

### **Update and remodel of Grounds Maintenance – Corporate Head of Environmental Services (Helen Clark)**

**Synopsis of report:**

**To update the Committee in respect to a remodelling of the Ground's Maintenance service vehicles and equipment to improve service standards, increase capacity and deliver greater resilience.**

**Recommendation:**

**None – this is for information only**

#### **1. Context and background of report**

- 1.1 Delivery options for Ground's Maintenance were considered at Corporate Management committee on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022. The model recommended was in-house DSO/CS with the strategic development function to remain in Community Services. This recommendation was approved by Full Council on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022.
- 1.2 The former Idverde grounds maintenance contract was terminated 15<sup>th</sup> November 2022 by mutual agreement. The existing in- house team and former Idverde team were merged to create new mobile teams in January 2023. Since February 2023 the Direct Services Manager has recruited 7 new gardeners with 3 further gardeners pending Bupa driver clearance. One vacancy and 6 seasonal positions remain unfilled.
- 1.3 Vehicle and equipment specification lists were drafted by the Direct Services Manager at the commencement of the mobilisation project in February 2022 guided by area measurements provided by Idverde. Following Runnymede Borough Council procedures, a tendering and procurement programme was undertaken. The capital budget allocated to the grounds maintenance project was £420,000.
- 1.4 The total capital expenditure on the project to the end of March 2023 was £347,000. The Corporate Head of Environmental Services requested the £73,000 unspent capital budget be carried forward to 2023/24 given the likelihood of unanticipated expenditure once the grass cutting season commenced in April 2023.
- 1.5 A further report was submitted to the Corporate Management Committee on 25 May to approve some additional financing to purchase some additional equipment

#### **2. Report**

- 2.1 The new grounds maintenance service is mobile and consists of 6 separate teams. There is a degree of flexibility and accommodation but largely the 6 teams are allocated to roles as follows.

- Fine Turf team to cover all cricket wickets and bowls greens.

- Horticulture team to cover all planting and bedding in parks and high streets, maintenance of hedges and shrubbery (187 sites in total)
- Parks team designated to grass cutting and specific meadow cuts in large green spaces plus all cricket outfields.
- Housing/sheltered accommodation team to undertake all maintenance in these locations including gardens, lawns, and walkways.
- Cemeteries team covering all maintenance at the 6 Runnymede cemeteries including grass cutting between graves, grassed areas, hedges, and shrubbery.
- Follow-up team cutting grass in smaller green space sites, strimming and following up areas inaccessible to larger machinery.

### 3.0 **Update and issues identified between April and May 2023**

- 3.1 Between November 2022 and March 2023 the teams caught up with maintenance issues outstanding pre-November 2022 in sheltered housing sites and within cemeteries. Regular meetings held with Housing resulted in a number of new locations being added to the schedules. Housing have requested that the new team develop further gardening initiatives once resources allow.
- 3.2 Delivery of the wide angled mower (WAM) was delayed. Consequentially a tractor with rotary deck was hired in April to cut larger green spaces and outfields.
- 3.3 Various issues have impacted on the service over the first few weeks of the growing season with April until May being the time when the grass grows at its fastest rate each year.
- 3.4 The months of March and April were both extremely wet – March the wettest in 40 years and April the wettest since 2018. Over 190mm fell over the two months leaving the ground sodden or flooded in many locations. The team were unable to start mowing as scheduled at the start of the season as we risked damaging the grass or equipment. The tractor driver tried to cut the grass in Chertsey Recreation Ground for a cricket match in April and having finished the short border sank up to the axle in mud.
- 3.5 The tractor then suffered from several mechanical issues including the clutch burning out three times and a puncture. Although a mobile mechanic has attended as per the contract this has resulted in approximately 10 lost mowing days. The extremely wet March and April has resulted in very rapid growth of grass in May, and it has become clear that reliance on one piece of equipment to cut all large green spaces gives insufficient resilience to the service.  
  
Using the smaller ride on mowers to cover in this situation is not an option and consequentially the Parks team fell behind with respect to cutting the grass in the large green spaces.
- 3.6 An interim recovery plan for grass cutting has been approved by the Chief Executive and the above issues have forced the Corporate Head of Environmental Services to reconsider the model previously approved and seek to improve resilience within the service.
- 3.7 The new model will also give greater flexibility with respect to the type of cut possible. Cutting longer grass requires specialist equipment. Having the capacity to allow grass to grow longer will support wildflowers and encourage biodiversity. This will

enable the Borough to deliver an increased percentage of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG).

- 3.8 The review also identified that two of the second-hand vehicles purchased for the team are not optimal with respect to transporting larger mowers. Transporting mowers on beaver-tail trucks is far safer, and quicker. These trucks are more agile allowing them to be used in tighter locations. Beaver-tail trucks can be driven by gardeners who do not have a trailer endorsement on their licence.
- 3.9 Finally growth is sought to buy one additional van for the supervisors. The one van presently available restricts their capacity to support the mobile teams and each other in the event of mechanical failure or accidental injury.

#### 4.0 **Proposed Revisions to the model**

- 4.1 To purchase a small tractor with two decks, one rotary and one cylinder. The two decks will be able to accommodate the grass cutting standards required in all larger green spaces including cricket outfields, meadows, and grassed areas. This machine will complement the wide angled mower due for delivery late May. The two machines will give the service the resilience required to ensure standards are maintained even in exceptional circumstances.
- 4.2 The new tractor will also allow the team to develop naturalised areas as it will have the capacity to cut longer grass left to naturalise over the summer to encourage wildflowers and support biodiversity.
- 4.3 To purchase a flail deck which can be attached to a ride on mower. A flail deck will allow the team to cut paths and firebreaks through meadow areas. Without this equipment the work would have to be completed by a contractor.
- 4.4 Purchase one small zero turn mower for use in cemeteries and sheltered housing locations. This mower is light and slim allowing safe mowing in difficult situations such as between graves or on narrow paths within sheltered housing accommodation.
- 4.5 Sell the two second hand vans and use the income to offset the purchase of two beaver-tail trucks. These trucks are safer and quicker to use. They offer greater mobility as trailers are not needed and preclude the requirement for a trailer endorsement on the driver's licence.
- 4.6 Purchase one small van to be used by the grounds maintenance supervisors to ensure the teams are supported as required and to attend any incidents.
- 4.7 Full vehicle and equipment details are shown in the table at appendix A

#### 5.0 **Policy framework implications**

- 5.1 The remodel will improve service delivery and give resilience to the grounds maintenance service. Purchase of a flail deck will allow greater flexibility to develop naturalised grass areas and contribute to biodiversity. The flail deck will also be used to create fire breaks within meadows, protecting both property and natural habitats in line with the Runnymede Borough Council Climate Change Strategy.

#### 6.0 **Resource implications/Value for Money (where applicable)**

- 6.1 The original capital scheme approved in February 2022 for the purchase of equipment came to £420,000 of which approximately £347,000 has been spent to date leaving £73,000 unspent.
- 6.2 Appendix A sets out the proposed new and alternative acquisitions which total £134,000. This would make the anticipated cost of the overall capital scheme £481,000 meaning that a supplementary Capital estimate for the difference of £61,000 was required to enable these purchases
- 6.3 The additional cost was financed from the virement of an existing revenue budget set aside for a contribution to a Surrey-wide Traveller site which is now unlikely to proceed in the current financial year, with the balance being generated by selling off two of the existing vehicles.
- 6.4 The new model will give the team greater resilience to deliver the service during extreme weather events and in situations such as breakdowns or accidents. The equipment and vehicles proposed will increase the efficiency of the service. The new model will give greater flexibility for creating meadows, naturalised areas, and wildflowers areas, supporting increased biodiversity.
- 6.5 Prices shown are the best available at the time of writing. The team will seek to secure the best equipment and price available at the time of purchase. Consideration will be given to reliability and future maintenance requirements.

## 7.0 Legal implications

- 7.1 The Public Contract Regulations 2015 (PCR 2015) sets procurement thresholds for goods, works or services above which the processes and procedures are laid down by law. Below these thresholds, the Council's Contract Standing Orders (Part 4 of the Constitution) set the rules that must be followed.
- 7.2 Following a competitive tendering exercise in 2022/23, a number of grass-cutting mowers were purchased from Farol Ltd. The company have now delivered all but one of the mowers purchased. As identified in the report the equipment ordered has proved inadequate given the ground and weather conditions this spring.
- 7.4 A waiver to contract standing orders (CSO2.6.1) was approved by Corporate Management Committee in May to purchase additional equipment without a procurement exercise on the grounds of urgency which will allow the grounds maintenance team to catch up with grass cutting rounds and deliver acceptable grounds maintenance standards going forward.
- 7.5 In order to expedite the requirements faced, officers have sourced suitable equipment from reputable suppliers including Farol Ltd which are available for immediate delivery as per items in Appendix A. These items are all at below market cost (RRP) and officers sought a waiver to contract standing orders to purchase directly from these suppliers without conducting a tender process, with the justification that the goods are required immediately to deliver essential services. CSO2.6.3 allows for an exemption to competition requirements where there is an unforeseeable risk of serious disruption to council services.

## 8.0 Equality implications

There are no equalities implications.

**9.0 Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications**

Purchase of a flail mower will allow greater flexibility to develop naturalised grass areas and contribute to biodiversity. The flail deck will also be used to create fire breaks within meadows, protecting both property and natural habitats in line with the Runnymede Borough Council Climate Change Strategy.

**10.0. Timetable for Implementation.**

- 10.1 Officers have already contacted local suppliers to establish existing availability of the machinery required. Below list price offers have been secured.

**11. Conclusions**

Corporate Management Cttee approved an additional capital estimate for the additional equipment on 25 May 2023

**(For information)**

**Background papers**

None