

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

16 OCTOBER 2012

**FINAL REPORT
- ENVIRONMENT SERVICE
STANDARDS**

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the Environment Scrutiny Panel's findings, conclusions and recommendations following its investigation of the topic of Environment Service Standards.

BACKGROUND

2. In line with Middlesbrough Council's customer-focussed approach, a number of years ago the authority's Environment Services function produced Service Standards (also known as *Service Promises*) covering approximately 20 service areas. These set out the standards of service that residents/customers can expect to receive.
3. In early 2012 the scrutiny panel had heard from the Assistant Director, Environment, on the potential impact of the Council's ongoing budget reduction exercise (which has resulted from cuts in central government funding) on environmental services.
4. In this context, the scrutiny panel examined existing Service Standards and how these might be affected by current and future budget reductions. The panel also went on to consider other performance-related targets that are not part of the published Service Standards and the likely implications of budget reductions across the service area in general.
5. The panel investigated this topic over the course of two meetings, held on 9 and 30 July 2012. A final panel meeting was held on 29 August 2012 to consider a draft final report. A Scrutiny Support Officer from Legal and Democratic Services co-ordinated and arranged the submission of written and oral evidence and arranged witnesses for the investigation. Meetings administration, including preparation of agenda and minutes, was undertaken by a Governance Officer from Legal and Democratic Services.
6. A record of discussions at panel meetings, including agenda, minutes and reports, is available from the Council's Eagenda system, which can be accessed via the Council's website at www.middlesbrough.gov.uk.

7. This report has been compiled on the basis of information submitted to the scrutiny panel by officers from the Council's Department of Adult Social Care and Environment.
8. The membership of the scrutiny panel was as follows:

Councillors Kerr (Chair); Clark (Vice-Chair), Brady, Davison, C Hobson, McPartland, Saunders and P Sharrocks.

THE SCRUTINY PANEL'S FINDINGS

9. The scrutiny panel's findings are set out under the following sub-headings:
 - a) Published Environment Service Standards.
 - b) Additional Environment Service Standards and associated information.

Published Environment Service Standards.

10. The scrutiny panel was informed that published service standards had been produced by the (then) Environment Department over 10 years ago. This was prior to the formation of Area Care and was undertaken as part of a review of street cleansing services. At that time, the aim had been to improve services by introducing service standards. The purpose of this was twofold:
 - To enable meaningful performance targets, which could then be measured and monitored, to be set.
 - To inform the public/Middlesbrough residents of standards of service that they could expect to receive.
11. The Service Standards that were produced at that time are shown below.

	Service	Service Target
1.	Asbestos - Remove dumped asbestos from public land.	Arrange to remove within 48 hrs.
2.	Becks - blocked and flooded becks.	Attend blocked and flooded becks within 2 days.
3.	Bonfires	Remove those classed as dangerous within 24 hours (in October and November).
4.	Removal of dead animals - from all public areas, highways and domestic properties.	Collect within one day.
5.	Fly Tipping - remove rubbish from public land.	Remove within 24 hrs on a normal working day.
6.	Graffiti Removal - from public property	Remove within one day of notice.
7.	Grassed Areas	Mow parks, open spaces and verges on average 13 times per year. Mow other areas (beck sides, meadows etc) four to six times per year.
8.	Gullies	Attend blocked within two days. Clean all twice a year.
9.	Highway Inspections (pavements)	High usage areas (eg shopping centres) - inspect monthly. Residential areas - at least annually.

10.	Needles	Remove within two hours.
11.	Play Areas	Visually inspect once a week; technical inspections every three months.
12.	Recycling	Provide kerbside recycling scheme, including greenwaste.
13.	Refuse Collection - Household	Collect missed bins on next working day.
14.	Refuse Collection - Junk Jobs	Advise on collection date - aim to collect within 5 working days.
15.	Refuse Collection - White Goods and Electrical	Advise on collection date - aim to collect within 5 working days.
16.	Shrub Beds	Apply herbicide once a year. Spot treat as necessary. Prune shrub beds on rolling programme of one to four years.
17.	Street Cleaning	Clean public shopping parades on regular trading days. Other areas at varying frequencies.
18.		
19.	Streetlights	Repair within one week.
20.	Trees (Dangerous).	Respond and make safe within two hours.
21.		
22.	Weed Control	Roads and footpaths - three times annually.
23.	Winter Gritting	Salt primary routes within three hours of notification of adverse weather.

12. Since the above standards were developed, amendments have been made to the above list, which now includes:

- Graffiti - Remove offensive or racist graffiti from public property within one day.
- Damaged or stolen refuse bins - Replace within one week.
- Litter Bins - Empty at least once a week.

Additional Environment Service Standards and Associated Information

13. As well as monitoring the frequencies etc set out above in relation to the services shown, the Department of Adult Social care and Environment also monitors a number of other indicators relating to these, and associated, environmental services. These are set out below.

14. Street cleanliness is monitored regularly. This was initially undertaken through a national Best Value Performance Indicator - BVI 199 - which was introduced in 2003 to provide a national standard for local authorities to measure the environmental quality of the public realm in a structured way. This performance indicator was superseded by the current BV 195, which measures the four separate elements of litter, detritus, graffiti and fly-posting.

15. Sites are measured on a random basis by an independent officer and graded on a four point scale, ranging from Grade A (clean) to Grade D (heavily affected). These grades are then weighted to give an overall NI 195 score, which is the percentage of sites graded below Grade B for litter, detritus, graffiti and fly-posting.

16. The panel heard that Middlesbrough has achieved a standard of 96% over the past year in respect of street cleanliness - ie, overall, 4% of streets were below the cleanliness standard. This compares to 57% below the standard when BVI 199

was first introduced. The target set for the current year is that 93% of streets will meet the standard, with an expectation from officers that this will be achieved. It is noted that, due to above average rainfall in May and June, seasonal staff who would normally have been engaged in grass cutting and grounds maintenance have been used for works such as litter picking and street cleaning. Although it is probable that street cleanliness standards will be maintained for those months, it is unlikely that this will be the case in future, as budget reductions begin to further impact on service delivery.

17. In addition, the loss of Working Neighbourhoods Funding - which had been used to narrow the gap in standards of cleanliness across the Borough - is also likely to impact in future. This situation is to be monitored closely by officers.
18. In summary, there may be a need to lower the current target relating to street cleanliness in future as budget cuts impact further on environmental services. The scrutiny panel found that recent Council budget reductions have resulted in a reduction of twenty one front-line posts in Area Care over the past 12 months and that funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund has also been lost. In this context, the scale and amount of works undertaken by Streetscene Services and Area Care has to be borne in mind. For example:
 - One round of grass cutting produces about 1,000,000 m³ of cuttings.
 - Shrub beds cover over 1,250,000 m².
 - Soft landscaping covers 10,000,000 m².
 - The service maintains over 60km of hedges.
 - Over 20km of fence lines are strimmed.
 - Strimming in Linthorpe Cemetery alone involves almost 1km of obstacles.
19. The latest monitoring information (May 2012) was made available to the scrutiny panel. Owing to its detailed and comprehensive nature, it is not reproduced in this report. The information submitted to the scrutiny panel highlighted that:
 - a) With a few exceptions, targets for collections of fly tipping, graffiti removal and collection of missed refuse bins on the next working day were generally around 95% or above.
 - b) The number of reports via the customer contact centre had steadily decreased from 6105 in May 2011 to 3940 in May 2012. The May 2011 reports included 2869 calls on recycling and waste, 315 on infrastructure maintenance, 470 on Area Care and 286 regarding highways and transportation.
 - c) Missed refuse bin collections varied over the past year, generally from approximately 100 to 240 per month. A large increase to 340 in December 2011 was due to adverse winter weather. All of these figures need to be considered in the context of there being approximately 54 000 residential properties in Middlesbrough.
 - d) Since charging for replacement of stolen and missing bins was introduced, numbers peaked at 160 in November 2011 but have reduced to 64 and 69 in April/May 2012.
 - e) Since charging was introduced for junk jobs, these have reduced in number from 1542 in March 2012 to 434 in May 2012.

- f) Fly tipping reports averaged around 200 per month since May 2011, with no increase since charges for junk jobs were introduced in April 2012. It is thought that residents are making their own arrangements to dispose of bulky items, such as via the civic amenity site.
- g) Average response times for removal of junk jobs, white goods and junk jobs from back alleys were one to two days, in accordance with service standards.
- h) Household green waste collected for recycling between April and October 2011 had generated between 375 and 475 tonnes of waste each month, with a peak in July and August.
- i) Kerbside recycling generated between 310 and 376 tonnes of materials each month between April 2011 and April 2012. Recycling levels for Middlesbrough are currently around 23% in total.
- j) Contact Centre calls relating to issues that are the responsibility of Erimus (horticulture, cleansing etc) varied between seven and 60 between May 2011 and May 2012.

20. Having considered the submitted information, the following points were raised or noted by the scrutiny panel:

- a) Grass cutting is often a service of major concern to the public, both in terms of the frequency and number of cuts and the standard of finish. The relevant service standard specifies that open spaces, parks and verges will be mowed 13 times a year (on average), weather permitting. The scrutiny panel notes that, due to the climatic conditions of recent years, the service is currently exceeding that target by cutting grass on average 18 times per year. The panel questioned whether, for ecological and financial reasons, grass could be left to grow longer in some areas of open space, possibly for use as wildflower meadows and/or to encourage wildlife. It was advised that even if the grass was allowed to grow longer, maintenance would still be required - for example the grass would still need to be cut and baled periodically and wildflower areas would need to be seeded. Also, different machinery might also be needed (for example threshers instead of mowers) which could lead to additional expense.
- b) Street cleaning is often viewed by the public as a key indicator of local environmental conditions.
- c) The bulk of costs associated with environmental services relates to labour and vehicles. Due to budget reductions, over 20 posts have been lost from Area Care in the past 12 months. About half of these staff left through early retirement and voluntary redundancy, with the remainder having been subject to compulsory redundancy. Full time staff have been replaced by seasonal staff, with the number of full time Area Care posts having been reduced from approximately 230 to around 170 for summer 2012. In addition, management arrangements have also been revised as part of a cost reduction exercise.
- d) Both the Council and Environment function are committed to maintaining standards as much as possible. However, the authority's budget position means that there will be a need to further consider what the public might consider to be the most important issues in respect of environmental services provision. It is noted that it will not be possible to reduce some services that are delivered - for example burials, as well as graves which need to be maintained in perpetuity - with the result that other services may need larger reductions than otherwise might be the case.
- e) A number of complaints were received from the public concerning green waste collection arrangements in 2011. In the main, these related to the end date for collections, which the public considered to be too early. As a result, collections

for 2012 have begun a few weeks later and will finish later in the year than in 2011.

- f) Following the introduction of a charge of £25 for a new or replacement dustbin, the position was queried in relation to tenants of housing associations. It is noted that landlords are responsible for ensuring secure bin provision on behalf of their tenants.
- g) Income targets for 2012-13 in respect of replacement bins and junk jobs (total £150k) will not be realised. It is envisaged that around half this amount will be received.
- h) It was suggested that in cases of libellous, or particularly offensive, graffiti there could be a need for removal more swiftly than within one day.
- i) Budget reductions to date are being felt at service level but are yet to fully impact on the public.

CONCLUSIONS

- 21. Having considered the submitted information, the Environment Scrutiny Panel reached the following conclusions:
 - 1. Agreed service standards contribute to a customer-focussed approach, where the public and service users know what services to expect and how they will be delivered. This is especially true of environmental services, which contribute significantly to the condition of the local area. Agreed standards also enable services to be monitored, evaluated and improved.
 - 2. Environment Service Standards need to be realistic and achievable in the context of the authority's current difficult financial situation. The scrutiny panel recognises that there is a need to balance published service standards against the Council's budget position and that the authority must be realistic about what can be achieved with significantly reduced resources in future. While there is a desire to maintain service standards as much as possible, continued budget reductions will inevitably impact on service provision, with difficult political decisions being needed in terms of future priorities and where service reductions can be made. Given the anticipated scale of budget reductions, it may be unrealistic to expect that services can continue to be provided at the existing level. In order to make the best use of available resources, services must continue to be delivered as cost effectively and efficiently as possible. There will be a need to engage with the public and inform them as to why particular decisions are made as, otherwise, they are likely to demand the same level of service that has always been provided.
 - 3. The scrutiny panel considers that it is possible that some service standards will need to be reduced - such as by providing less frequent services or taking longer to provide services in response to service requests. It is acknowledged, however, that while some savings would result from service reductions, given that the major cost of providing environmental services relates to labour and vehicles, large scale savings could only result from the Council deciding to stop providing particular services, such as by not cleaning streets to the current standard. This illustrates the scale of the problem that the authority faces, especially in the light of a significant reduction in Area Care staff over the past

12 months and savings of over £1m to date. It is imperative that every step is taken to minimise reductions in service standards.

4. The panel notes that mitigating factors, such as grounds maintenance staff being used for street cleaning due to adverse summer weather, have meant that budget and staffing reductions are yet to fully impact on service delivery. However, Streetscene Services, especially frontline staff, are also to be congratulated for the way that service levels have generally been maintained.

RECOMMENDATIONS

22. Following the submitted evidence, and based on the conclusions above, the scrutiny panel's recommendations for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny board and the Executive are as follows:
 1. That Officers continue to monitor the position in respect of compliance with the published Environment Service Standards - in particular to determine the impact of the Council's budget reductions.
 2. That the Environment Scrutiny Panel is consulted ahead of any Executive decision to reduce frontline environmental services as a result of further budget reductions and that the Executive Member for Streetscene Services and Transport is invited to attend relevant panel meetings.
 3. That, in the event of future service reductions, every effort is made to engage with the public/service users to publicise revised service arrangements and the reasons for such reductions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

23. The Panel is grateful to the following officers, who presented evidence during the course of this investigation:

G Field - Environment Services Manager.

K Garland - Neighbourhood and Area Care Manager, Streetscene Services

BACKGROUND AND REFERENCE MATERIAL

24. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:

- Report to and minutes of the Environment Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 9 and 30 July 2012.

**COUNCILLOR BOB KERR
CHAIR OF ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL**

September 2012

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