
REPORT TO:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	AGENDA ITEM: 7
DATE OF MEETING:	2nd May 2012	CATEGORY: DELEGATED
REPORT FROM:	Cllr Neil Atkin Cllr Roy Bell	OPEN
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	Bob Ledger 5975 bob.ledger@south-derbys.gov.uk	DOC:
SUBJECT:	Service Review: Grounds Maintenance	REF:
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	TERMS OF REFERENCE:

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 That members note and comment on the extent and findings of the review.
- 1.2 That members approve the actions as detailed in section 7 of the report.

2. Purpose of Report

- 2.1 To advise members of the extent of the grounds maintenance review and the recommendations for action.

3. Methodology

- 3.1 At the meeting of the Committee on the 18th January 2012 the scope of a review of the grounds maintenance service was agreed. The proposal for such a review had come from Cllrs Lemmon, Watson and Tilley. The meeting on the 18th January 2012 agreed that a task group of Cllrs Bell and Atkin would lead the review with the intention of reporting back to the May 2012 meeting of the Committee.
- 3.2 The task group met for the first time on the 17th February 2012 and initially agreed:
 - to review the current working practices and specification
 - to assess whether this was being adhered to and that quality was of a good standard
 - to spend time out with the Grounds Maintenance Manager to see the on-site operation at first hand
 - to engage Parish Councils in this review and seek their views on service provision

- 3.3 The meeting of the 17th February reviewed the specification in some detail and the notes of that meeting are attached to this report as appendix 1.
- 3.4 The Parish Councils were originally written to on the 6th February asking them for their views on the Grounds Maintenance service and that if they were interested in commenting, or needed further information before commenting, to contact Bob Ledger. Seven parish Councils took up the offer of further information and this was sent out in February in the form of the estimated schedule for that specific community (example at Appendix 2). On the 5th April Bob Ledger e-mailed all of those seven Parish Councils to seek feedback.
- 3.5 On the 22nd March Cllrs Bell and Atkin took part in the quarterly liaison meeting with the County Council which includes consideration of the grounds maintenance service. On the 27th March Cllrs Bell and Atkin spent time with the Grounds Maintenance Manager and visited a number of locations around the District to both see the team in action and review work where it had recently been carried out.

4. Costs and Income

- 4.1 The Grounds Maintenance service operated in 2011/12 to a cost of £757k which included for vehicle maintenance and replacement as well as employee and material costs.
- 4.2 An external tender process for the grounds maintenance service was completed as recently as June 2011. The lowest external contractor price was more than the in-house cost and therefore the decision was made to retain the service in-house. In addition there would be risk in transferring the service to an external provider particularly as there are a number of examples where such transfers have not gone smoothly.
- 4.3 The income into the service primarily comes from the District Council's General Fund but sizeable income also comes from the local Housing Revenue Account, £140k, and the County Council, £150k.

5. Specification

- 5.1 There are different levels of service for different areas. The main ones are as follows:
- public open space and grass verges in the built up areas (12 times a year)
 - playing fields (12 times a year)
 - parks (at least 24 times a year)
 - public housing land (14 times and 22 times around sheltered),
 - verge cutting outside the built up areas (this flail mowing ranges from 2 – 3 times a year with one full width cut to approximately a third of the District every year),
 - hedge cutting (generally once a year, restricted to hedges within public open space – most hedges are the responsibility of the land owner)
 - tree work (as and when necessary – recent employment of a tree specialist means a lot of work has been generated over recent months)

6. Feedback and findings

6.1 Cllrs Bell and Atkin report that they have found no major issues for concern in their analysis of the grounds maintenance service. They would like to record their appreciation of the cooperation received from staff in detailing the extensive scale of the work undertaken by the grounds maintenance department and for the time expended in visiting various locations around the District.

6.2 Spraying and strimming around street furniture, road signage and trees
Spraying to restrict grass growth is done for a number of reasons in various situations:

- To prevent damage to trees from strimmers which could cut through the bark.
- Similarly damage to signposts etc. by strimmers is prevented. Strimmers may break through any protective coating leading to corrosion.

6.2.1 There is some evidence though that some areas have been oversprayed in terms of the distance away from the obstacle to where the spray is applied. As a normal rule of thumb this should be upto one metre from the obstacle. The Grounds Maintenance Manager has instructed the grounds maintenance operational teams accordingly.

6.3 Collections of cuttings

Until a couple of years ago there used to be complaints about thick unsightly cuttings being left particularly at the first cut of the year. These complaints have substantially reduced in the last couple of years by:

- Starting to cut earlier in the season (i.e. before substantial growth has occurred) as well as later in the season
- Being flexible over the cutting schedule i.e. utilising dry periods in the early Spring and avoiding cutting in prolonged wet conditions wherever possible.

6.4 Future commitments

6.4.1 The expansion of the District means that the commitments of the grounds team continue to grow without additional resource and this position must be kept under regular review to ensure service quality is maintained.

6.4.2 In influencing the design of soft landscaped areas on new estates planning colleagues should be asked to bear in mind the repercussions of banked grassed areas i.e. such areas often can only be effectively safely cut by a hand operated strimmer which is therefore time consuming and expensive.

6.5 Parish Council Response

Seven Parish Councils requested further information and this was sent to them, for the most part, in mid-February. The seven were: Aston, Castle Gresley, Dalbury Lees, Melbourne, Rosliston, Weston and Willington. Two other Parish Councils, Etwall and Overseal, commented without the additional information. We also understand that Ticknall Parish Council will be writing to us to express concern on the potential overspraying issue.

6.5.1 A reminder e-mail was sent out to the Parish Councils that had requested additional information on the 4th April. By the 24th of April the comments received were as follows:

Parish Council	Comment
Aston	Replied 4.4.12 stating that they would comment after work had been carried out.
Castle Gresley	Replied 6.4.12 stating that the matter would be discussed at the next meeting.
Dalbury Lees	Requested further information. No comments have been received yet on service delivery.
Etwall	<p>“Etwall Parish Council discussed the grounds maintenance service as provided by SDDC at its meeting and members were generally very pleased with the service provided.</p> <p>Only one slightly negative comment was made in that it appears that the verges on Sutton Lane in Etwall are not cut”.</p> <p><i>Sutton Lane is cut on the out of village schedule i.e. two to three times a year.</i></p>
Melbourne	Requested further information. No comments have been received yet on service delivery.
Overseal	<p>“The Council are happy with the standards and extent of the services provided at present and hope that they will be able to continue at this level for the foreseeable future. The only comments which were made related to the extent of litter on most of the grass verges, which we recognise is a national problem and is not strictly related to your review. The Clean Team do an excellent job when they are called out to deal with this, especially the A.444 through the village, and lorries visiting the landfill site add significantly to the problems in Park Road and A.444. I have taken this up with Veolia separately in the hope of making some improvement.</p> <p>If your Task Group can come up with a solution, that would be most welcome”.</p> <p><i>Grounds Maintenance Manager will instruct operative to come off the grass cutting if excessive litter produced and report matter to Clean team.</i></p>
Rosliston	Requested further information. No comments have been received yet on service delivery.
Ticknall	Comments awaited on perceived overspraying.
Weston	Requested further information. No comments have been received yet on service delivery.
Willington	<p>“In general terms they make a very good job of keeping the grassed areas well maintained.</p> <p>My only comments would be about them using the spray around posts etc as they cannot get close too obstacles – however I haven’t seen this yet this year...”</p>

6.5.2 Although there has been some response from the Parish Councils, it has been limited. It could be that the limited response, and the response that has been received being generally positive, means that there are no major concerns for the service to address from the Parish Council perspective. It is though recommended that the grounds maintenance service be discussed at the next Parish/District Council liaison meeting to check and verify this position.

7. Action points

7.1 Quality control. There are three clients as mentioned above. The only person fulfilling the role in any meaningful detailed way is Zoe Sewter in the Community and Planning Service. As it's an in-house service we should be carrying out minimal monitoring and it's the Grounds Maintenance Manager's job to ensure quality across the board. He, and the Grounds Supervisor, are carrying out a quality inspection process but this does need review to ensure its measuring the right things at the right frequency

Amended Quality control system to be in place by 1.10.12

7.2 Closely linked to 1) is to more widely define 'who does what' i.e. the service is in-house and it's unproductive to have a hard client/contractor split.

Formally define the Community team/grounds maintenance contractor division by 1.7.12

7.3 At least one parish council is paying for additional work by a third party contractor. We need to try to establish better coordination with those works. It could be said that we're the lead operator and its upto others to fit in around us and this would have to be the stance if a large number of parishes were doing their own work (otherwise it would become unmanageable) but as its currently one (and maybe two) we'll look at whether this can done.

Contact made with the contractor and our estimated schedule supplied. Grounds Maintenance Manager to e-mail changes as and when they occur.

7.4 Feedback. Currently the feedback channels are limited to a formal customer complaint or an unlogged telephone call. We want to do more about getting feedback from local recipients of the service.

Targeted questionnaire with prize draw incentive to be issued to 500 residents by 1.7.12.

Website feedback option to be developed by 1.7.12.

7.5 The current agreement and funding with County is relatively loosely defined. Our assessment is that the amount of work we do is commensurate with the funding supplied but there does need to be more written down about what we are providing and what it costs us to do that. The County are currently looking to cut their level of funding which raises the priority of this action point.

Service Level Agreement to be negotiated with the County Council by 1.12.12.

7.6 External accreditation. Although the perception of the service overall appears to be good there is also acceptance that things not so long ago weren't as good. Therefore there may be some benefit is seeking an external accreditation as verification of the improvements that have been made. However it is recognised that such a commitment involves a significant additional work burden

The proposal to seek a Quality Standard accreditation to be explored further and an additional paper on the matter to be brought to the Committee by 1.9.12.

8. Corporate Implications

8.1 The Council's reputation is assessed by many on the standard of such generic services as grounds maintenance i.e. its key that this service be of a good quality. The outcome of the review is that this is generally the case. The actions proposed should assist in consolidating and improving on that position.