

From: Roger Wilkin, Director of Highways, Transportation & Waste
To: Environment & Transport Cabinet Committee – 30 November 2017
Subject: Task & Finish Group Review of Future Commissioning of Soft Landscape Service

Key Decision: Non Key Decision

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of Paper: N/A

Future Pathway of Paper: Cabinet Member Decision

Electoral Division: Countywide service - All electoral divisions

Summary:

At the 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 was to explore devolution of discretionary services to local councils. On 11 March 2016 the Cabinet Committee decided that Highways Transportation & Waste were to lead or assist with a series of workshops addressing the devolution of the soft landscape service to local councils. Ten workshops were held across Kent. Of the 49 parish councils which initially expressed an interest in devolution; 7 have subsequently taken on the service however, in the same period two districts councils have handed the service back.

Recommendation:

The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse, or make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste on the proposed decision for Highways Transportation & Waste to continue supporting individual local councils who express an interest and to ensure that opportunities continue to remain available for the delivery of soft landscape services at a local level.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At the 4 December 2015 Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee (ETCC) 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 met on four occasions to consider the draft Diagnostic Report and the five proposed service options. (See Appendix A.)
- 1.2 The T&FG's preferred approach was to explore devolution of soft landscape services (mainly the discretionary services of urban grass, shrubs and hedges) to parishes and town councils while recognising the need to meet the MTFP savings target of £380k for 2017/18 and 2018/19. Subsequently HT&W lead on a series of workshops addressing devolution of the soft landscape service to

local councils. This paper provides an update on the workshops held and the interest expressed so far.

2. The report

- 2.1 The concept of local councils undertaking soft landscape works on behalf of KCC is not new and a number of councils had already taken up this option in the past (see Appendix B).
- 2.2 However, it was felt that the devolution opportunity required wider dissemination to stimulate interest and HT&W worked with the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) to deliver six presentations. This was supplemented by four additional KCC countywide parish seminars and a further meeting with seven Swale parish councils (See Appendix C).
- 2.3 Approximately 15 - 20 people attended each of the KALC area committee presentations and 124 parish representatives attended the four additional KCC parish seminars. Representatives from seven parishes attended the special Swale meeting. A number of representatives attended both the KALC and KCC seminars.
- 2.4 Since the workshops took place 30 parishes and town councils in the west of the county and 19 parishes and town councils in the east have expressed specific interest in a devolved service. Interested local councils received detailed maps and schedules identifying KCC grass, shrubs and hedges within their boundaries with the measurements for each. The combined costs for this service in the 49 councils totals £94,613.38 out of a budget of £908,600 (this is the revised countywide budget allocation after meeting the 2017/18 MTFP savings). See Appendix D for a summary of interested parishes.
- 2.5 A further four councils expressed an interest in carrying out rural swathe and visibility cutting representing £2,360.46 out of a budget of £295,000.
- 2.6 The feedback from the parish seminars and KALC-led meetings expressed concerns over security of funding, a lack of local expertise to manage the service, a failure by KCC to prioritise soft landscape services and differing standards across the county. See summary of comments in Appendix E. All concerns were addressed either at the meetings or directly with the parishes concerned.
- 2.7 It has now been a year since the opportunity was highlighted. To date 7 of the local councils have confirmed they wish to proceed and are currently carrying out the service on behalf of KCC. The total annual value for this work is £11,701.46 (Appendix D). During this period the soft landscape team have been in discussions with the remaining 42 parishes to obtain updates on their intentions and assist with any questions.
- 2.8 The soft landscape commissioning plan accepts the need to procure services. Current contracts allow for take-up by local councils and future contracts will also provide this opportunity, in proportion to the contract values and procurement rules. This ensures the required flexibility remains in place to support both approaches.

- 2.9 As a result of implementing the MTFP savings for 2017/18 onwards Gravesham and Swale councils unfortunately handed back the soft landscape service from 1st April 2017 on the basis that the monies available from KCC were insufficient. The annual value of these works is approximately £160k. The impact on devolution at the district/borough level is shown on the maps in Appendices F and G.
- 2.10 At this point in time KCC have gained seven local councils and lost two District Councils. A net gain of five local councils. However, from a financial perspective KCC have devolved £11.7k but have had £160k worth of work handed back. This has resulted in a net reduction of £148,300 pa of work delivered at a local level.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 The required MTFP savings target of £380,000 will be phased in over two years. The £250k earmarked for 2017/18 was reduced to £132k. The remaining £248k will be taken from the revenue budget in 2018/19.
- 3.2 The MTFP savings require a reduction in urban grass cutting from 8 to 6 cuts per annum which commenced in 2017/18 across the county. Any funding provided to local councils take the required savings into account. As a result there is no financial impact in 2017/18 for delivery at a local level.
- 3.3 Urban grass cutting, shrubs and hedges will be re-tendered in four districts (Dartford, Maidstone, Canterbury and Thanet) for 2018/19 and in a further five districts for 2020/21. It is anticipated that any further budget savings required above the £248k will require further reductions in the frequency of the grass cutting service to achieve this.
- 3.4 If grass cuts have to be further reduced to meet ongoing and future budget savings, local councils who have taken up the service will have their funding reduced. This may impact on the number of interested councils and may lead to a number of existing local council providers handing the service back.
- 3.5 Currently the delivery of the service at a local level remains cost neutral to KCC and as such is not impacted by the number of local councils who wish to provide the service on KCC's behalf. The benefits of local delivery are greater local decision making and associated customer satisfaction. It allows local councils to top up the service to improve visual amenity to meet local priorities and has the potential to achieve more for less via subsidisation from the local council providers.

4 Legal implications

- 4.1 There are no legal implications.
- 4.2 Current and new contracts are able to facilitate local delivery at current levels of interest. A significant increase in parish interest would require phasing over a number of years to avoid the potential for contract frustration and potential

claims existing contract suppliers.

5 Equalities implications

- 5.1 No equality implications apply to the service at the 2017/18 revised maintenance levels. Any further reductions beyond those proposed for 2017/18 may have equality impacts. Any associated significant change in service may require a public consultation exercise.

6 Conclusions

- 6.1 Arrangements have been put in place to realise the required £380k MTFP savings at the same time as pursuing devolution of the soft landscape service to local councils.
- 6.2 Initially, 15% of local councils in Kent expressed an interest in local delivery but only 2% (seven number) have confirmed they will proceed at this point in time. It is appreciated that any proposal to take on the service is very much a local decision with separate governance timeframes to KCC. Therefore the opportunities should remain open for the foreseeable future. Current contract arrangements support this and future procurement will also facilitate this opportunity.
- 6.3 It is possible that the service reductions from 2017/18 and funding on offer to local councils from KCC to undertake devolved service provision will not generate significant interest from local councils. As such increased local delivery may not increase in popularity in the short term.
- 6.4 The local delivery option of the soft landscape service should continue to be supported where interest becomes apparent. However, due to the impact on current staff resource proactive marketing of the concept will need to be re-directed to focus on supporting specific councils. This will ensure that the full range of benefits: local employment; greater local ownership; accountability for the service and improved customer satisfaction remain viable future opportunities for all parties moving forward, with minimal impact on KCC's ability to manage front line services.

7. Recommendation:

The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse, or make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste on the proposed decision for Highways Transportation & Waste to continue supporting individual local councils who express an interest and to ensure that opportunities continue to remain available for the delivery of soft landscape services at a local level.

8. Appendices and Background Documents

- 8.1 Appendix A: Council Members – Task and Finish Group Members
Appendix B: Soft Landscape District & Parish Providers 2016/17 and 2018/19
Appendix C: Local Council Workshops
Appendix D: Parish Interest West Kent and East Kent

Appendix E: Parish Seminar Feedback – Common Themes
Appendix F: District Devolution of Urban Soft Landscape Services 2016/17
Appendix G: District Devolution of Urban Soft Landscape Services 2017/18

9. Contact details

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Appendix A

Council Members, Task & Finish Group

Clive Pearman, Chairman
David Brazier
Mike Baldock
Ian Chittenden
Martin Whybrow
Colin Caller

Officers:

Andrew Loosemore
Richard Diplock
Lynn Leigh
Robin Hadley

Appendix B

Soft Landscape District & Parish Providers 2016/17 and 2017/18

Urban Services

Local Authority	Service	2016/17 Costs	2017/18 Costs
Ashford	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£131,328	£108,492
Dover	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£26,913	£21,438
Gravesham	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£73,718	£0
Shepway	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£84,237	£59,506
Swale	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£133,678	£0
Hadlow	Shrubs	£623	£623
Hextable	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£2224	£1486
Horsmonden	Urban grass	£179	£133
Minster	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£2236	£1909
Shepherdswell & Coldred	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£290	£290
Tenterden	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£0	£6315
Wateringbury	Urban grass, shrubs and hedges	£355	£61
Total		£455,781	£200,253

Rural Services (Service no change proposed)

Local Authority	Service	2016/17 Costs	2017/18 Value
Dover	Rural swathe & visibility cutting	£39,631	£39,631
Shepway	Rural swathe & visibility cutting	£23,439	£23,439
Boughton under Blean	Rural swathe	£245	£245
Chiddingstone, Hever, Leigh, Penshurst	Rural swathe & visibility cutting	£3,831	£3,831
Total		£67,146	£67,146*

*Benchmark rates could change with new 17/18 tender

Appendix C

Local Council Workshops

Date	Meeting	Venue	Attendees
23-Jul-16	KALC AREA COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS	Ditton Community Centre, Aylesford	1520
09-Sep-16	KALC AREA COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS	Sevenoaks TC Offices	15-20
18-Oct-16	KALC AREA COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS	Tyler Memorial Hall, Canterbury	15-20
20-Oct-16	KALC AREA COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS	Civic Centre Folkestone	15-20
21-Oct-16	KCC Parish Seminar*	Cricket Ground, Canterbury	29
25-Oct-16	KALC AREA COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS	Phoenix Centre Sandwich	15-20
27-Oct-16	KCC Parish Seminar*	Oakwood House, Maidstone	35
03-Nov-16	KCC Parish Seminar*	Holiday Inn, Ashford	31
03-Nov-16	Soft Landscape Team and 7 Swale Parishes		7
07-Nov-16	KALC AREA COMMITTEE PRESENTATIONS	Swale House Sittingbourne	15-20
10-Nov-16	KCC Parish Seminar*	Mercure Hotel, Tunbridge Wells	29
Total			221 - 251

* KALC also attended

Appendix D – Parish Interest West Kent

No	Parish/town Council	Date Contacted Kcc	Value PA	Confirmed
1.	Crockenhill	20 th Jan 2016	£785.34	No
2.	Seal	22 nd Oct 2015	£1,041.39	No
3.	Horton Kirby	12 th Sept 2015	£1,350.20	Yes
4.	Badgers Mount	11 th Oct 2016	£4,230.69	No
5.	Farningham	11 th Oct 2016	£1,553.21	No
6.	Chiddingstone	6 th Oct 2016	£69.21	No
7.	Leigh	6 th Oct 2016	£442.50	No
8.	Penshurst	14 th Oct 2016	£17.83	No
9.	Westerham	18 th Oct 2016	£1,729.39	No
10.	Sevenoaks Town Council	26 th Oct 2016	£11,405.07	No
11.	Dunton Green	28 th Oct 2016	£519.59	No
12.	Otford	10 th Nov 2016	£2,593.12	No
13.	Shoreham	10 th Nov 2016	£4,230.69	No
14.	Riverhead	10 th Nov 2016	£1,323.74	No
15.	Hever	10 th Nov 2016	£37.69	No
16.	Hartley	5 th oct 2016	£1,598.64	No
17.	Eynsford	22 nd Nov 2016	£217.11	Yes
18.	Edenbridge	30 th Nov 2016	£4,116.95	No
19.	Kingshill	28 th Jan 2016	££4,692.54	No
20.	Wouldham	28 th Jan 2016	£672.10	Yes
21.	Burham	Nov 2016	£401.05	No
22.	Birling	11 th nov 2016	£45.07	No
23.	Aylesford	31 st Oct 2016	£17,154.04	No
24.	Platt	31 st oct 2016	£344.66	No
25.	Speldhurst	10 th Nov 2016	£2,143.10	No
26.	Frittenden	10 th Nov 2016	£0	No
27.	Paddock Wood	11 th Nov 2016	£5,551.38	No
28	Higham	27 th oct 2016	£3,057.28	No
29.	East Sutton	27 th oct 2016	£0	No
30.	Yalding	2 nd Nov 2016	£48.43	No

Appendix D - Parish interest East Kent

No	Parish/town Council	Date Contacted Kcc	Value PA	Confirmed
1.	Barham	17th nov 2016	£1,687.82	No
2.	Littlebourne	21st Oct 2016	£304.13	No
3.	Hackington, St Cosmus & st Damien in the Blean	7th Nov 2016	£688.08	No
4.	Wickhambreaux	14th Nov 2016	£7.32	No
5.	Ramsgate	3 rd Nov 2016	£11,019.98	No
6.	Iwade	22 nd June 2016	£2,433.01	Yes
7.	Graveney & Goodenstone	1 st Oct 2016	£0	No
8.	Borden	1 st Dec 2016	£1,305.74	No
9.	Milstead	22 nd Mar 2016	£0	No
10.	Bapchild	22 nd Mar 2016	£472.03	Yes
11.	Bredger	22 nd Mar 2016	£242.01	Yes
12.	Rodmersham	22 nd Mar 2016	£54.75	No
13.	Newington	22 nd Mar 2016	£831.79	No
14.	Bobbing	22 nd Mar 2016	£2,952.50	No
15.	Upchurch	22 nd Mar 2016	£1,078.98	No
16.	Hartlip	22 nd Mar 2016	£110.37	No
17.	Lower Halstow	22 nd Mar 2016	£51.13	No
18.	Tenterden	March 2016	£6,315	Yes

Appendix E

PARISH SEMINAR FEED BACK - COMMON THEMES

1. Can we (The Parishes) pay you (KCC) to provide the service on our behalf
2. What is the time frame
3. Can the service be provided through direct employees or contractors
4. Will KCC provide or cover the insurance
5. Will technical advice be available to help us get started
6. Can we give the service back if the devolved arrangements don't work
7. Annual agreements with minimum specification requirement
8. Asset & cost confirmation required to inform income potential
9. Security of funding over the longer term. Will new arrangements be sustainable
10. Will KCC save any more money if you pay parishes the same amount
11. Concern that parishes are not resourced or have the expertise to take on this type of work
12. Concern that KCC are not adequately prioritising and funding Soft Landscape services
13. Clustering an option but in reality would be problematic to implement, many different models available
14. Ability to top up services welcomed in terms of quality however, would lead to differing standards across the county
15. KCC should not be asking parishes to subsidise the service
16. Concerns around service levels going below safety minimum levels going forward
17. Concern that parishes were being forced to take this on despite clearly being offered by KCC as an option



