MINUTES OF PUBLIC REALM AND WORKS SERVICES UNIT TASK GROUP

27 MAY 2010

PRESENT:

Members of the Group:

Councillors Day, Gillias, Mistry, Ms Robbins, Roodhouse, Sewell, Helen Walton.

Officers:

Sean Lawson (Head of Environmental Services), Andy Smith (Works Services General Manager), Chris Worman (Parks and Open Spaces Team Leader), Wayne Knighton (Operations Manager), Gill Russell (Environment and Waste Services Manager), Deborah Middlemiss (Grounds Maintenance Manager), Paul Mernagh (Street Scene Team Leader), Joanne Birkin (Assistant Scrutiny Officer), Linn Enticott (Democratic Services Officer).

20. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2010 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

21. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillor Kirby.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

23. TIMING OF REVIEW

The Task Group considered a report (Part 1 – agenda item 4) providing a timeline for the remaining work of the review.

At the first meeting of the task group members agreed a programme of work which was divided into 2 phases. Phase 1 was due to be completed during June/July and Phase 2 was planned to take place over two meetings in September and October for the final review report to be considered by Cabinet on 22 November.

The meeting due to be held in April was cancelled due to the elections and the topics from April were considered at this meeting but the group is still behind with its programme of work. It was agreed that the final two topics should be amalgamated at the next meeting allowing phase 1 to be completed on schedule.
The Task Group considered a report (Part 1 – agenda item 5) concerning performance indicators for grounds maintenance and presenting the methods of measuring performance used by other councils.

Before the item was discussed members were presented with a variety of handouts by the Parks and Open Spaces Team Leader which included Performance Indicators for Parks, a copy of the 2009 Heart of England in Bloom booklet, a feedback request form, the Green Flag Award score sheet, the green stat survey questionnaire and the parks and open spaces questionnaire.

At the last meeting the Group noted that there were no performance indicators for grounds maintenance other than those which are based on empirical measures such as the number of times grass is cut.

Members had requested that other Councils be contacted to ask if they had any performance indicators in place for their grounds maintenance services. The Scrutiny Officer contacted all of the Councils with the “family group” which is often used for comparisons and also those which had been awarded beacon status and the results were shown in the report.

The Group were informed that the Council has not got any meaningful statistics apart from the old cost per hectares which does not allow for any specific details relating to the quality of work.

One potential measure is to involve other people in rating public areas. The West Midlands GreenSpace Forum is moving towards an outcome based approach basing overall performance on what the public see. The industry is focusing on judging green space as a whole.

The following suggestions for targets were made to the Group:

i) That the Green Flag Award be retained for Caldecott Park and aim to gain at least 2 others.

The Green Flag Award is a nationally recognised quality standard and is managed by The Keep Britain Tidy Group on behalf of the Green Flag Partnership. Over 1000 parks currently hold a green flag which measures and scores such items as a welcoming place, health safety and secure, clean and well maintained, sustainability, conservation and heritage, community involvement, marketing and management. Each of these elements is broken down for evaluation.

If we submit further areas for the award we could include a cemetery and one other area to add consistency.


The Council already participates in this competition. This is an independent assessment which looks at performance on an overall basis and includes management of clean and green services, community engagement and sustainability, alongside the floral displays.

iii) Information obtained from the greenSTAT questionnaire.

This is an independent survey model managed by GreenSpace.
The Council subscribes to the service which then allows the public to fill in pre set questionnaires and rate individual parks or the service as a whole. This is currently only available online although the rolling out in paper format will begin in 2010. The information gained would provide a useful management resource.

iv) TAES (Towards an Excellent Service) peer reviews.

This is a framework developed in association with CABE, GreenSpace and IDeA to enable local authorities to undertake their own assessments matched against a set level of criteria or themes. These are evidence based.

Members discussed whether there were any elements from any of the other authorities covered in the report or from the suggestions made that they would like to see included in future grounds maintenance contracts. The main points raised were as follows:

- It was agreed that Rugby compares favourably compared to the other authorities.

- Members noted that grass cutting took place on a cyclical basis of around 15 cycles per year and commented that in rural areas an ‘as and when’ approach would be more realistic. Many parishes have large green areas and the future aspiration was for each parish to manage their own.

- The Council had made questionnaires available asking whether people felt that the changes to Caldecott Park were an improvement. Members were informed that 300 had been returned from various locations around the town. 95% of the responses had been positive.

- Members commented that there was a need to rationalise where this information was used and how performance was measured.

- The Group suggested that local champions could be recruited to communicate with the public and feedback observations.

- Comments were made that investment in the appearance of the town was necessary to encourage visitors and support tourism.

- It was also suggested that another measure of performance could be the visual presentation of the green spaces. Particular grass heights could be a way of creating the right standard of visual image. Photographs could be taken to show what the parks and green spaces should look like. It was recognised that different visual standards would be necessary for different areas.

- It was noted that a good visual impact creates a higher environmental quality and which links into a better quality of life for residents.

- It was noted that public satisfaction was more important than surveys.

The County Council are carrying out a scrutiny exercise to look at highways verge cutting within the County. There will be a Borough Council representative on the group who would be able to have an influence on the outcomes. The WSU manager agreed to email all councillors to explain and clarify the Council’s grass cutting responsibilities.
25. WORKS SERVICES UNIT – OTHER SERVICES

The Task Group considered a report (Part 1 – agenda item 6) providing details of the other services operated by the Works Services Unit.

The report outlines four areas:

i) Public conveniences

The WSU is responsible for the cleansing and management of the public convenience situated in North Street. The facility has won a national award. It suffers from very little vandalism as it is looked after by attendants who also ensure high levels of cleanliness are maintained.

ii) Vehicle maintenance workshop

The WSU operates fourteen full sized refuse collection vehicles but the workshop only has two full size maintenance bays meaning that the mechanics are often having to work outdoors to carry out necessary repairs. Capital funding for a workshop extension has been approved but work will not go ahead until after the completion of this scrutiny review.

iii) Highways/Civil Engineering Team

The team is small having only three operatives but it provides all sub-contract labour necessary to complete works. They do not advertise but this is an area that could be expanded. They operate on an open book system and do not make any profit from works undertaken for Parish Councils.

iv) Commercial waste collection

As this service is a commercial venture it is not supported by the general fund and must cover its costs from the income it generates. Operating costs have risen sharply recently but the Council is trying to keep its prices keen.

The commercial recycling service has 80 customers. Local businesses want the service but they are unwilling to pay for this service. The service is only slightly more cost effective than paying for landfill charges.

As this is a commercial service it cannot be supported by the general fund. There is potential for expanding this however it will require a re-examination of the charging policy and can only be accomplished if the service is self financing.

26. VISIT TO SEVENOAKS DC WORKS SERVICES UNIT

The Task Group considered a report (Part 1 – agenda item 7) concerning a visit to Sevenoaks DC WSU by the Chairman and officers.

During the discussion of the item Members raised the following points:

- Members raised concerns regarding the longevity of the Council’s WSU assets and were informed that the WSU have two sites, one being a small area within Caldecott Park, and the second at Hunters Lane.
There are no current plans to move the park site to Hunters Lane. Hunters Lane would be a very difficult site to develop as it is situated on a flood plain and the Severn Trent pumping station divides the site. The site has a waste licence which is difficult to obtain from scratch and it would prove hard to find another suitable site within the Borough that already had such a licence. The space could be rationalised but would still remain a Council depot.

- It was noted that to generate income the garage site needed to be expanded and that the equivalent site at Sevenoaks DC was turning over a profit without the need for advertising. Funding for expansion has already been agreed together with the addition of a bay for MOT’s to be carried out, although the implementation of this had been deferred until the end of this review.

- Members were informed that the Hunters Lane site would be of little capital value as a development site though the park area may be suitable for housing.

- It was agreed that any relevant aspects of the Licensing Policy, which is currently being revised, should be incorporated into the review report.

27. MOTION TO EXCLUDE THE PUBLIC UNDER SECTION 100(A)(4) OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

RESOLVED THAT – under Section 100(A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items on the ground that they involved the likely disclosure of information defined in paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 of Schedule 12a of the Act and that in all of the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

28. SEVENOAKS DC WORKS SERVICES UNIT FINANCIAL AND PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

The Task Group considered a report (Part 2 – agenda item 1) concerning details of Sevenoaks DC WSU’s financial situation during 2009/10 and comparisons to this council’s WSU.

- Members commented that Rugby compared favourably to Sevenoaks.

- It was noted that some of the standards at Sevenoaks were dropping whereas this Council were improving.

- Members commented that the WSU need to develop a different culture based on income generation.

- The Group were informed that discussions with Swindon Council have taken place. Swindon operates its commercial services as a separate private company and is generating sizeable profits. A site visit is being planned.
29. **DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

The Task Group agreed that the next meetings be held at 5.30pm on Wednesday 14 July 2010.

**CHAIRMAN**