
From: Cabinet Member – Environment Highways & Waste
John Burr – Director of Highways and Transportation

To: Environment, Highways & Waste Cabinet Committee

Date: 10 January 2013

Subject: Highway Soft Landscaping - review of standards

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides detail of the progress of work completed this year and sets out the challenges encountered by the soft landscape service from the combined effects of the very wet summer and the budget reduction. It also proposes operational frequency changes for the future.

Recommendation:

That the Cabinet Committee provide comments to the Cabinet Member on the soft landscaping service standard for 13/14, for weed spraying, shrub bed/hedge maintenance, swathe cutting of selected roads and removal of tree stumps at the same time as felling. Noting that funding is only currently available to match the 12/13 standard.

Introduction

1. As part of KCC's requirement to save some £340m over three years the budget for Soft Landscaping was reduced from £4.6m to £3.2m in 2011/12 (a reduction of 1.4m).
2. The Soft Landscaping asset consists of 4 million square metres (m²) of urban grass, 470,000 m² of shrubs, 65,000 m² of hedges, 4900km of roads with a rural swathe cut, 4,200km of roads and pavements for weed treatment and 500,000 trees. The table below shows details of the service provided pre and post budget saving announcement.

Budget (tree maintenance. grass cutting. weed control)	£4.6M	£3.2M
Service Levels	2010/11	Post 2010/11
Rural grass cutting	2	1
Shrub maintenance	2	1
Urban grass cutting	12	8
Visibility cutting (sight lines at junctions etc)	3+	3
Weed spraying	2-3	1
Bus route clearance	✓	x
Removing Tree Stumps	✓	Safety Only
Tree planting / maintenance	✓	Legal replacements only

3. The service reduction was partially mitigated by the dry conditions of the summer of 2011 that restricted vegetation growth. This reduction in service nevertheless resulted in an increase in the number of complaints, with weed control generating most complaints.
4. The spring/summer of 2012 was the wettest on record; it saw prolonged periods of rain followed by sunny spells which created ideal conditions for vigorous growth of vegetation. This meant certain scheduled cuts could not be completed on time and had to be reprogrammed. Overall, the reduction in service levels since April 2011 combined with the weather conditions resulted in a significant increase in the number of complaints including a surge in Member concerns.
5. The County Council responded by undertaking manual weed clearance following weed spray in the May/June, a second weed spray and extra shrub cutting to deal with highway safety issues.
6. The County Council undertake a five yearly cycle of tree inspection. When trees represent a danger to the safe use of the highway user they are felled. The current practice, due to the current budget is to retain the stumps at a height of between 1m - 1.5m so they are clearly visible and do not pose a trip hazard to pedestrians. Tree replanting is only undertaken when it is a requirement of the Town and Country Planning Act. This approach was adopted as part of the cost saving exercise and resulted in a backlog of 1400 tree stumps throughout the County. The loss of trees, the retention of stumps and the decision not to replant following tree removal resulted in concerns from Members and the community about the neglected appearance of urban streets. As a one off exercise, the backlog of stumps is being removed and each site is being reinstated to match the adjacent surface. This work will be completed by the end of March 2013. Members have been invited to consider replanting opportunities in their own areas using their MHF allocations.
7. In April 2005 the Council in-sourced the highway functions from district councils functions with the exception of soft landscaping maintenance. In the intervening years, a number of district councils have handed back the service. Soft landscaping maintenance is now being delivered by a mixture of district councils, the Council's Commercial Services and external contracts. The majority of the current contracts, whether procured by district councils or the Council end at different dates in the next five years. A procurement exercise is being undertaken to rationalise the service delivery process to improve customer experience and to achieve better value for money. The suite of new contracts

has been especially designed to encourage SMEs and the local farming community to bid for the works. District councils who have expressed an interest to maintain soft landscaping on behalf of the Council in their own areas will be subject to benched marked market rates. The new contracts will be in place on 1 April 2013.

8. The wider highways review has demonstrated significant savings. As part of the on going process of introducing further improvements to service delivery a review of the management of the Soft Landscaping Group was undertaken. The review found that the Service would benefit from in-sourcing the management function and day to day running of the Group, currently provided by Jacobs. This is line with the findings of Make, Buy, Sell Review and will improve the breadth of the intelligent client role. The in-sourcing will be completed by end of March 2013.

Discussion

9. Weed growth is unsightly, in urban areas can create a trip hazard, trap litter and is a source of seed that quickly spreads. Weeds, especially woody weeds, once established can be difficult to kill and can soon damage the highway infrastructure creating broken surfaces and blocking drains. The current standard of one weed spray carried out in May/July means that many species are not effectively controlled and contribute to an ever increasing seed bank year on year. A further spray in Sept/October will mean that a wider range of actively growing plants is targeted and reduces or controls the amount of seed that overwinters ready for the next season.
10. The one shrub maintenance visit should take place October/December. The wet weather and increased growth during 2012 highlighted problems associated with one cut and resulted in many safety critical issues, blocked sight lines, obstructed paths etc. The annual cut was brought forward in these cases resulting in the requirement for a second cut in the autumn to ensure that the plants are kept under control at the start of the next growing season.
11. A 900mm wide swathe cut is undertaken on rural roads. The reduction to one annual cut has led to concerns from rural parishes about reductions in carriageway width and the lack of a clear refuge for pedestrians alongside roads not having a footway. Visibility cuts at road junctions that were previously combined with the swathe cutting programme now require separate visits. There is a need for an additional swathe cut on a number of rural roads leading into villages and leading to road junctions with visibility splays.
12. Once the current stump removal programme is completed continued tree felling will create a new backlog of stumps unless the current operational approach is changed. This will lead to further complaints, increasing as the backlog increases. Stump removal costs are very variable and depend on the size of the stump, the type of surface it is located in and the proximity underground services.

Going forward

13. The reduction in works frequencies has had an adverse effect on public satisfaction and therefore to increased complaints. It should be noted however that this was significantly

compounded by the extreme weather/growing conditions during 2012. To mitigate, reactive works are generally undertaken which are expensive both in operational costs and staff resources. Highways and Transportation have also been promoting self help via the KCC website that enables communities/homeowners to cut grass and weeds/low shrub areas where it is safe to do so.

14. It is proposed that the annual eight urban grass cutting is maintained.

Conclusion

15. The reduced service standards arising from the funding cut of £1.4m from 2011/12 to 2012/13 are contributing to a cumulative decline of landscaped areas and aesthetic appearance of the urban environment as well as an increase in reactive costs. These have resulted in community and Member concerns. Additional funding would be required if members wished to increase the level of maintenance. This will necessitate a reduction of service in other areas if additional funding cannot be found.

Recommendations

That the committee is asked to provide comments to the Cabinet Member on the service standard for 13/14, with regards to weed spraying, shrub bed/hedge maintenance, swathe cutting of selected roads and removal of tree stumps at the same time as felling. Noting that funding is only currently available to match the 12/13 standard and that other service cuts may therefore be required to fund any additional planned works.

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