to involve the community and generate civic pride are explored including:
- The development of an accredited volunteer scheme.
 - Making the right tools for the job available for members of the community who wish to assist with neighbourhood tidying
 - Consideration of how the Streetpride Champions initiative could be re-invigorated or replaced.
 - Councillors and staff to become eyes and ears in the community

3. Information Sharing

- a. That an exercise to assess over used and under used bins is completed with a view to moving existing bins in line with its findings and that the following methods are used to maintain this over time:
- Staff on the ground to monitor usage
 - Engagement with Planning on bins at application stages and ward members when removing bins
 - Monitoring of shopping areas
- b. That Cabinet consider any ways in which the Cabinet portfolios covering this area could be clarified and simplified.
- c. That all pilots and initiatives generated as a result of this review are evaluated fully and progress is reported back to the relevant Cabinet Member.

1. Why members wanted to undertake this review?

A full report was presented to the Improving Places Select Commission on the 25th July 2012. Following some very detailed discussion it was agreed that a review of the service was required. It was noted that officers were already committed to conducting a review in October/November of 2012, however, Members felt very strongly that they needed to be involved in the review as they were responsible for making the budget decisions. A joint Member/officer review was therefore agreed.

It would also aim to support the achievement of the following Council priorities from the Corporate Plan:

- Improving the environment

The stated objectives of the review were to consider, as follows:

- To analyse the impact of budget cuts to the service
- To ensure that risk and impact assessments have been fully considered and are in place for the future
- To develop practical suggestions for improvement of the service within budget
- To consider invest to save options

2. Terms of reference

The work of the review group was conducted over three separate meetings during November and December 2012. The first meeting considered the initial officer review completed on Grounds Maintenance. The subsequent meetings considered further detailed evidenced submitted by Streetpride and heard from Cabinet Members for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods and Waste and Emergency Planning. Views from other ward members were also sought to supplement this evidence.

The review has been provided with technical support by Steve Hallsworth, Streetpride. Other witnesses that contributed to the review were:

- David Burton, Director of Streetpride
- Richard Jackson, Streetpride
- Councillor Rose McNeely, Cabinet Member, Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods
- Councillor Richard Russell, Cabinet Member, Waste and Emergency Planning
- Councillor Maggie Godfrey
- Councillor Emma Hoddinott

3. Evidence

The majority of the evidence gathered as part of this review was from the Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing Service and was received in both written and verbal form. An initial officer review on the Grounds Maintenance Service was

carried out prior as a starting point for the review. This is attached as Appendix A. A range of supplementary documents and evidence was then requested which is listed in Appendix B and can be made available as background documents to this review.

4. Background

The grounds maintenance and street cleansing functions are now part of the Leisure and Community Services Team within Streetpride. The Grounds Maintenance service was brought back in-house and integrated with the Street Cleansing service in January 2010 after almost two decades of being contracted through outside providers.

The Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing integrated service is divided into two delivery teams.

- Eastern Team: working from Barbers Avenue Depot, Kiveton Park Depot and Hellaby Depot.
- Western Team: working from Oaks Lane Depot and Ulley Country Park.

Staff numbers in Grounds Maintenance have reduced from 43 in 2011/12 to 25 currently and will further reduce to 20 in 2013/14. Staff numbers in Street Cleansing have reduced from 54 to 41.

Their work includes general grass maintenance, shrub and rose bed maintenance, hedge maintenance, fine turf, horticultural services including seasonal bedding displays, scheduled litter picking and emptying of litter and dog waste bins.

There is also a Miscellaneous Cleansing Team Based at Hellaby Depot that provides the following services: mechanical sweeping, graffiti removal, fly tip removal, weed killing, leaf removal, and response to other cleansing issues (e.g. road traffic accidents). There is also a specific cleansing team based and dedicated to Rotherham town centre.

Leisure and Community Services has been affected by the Council's need to find savings as part of the Government's austerity measures and as such the Council's Cabinet approved total budget savings of £2,472,000 over the period 2011/12 to 2013/14. The total savings relating directly to the delivery of grounds maintenance and street cleansing services is £1,683,500. This equates to % of the total budget.

The reduction in the grounds maintenance budget has resulted in a change to the grass cutting schedules. Up to 2010/11 general grass cutting took place across the borough on a two weekly cycle, in 2011/12 this was reduced to 3-weekly and at the start of this year's cutting season the budget could only accommodate a three weekly cycle from 2nd April, reducing to a five weekly cycle from the beginning of July. This means that the grass will grow to a greater height between cuts and the cuttings that remain after work has taken place will be greater and more visible.

The savings required from the street cleansing budget have resulted in a reduction in the scheduled litter picking and in the frequency that litter and dog waste bins are emptied. Areas previously scheduled for work 2 or 3 times per week have been reduced to once 1 per week, with the exception of parks which remain the same; areas previously scheduled for work once every 3 weeks are now done

monthly, and areas previously scheduled for work every 9 weeks are now done every 10 weeks.

The treatment of weeds has been reduced from twice yearly, to only once a year.

In August one of the three mechanical sweepers was withdrawn and a new schedule for the two remaining sweepers drawn up.

The changes to the grounds maintenance and street cleansing services, including reduced frequency of operations for grass cutting and litter picking and the emptying of dog waste and litter bins, have resulted in an increase in the level of dissatisfaction of customers .

5. Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing

5.1 Grounds Maintenance.

The review group welcomed the work provided by Streetpride Officers and noted the suggestions being made. They used this paper for their initial deliberations but noted that they would require further work on them before they could agree to them. It was also noted that the proposals should be subject to consultation with stakeholders (e.g.wild flower planting)

The review group expressed concern about the changes to grass cutting schedules in particular changes to the frequency of grass cutting. It was noted that the driving force behind this was the budget cuts that were implemented in the previous year, however it was felt that a stronger evidence base or rationale was required for the changes . Members were concerned about the lack of flexibility in the schedules and that this has been an unintended secondary effect of the budgets cuts.

Members of the review group discussed the proposals from the initial officer review in detail, with the officers concerned. This resulted in the following findings:

- Use of spare capacity of green waste collection operatives (from the 41 fte staff) during winter by the development of a winter schedule of works to deal with the back log in Grounds Maintenance.
- Urban gardening should be considered as an alternative option to planting shrubs. This could be explored in partnership with Rotherham in Root, run by Groundwork. The starting point for taking this work forward would be the identification of suitable sites. The review group understood during discussions that work to identify sites was already being taken forward by officers, including those sites not yet subject to reduced schedules and options for disposal or alternative use.
- When disposal of land is being considered the Council could look at waiving legal fees – with appropriate safeguards and a simple procedure, for example the sale only benefits one property. Ward members should be made aware of any of these changes. Priority should be given to community organisations, schools, community centres etc.. Schools could be proactively targeted with this, looking at the whole site.

- The review group members supported the idea of appointing a person to carry out this work as it could be a good example of spend to save.
- In noting that Streetpride were in the process of trialling grass retardant spraying, consideration should be given as to how this might be rolled out if successful. Timescales and the process for evaluation are required.
- Schools who have purchased their grounds maintenance service from elsewhere due to costs may be prepared to consider coming back to Streetpride as a result of receiving an inferior service elsewhere. Streetpride should consider targeting these schools to see if any would prefer to buy the services of Streetpride grounds maintenance due to the higher quality.
- Overgrown junctions in rural areas not being effectively monitored and this could lead to a road safety issue. This should be addressed.
- Explore the possibility for a consortium for purchase of equipment. It was recognised that this might be a longer term objective, however it was felt that there may be potential to save money via this route.

5.2 Street Cleansing.

The review group considered a number of issues regarding this area of work. This included the use of bins, the issue of targeting services in certain areas of the Borough, and customer response times. The main point about the effect of budget cuts on timetables was re-iterated and again greater flexibility was recommended.

The group felt that an exercise was required to identify over and under used bins. This was required to ensure that bins are located in the right place. There were also a number of recommendations made about how to monitor and gather intelligence on this both for the exercise and on an ongoing basis. This included:

- Use of staff on the ground to monitor and use local knowledge and intelligence
- Engagement with planning – more up front dialogue and consideration on location and size of bins with applications
- Monitor shopping areas, using enforcement officers knowledge where appropriate.

It was noted that costs involved in carrying out this piece of work do not necessarily result in savings down the line (i.e not a spend to save initiative) however it was felt that the reputational gains and reductions in complaints received about this issue would make it worthwhile. For this reason it is suggested that it is done gradually over time with small savings on the budget. The review group members also recognised the sensitive nature of this piece of work, particularly associated with removal of bins, however this is being recommended where they are being under used.

Members of the review group have become aware of plans for the removal of concrete bins, during the completion of this review, and have expressed concern about the lack of consultation with Ward members. As many as 250 of these bins are under consideration for removal. The review group would strongly recommend that consultation should take place and a range of options be considered.

The review group considered the previous policy focus on strategic gateways into the Borough and concluded that this was no longer current. Cabinet members even appeared to be unclear about the status of this policy. They also considered the

impact on street cleansing issues of the Council's policy to focus on the 11 most deprived areas of Rotherham. The conclusion was drawn that the most visible parts of the Borough to the residents are the village and town centres, regardless of their level of deprivation. They are therefore recommending to the Council the introduction of a village/town standard (not including Rotherham Town Centre). It is further recommended that the dedicated operatives (lengthsmen) resources are focused on these centres. It was noted that this recommendation is not just about physical appearance but also contributes to the economic resilience of areas. This is of increased importance as the Local Authority will now retain a proportion of local business rates.

The review group considered the way in which the Billy Goat machine had been piloted in Rotherham and noted that so far this seemed to have been a success. They recommended therefore that as and when small amounts of budget become available and subject to the pilot being deemed as successful when it is fully evaluated, more of these machines are purchased.

Finally, in this area, the group considered the response times for graffiti. They were concerned that different response times for example, 4 hours for racist or homophobic graffiti may be unrealistic and create a lack of flexibility around the deployment of resources. For this reason the group considered that a more realistic response time might be 24 hours and recommend that the potential savings associated with this be calculated. It was also felt that this would impact positively on customer expectations as it is more realistic.

5.3 Customer contact.

The group felt very strongly that communications with the public over the delivery of these services needed to improve. They noted that information was not readily available about complaints on a geographic basis and observed a lack of clarity about how customer feed back is logged. Suggested ways of improving this were:

- Customer contacts should be recorded with geographical information so that trends and patterns can be mapped and therefore resources deployed appropriately. This could be used over time following the adoption of a Village/Town Standard, to refine it. This information should be reported to Ward members on a monthly basis.
- Producing weekly lists – what is planned and where for the week ahead. This should include big works and schemes (road closures due to litter picking and grass cutting). The group recommended learning from Planning who do this currently and whether it could be adapted for Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing.
- Monitoring of standards required and adjusting them as appropriate, being clear with people what they can expect, and communicating this back to people who submit reports. This is becoming a growing problem and therefore of increasing importance.

5.4 The role of the community.

In recognition of the increasing pressure on resources and the impact of cuts made already, the review group gave consideration to the ways in which greater value for money could be achieved with the involvement of the wider community. They could see the benefit to be derived from the use of volunteers within Streetpride and recommended that this should be an accredited scheme. It was felt, however, that such volunteers should be distinguishable from regular members of staff. In light of this they expressed concern that the existing volunteer scheme gave volunteers the same uniform and shift pattern as regular employees.

They also supported measures to increase the level of civic pride within the community and their ability to help themselves around grounds maintenance and litter picking. Making the right tools available to encourage neighbourhood tidying could be one way to achieve this.

The group felt that there is an indication that the Streetpride Champions initiative has run its course. It is suggested therefore that officers consider this for the future, looking at, for example, how many people attend the meetings.

It was also considered that as well as the wider community, Councillors and all staff could have a role to play being the “eyes and ears” on the ground therefore the Council could encourage a corporate approach to reporting issues.

5.5 Cabinet Member portfolios

As part of the review process, the four Cabinet Members with a relevant portfolio were consulted. The cabinet members for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods and for Waste and Emergency Planning attended one of the review group meetings. The Cabinet Members for Regeneration and Development and for Culture and Tourism were unable to take part in this meeting.

It was observed by the review group that the services cut across potentially four portfolios and that this was creating confusion as to who the lead Cabinet member for this area was both for members of public and also amongst members themselves. One of the recommendations of the group to create a more flexible management of resources and schedules at a local level, would be easier to manage with one line of accountability for both Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing. It is therefore suggested that a clarification and simplification of the Cabinet Member roles for this area could be considered. This links into section 5.6 below and difficulty with interrogating the budget lines for these services.

5.6 Further reviews and evaluation

During the review, the group discussed early ideas with Streetpride officers. It is understood that initial investigations have been instigated as result of the review and that work on the following will be reported back early 2013:

- Review of sites (see section 5.1)

- Review of schedules looking at altering frequency in areas of high volume and a pilot in one area where the schedule is removed and on the ground intelligence to flex resources is used instead, with a view to rolling this out if deemed successful.
- Review of bins (see section 5.2)

It was noted that pilots could be used to test out ideas for service improvement that lead to cost savings and have been already, for example, Billy Goats. The group wish to stress the importance of these pilots being properly evaluated before any longer term decisions can be made based on them. They also found that detailed impact assessments should be required for any future budget cuts and that they need to allow for unintended impacts. The group were unable to make any detailed conclusions about the budget situation for these two services, as there was a lack of information available to do this. This recommendation should apply to all services and not just the ones in scope of this review.

6. Summary of recommendations.

Flexibility of resources

1. That the options put forward as part of the initial officer review (appended to this report) that have not been explored further as part of this review be supported in principle and subject to further detailed consideration for ways of improving services and reducing costs.
2. That the areas detailed in section 5.1, and summarised below are subject to further detailed consideration and proposed actions reported back
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 - Opportunities for grass retardant spraying
 - Dealing with over grown rural junctions
 - Consortium for purchase of equipment

3. That the Council considers the adoption of a Town/Village centre standard for Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing that focuses resources in these areas using the Parish Network where appropriate.
4. That, subject to a positive full evaluation of the pilot, the Council purchasing further Billy Goat machines as and when resources allow.
5. That the response times for racist and homophobic graffiti is changed from 4 hours to 24 hours, to allow greater flexibility of resources and ensure this target can be met.
6. That a study is completed to identify the most effective use of diminishing staff resources

Local feedback and support

7. That customer contact is improved by the following and that this information is used to inform the Town/Village Centre standard:
 - Recording contacts with geographical information to gather intelligence on trends and patterns.
 - Weekly lists of big works and schemes
 - Monitoring of standards and reporting back to customers who complain
8. That ways to involve the community and generate civic pride are explored including:
 - The development of an accredited volunteer scheme.
 - Making the right tools for the job available for members of the community who wish to assist with neighbourhood tidying
 - Consideration of how the Streetpride Champions initiative could be re-invigorated or replaced.
 - Councillors and staff to become eyes and ears in the community

Information Sharing

9. That an exercise to assess over used and under used bins is completed with a view to moving existing bins in line with its findings and that the following methods are used to maintain this over time:
 - Staff on the ground to monitor usage
 - Engagement with Planning on bins at application stages and ward members when removing bins
 - Monitoring of shopping areas
10. That Cabinet consider any ways in which the Cabinet portfolios covering this area could be clarified and simplified.

11. That all pilots and initiatives generated as a result of this review are evaluated fully and progress is reported back to the relevant Cabinet Member.

7. Future monitoring.

The recommendations contained within this report, that are subsequently agreed by the Cabinet, should be monitored on a six monthly basis and reported to the Improving Places Select Commission

8. Background Papers

Report to Improving Places Select Commission - Leisure and Community Services: affects of budget savings on grounds maintenance and street cleansing schedules. Dated 25th July 2013.

9. Thanks

Thanks for their support and assistance with this review go to David Burton, Steve Hallsworth and Richard Jackson from Streetpride, to the Cabinet Members, Councillors McNeely and Richard Russell, and also to Councillors Godfrey and Hoddinott for their ideas and suggestions.

For further information about this report, please contact

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