

## **Streets, Environment & Homes Scrutiny Sub-Committee - Grounds Maintenance Officer Briefing – 29<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

**Present:** Councillors Councillor Leila Ben-Hassel (Chair), Councillor Kola Agboola (Vice-Chair), Adele Benson, Amy Foster, Christopher Herman and Luke Shortland

**Also Present:** Steve Iles (Director of Sustainable Communities) and Daniel Shepard (Head of Independent Travel)

The Chair started the meeting by informing the Sub-Committee that an update on Grounds Maintenance had been given at a previous Sub-Committee officer briefing at which officers outlined an improvement plan to ensure the service would be stabilised by the next cutting season in 2022/23. The plan was presented and articulated around the following improvement areas:

- Establishing service standards across the different areas covered under Grounds Maintenance (Highways, parks, cemeteries, housing)
- Recruitment of seasonal workers
- The restructure of the service
- Capital expenditure and investment into new equipment.

In April 2022, the Sub-Committee Chair requested an update on the improvement plan. The Director of Sustainable Communities, Steve Iles, and Head of Independent Travel, Daniel Shepard, shared a brief presentation that stated that there were **127 parks and green spaces in the borough** and that Croydon was in the **top seven London boroughs for distribution of green spaces** in relation to total borough size.

Grounds Maintenance services were brought back in house in two phases in 2019/20 and included 69 staff, 30 seasonal workers and a budget of £3.5 million. A restructure of the service was paused due to COVID and was being undertaken and was approaching the final stages. The Medium Term Financial Strategy 2020-23 had identified savings of £1 million over two years with a 15% headcount reduction in 20/21 and £450,000 service reduction savings in 21/22. The 22/23 annual budget included a growth bid of £360,000 to increase grass cutting frequency from eight to ten weeks, to four to six weeks. Members heard that officers were looking at alternative ways to fill vacant posts after unsuccessful recruitment in some areas. Officers advised that this was a wider issue across authorities.

The Chair asked if there had ever been a separate contractor for grounds maintenance on housing land and it was confirmed that this had not been the case; this had initially been an in-house service that had been outsourced as part of the wider original contract.

Members heard that the restructure had now been agreed with an implementation date of 1<sup>st</sup> July 2022 and leading to the following:

- 57 Full Time Employees budgeted and;
- A total controllable budget of the service for 22/23 of £2.9 million.
- An agreed equipment commissioning strategy using the council procurement frameworks to purchase a number of on road and off road vehicles for a value of £1.3 million (a capital budget carried forward from last financial year);
- A number of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with other Council service areas have been developed, including for Parks and Green Spaces, Housing Revenue Account's Assets and Estates, Cemeteries, Highways and Education.

Work on dashboard reporting was ongoing to allow reporting by ward to highlight what grass had been cut and when the next cut was needed; there were discussions about whether this would be accessible to Councillors going forward. The Chair requested that Red, Amber, Green ratings were properly defined to ensure that data was easy to interpret and asked whether this would feed into wider performance monitoring across the Council. Members heard that KPIs for this would be developed to feed into corporate performance monitoring.

Sub-Committee Members requested a copy of the grass cutting schedule and were informed that the aim was for a four to six week cutting cycle. The two-week flexibility was to account for external factors such as weather and condition of equipment. A ward by ward schedule had previously been published (in 2020/21) on the council website and work was ongoing on communications that would give a clear indication of grass cutting timescales to be shared on the website within the next couple of months.

The service was looking to review and update the information available on the Council website, finalising the performance dashboard and reviewing and updating the Grounds Maintenance works schedule for publication. Members asked how it was known that cutting was taken place and to the correct standard. The Sub-Committee heard that officers in the parks team were responsible for quality assurance and ensuring that cutting had taken place. Members asked when realistic timescales could be shared with councillors and were informed that this would be available by the end of July 2022.

The Sub-Committee commented on the visible nature of the service and stated that the increased cutting recently was noticeable; members asked that whether, with reduced staffing, the planned work would be possible and whether those who paid service charges for grass cutting were receiving satisfactory service. On Service Level Agreements, the Sub-Committee heard that these were used to ensure that the service was held to account by the monitoring team and that value for money was achieved as compared to use of an external contractor. Where there was work for other services, the SLAs spelt out what works were expected; where grass had not been cut for extended periods due to equipment not able to cut this as quickly, external providers were being used where tractors were needed.

Members asked how areas were being prioritised for cutting and heard that there had been work done to look at what level of service was possible within the 2022/23 approved budget and work was prioritised accordingly, however, there still are issues down to unfilled positions and new equipment being needed. Officers advised there had been testing of the market for equipment, and the equipment needed had now been decided, but the lead in times for acquiring this varied; officers restated their commitment for the equipment to be acquired as quickly as possible. Areas of cutting had been approached on a case by case basis for priority previously but, as the service returned to normal frequency, retaining a regular cutting schedule would become easier. Officers anticipated that the service would take two cutting cycles to reach full stabilisation and deliver as per agreed standards.

Some members of the Sub-Committee asked about possible health risks related to increased levels of ticks as a result of long grass. Officers advised that there was not widespread evidence for large increases but that this was a known consequence of long grass.

Members asked about the equalities impact of grass not being cut on housing estates and how health outcomes would be considered going forward. The Sub-Committee heard that more could be done on this and tree planting to create canopies was given as an example; it was recognised that the lack of cutting in the previous year had been a short-term solution to budget issues that would now be rectified and this would be helped by the SLA with HRA Assets and Estates.

The Sub-Committee asked about previous plans for 30% of green spaces to be meadowed which had not taken place. Officers agreed that this would require funding and trials to ensure the right balance of species were chosen to cope with anticipated weather changes and that already some appropriate locations had been identified. Work with parks Friends groups is being undertaken to produce maps of areas of parks that should not be cut and to further re-establish links with these groups and communities. There had also been work done with meadowing to ensure there was not a decline in pollinators in the borough and further work would be developed once the priorities to stabilise the service have been delivered.

Some work was being done on the pilot areas identified in 2019. Although this had been previously paused, officers offered to bring a wildflower and biodiversity strategy to a future meeting. The Chair asked about the availability for funding for community groups and asked whether there was a possibility of engaging these groups to help them bid for this. The Sub-Committee heard that lists of available funding were sent to officers regularly and bidding for this would be developed alongside publicising funding opportunities to community groups.

The Chair asked whether tenants could be engaged on the housing side to identify land not suitable for leisure that could be used for wild flowering. Officers advised that they are planning on working with the housing resident engagement team.

Members asked if the service had been stabilised with the correct resourcing for all areas and heard that officers were confident that SLAs were deliverable within the established budgets. There were still some threats to the service, including recruiting to vacant posts and the equipment procurement process was still ongoing, but the service was in the process of stabilising. It was not yet known whether services may be reduced in future years depending on the Mayor's priorities and future Council budgets and MTFs. The Chair asked how budgets compared with other authorities for this particular service and the Sub-Committee heard from officers that the borough was below Grounds Maintenance budget average from equivalent authorities but that more data on this could be provided, noting that a like for like comparison is usually difficult.

The Chair concluded the meeting by requesting that some communications were added to the website about the work currently being undertaken on the service so far as a holding statement until the ward by ward schedule is ready for publication.