

# scrutiny

focus on performance

**NOTE OF:** Performance & Downsizing of Environment (with Highways) Task Group

**FOR:** Regeneration & Neighbourhoods Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**ON:** 30<sup>th</sup> September 2014.

**RE:** Briefing on Grounds Maintenance and Cemetery and Crematoria Services.

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## **1. Purpose of the task group**

For Members of the Regeneration and Neighbourhoods Committee to note the information discussed at the performance and downsizing of Environment (with Highways) task group.

## **2. Present**

Cllrs Surve, Roberts, Daley, Casey and Entwistle.

Also present: Sayyed Osman - Director for Environment, Housing and Neighbourhoods, Tony Watson - Head of Environment and Sonya Palmer-Scrutiny Officer.

Apologies: Cllrs H.Khonat, Hollings, C.Rigby and Whittle.

## **3. Background**

At the first meeting in the municipal year of the Regeneration and Neighbourhoods Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members agreed that it would be beneficial to have an in-depth briefing on Environment and Highways portfolio to allow Members to understand the priorities of how the service would look going forward and how previous and future budget cuts have affected the performance and downsizing of the service.

## **4. Outcome of the task group meeting**

### **Grounds Maintenance**

Tony Watson provided Members with a list of areas covered by the Council for grounds maintenance, these included:

- Formal outdoor recreation sites, including outdoor sports facilities and Bowling Greens
- Parks and Gardens
- Urban Green Space
- Wildlife & Nature Conservation Areas

Members were informed that there were 14 formal Parks and Public Gardens within the borough, as identified by the Council's open space strategy. Tony also informed Members that Urban Green Space includes areas such as the Local Nature Reserves, but also includes Housing Association sites within the borough which the Council have no responsibility for.

It was advised that there were 3 sites of special scientific interest in the borough; 99 biological County Heritage sites covering 3,697ha; and 6 Geological County Heritage sites covering approximately 53ha, all of which was managed by the green spaces team.

Members noted that all Bowling Green sites in the borough are self-managed and not maintained by the Council, however the Council provides a grant contribution annually.

In response to questioning from Members it was advised that the Council could provide maintenance support to the Bowling Green sites depending on what support was required. It was reported that the Council try to work with the Bowling Green Clubs to provide support and guidance if needed.

Members held a detailed discussion around community engagement and participation while promoting a healthy lifestyle by using facilities at the Bowling Green sites within the borough and felt that more could be done. Members discussed various marketing strategies and felt that the Culture, Leisure and Sport portfolio could provide assistance.

Members were informed that the Council has 66 playgrounds within the borough. It was reported that 3 years ago, as a result of budget savings, it was decided that the Council would no longer repair any major damage caused to playground equipment. It was further advised that the Council inspect equipment, litter pick and remove glass and other debris, remove small scale graffiti and undertake repairs and maintenance to equipment at least weekly (some more frequent).

Members raised concerns regarding damaged playground equipment and Tony advised the task group that the Council look for BID and grant funding opportunities to repair major damage, however, if the funding applications were unsuccessful the Council would make the area safe and remove any damaged items. Tony advised Members that the Council do not have insurance to cover the damaged items.

Members requested information and data relating to how many playgrounds, in the borough, were damaged. It was advised that an independent report was being prepared and as soon as it was available it would be distributed to Members.

It was further advised that the Council has 26 football pitches requiring the following maintenance:

- Initial annual and weekly marking out
- Replace/repair divots weekly
- Forking weekly
- Vertri-draining twice per annum
- Rolling as necessary
- Reseeding and pitch renovation at least once per annum
- Overseeding 3 times per annum
- Fertilising twice per annum
- Selective weed killing once per annum
- Mowing (starts march to November)
- Erecting goalposts and dismantling them annually

It was reported that several problems arise with football pitches, including grass cutting (demand depending on the weather), drainage and maintenance and re-seeding. It was added that previously the Council used to take the top 4 inch off a football pitch every two years however due to budget savings this had been reduced and the council are only able to do this around the goal areas and the centre circle.

Members were provided with information relating to budgets for Grounds Maintenance showing an employee cost of £1,179,300 for 2006/7, £951,112 for 2010/11 and decreasing to £379,900 for 2014/15. Tony informed Members that staffing has been reduced by almost a third and further informed Members that staff cope the best they can, however some sites were not maintained as frequently as they had been in the past.

Members were informed that 2014/15 is the first year that the Council have not entered any of the parks into the Green Flag awards as it was felt that due to the reduced maintenance within the parks the results may not have been positive, which would affect staff morale even more than it already has.

Tony provided Members with information relating to staffing and it was reported that staff work annualised hours, 42 hours per week in summer and 29 hours per week in winter.

The Director for Environment, Housing and Neighbourhoods informed Members that due to the aging workforce across Environment and Highways the Council were looking to take on 16 to 18 trainees on a traineeship programme starting in January, in partnership with Blackburn College and Training 2000. Trainees will be reviewed over a 6 month period with a view for

some of the trainees to be taken on as permanent staff within the department. It was advised that the trainees would spend a mix of their time in the workplace and in college, increasing more into the workplace over a period of time.

It was highlighted to Members that the Council's transport costs for grounds maintenance was £455k. Members noted that some of the vehicles and machinery required was Council owned and some of the equipment was hired due to the issues around hand held vibrations. Members were advised that the hired equipment was maintained to a high standard which would mitigate the impact of hand held vibrations onto staff. It was also advised that in relation to hand held vibration issues the Council were still receiving historical claims.

Tony informed the Committee that grounds maintenance would be reviewed in the next round of budget savings. He explained that a 20% reduction would need to be found in the next few months.

### **Cemeteries and Crematoria services**

Members were provided with details of Cemeteries covered by the Council:

- Pleasington Cemetery
- Darwen Cemetery (old and new)
- Blackburn Old Cemetery

Members were also advised that the Council have maintenance responsibilities for Church of England closed Churchyards within the borough, as listed below:

- St James Blackburn
- St Peters Darwen
- St Peters Blackburn
- St James Darwen
- Pole Lane (no church name)
- Holy Trinity Blackburn

Tony informed Members that 'closed' cemeteries or churchyards were those that have been closed by an Order in Council because there was no space left to dig a new grave, however, there may still be space in family graves which can be used for other members of the family. The Council has the responsibility for maintaining the grounds in all of these cemeteries or churchyards. The ownership of the memorials, however, remains with the original purchaser or his heirs. The Council is classed as the 'occupier' with attendant responsibilities for safety.

Members were provided with performance data relating to burials during 2013/14:

- Blackburn Cemetery – 3 burials, 4 ashes burials
- Darwen Cemetery (old) – 6 burials, 16 ashes burials
- Darwen Eastern Cemetery – 67 burials, 10 ashes burials
- Pleasington Cemetery – 289 burials, 76 ashes burials
- Cremations – 1169

Members were also provided with information relating to staffing and premises related costs. It was explained that the Council have 3 buildings (Blackburn Old Cemetery, Darwen Cemetery and Pleasington Cemetery) which were managed by the cemeteries service. Costs were incurred for rates, electricity, gas, water, insurance, repairs, and maintenance to the buildings and facilities such as crematoria equipment.

It was reported that the Council have supplies and service costs for items that need to be bought in such as: Urns, Muslim timber, memorial trees, brushes etc.

Members held a detailed discussion regarding the cost of the timber required for Muslim burials. Members were provided with a list of fees and charges for all crematoria and cemetery services. It was also advised that there were usually 3 pre-dug graves (covered) for Muslim burials due to the quick turn over in which they were required.

Members also questioned the cost of burials for non-Blackburn with Darwen residents and it was advised that the Council allow burials for non-residents but a 50% increase in charges was applied to costs.

Tony provided Members with figures relating to income and expenditure for 2011/12, 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15, it was advised that the forecast income for 2014/15 for cemeteries and crematoria combined was £1,384,175.

**Sonya Palmer**  
**Scrutiny Officer**