



Policy Panel

Item

8

2 August 2023

Report of	Head of Sustainability	Author	Head of Neighbourhood Services
Title	Grounds Maintenance Contract and Transition Update		
Wards affected	All Wards		

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides a summary on the activities undertaken since the meeting of the Policy Panel on the 12 January 2022, where recommendations were made to Cabinet to extend the current grounds maintenance contract and for officers to continue with plans for an inhouse delivery model.
- 1.2 The report sets out contractual and performance standard changes in order to meet the Council's financial challenges, particularly in relation to weed management and grass cutting.

2. Action Required

- 2.1 For information only.

3. Reason for Review

- 3.1 To provide an update to the Policy Panel, as agreed by Cabinet on 9 March 2022, which resolved that:
- a) authority be delegated to the Assistant Director of Environment to extend the contract with the existing contractor for three years in accordance with the existing terms.
 - b) the recommendations by the Policy Panel at its meeting on 12 January 2022 referred to in section 3 of the Assistant Directors report, be approved.
- 3.2 At its meeting of Policy Panel on 12 January 2022, the following recommendations were made:
- a) the contract with the current contractor Idverde be extended on the same terms. There is provision within the current contract for an extension of three years [only] if the Council decides up to 72 months from the commencement date. The last date for extension notice is 1 April 2022.
 - b) Officers should continue with plans for an inhouse service, meeting the objectives agreed for commencement at the end of the contract extension.
 - c) an annual update be provided to the Policy Panel on progress of plans towards bringing the grounds maintenance service inhouse, with confidential sections to allow discussion of commercially sensitive matters where necessary.

3.3 At its meeting on 28th June 2023, the Policy Panel requested an earlier update than proposed, which would include an overview of performance of the current Idverde contract, particularly in relation to weed management and grass cutting.

4. Background Information

Current contract

- 4.1 The Council currently has a grounds maintenance contract with Idverde. This contract has been extended through to 31st October 2026, as recommended by Policy Panel at its meeting on 12th January 2022 and agreed by Cabinet at its meeting on 9th March 2022.
- 4.2 During the extension of the contract, the officers and contractor have set out a commitment to develop service improvements. This includes such things as:
- Delivering a carbon neutral service.
 - Continuing to invest in new, cleaner, and more efficient fleet, be that electric or zero emission alternatives.
 - Investment in technology.
 - Using technology to improve communications through a service management system, which will be introduced more comprehensively within Colchester. It is designed to enhance supervision, digitise monitoring, and make communication and reporting more transparent.
 - Sustainability and biodiversity.
 - Support the delivery of Colchester's biodiversity strategy.
 - Increase community activities.

2023/24 financial challenge

- 4.3 Like all local authorities, Colchester City Council is facing significant financial challenges. Faced with a significant budget deficit, and £10m of extra costs. The council has agreed to a raft of savings and income generation measures to balance its books. In this context a range of budget options for saving and income generation were approved by Full Council in February 2023.
- 4.4 Due to the ongoing financial challenges that is faced, the Council sought savings against the Idverde contract totalling £212k (13% of the contract value). These savings were earmarked to be delivered against three distinct areas:
- Sports Pitches - £50k
 - Castle Park Cricket Maintenance - £80k
 - Highway Verges - £82k
 - *Total - £212k*

Sports Pitches

- 4.5 There is a £50k saving target attributed against sports pitches in 2023/24 and a further £50k will be saved in the financial year 2024/2025.

Castle Park Cricket Maintenance

- 4.6 Colchester and East Cricket Club currently have a long lease with the Council on the club house within the grounds of Castle Park Cricket Field. For a number of years (20+) they have played cricket games on the Council owned Castle Park Cricket Ground, exclusively paying a nominal annual rent.

4.7 The cricket ground is currently maintained to a County Standard as on occasion, Essex County Cricket Club have played on the pitch attracting many visitors to the area. Essex's first team have not visited Colchester in a few years. By the Council maintaining this pitch to a County Standard, the Council is effectively subsidising the Cricket Club circa £80k. Therefore, a proposal was submitted to reduce the maintenance of the Cricket Pitch to 'Club Standard' and still facilitate Colchester Cricket Club's games, with the option to enhance the maintenance of the outfield if and when Essex County Cricket Club would visit, in agreement with the Council as landowners. In recognition of the economic climate and the role the Cricket Club play in supporting Colchester's economy, along with its provision of sports, health and wellbeing for the community, the fee for 2023/24 was renegotiated for the short-term. However, it does not meet the Council's subsidy of circa £80k. Discussions continue on future arrangements that support both organisations.

Highway Verges

4.8 Currently, the Council spends £144k per year carrying out functions on behalf of Essex County Council (ECC), notably cutting highway verges and border maintenance. The expectation from ECC is that highway verges are cut twice per year and the funding the Council receives for this function covers that. But the Council have undertaken fourteen cuts per year, therefore subsidising this work circa £82k annually. ECC have declined to fund more than 2 cuts and confirmed they would continue to support the payment to cover this only.

4.9 The proposal forming the above savings proposal (£212k) was to cease to subsidise the highway verge cutting on behalf of Essex County Council and revert back to their expectation, therefore saving the Council circa £82k. In January 2023, Cabinet decided to support the above identified savings. However, the baseline saving was reduced to a total of £130k to keep the highway verge cutting at an acceptable level. It was recognised that the highway verges should not receive more cuts than Colchester's amenity grass, however there was an aspiration to provide enough cuts to keep the areas looking tidy:

- Castle Park Cricket Maintenance - £80k
- Sports Pitches - £50k
- *Total - £130k*

Contract and performance standard changes

4.9 Throughout this process, there have been ongoing discussions with Idverde about how the above savings could be met. Due to the way the contract is operated (economies of scale), it is not possible to just save against one specific function. Therefore, many discussions have taken place exploring different options to minimise the impact of the savings expected whilst still delivering a service to Colchester and officers have looked across the whole contract to make the targeted savings.

Changes to standards to deliver savings

4.10 In working through savings on the contract, the standards have been changed and the financial impact is set out in Section 9:

Grass cutting

4.11 The first cut is undertaken in April and the last cut is in September, with the rotation of the cuts throughout the period varying and adapted to the weather conditions:

- Open spaces – was 14 cuts: now 8 cuts.
- Highways – was 14; now 6 cuts.
- Allotments – was 9 cuts: now 4 cuts.

4.12 The Council has several sites that it continues to maintain for wildflower, and these are cut once a year, along with further open spaces that are being encouraged to naturalise. The sites and standards for these have not changed. However, whilst the Council this year has applied 'No Mow May' to a number of sites across Colchester, the proposal for 2024 onwards will apply 'No Mow May' only to the wildflower and naturalising areas only.

Hedge cutting

4.13 Once a year (outside of bird nesting season)

Border maintenance

- Parks and open spaces – was 9 visits, 5 visits (4 in summer, 1 in winter)
- Highways – was 4 visits, 2 visits (1 in summer, 1 in winter)

Weed management and the reduction of glyphosate-based products

4.14 The Greening Colchester policy was first presented at the Environment and Sustainability Panel on 17th September 2020 and agreed by Cabinet on 14th October 2020, including the approval of:

- a) the phasing out of the use of glyphosate-based chemicals (herbicides) in grounds maintenance operations on Council owned land and trial alternative methods of weed control as set out in this report and appendices.
- b) a change in grass cutting frequency on selected grass verges and areas of open space to be managed as areas to encouraged wildflower or naturalisation as set out in this report and appendices.

4.15 The policy aimed to achieve the following 3 priorities:

- i. *stop using glyphosate-based products through a phased reduction of use on its land and land owned by partner organisations, Colchester Borough Homes, and Amphora – this has been completed.*
- ii. *encourage glyphosate free/reduced use across Colchester including providing advice to internal and external partners, Town and Parish Councils, businesses, schools, and other organisations who may use glyphosate-based products for the control of weeds, moss, and lichens.*

- The Wivenhoe Project

In January 2021, Wivenhoe Town Council (WTC) worked with the Council's officers to trial "no mow" management regimes between March and September 2021 at 12 designated open spaces and residential verges in the town. The objectives were to work more closely with communities and establish if a local approach could increase biodiversity and to assess public reaction. This would be the first approach of this type undertaken by the project team, undertaken as a trial, so that if it was successful, it could be

used as a template and example to roll out to other Councils and partners. Several town and parish councils have expressed an interest in the approach and WTC have hosted presentations and shared their experience and approach with others, supported by Council officers.

- Providing advice, guidance and sharing knowledge

In 2021, the Group Manager presented details of the Woodland and Biodiversity Project, of which the Greening Policy features to UK Local Authority leaders and senior managers at the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) Annual Seminar and to UK Local Authority industry specialists at the APSE Parks and Open Space Seminar. Officers have also been approached by other authorities, including Essex County Council for information and advice on the application of the policy. Officers will continue to offer support and advise.

iii. *stop or reduce grass cutting in specific areas. Changing the management regime to improve the biodiversity and visual amenity of the grass verges, leaving the areas to be left to re-wild and be managed as wildflower areas or left to naturalise as woodland – these sites are listed on the Council’s website and are added to at the request of Ward Councillors and following an assessment.*

- To improve engagement and education about these sites, signage has been produced and installed. In addition, Community Enabling colleagues, working in partnership with the Essex Local Delivery Pilot launched Street Tag, a free interactive app that promotes physical activity in a fun and accessible way. Street Tag turns physical activity into a game by converting walking, running, and cycling into Street Tag points (tags). It is a way to transform streets and parks into a giant virtual playground for local communities. Competitors compete to top the leader board and win prizes. More information can be found here: www.colchester.gov.uk/street-tag. In linking to this project, tags have been added to all the rewilding sites and encourage users to monitor the locations (e.g., the number of butterflies they see).

Transition to an inhouse operating model

4.16 This report follows an update provided on 3rd March 2023 within which a description of the reorganisation of the Parks, Countryside and Greening team ('Greening team'), to create the foundation to develop a more comprehensive team in the future. The core objectives of the reorganisation being to:

- Create greater focus, ownership, and accountability for performance of the service.
- Develop resilience and future proofing the service.
- Focus on Strategic Priorities
 - Sustainable services
 - Green, biodiverse Colchester
 - Safe, well, enabled residents and communities.
 - Supporting economic development

4.17 This new structure has been embedded but has suffered from three long-term sickness absences, maternity leave, and the departure of the Operations Manager. However, a new Operations Manager started with the Council at the

end of July 2023, vacant posts have been filled and additional resource is being provided across the Council to support the team.

- 4.18 Some initial work has been undertaken to consider the future operating model. This work will be further accelerated when the new Operations Manager is in post.

5 Equality, Diversity and Human Rights implications

- 5.1 Whilst equality, diversity and human rights have been considered, as there are no new policies or major changes to a policy being asked for approval in this report, an Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed.

6 Strategic Plan References

- 6.1 The work outlined in this report directly supports the [Council's Strategic Plan](#) and objectives to 'respond to the climate emergency'; and in particular the priority to 'conserve and enhance biodiversity', and 'deliver modern services for a modern City'.

7 Consultation

- 7.1 As there are no new policies or major changes to a policy being asked for approval in this report a consultation has not been undertaken.

8 Publicity Considerations

- 8.1 The Council's website has been updated to reflect the changes to standards: [Grass cutting and grounds maintenance · Colchester City Council](#)

9 Financial implications

- 9.1 Whilst Officers, in working with the contractor have been unable to make the specific savings as agreed by Full Council in February 2023, including those associated with the Cricket Club, the changes in standards and contract have enabled the Council to make a savings of £131k in the financial year 2023/24. Officers will continue to work with Idverde and partners to consider and prepare for further savings required in 2024/25.

10 Health, Wellbeing and Community Safety Implications

- 11.1 The Council must do all it reasonably can to promote positive health benefits to our residents whilst reducing, removing, or minimising any unintended consequences to health that may arise from services or decisions. The changes to the 'Greening team', with the introduction of the Senior Ranger for 'people' enables the Council to have greater focus on this area of our work; this has materialised in a successful funding bid (£57,000) to the Local Delivery Pilot Inequalities Fund for an Education Ranger. Additionally, the introduction of Greening Officers enables us to have more officers within our public open spaces, which we hope will help to improve and prevent crime and disorder and reduce the fear of crime in certain areas.

11 Health and Safety Implications

- 11.1 There will be no harm to the health and safety of the general public.

12 Risk Management Implications

12.1 There are no risk management implications.

14. Environmental and Sustainability Implications

14.1 The consideration of environmental and sustainability implications of the decision being taken is set out in the table below:

Sustainability theme	Positive environmental impact	Neutral impact/ Not applicable	Negative environmental impact	What are the positive and negative impacts on carbon reduction / environment?	How will positive impacts be enhanced/ encouraged? And negative impacts minimized or eliminated
Energy	✓			The approach to reducing cutting regimes and a like will reduce visits and hence the energy used.	n/a
Waste		✓		n/a	n/a
Procurement		✓		n/a	n/a
Biodiversity and green spaces	✓			The Council continues to deliver on its Greening Colchester Policy that aims to improve biodiversity across Colchester.	n/a
Transport		✓		n/a	n/a
Adaption		✓		n/a	n/a
Water		✓		n/a	n/a
Digital		✓		n/a	n/a
Community	✓			The new structure ensures that there is resource to enable and support communities to be active in green spaces.	n/a
Housing/ Development		✓		n/a	n/a
Carbon Emissions saving	✓			The approach to reducing cutting regimes and a like will reduce visits and hence the energy used.	n/a