

From: Matthew Balfour, Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport
Barbara Cooper Corporate, Director of Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Environment & Transport Cabinet Committee Meeting - 11 March 2016

Subject: Task & Finish Group Review of Future Commissioning of Soft Landscape Service

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of Paper: N/A

Future Pathway of Paper: Cabinet Member Decision

Electoral Division: Countywide service - All electoral divisions

Summary: At their meeting on 4 December 2015, this Cabinet Committee agreed to set up a Task & Finish Group to review options for the future commissioning of the soft landscape works service. The Task & Finish Group's preferred approach is to set up a series of workshops to consider devolution of the service to local councils and determine the level of interest.

Recommendation:

The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and note the report.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At the 4 December 2015 Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee meeting; Members agreed to set up a Task & Finish Group (T&FG) to review and make recommendations for the future commissioning of the soft landscape works service. The T&FG has met on four occasions to consider the draft Diagnostic Report and five options proposed by officers. A list of Members is included at Appendix A.
- 1.2 The T&FG discussed the key principles for the future commissioning of the services; local control, customer satisfaction, integrating similar services and recommended an approach that combined elements of three of the proposed five options.

2. The report

- 2.1 The Highways Transportation & Waste (HT&W) Soft Landscape Team is responsible for the maintenance and safety of grass, trees, shrubs, weeds and hedges within the highway boundary in urban and rural areas (8,500km of road network). The majority of the service is discretionary, with tree works and visibility cutting at road junctions falling into the statutory requirement to

maintain a safe highway. The service is delivered both through publicly procured contracts and through agreements with district, borough, parish and town councils.

- 2.2 The publicly procured contracts will terminate in December 2017. There are also annual agreements with five districts and boroughs and twelve parish and town councils to deliver the service.
- 2.3 The current annual cost of all soft landscape works, including those delivered by districts, boroughs, parishes and town councils is £2,609,300. However the T&FG review has focused on the costs of programmed urban grass, shrub and hedge maintenance which comprise the majority of discretionary soft landscape services and total £1,460,000 of the annual budget.
- 2.4 The soft landscape service currently delivers a reduced maintenance regime considered against the long-term needs of the asset. For example one weed spray, rural grass cut and shrub bed visit, as opposed to higher frequencies recommended in national codes of practice. However the T&FG recognises that the service also faces MTFP target savings of £385,000 in 2017/18. Savings of £110,000 have been identified for 2017/18 through a combination of accurate asset measurements and on-going contract procurement. The remaining £275,000 will be found through the preferred future commissioning approach. The T&FG considered five outline options for the future soft landscape service:
- **Option 1 Status Quo - Highway Verge Maintenance at Current Annual Levels** - Continue working with interested districts, boroughs, parish and town councils and publicly procure the remaining service - 8 urban grass cuts; 1 shrub bed visit; 1 hedge cut; 1 rural swathe cut; 3 visibility cuts; safety tree works; 1 weed spray. The T&FG desire is to maintain the current level of service provided the MTFP savings (See Option 2) can be met. This option presents minimal risk.
 - **Option 2 Reduced Level of Service - to achieve proposed savings of £385k (MTFP)** – This will entail a reduction in programmed services for urban grass, shrub and hedge maintenance and rural swathe cutting. Statutory minimum service for visibility splays and tree works would continue. There would impact on customer satisfaction.
 - **Option 3 Devolve to Local Councils** - Devolve responsibility for urban grass, shrubs, hedges and weed control to district, borough, parish or town councils. Statutory minimum services for trees and visibility cutting will remain with KCC. The T&FG discussions confirmed preference is for devolution to parish and town councils together with MTFP savings. This option presents minimal risk.
 - **Option 4 In House - Bring the service in house** – Some services may continue to be contracted out as they are not financially viable to bring in house for specialised works and brief delivery periods. This option was therefore dismissed.
 - **Option 5 - Statutory minimum service only** – Termination of programmed services. Statutory minimum service for visibility splays (urban and rural) and

trees; reactive emergency service to all other vegetation. The option achieves savings greater than proposed MTFP however there is a high risk to customer satisfaction and therefore this option was dismissed.

- 2.5 The T&FG preferred approach is a hybrid of options one, two and three The T&FG recommends that HT&W lead on a series of workshops to local councils that will consider devolution and set out the standards that local councils will be expected to adhere to in delivering the service.
- 2.7 The work of the T&FG has focused on the soft landscape service in isolation and the recommendations reflect a preference to devolve the service to parish and town councils. Currently there is a wider corporate agenda looking at devolution of multiple highway service elements to clusters of district and borough councils. This may offer advantages to the future of commissioning of the soft landscape service as it provides greater local decision making and customer satisfaction. The two processes are seen as complimentary in terms of concept however the T&FG's proposed implementation plans may overlap with the wider corporate agenda and require close coordination.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 The annual cost of soft landscape works appropriate for devolution, including those currently delivered by district, borough, parish and town councils is £1,080,000. If larger clusters of local councils were interested in delivering the service, then additional elements such as weed control and rural swathe cutting could also be devolved. The annual cost of those services is £380,000. The total current value of all services that might be devolved is £1,460,000. However £275,000 of the MTFP savings would have to be found in the future delivery of those services.

4 Legal implications

- 4.1 A draft briefing from Legal Services indicates there are no significant constraints in devolving urban grass, shrub and hedge maintenance to district, parish and town councils.
- 4.2 The majority of the soft landscape service is discretionary, with tree works and visibility cutting at road junctions falling into the Council's statutory requirement to maintain a safe highway.

5 Equalities implications

- 5.1 An initial EqIA screening has been carried out. Only option 5 which considers a statutory minimum service would result in a significant change to the service and potential impacts to EqIA. There were no significant implications to the devolution approach preferred by the T&FG (a hybrid of Options 1, 2 and 3).

6 Conclusions

- 6.1 The preferred approach to the future commissioning of the soft landscape service is through devolution to local councils. This approach could also retain existing service levels and meet proposed MTFP savings for 2017/18.
- 6.2 Working in partnership with local councils in Kent could deliver a range of benefits: local employment; greater local ownership of, and accountability for, the service and improved customer satisfaction.
- 6.3 The first stage of this preferred approach proposes that HT&W lead on a series of workshops with clusters of local councils to determine level of interest in time to shape procurement.

7. Recommendation:

The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and note the report.

8. Background Documents

- 8.1 Briefing note regarding the potential delegation of KCC's Highways Grounds Maintenance function to Parish Councils – KCC Legal Services

9. Contact details

Report Authors:
Richard Diplock, Soft Landscape
Manager
Lynn Leigh, Contract Support Officer
03000 413603/413706
Richard.diplock@kent.gov.uk
Lynn.leigh@kent.gov.uk

Relevant Director:
Roger Wilkin
Director of Highways, Transportation &
Waste
03000 413479
roger.wilkin@kent.gov.uk