

Background

A cross party Member Working Group was established in September 2022 leading to the Cabinet “approval in principle” dated 2 March 2023. The group was re-established in November 2023 with new Members, to conclude the work leading up to a Key Decision regarding the Public Realm Services Future Operating Model, scheduled for Cabinet 28 March 2024.

The role of the group was to enable officers to better understand the issues and concerns relating to the public realm services, and to ensure the form of any new arrangements improved and enhanced the public realm services.

Requirements for Future Arrangements:

For the future arrangements for delivery of the Public Realm services the Member Working Group considers the following requirements are important:

- a. A clear distinguishment of council staff and the contractor, delivering a more traditional client and contractor relationship.
- b. The council to deliver its core technical services with a greater degree of assurance and oversight, where the council commission works and own the development of the annual plan and work programmes, with expertise being provided from the contractor.
- c. The council provide robust challenge and scrutiny of services delivered by the contractor, including commercial assurance ensuring value for money and ensuring a high quality of works completed on the ground.
- d. Introduction of fleet, plant and materials aligned with best practice in environmental standards, and aligned with the council's net zero carbon ambition.
- e. Improvements in customer service hosted by the council, where the key drivers are responsiveness, speed and quality of works with improved channels for reporting.
- f. Greater engagement and involvement with ward Members, parish councils, community groups, lengthsman and volunteers relating to the delivery of services, where engagement provides awareness and support.
- g. Opportunities for delivering services shared with other council's should be investigated where it can lead to learning and efficiencies.
- h. The council should work with the contractor to reduce management costs across the contract, and prioritise works on the ground to support efficient front line service delivery and value for money.
- i. The council and contractor should work together to review and revise performance measures aligned to new priorities, as well as the business as usual operational standards.
- j. The service should be rebranded and launched as a new service for the residents of Herefordshire where the council are seen to be taking a more leading role.

Members Views

Member views and perception on the current arrangements were sought, and summarised below.

- 1.1 Despite numerous assurances, Members felt there was no overall improvements in the services delivered on the front line.
- 1.2 Members favoured involvement of local contractors, who were perceived as better positioned to deliver the services, with greater local knowledge and the efficiency of being based locally.
- 1.3 The historic arrangement formed over time between the council and contractor appears too friendly with lack of contractual control.
- 1.4 The current arrangements do not provide the council with adequate levels of assurance and control for the services that are delivered on the ground.
- 1.5 Members felt that the council lost its ability to effectively client the contract, when the contract came into operation, with a high degree of outsourcing or services and expertise to the contractor.
- 1.6 Members would like to see more of the works checked by the council to ensure appropriate response times, and to ensure the works delivered are of suitable quality.
- 1.7 Concerns raised over the quantum of management and support services, in relation to the quantum of works being delivered on the ground.
- 1.8 Project work and design matters appear often over engineered and overly complicated in some instances, with a lack of council direction and input through the design stages. This leads to concern over the cost of some project work and concerns regarding value for money.
- 1.9 The contractor is considered to deliver project work well, however on more complex projects there are instances where the project is considered overly complicated and takes too long to complete.
- 1.10 There are some service areas, for example litter bin emptying, where the services should be reviewed and re-designed.
- 1.11 Concerns widely raised regarding value for money of some services.
- 1.12 The current customer reporting system where the council and contractor systems interface, have some limitations and could be improved.
- 1.13 There is a lack of engagement with parish councils and other partners who could potentially contribute to the delivery of services by topping up services delivered by the council.
- 1.14 Members are supportive of the lengthsman scheme, and would like to see it enhanced and expanded.
- 1.15 Concerns regarding contractor led communications, which in some cases are unaware of local issues and sensitivities wider than the public realm services.
- 1.16 The current public realm services and contractor are generally not well thought of within Herefordshire.