

Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee

2 September 2014

Report of the Highways and Streetscene Contract (BBLP) Task Group

Purpose of Report

- 1 To present the report of the Highways and Streetscene Contract (BBLP) Task Group on the Annual Performance of the contract.

Background

- 2 An update on the Highways and Streetscene Contract was presented to the O & S Management Committee on 5 November 2013. At the meeting the Committee agreed:
 - a) That a rapid scrutiny exercise would be conducted on the content of the report submitted by the Cabinet member to enable greater clarity of the concerns raised;
 - b) That a progress report would be presented to the Environment Select Committee after the winter, addressing operational performance;
 - c) That the Environment Select Committee conduct a full scrutiny exercise in June 2014, after the first full year of operation of the new contract.
- 3 At the meeting of the Environment Select Committee on 15 April 2014, it was agreed that the rapid scrutiny group referred to in a) above should form a Task Group and undertake the review into the performance of the Highways and Streetscene Contract after the first full year of operation, referred to in c) above.
- 4 Prior to the end of the first year's operation, a number of issues were raised in relation to the grass cutting element of the contract. Whilst it was agreed that a meeting would be useful to address these issues, due to time constraints, it was not possible for this to be organised. Subsequently, it was agreed that the issues around grass cutting would be raised within the meeting to review the first year's performance of the Highways and Streetscene contract.

Membership

- 5 The membership of the Task Group had changed since it last met due to resignations. The current membership is Cllrs Jeff Osborn (chair), Linda Packard, Gordon King, John Walsh, Bob Jones and Tony Trotman.

Witnesses

6 In its review of the contracts, the Task Group took evidence from:

Cllr John Thomson, Cabinet Member for Highways and Streetscene and Broadband

Cllr Philip Whitehead, Portfolio holder for Highways Contract

Dr Carlton Brand, Corporate Director

Parvis Khansari, Associate Director, Highways and Transport

Peter Binley, Head of Highways, Asset Management and Commissioning

Amanda Fisher, Managing Director, BBLP

Steve Helliwell, Operations Director, BBLP

Tom West, Contract Director, BBLP

Richard Stokes, Consultancy Manager, Atkins

Written Evidence

7 The Task Group considered the following documents:

Highways Contract – Report on Annual Performance 2013 - 14;

Appendix 1: Wiltshire Highways Contract – Review of Performance;

Appendix 2: Atkins – First Year Review;

Appendix 3: BBLP First Year Review - Undertakings and KPI review.

8 The Task Group had also considered 97 communications received in respect of the grass cutting service.

Findings

9 The Task Group remit did not include a review of the performance of the Atkins contract and therefore it had not undertaken any work in relation to it. The information provided for the Annual Review included a review of the Atkins contract, which the Task Group agreed to take 'as read' and acknowledged that the performance was good. The Task Group agreed that it would focus attention on the Atkins contract in the future.

10 There had been considerable concerns over the grass cutting service, primarily but not only, in the west of the county. Although this element accounted for only 2% of the contract, it represented a significant issue in terms of the reputational damage done to both the Council and BBLP. BBLP recognised this and published a leaflet with a public apology which was sent to the residents in Bradford on Avon, Melksham, Trowbridge and Westbury in the week beginning 21 July 2014, at its own expense (Appendix 1). The Task Group congratulated BBLP for this positive action.

- 11 The Task Group was concerned that at the meeting at the end of March the Rapid Scrutiny Group (as was) had been assured by Council officers, the Cabinet Member and BBLP that, following the problems with grass cutting in 2013, everything was in place to ensure a good service in 2014. This assurance proved to be of little value as immediately after, complaints from the public about grass cutting began to mount.
- 12 BBLP had underestimated the resources required for grass cutting, despite this issue having been raised with them by the client team. As a result, they had been required to employ extra agency staff and had incurred additional costs. Also, BBLP did not receive full payment from the Council for the work it did not deliver under this element of the contract.
- 13 BBLP indicated that 30 agency staff were to be recruited to their permanent staff. They also intend to use a number of local contractors/agency staff to assist early in the 2015 season, reverting later to the core staff only.
- 14 The BBLP First Year Review (Undertakings and KPI Review) listed 10 positives from the performance monitoring exercise and 29 action points (Appendix 2). The Task Group is to be provided with a list documenting what action is to be taken/progress made against each point.
- 15 There was evidence that the Community Team service was not working in some areas of the county and that it was less flexible than had been anticipated. Suggestions were put forward as to why this might be and work was to be undertaken to identify best practice for Community Coordinators. Difficulties were acknowledged in developing the multi-skilled team required to deliver the Council's vision of an integrated service, but progress was being made. There was a lack of clarity over what comprised a Community Team and what resources were available for Community Days.
- 16 Differences in the approach taken by Community Coordinators were noted. It was acknowledged that different areas had different requirements. However, a case study was to be undertaken to compare the work of Community Coordinators in two different areas with a view to identifying good practice, which could be disseminated across all areas.
- 17 The electronic system supporting the reporting/feedback process behind the 'My Wiltshire' App had only been available from 1 April 2014. This had resulted in a lack of data and the inability of BBLP to report on some of the KPIs, making it difficult to judge performance accurately on those KPIs.
- 18 Monitoring of the quality of work, initiated through the App reporting system, was by means of photographs on completion of the work. The Task Group

was informed that it had not been envisaged that the Council or BBLP would monitor the work of the Community Teams.

- 19 The tender promises indicated that a minimum of six apprenticeship placements per year would be provided. There was concern that the four placements during year 1 were not new and had been carried over from the Ringway contract.
- 20 Despite assurances to the contrary, it was reported that the customer experience in some areas was that there was a difference in the quality of services provided between towns and villages.
- 21 There was disappointment that a 'user-friendly' guide to the key clauses in the BBLP contract had not been provided.
- 22 Significant extra finance had been made available for the highways work; BBLP confirmed that they had the capacity and resources to undertake the additional work.
- 23 The Task Group noted the good response by BBLP to the winter floods over a period of four months, and also the precautionary salting of roads they undertook. BBLP are to be congratulated on this performance.

Conclusions

- 24 A number of the concerns the Task Group had raised in relation to the performance of the contract had also been identified in the 29 action points in Appendix 2. They were pleased that BBLP and the Council had committed to responding to each of the points and looked forward to seeing the resulting improvements in performance.
- 25 The Task Group welcomed the work to be undertaken around the role of the Community Coordinator to identify learning points and best practice.
- 26 It was acknowledged that BBLP had made good efforts in June and July to fulfil the grass cutting elements of the contract and they had liaised with local members to obtain the necessary local knowledge. However, it had taken far too long and a great deal of work to reach this point.
- 27 The Task Group wanted to see the extra resources committed to grass cutting maintained and welcomed the recruitment of 30 additional permanent staff, trusting that their local knowledge would support the effective delivery of the contract.

- 28 The Task Group believed that many lessons had been learnt on all sides through getting the contract back on track. It was imperative that the learning was built on constructively. They noted the manner in which BBLP had acknowledged their early mistakes and welcomed the long term commitment they had made. Whilst this was welcomed the Task Group wanted to see the improvement maintained.
- 29 It was acknowledged that in the current economic climate the Council had to be bold and take risks with its contracts in order to find the resources for key services, therefore it was essential that the BBLP contract delivered. The Task Group accepted that the contract cannot be allowed to lapse, or elements of it be retendered, but it wanted to see much more evidence of effective partnership working.
- 30 The Task Group awaits the report on the Highways and Streetscene Contract from the Audit Committee to inform its future work.

Recommendations

- 31 That the Task Group should continue its work by monitoring the performance of certain elements of the contract throughout the year and reviewing the next Annual Report.
- 32 That the Task Group should meet in 2/3 months time to consider the actions/progress against the 29 action points, as well as the Year 2 plans for BBLP and Atkins, and report on these to the Environment Select Committee on 28 October 2014.
- 33 That the Task Group maintains regular contact with the Cabinet Member, Portfolio holder, officers and BBLP between meetings so that they are quickly informed of any slippage in performance.
- 34 That the Task Group gives due attention to better understand and evaluate Atkins' activities.
- 35 That consideration should be given to adding high risk contracts to the Council's Risk Register.

Cllr Jeff Osborn, Chairman, Highways and Streetscene Contract Task Group

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