

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board Grounds Maintenance Contract

Summary Note of the Working Group Meeting held on Wednesday 1st August 2012

1.0 Background

- 1.1 At its meeting in June 2012, the Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board acknowledged a request for Scrutiny made by Councillor Wadsworth in relation to the new Grounds Maintenance Contract. This referred to the initial delivery of service standards and more specifically around the maintenance of grass around street furniture and sheltered housing areas; dealing with grass arisings; and communication links with Elected Members and the public. The Scrutiny Board therefore agreed to hold a working group meeting to discuss progress with the contract.
- 1.2 The main aim of this meeting was to discuss the key issues that had arisen during the initial stages of contract delivery, the reasons for these and any actions taken to help address such issues in the future.
- 1.3 The following individuals had attended this working group meeting:
- Councillor Barry Anderson (Chair of the SSC Scrutiny Board)
 - Councillor Ann Blackburn (Member of the SSC Scrutiny Board)
 - Councillor Neil Buckley (Member of the SSC Scrutiny Board)
 - Councillor Mary Harland (Member of the SSC Scrutiny Board)
 - Councillor Neil Walshaw (Member of the SSC Scrutiny Board)
 - Councillor Mark Dobson, Executive Board Member for Environment
 - Councillor Paul Wadsworth
 - Angela Brogden, Principal Scrutiny Adviser, Leeds City Council (LCC)
 - Nick Broad, Operations Director, Continental
 - Mark Mclaughlin, Operations Manager, Continental
 - Helen Freeman, Chief Officer, Environmental Action, LCC
 - Sean Flesher, Head of Parks and Countryside, LCC
 - Giles Jeffs, Contracts Manager, Grounds Maintenance Hub Team, LCC
 - Steve Smith, Environmental Services, LCC
 - Clare Warren, Chief Executive of West North West Homes Leeds
 - Simon Costigan, Chief Executive of Aire Valley Homes Leeds
 - Wayne Shirt, Contracts Manager, Aire Valley Homes Leeds
 - Steven Vowels, Head of Partnerships & Support Services, East North East Homes Leeds
 - John Woolmer, Locality Manager, East North East Leeds, LCC
 - Tom Smith, Locality Manager, South and Outer East Leeds, LCC
- 1.4 The main issues raised during the working group's discussion are summarised below.

2.0 Main issues

Mobilisation of the new contract

- 2.1 It was acknowledged that, as the second largest Metropolitan District, Leeds has one of the largest local authority grounds maintenance contracts in the UK.
- 2.2 In view of this, a detailed contract mobilisation action plan was put in place to ensure the smooth mobilisation of the new contract when it was awarded to Continental Landscapes Ltd in August 2011. This was overseen by a Mobilisation Team with representatives from each of the internal clients, including the ALMOs, BITMO, Highways and Transportation Service, with support from Procurement, Environmental Services and Parks and Countryside.
- 2.3 Continental started the contract on 3rd January 2012 and provided a detailed induction programme for all front line staff, regardless of whether they were new or had been transferred from the previous contractor. Continental are also committed to train its staff to NVQ Level 2 in amenity horticulture and provide opportunities for a number of apprenticeships.
- 2.4 Following the induction programme, staff began work on site on 5th January 2012, completing the remainder of the winter maintenance programme handed over by the outgoing contractor. During the working group meeting, there was a consensus agreement that the mobilisation process for the commencement of the new contract had been successful.

Initial delivery of service standards specified within the contract

- 2.5 Within the contract specification, the preferred option for delivery of the grounds maintenance service is to maintain all amenity grass to a cut height of 25mm. In doing so, the contractor is required to undertake 13 cuts in any one growing season.
- 2.6 However, it was noted that the weather at the start of the growing season this year was a significant factor in causing operational difficulties and perceived quality issues. This unusually wet warm weather had caused a prolonged 'flush' of grass growth slowing down mowing speed and creating a large volume of grass arisings after each cut, which was often considered unsightly. In addition, the periods of extreme wet weather also prevented grass cutting on some days and made access to some areas difficult or impossible.
- 2.7 During the working group meeting, Continental explained that at the outset, the 13 cut frequency was always going to prove challenging. However, the extended cut frequency caused by the extreme weather conditions had allowed significant growth between cuts, thereby adding to this existing pressure. However, it was acknowledged that where genuine mistakes are being made, these need to be addressed urgently with appropriate training.
- 2.8 It was highlighted that Continental would like to aspire to a two calendar weekly grass cut frequency (16 cuts in one season) to achieve a better quality of cut. Whilst this has not yet been achieved, the working group learned that Continental has employed an additional three cutting teams (totaling a local workforce of 108

staff) and have also offered overtime working to their staff to try and increase the cut frequency to two calendar weeks.

- 2.9 Whilst the preferred option for the delivery of the grounds maintenance service was clearly set out within the contract specification, other options were also identified within the contract. To ensure that value for money and affordability was obtained, the contractor was expected to price all of these options (eight in total) within a separate Schedule of Rates. The working group also noted that the opportunity does exist for parish and town councils to procure additional cuts for specific areas should they wish to. It was therefore felt that local parish and town councils needed to be reminded of this.
- 2.10 However, in view of Continental's own aspirations to deliver a two calendar weekly grass cut frequency in order to achieve a better quality of cut, this prompted questions about whether the current frequency of cuts was sufficient and highlighted a need for this to be reviewed.
- 2.11 Whilst acknowledging that the contract specification makes reference to other options available for the delivery of the grounds maintenance service, it was felt that the Council may be able to obtain greater added value by adopting a more flexible approach towards such variations and also exploring where any additional services provided by Continental could lead to further cost savings. It was acknowledged that this was particularly relevant to winter works which would directly protect Continentals workforce enabling greater service security in subsequent years.

Maintaining Primary Network routes

- 2.12 Primary Network routes can be defined as any grass adjacent to the Principal 'A' roads within Leeds Metropolitan District Boundary. These roads are generally for fast moving long distance traffic with little frontage or pedestrian traffic, with speed limits in excess of 40mph. The contract specification therefore states that it is essential that during such works, the Contractor liaises with the relevant Highways Network Management Officers as some sites may need to be completed outside normal working hours (i.e. between 9.30am and 3.30pm, evenings and weekends).
- 2.13 Primary networks are divided into two Classes;
- Class 1 – The majority of the primary network grass cutting will be carried out on 6 occasions between March and October.
 - Class 2 – The remainder of the primary network grass cutting will be carried out on 3 occasions between March and October.
- 2.14 Both Class 1 and Class 2 grass is to be cut back to a height of 100 mm.
- 2.15 Grass in these areas will typically be on the verges or central reservations of dual carriageways and other high speed roads. It is therefore essential that the Contractor works within the relevant guidelines (Chapter 8 of the Traffic Signs Manual). All personnel employed by / or sub-contracted to the company carrying out the works, which are on or adjacent to the highway network, must also have the appropriate training and certification required by the National Highway Sector Scheme.

2.16 The working group learned that the first scheduled cut of this category of grass was delayed and that the quality of service delivered across the city was inconsistent. The quality issue was partly due to this delayed start and the fact that Continental used sub-contractors. In addition, there was also a delay in Continental providing cut information which made monitoring difficult. The perceived quality of service provided was therefore based on complaints. There was also a delay in agreeing traffic management protocols that affected grass cutting on high speed roads that required traffic management arrangements to ensure that cutting was carried out safely. The locations affected were as follows:

- Ring Road, Weetwood.
- M1/A650 junction (J41)
- Ring Road, Seacroft (70mph section)
- A63 Selby Road
- Ring Road, Beeston

2.17 However, it was reported that following discussions with Continental, a mechanism is now in place to ensure that the grass is cut at a reasonable interval and that timely cut update information is received from the sub-contractors and passed onto the Council. It was also reported that Highways Services have reviewed each location specified to be cut 6 times per year and, where appropriate, reclassified to 13 times per year. This initial work was carried out in February 2012 and has continued to date.

2.18 In addition, traffic management arrangements are also now established and future cuts scheduled. It was reported that in the last contract, a number of sites were identified for traffic sensitivity. However, a significant number of other sites have since been identified for traffic sensitivity by Continental. Where road closures are necessary to conduct such works, it was felt that this needed to be considered further to ensure smooth traffic flows and minimised disturbance to residents. In the meantime, it was noted that Continental has agreed to Council Street Cleaning teams using their road closures, which has worked particularly well on Stanningley Bypass.

Maintaining grass and other growth around street furniture

2.19 The contract specification states that 'the Contractor must maintain the grass and any other growth around street furniture and any other obstacles cutting to the same height as the surrounding grass'. During the working group meeting, it was highlighted that there had been complaints regarding staff failing to trim around street furniture where required.

2.20 During the working group meeting, Continental highlighted that where mistakes had been made, this primarily involved new staff within new areas and that this would be rectified with training. In accordance with the contract specification, Continental acknowledge that it is encouraged that they deploy localised grounds maintenance teams in order to nurture ownership and pride in the quality of service delivered and that they remain fully committed to this. However, it was suggested by the Executive Board Member for Environment that the Scrutiny Board may wish to undertake further work with the grounds maintenance contract team and Continental to explore how the delivery of this particular service could be improved upon.

Shrub bed maintenance

- 2.21 It was reported that the wet weather conditions have also encouraged unusual levels of weed growth in many of the shrub and rose beds. In particular those strains of weeds that tend to be more tolerant to the herbicides used eg thistles, nettles etc have become an issue.
- 2.22 In conjunction with Continental, a schedule of additional maintenance visits has been agreed to be completed by the end of September 2012. This will include initial manual removal of established weeds followed by an herbicide application when the weather conditions are more favorable. It was reported that Continental has also employed three additional teams to carry out this work which began in early July 2012. It was also acknowledged that the current shrub bed maintenance specification that requires Continental to visit shrub beds twice per year requires revision to provide a consistently acceptable service.

Sheltered housing

- 2.23 It was acknowledged that the cut quality around some of the ALMO sheltered complexes had been a key issue. This was linked to the fact that whilst the frequency of cut is the same as standard amenity grass i.e 13 times per year, many residents believed that it should be more frequent. As a result, it was reported that the ALMOs have now reviewed their sheltered housing complexes and, where appropriate, have increased the frequency of grass cutting up to the end of this grass cutting season. As a result, Continental has established dedicated teams to carry out this work and to date are achieving a full cut in a week. Whilst acknowledging that the full benefits of this are still to be reviewed, this approach was welcomed by the working group.

Litter picking

- 2.24 The contract specification states that 'prior to scheduled works, the contractor will remove and dispose of rubbish including leaves, rubble, litter and wind blown branches and fruits, plus anything else that the Client considers detrimental to the appearance of the site. Litter picking is particularly important and will be managed through the monitoring process'. In addition, Continental is also to ensure that litter picking and cutting is completed in the same working day for each asset.
- 2.25 However, it was highlighted that a common service quality issue relates to litter not being removed from grassed areas prior to being cut, resulting in shredded litter. Whilst acknowledging that it is the outcome that is important, the perception from the public is that it does not make sense to try and pick up litter once it has been shredded.
- 2.26 It was reported that Continental have carried out further training with staff and where appropriate, taken formal action. The Council will also continue to monitor service quality and any issue of this nature will be passed back for rectification. Failure to respond will result in contract deductions.
- 2.27 It was also highlighted that Continental continue to work closely with the Locality Teams to deal with issues around litter picking as they are keen to work more effectively together in delivering a joined up service. The working group also recognised that a closer working relationship is needed with Locality Management in terms of the collection of litter arisings. It was noted that similar discussions

around joined up working are also taking place with other partners, such as the ALMOs and Parks and Countryside.

Dealing with grass arisings

- 2.28 The contract specification states that all arisings will be left evenly distributed across the plot. All grass clippings resulting from operations falling on paths and other hard surfaces including driveways, are also to be dispersed back on to the grassed area. In particular, grass arisings must not be blown onto the carriageway.
- 2.29 It was reported that another common service quality issue relates to grass arisings not being cleared from hard surfaces following grass cutting. During the working group meeting, reference was also made to the potential impact of not removing grass arisings from gullies, which could lead to blockages and flooding. However, it was highlighted that further investigation would need to be undertaken to get a more accurate assessment of this problem. Linked to this, it was also acknowledged that the public perception is that grass arisings should be collected. The ALMOs explained that this is the second highest complaint reason and that when the grass is long and wet, this becomes more of an issue with the public. The staff at Continental also receive complaints from the public on this matter, despite the fact that the collection of grass arisings has never featured in any Leeds Council grounds maintenance contract. It was therefore felt that this needed to be communicated more clearly to the public.
- 2.30 In acknowledging that ALMOs already have effective communication links with residents to be able to relay this message, it was suggested that Continental should make use of their own website to communicate this message to the wider public. In recognising that many of the public complaints are received via the Council's Call Centre, it was felt that staff at the Call Centre should also be trained to respond effectively to such complaints by explaining what is actually expected from the grounds maintenance staff in accordance with the contract. It was reported during the working group meeting that this is being explored.
- 2.31 In terms of dispersing grass cuttings from hard services back on to grassed areas, this is usually done by blowing the grass. It was noted that when grass is short and dry, it usually gets blown away on its own. However, when it is long and wet, the staff are required to disperse it themselves. It was noted that Continental have carried out further training with staff on this issue and, where appropriate, taken formal action. However, it was highlighted that dispersing grass from the highway is a particularly dangerous task and therefore Continental continue to hold discussions with health and safety on this matter.
- 2.32 The Executive Board Member for Environment had suggested that this may also be an area for the Scrutiny Board to explore further with the grounds maintenance contract team and Continental.

Contract monitoring

- 2.33 In accordance with the contract specification, the day to day operational contract monitoring is to be undertaken by the individual clients (ALMO's, BITMO and Highways). It also recognises that the clients have a number of Registered Tenants Groups, Town and Parish Councils, Residents Panels and individual residents who may also be involved in the day to day monitoring of any work carried out in their respective areas.

- 2.34 Monitoring of the service delivery has been carried out since the 3rd of January 2012. The ALMOs continue to monitor their own assets and the grounds maintenance team monitor Highways assets.
- 2.35 It was reported that the aim is to ensure that a minimum of 10% of each cut is monitored, this being regarded as a statistically representative sample. To date, in excess of 10% has been achieved. However, it was noted that the ALMOs are monitoring at least 30 to 40% of their assets. It was highlighted that initial staffing issues within the grounds maintenance team have now been addressed and that significant improvements should be seen in the future monitoring of Highway assets.
- 2.36 In accordance with the contract specification, all failures are to be rectified by the Contractor within 2 working days (rectification period) of notification being received. Any failures to rectify at the second monitoring visit will result in a performance deduction.
- 2.37 The ALMOs reported having a positive relationship with Continental, with the 'first time right' rates being at the highest levels (within the 90th percentile). However, it was noted that the Highway assets reported a higher number of failures, despite monitoring less assets. Whilst acknowledging that there is a degree of subjectivity as part of the monitoring process, it was recognised that this needed to be addressed in order to achieve greater parity between the ALMO and Highway monitoring processes whilst recognising the different specifications to be achieved.
- 2.38 It was also reported that whilst the management and administration of the grounds maintenance contract is currently done through the grounds maintenance team within Environmental Service, this would be carried out by the Parks and Countryside Service with effect from the 1st September 2012, enabling a full review of the efficacy and value for money of the monitoring processes in the light of the high level of service delivery being provided.

Contract Variations

- 2.39 It is acknowledged within the contract specification that the asset register will continually change and so variations are produced to reflect any fluctuations in the contract. Variations to the asset types need to be agreed between the Client and the Contractor within 5 working days and signed acceptance forms completed.
- 2.40 Reference was made to undertaking further analysis surrounding miscellaneous areas of grass which need to be assigned to the appropriate client. Whilst appreciating the importance of ensuring that assets are correctly identified and assigned to the appropriate client, the working group felt that such processes should not hinder the delivery of the service, particularly as the public is not likely to make such distinctions and will simply hold the Council to account for this service. Where council ownership is not clear these sites need to be investigated speedily to clarify responsibilities so that private land-owners can be approached by council enforcement officers.
- 2.41 It was reported that there is a formal process within the contract to ensure that work can be varied in and out as required. This process is managed by the grounds maintenance team. Due to staff issues and the high volume of work, it was noted that a backlog of variations had developed. Additional support has been

provided and the turn-around time is now approximately one week. It was highlighted that Continental have been particularly helpful with this issue and responded to requests for work in advance of the variation orders being raised. However, variation orders are recorded and now monitored more closely to ensure that an acceptable processing time is maintained.

Communication

- 2.42 The contract specification states that the Contractor is required to periodically attend ALMO and BITMO Board meetings, Area Committees, Scrutiny and Executive Board and local residents meetings and any other meetings deemed necessary by the client.
- 2.43 It was reported to the working group that Continental have been proactive in terms of communicating and connecting with services within the Council (for example Locality Management) as well as local resident and tenant groups.
- 2.44 Continental also recognise that local councillors provide added value to the overall monitoring process and therefore remain committed to working closely with Area Committees and local parish and town councils. Members of the working group also acknowledged that Continental have been quick to respond to complaints and seek to deal with issues promptly.
- 2.45 During the working group meeting, particular reference was made to the In Bloom committees. It is acknowledged with the contract specification that certain areas of grass, which may be amenity or other categories, may fall into Yorkshire in Bloom and / or Britain in Bloom judging areas. As Leeds City Council regards the "In Bloom" competitions throughout the City as being highly prestigious, the contract specification states that the quality and timing of cuts are of paramount importance in order to achieve a high standard of finish throughout the season. The contractor is therefore expected to mobilise at short notice in the provision of services in this regard and will be notified of judging dates as they become available. It is expected that each In Bloom route will receive at least 2 cuts prior to the first judging date.
- 2.46 In view of this, the Contractor is expected to work closely and have regular consultation with the In Bloom committees. Whilst such works have clearly added to service delivery pressures faced by Continental this year, it was reported to the working group that Continental have now developed good working relationships with the 'In Bloom' groups.