

Briefing Paper: Overview and Scrutiny Member Working Group 20 June 2024**Item:****Author: Sue Green – Assistant Director Service Delivery****1. Introduction**

Following a referral from Cllr Wendy Stamp, Officers agreed to report back to the working group with more information about the concerns raised about the condition of the Cemeteries Grounds Maintenance, the new Grounds Maintenance Contract.

2. Referral From Councillor W Stamp

This briefing paper is in response to Cllr. Stamps referral and the officer's response is at 3. which it hoped will provide information to reassure Members of the measures that are in place to manage the contract effectively.

3. Officer Response**3.1. Decision to Outsource**

- 3.1.1. Following the changes in the structure in 2019, leading to a reduction in resources, it has been a challenge to maintain a good level of grounds maintenance in our Cemeteries. The additional maintenance demands caused by climate change causing a longer growing season, and more exceptional weather patterns have made the situation even more challenging for staff to manage the amount of work, and therefore contractors have been supporting the grounds maintenance in our cemeteries for a number of years.
- 3.1.2. A vacancy within the Cemeteries team provided an opportunity to review how the grounds maintenance and grave digging services were being delivered and opportunities to increase consistency and resilience, resulting in a report to The Strategy and Resources (S&R) Committee on 23 November 2023 where Members approved the business case for the procurement of both Grave Digging and Cemeteries Grounds Maintenance services.
- 3.1.3. The report to the S&R Committee set out that the main benefit of the outsourcing of the service was to provide a greater level of resilience and consistency. The report set out the service standards as follows:
- 16 grass cuts per annum (pa)
 - Grass edges and borders to be trimmed flush to their defined edge
 - Mown litter and debris to be removed shortly after completion
 - Headstones, paths and hard standing areas to be left free of grass arisings
 - Well-managed hedges, shrub beds and climbing shrubs
 - Weeds within cremation and shrub beds to be managed to maintain a tidy and visually attractive appearance
 - Hedge bases to be maintained free of weeds through manual weeding and mulching wherever possible
 - All arisings to be cleared and disposed from site for recycling into compost
- 3.1.4. A robust procurement process led to the appointment of the Contractor, who was in fact the contractor that has successfully been helping to deliver the service for a number of years.

3.2. **The contract**

- 3.2.1. The contract for the Cemeteries Grounds Maintenance service sets out clearly the outcomes that are expected, as detailed at 3.3.1. A copy of the report to the Strategy and Resources Committee on 23 September 2023 is appended to this update.
- 3.2.2. These service standards mirror previous service standards, as the purpose of the outsourcing was to deliver a more consistent and resilient service. The outsourcing of the service was cost neutral; therefore, the service standards were not increased, but should be delivered in a more consistent way
- 3.2.3. The new contract came into effect from April 2024, and we have been working closely with the contractors to ensure delivery of the contract.

3.4. **Exceptional circumstances**

- 3.4.1. During May we have had the warmest and wettest May on record, creating unprecedented growth in all our open spaces and Cemeteries. Our contractors were directed to prioritise the cutting of grass to ensure that the majority of the Cemetery remained accessible and to a good standard, with the weeding of Cremation Beds and other areas to follow. The contractors have also allocated additional resources to bring the weeding up to date. The majority of the beds within Maldon cemetery have now been weeded and the beds within Burnham and Heybridge will follow.

3.5. **Contract going forward**

- 3.5.1. The contract provides for a specified number of grass cuts per year to keep the Cemeteries to a good standard, in line with the agreed budget. This will generally ensure the Cemeteries can be kept to that standard, however there may occasionally be periods of exceptional weather conditions that will result in that number of cuts not being enough. Should Members wish to review the service standards to increase the levels of service, but that would have an additional cost.
- 3.5.2. In respect of the cremation beds there will inevitably be a period at the start of every growing season where the seventy cremation beds will all require significant weeding as it has always been the ethos of the Cemetery not to use pesticides unless absolutely necessary. However we will continue to work with our contractors to ensure they are delivering against the contract and ensure that the weeding in the cremation beds is carried out promptly at the start of the growing season and maintained in accordance with the contract.
- 3.5.3. We will look at how we can improve the signage and communication with the Cemeteries to reassure visitors that work is being carried out.
- 3.5.4. We are currently delivering contract management training to all officers responsible for contracts to support the effective and efficient delivery of contracts.

4. **Summary**

- 4.4.1. Whilst we accept that the cremation beds temporarily did not meet our normal expected levels of quality, this was due to very exceptional weather conditions at the start of the growing season. Very exceptional weather conditions had created rapid growth which is now back under control.

- 4.4.2. We are only a matter of weeks into new contract which we are managing robustly and will work to ensure that our contractors deliver the standards set out in the contract.
- 4.4.3. Our Contractor has provided additional resources to bring the cemeteries back to an acceptable standard as quickly as possible.
- 4.4.4. We will look at options for increasing our signage and communication to provide reassurance that contractors are working on the Cemeteries.
- 4.4.5. The Contractor appointed was also the previous contractor so has a good knowledge of delivering this service and is also a local business.
- 4.4.6. We will continue to monitor the contract robustly and will ensure that all complaints are investigated and addressed.

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