

## **ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL**

**6 JANUARY 2015**

### **FINAL REPORT OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL**

#### **MAINTENANCE OF OPEN SPACES**

#### **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1. To present the findings of the Environment Scrutiny Panel's review on the topic of the maintenance of open spaces.

#### **AIM OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION**

2. The overall aim of the scrutiny investigation was to assess the impact that the budget reductions have had on the maintenance of open spaces across the town and to consider whether the resulting reduction in service standards are acceptable to residents and Members.

#### **TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION**

3. A number of areas have been identified as of interest to the panel in undertaking this review as follows:-
  - To consider the changes to service standards as a result of recent budget cuts.
  - To examine the response of neighbouring local authorities to budget reductions in this area.
  - To consider the public's response to changes in service standards.
  - To examine how the Council's grounds maintenance standards compare with those of Erimus Housing.

#### **METHODS OF INVESTIGATION**

4. Members of the panel met formally on 11 August, 8 September, 29 September, 20 October and 10 November to discuss/receive evidence relating to this investigation and a detailed record of the topics discussed at the meetings is available from the Committee Management System (COMMIS), accessible via the Council's website.

## **MEMBERSHIP OF THE PANEL**

5. The membership of the Panel was as detailed below:

Councillor P Purvis (Chair), Councillor R Brady (Vice Chair), Councillors G B Clark, J G Cole, P Sanderson, M Saunders and P Sharrocks.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

6. Parks and open spaces are one of the most frequently used public services, with over 50 per cent of people visiting a park at least once a week<sup>1</sup> and many using green spaces as an integral part of daily life. National research has found that over 90 per cent of the public believe parks and public spaces improve their quality of life and provide a focal point for their local community.<sup>2</sup> The maintenance of open spaces also has an important role to play in generating a feel good factor about the town and promoting a sense of physical and mental well-being, which residents value and benefit from on a daily basis.
7. Yet England's parks and green spaces are being managed in a context which is changing fast and fundamentally. Councils are being given greater autonomy to determine the services they provide to their communities, but this autonomy comes with significantly reduced resources. As advocated by CABI Space, the challenge is to keep going with less money, while safeguarding the service and quality expected by local people.<sup>3</sup> In light of the above the panel sought to examine the issue of the maintenance of open spaces in an effort to understand the impact the budget reductions have had to date, as well as the challenges facing the service in the future.

## **TO CONSIDER THE CHANGES TO SERVICE STANDARDS AS A RESULT OF RECENT BUDGET CUTS**

8. As part of the setting the scene presentation the panel requested that the following information be provided:-
  - Background information on the Council's current service standards for the maintenance of open spaces.
  - Information on the changes to service standards as a result of the budget cuts in recent years.
  - The impact of budget reductions on cleanliness and overall standards of grounds maintenance across the town.

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<sup>1</sup> People, Places and their Green Spaces - Keep Britain Tidy (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Parks and Squares: Who Cares. CABI Space. (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Managing green spaces; seven ingredients for success – CABI space (2010)

9. The Director of Environment, Property and Commercial Services and Streetscene Services Manager attended an initial panel meeting to provide a setting the scene presentation on the topic. The panel was informed that between 2012 and 2014/15 a total budget reduction of £1.433 million has been made across the service. This comprises of a £1.33 million reduction in service standards and a £100,000 saving in the contribution to central overtime reductions.

10. It was reported that the current net budget for Area Care/Waste Services for 2014/15 is approximately £5.1 million. This represents a budget cut of 22% over the last three years. However, as waste collection could not be reduced substantially, a higher proportion of the cuts have fallen on Area Care. It was highlighted that further savings of around £150,000 will be required over the next two years from the same budget.

11. The effect of these cuts to date on staffing are as follows:-

Reduction of full time equivalent's	42
- Compulsory redundancies	11
- ER/VR or Staff who have left and not been replaced	31

12. Of those staff reductions, four were managerial posts, two were office operational support posts and the remaining 36 were operatives. In addition, the apprentice programme had also been suspended, which employed on average 20 young people per cohort.

13. Details of the effect on annual service frequencies was outlined as follows:-

	<u>Previous</u>	<u>Current</u>
Amenity Grass (Number of cuts)	16	13
Low Maintenance Areas (Number of cuts)	3	1
Weed spraying roads / footpaths (Occasions)	3	2
Weed spraying around obstacles (Occasions)	3	2
Flower beds (Plants purchased)	200,000	70,000
(Due to reduction in beds and Cessation of spring bedding)		
Shrub Bed Pruning – (Occasion)		
Shrub beds – Located in Inappropriate places	2	1
Shrubs – Other	1	Responsive as required

Street Cleansing frequency has been reduced by approximately 25%

Litter Picking - Planned work has been reduced and become more responsive

14. In terms of street cleanliness Standards (BV199/NI 195) it was advised that despite the cuts performance continues to be top quartile with around 5% of areas being

classed as unacceptable. It is considered by management that this is because in general, due to the high standards which have been achieved across the town and which residents now accept as 'the norm', people are not dropping as much litter as previously. Additional bins have also been provided to reduce littering and dog fouling.

15. It is evident that the work undertaken as part of the Council's Green Spaces: Public Places Strategy (2007-2012) has had a significant effect on improving environmental standards across the town. The review undertaken in respect of that document identifies that strategic efficiencies such as combining departments to create Area Care in Middlesbrough has improved the management and maintenance of green spaces through better co-ordination of resources. It is also evident that strong partnerships exist across the town, which mean that there is a concentration of resources on joint aims. External and internal funding has also been found to develop some of the key objectives contained in the Green Spaces: Public Places Strategy.
16. The panel received evidence, as attached at Appendix 1, which highlights over the last five years in excess of £14million of Environmental Improvement Funding has been invested in some of the town's major open spaces and facilities. For example, a master plan was developed to restore Stewart Park and a successful 'Parks for People' Lottery bid secured £4.5 million lottery funding for improvements.
17. Active friends groups have also played an important role in improving local amenities including the Friends of Fairy Dell and the Friends of Stainton and Thornton Green Spaces. These groups of volunteers are instrumental in undertaking environmental improvement works and in helping to achieve Green Flag status for their areas. Middlesbrough has worked hard to secure Green Flag Status for parks across the town. The work undertaken to date is testament to the dedication from everyone involved to maintain high standard, quality open spaces in Middlesbrough in spite of the significant cuts in financial resources.
18. It was highlighted that as resources are now extremely limited, any further reductions would almost certainly lead to a reduction in standards of street cleanliness across the town. The panel was also advised that there has been a decline in the overall standard of grounds maintenance over the last two years due to the cuts. This is visible in grassed areas before and after cutting and the reduction in floral displays around the town. The panel is keen to ensure that the high quality standards achieved in the maintenance of open spaces in recent years in Middlesbrough does not decline any further. In order to achieve this aim the panel accepts there is a need to look at more innovative / alternative ways to deliver the service in the future.
19. The Director highlighted that he had obtained information from his counterparts at Stockton and Hartlepool Councils. Both authorities have taken a decision not to reduce the frequency of grass cutting as any reduction would visibly impact on standards. Stockton has chosen to maintain 16 cuts per year. Hartlepool has actually increased the number of grass cuts to every eight to nine days to improve standards but have ceased providing floral displays.
20. It was noted that Stockton Council has allowed between 25 to 30 front line staff to leave its Care for Your Area Service but Stockton has made a commitment to

maintain standards and frequencies of litter picking and grass cutting. A budget has been made available for seasonal and agency staff to ensure those frequencies are maintained. In response to a query, the Streetscene Services Manager expressed the view that 16 grass cuts per year are required to maintain standards.

21. Queries were raised in relation to grass cutting specifications and whether these vary in different areas of the town. The Streetscene Services Manager advised that there should be no difference in the standards observed across different areas. However, differences are sometimes noticed between the land maintained by the Council and land maintained by Erimus.
22. In relation to the planned cessation of spring flower beds from next year along with a number of summer beds across the town, it was advised that some Wards have expressed an interest in obtaining sponsorship in order to maintain their own. It was stated that if the Council is not approached in relation to communities/wards planting flowerbeds, the beds will be seeded and grassed.

#### **TO EXAMINE THE RESPONSE OF NEIGHBOURING LOCAL AUTHORITIES TO BUDGET REDUCTIONS IN THIS AREA**

23. Following the panel's previous meeting and in accordance with the draft terms of reference, Jamie McCann, Head of Direct Services at Stockton Borough Council and Alastair Smith, Assistant Director of Neighbourhoods at Hartlepool Borough Council were invited to attend a meeting of the panel to present information in respect of their authority's approach to budget reductions in this area.

#### **Stockton Borough Council**

24. J McCann, Head of Direct Services at Stockton Borough Council informed the panel that Stockton's Care for your Area (CFYA) service has seen a £1m reduction in its revenue budget in 2014, with a target of £300k reduction from the grounds maintenance service. This year's budget reductions have followed cuts in the CFYA budget of £875,000 in 2012/13, £95,000 in 2011/12 and £110,000 in 2010/11. In effect the service has seen a total budget reduction of approximately £2.1m over three years. It was stated that these reductions in the budget will have an impact upon the responsiveness and quality of the service that both Members and residents have come to expect in the last 10 years.
25. In respect of the £300,000 savings identified from the grounds maintenance budget for 2014/2015 these savings will be achieved as follows:-
  - £150,000 reduction in bedding plants and ornamental displays.
  - £150,000 reduction in a review of staffing within street cleansing and grounds maintenance (6 posts)
26. The panel was informed that in total 110 ornamental beds across the borough will be retained (almost 60%) and 82 beds will be removed and turfed. The beds that are retained will benefit from spring and summer bedding and be of a high quality standard. In effect a main focal flower bed will be retained with smaller ancillary beds in the vicinity removed. A selective approach has been adopted in an effort to minimise the impact.

27. In terms of the areas Stockton's CFYA is trying to protect, the following priorities were highlighted:-
- Improve and retain key gateway features and areas where there is high visibility, retain almost 60% of ornamental beds
  - Continue to support tree planting schemes where possible in Schools, Cemeteries, Parks and Open Spaces
  - Continue bulb planting – 1m bulbs planted in the last 5 years
  - One – off investments in Strategic Roundabouts: improvement schemes on main arterial routes
  - Discussions with partners to discuss alternative providers e.g. Vela, Parish and Town Councils
28. In terms of grass cutting it was advised that Stockton Borough Council has taken the decision to maintain 16 cuts per annum on a 12 day cycle to ensure a high quality finish. The Head of Direct Services at Stockton expressed the view that when the cutting cycle is extended beyond 2 weeks the number of complaints increases significantly. Members in Stockton have therefore been keen to protect the current grass cutting frequency.
29. With respect of one-off investments in Strategic Roundabouts and improvement schemes on main arterial routes it was advised that a number of potential roundabouts have been identified. This is with a view to developing / improving provision via an 'invest to save' programme aimed at reducing ongoing revenue costs. It was explained that, for example, the current layout of the roundabout at Portrack Lane (outside Asda) is difficult to maintain due to speed and flow of traffic. A redesign would seek to reduce the current maintenance requirements and increase the overall visual appeal of the roundabout.
30. The panel queried what the public reaction in Stockton has been to the reductions in service provision. The Head of Service advised that the decision to remove only secondary flower beds/displays whilst ensuring the high visibility ones, which are valued by the public, are retained has had little impact on the public.
31. In terms of informing the public of the changes a press release was issued and Ward Councillors explained the arrangements in their own Ward newsletters. Stockton's Members also considered the issues via the Scrutiny process. The importance of working with CFYA staff was also stressed as an important factor, as with their local knowledge they are aware of what would have the biggest impact in terms of retention or removal.
32. In response to a query in relation to exploring alternative options to annual bedding plants the Head of Direct Services advised that whilst wild flower areas are an alternative worth exploring, they can sometimes be perceived by the community as areas that are lacking in maintenance. It was acknowledged that perennials are another alternative that can be explored but again these areas still require a degree of maintenance.
33. In terms of the overall effects of the cuts to date it was stated that the level of savings required has ultimately concentrated the mind and forced a cultural rethink in respect of the more formal expensive carpet bedding, which was previously routinely undertaken by the Council. It was also advised that although community

groups and volunteers have an important role to play in maintaining open spaces / ornamental beds there is a need to be realistic about the level of commitment required over a longer term period.

34. Reference was made to density of planting and it was explained that Stockton has decided to no longer use 'carpet bedding' which has specific requirement in terms of density for entry into Northumbria in Bloom. Stockton Borough Council will not be entering the competition this year. Whilst those flower beds/displays that are retained will still be planted to a high standard, the planting will be less dense.

### **Hartlepool Borough Council**

35. Alistair Smith, Assistant Director of Neighbourhoods at Hartlepool Borough Council, was also in attendance at the meeting to provide Members with an overview of the equivalent Open Spaces Service at Hartlepool and associated savings.
36. The panel was informed that the Open Spaces budget has been required to make savings of £220,000 over the past two years, which equates to a 17% reduction in real terms. It is anticipated that a further £100,000 of savings will be required in the future. It was also advised that the budget reductions in Hartlepool have resulted in a re-think in respect of working practices and horticultural features.
37. A number of measures have been undertaken to minimise the impact including the use of a generic workforce in Street Care Services, a percentage reduction on desirable features year on year, amendments to staff terms and conditions and the introduction of telematics in vehicles and machinery. It was noted that the issues of productivity need to be balanced against low staff morale. Having a very traditional workforce means that this is a big challenge. In terms of exploring the possibility of alternative providers / joint ventures it was stated that at present there is no appetite in Hartlepool for exploring alternative service provision. The Assistant Director anticipated that it would be at least two years before Hartlepool considered such options.
38. In terms of grass cutting frequencies the panel was advised that Hartlepool has taken the decision to increase the frequency of cuts from every 14 days to every eight days. It is felt that there are a number of benefits in adopting this approach. Increasing the frequency of cuts ensures a high quality service with the benefit of less grass strewn on the footpaths after cutting, and therefore, no need for the grass to be blown away. The public has noticed a difference in the standards and having a crisp, clean finish to the grass gives a feel good factor to the town. It was stated that in terms of priorities horticultural features are viewed as optional whereas grass is here to stay. The Assistant Director at Hartlepool advised that it is simply no longer possible to have beautiful flower bed arrangements in every ward.
39. In relation to roundabouts, the panel was advised that Hartlepool has embarked upon an 'invest to save' programme, which aims to reduce maintenance costs, traffic management issues and ensure staff safety through the provision of new designs. The view was expressed that from a drivers perspective roundabouts are passed in a 'blink and whoosh', as their eyes are predominantly on the road. However, the maintenance costs of high profile roundabout features can be horrendous.

40. Examples of current and proposed locations where roundabouts in Hartlepool have been redesigned were provided. It was noted that annually planted roundabouts have been replaced with new designs including a mix of hard landscaping, gravel, heathers and ornamental grass. This has vastly reduced maintenance costs and allowed for easier reinstatement of features if required. One of the transformed roundabouts has achieved significant savings with maintenance costs reducing from £11,000 to £1,500 per year.

#### **A689 wildflower planting scheme – July 2014**

41. Reference was made to roadside verges and central reservations and the panel was advised that a wild flora initiative has been undertaken on a half mile section of the A689 in Hartlepool. This section was chosen for the trial to make a bold, colourful impact for visitors and commuters coming into the town. It also provided the gently sloping, south facing conditions that the wildflowers favour. The range of flowers includes poppies, scabious, fairy toadflax and cornflowers, which were chosen to provide a range of colours and to evoke a traditional meadow.
42. In terms of how the initiative was undertaken it was explained that the central reservation was prepared for the wildflowers by removing the grass and cultivating the soil. The seed mix was then planted followed by a short wait for the flowers to start to appear. The flowers began to bloom at the beginning of July and will continue to bloom throughout the summer and into early autumn.
43. In addition to making an attractive and colourful statement on one of the busiest routes into Hartlepool there are a number of other benefits to the planting scheme. It was advised that the wildflower scheme is actually much lower maintenance than the traditional grass verge. The grass verge needs to be regularly litter picked and mown to keep it looking presentable, whereas since the wildflowers were planted there has been no maintenance needed (to date) on that stretch of the verge. Whilst litter is still likely to be present, it is hidden by the wildflowers and can be collected all in one go at the end of the season. This reduces maintenance costs to the Council and also reduces the risk to staff safety. It was noted that the area had previously incurred costs of around £5,000 in terms of annual grass verge maintenance compared with a total cost of delivering the wild flower scheme of approximately £3,500. Future costs in delivering and maintaining the scheme would be around £1,500 per year.
44. As well as benefits to the local authority the wildflower scheme also has benefits for biodiversity. Traditional grass verges are “monocultures” meaning that there are very few plant or insect species. In contrast the wildflower meadow provides cover and nectar for a much wider range of species including hover flies, bees and butterflies. The scheme has had a fantastic response from the public and visitors to the town.
45. In terms of general horticultural features throughout the town, however, it was advised that what was once deemed essential has now become desirable. Expenditure on annual bedding including hanging baskets and troughs has reduced from around £40,000 in 2011 to £15,000 in 2013/14. This figure will be reduced further to under £10,000 in the future. It was emphasised that the provision of horticultural features needs to be balanced with other issues facing the town such as crime.



46. Hartlepool Council simply does not have the resources to maintain formal bedding throughout the town. Secondary beds have therefore been removed and the focus will be on maintaining one main feature bed in high visibility areas.
47. In relation to Hartlepool's parks, consideration is being given to a themed park initiative, as follows:-
  - Ward Jackson Park - formal (high quality annual bedding).
  - Burn Valley Gardens - wild flora.
  - Rossmere - family (picnic areas, etc).
  - Seaton - sport and recreation (outside gym, sport and recreation use).
48. It was acknowledged that a culture change is also needed in terms of public and Member expectations and that consultation on the site specific themed parks would assist with this process.
49. In terms of income generation, information was provided in relation to the Council's Inspiration Garden Centre and Coffee House where Hartlepool Council previously produced its own plants. This had been turned into a retail outlet for public use and a coffee house and function room has been added.
50. The point was made by the Assistant Director of Neighbourhoods at Hartlepool that from his observations Middlesbrough Council is already dealing with open spaces efficiencies very well. It was also emphasised that it is important to network and exchange ideas and that Middlesbrough is very proactive in this respect.
51. Middlesbrough Council's Streetscene Services Manager was in attendance at the meeting and commented that Hartlepool's operating model is very similar to Middlesbrough's, with generic posts being introduced in 2008 through the merger of horticulture and cleansing in the form of Area Care. Middlesbrough does not currently use agency staff and, whilst seasonal staff are used, a 'banked hours' working system is an effective management tool in covering sickness and holidays.
52. Middlesbrough has also been required to identify priority areas in terms of the retention and removal of ornamental beds and it was also highlighted that volunteers are becoming increasingly relied upon particularly in the management of the beck areas. Community groups such as the Friends of Stewart Park and Friends of Fairy Dell will continue to be supported in their work by the Council.
53. Reference was made to the wild flower scheme in Hartlepool and the panel queried how successful such a scheme might be in pedestrianised areas. The Assistant Director considered location to be an important factor, for example an area where the flowers would not be trampled on. The litter element could be controlled by the correct location of such a scheme, however, it was highlighted that the wildflower initiative was an expensive project to undertake initially.
54. In response to a query, Middlesbrough's Streetscene Services Manager confirmed that following the reduction in grass cutting frequencies there had been an increase in complaints. However, the reduction in service standards has achieved financial savings.

## Site Visit

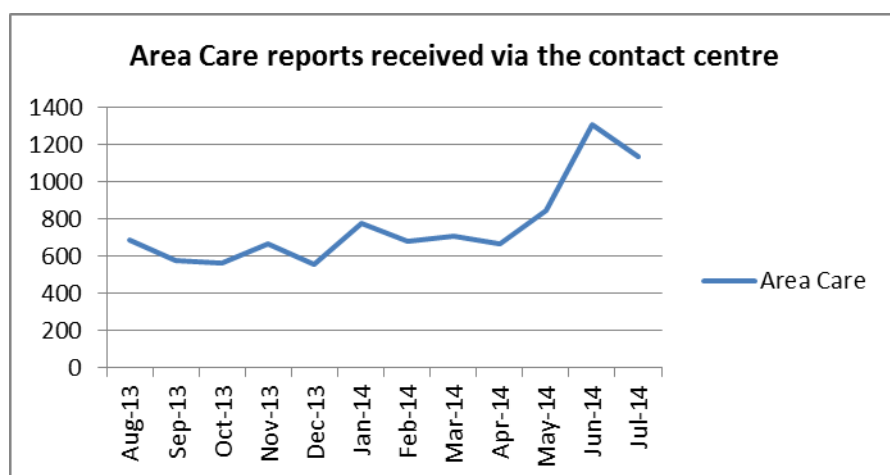
55. As part of this review the panel expressed the view that a site visit would be useful. On the morning of Monday 29 September 2014 a site visit tour of the town was undertaken by the panel and the following observations were noted.
56. In the town centre areas a number of issues were highlighted including unadopted grass plots, weeds in paths, litter and side waste.
57. The panel was advised that the Council's grounds maintenance programme now only provides for strimming and weeding to be undertaken twice a year. The first weeding programme commences on 1 March and the second on 1 July. It was also noted that the Council does not routinely blow the grass following a cut. This will only take place if the grass trimmings are excessive.
58. The comment was made by the panel that there are already quite a considerable amount of weeds in certain areas of the town but that under the current programme no further weed spraying will take place until March 2015 by which point the situation will be worse. A Member of the panel expressed the view that it would be beneficial if guidance could be provided to residents to inform them of the actions that they can take to maintain areas directly outside of their premises.
59. Another issue of note for some town centre areas was the amount of side waste observed during the visit, for example, on Princess Road and Linthorpe Road, which it was advised, is cleared by Area Care staff on a daily basis.
60. The binks street recycling bring site was visited as part of the visit and the panel's view on observing the amount of fly tipping which had taken place at the site over that weekend was that it was horrendous. It was also quite clear that a lot of the rubbish was from local businesses and was not household waste. It was advised that the Area Care Team is required to visit all three recycling bring sites in the town on a daily basis to deal with issues of fly tipping.
61. In addition to the above the panel was advised that the challenges generally facing the Area Team are seasonal with the biggest issues relating to grass cutting in June and July and clearing leaves in September, October and November. It was confirmed that no half-moon edging is now undertaken by the Council and that weed spraying remains a huge task. The weather is also a significant factor in the work undertaken by the service.
62. Shrub maintenance is a further issue and St John's Gate was highlighted as a problematic area with one year's shrub growth now already several feet high. It was stated that often developers plant fast growing shrubs when developing a site but once the site is completed these are handed over for management by the Council. Given that the Council's shrub maintenance programme has now been reduced from annually to once every two years shrub management is a further issue that needs to be addressed.
63. Grass cutting standards were observed over the course of the visit and it was advised by the officers present that there is clearly a difference in the service standards between the Council and Erimus. The Council's cutting cycle has reduced from a 10 day cycle to a 13 to 15 day cycle, which means that the Council

is cutting the grass when it is longer and lush. In certain areas the grass then needs to be dispersed or collected following a cut. Erimus' shorter cutting cycle means there are no sidings sitting on top of the grass and the cut is a lot shorter, almost right to the soil.

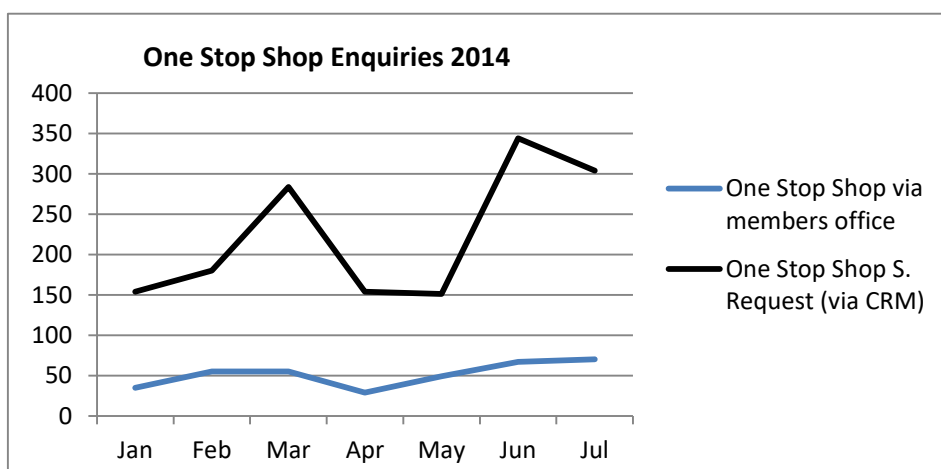
- 64. Side waste is another issue that was drawn to the panel's attention over the course of the visit and it was stated that in East Middlesbrough side waste is a big problem. Residents' bins are already full but the refuse team do not collect any side waste, which inevitably impacts on Area Care.
- 65. Reference was made to the issue of the maintenance of flower beds at a number of roundabout locations across the town. In particular the Poole Hospital Roundabout, the Nunthorpe Village Roundabout, the Viewley Hill Roundabout and Bluebell Roundabout. It was noted that there are occasions when road closures are necessary in order to maintain flowerbeds features and the redesign of specific roundabouts across the town, as part of an 'invest to save' programme, could be beneficial. In areas where new developments are established and roundabouts installed, for example, at Stainsby Hall Farm alternatives to traditional flowerbed planting on roundabouts should be considered.
- 66. The issue of roundabout sponsorship was also raised by Members and it has since been advised that the contract the Council previously had to generate income via business roundabout sponsorship has recently lapsed. It is noted by the panel that since 2009 an income of approximately £120,000 has been generated for the Council via this arrangement and the panel is keen to see the contract re-tendered.

**TO CONSIDER THE PUBLIC'S RESPONSE TO CHANGES IN SERVICE STANDARDS**

- 67. In accordance with previous reference to Environment's performance reporting system, which had highlighted increases in complaints and one stop enquiries relating to the maintenance of open spaces, a copy of Environment's most recent performance report was submitted to the panel for consideration.
- 68. The information provided highlighted that there had been a significant increase in the number of reports received through the contact centre in relation to Area Care service requests, where numbers had risen from 575 in August 2013 to 1,306 in June 2014. The panel queried whether such an increase was normal for that time of year. It was advised that the reason for the increase could be due to seasonal factors and also pressures on the service following budget reductions.



69. It was highlighted that within those figures the department had also seen an increase in service requests / enquiries submitted by Members both via the contact centre and the Members Office. Service requests received from Members via the contact centre had increased from 284 in March to 344 in July. Enquiries directed via the Members' Office One Stop service had increased from 55 in March to 70 in July.
70. It was clarified that enquiries made direct to the Contact Centre are recorded as service requests and are dealt with directly by the service area. Enquiries directed through the Members' Office One Stop service require a written response from the service area. It was also pointed out that some Member One Stop enquiries could contain several actions to be carried out by the service but are only counted as one enquiry. It was stated that the requirement to provide a written response to each Member One Stop enquiry is impacting on staff undertaking operational duties.

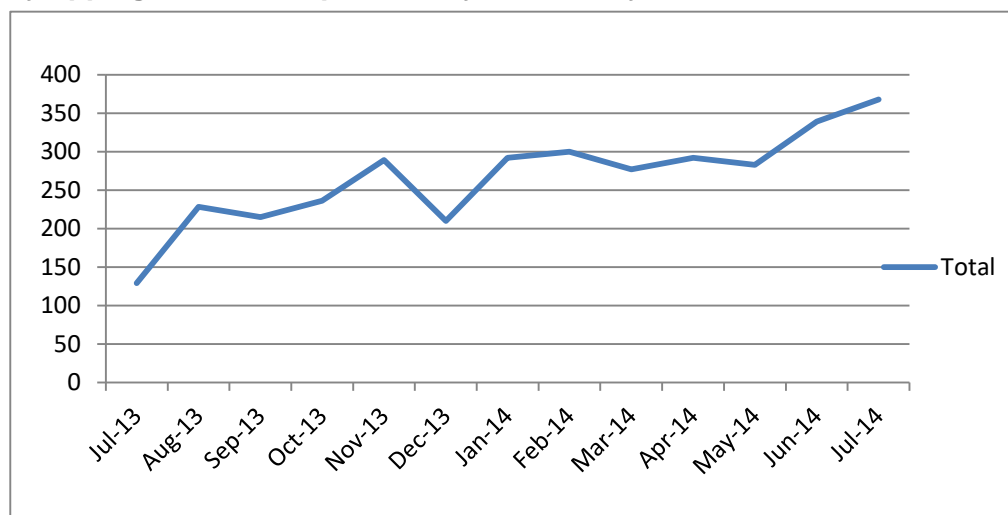


71. The view was expressed by a Member of the panel that despite the significant cuts in the Area Care budget it would seem that the culture of cuts has not permeated through to all Members of the Council. It was suggested that the document submitted to the panel, which outlined the impact that the cuts have had on service delivery (for example the reduction in grass cutting from 16 cuts per year to 13 cuts per year) should be circulated to all Members of the Council to assist them in dealing with queries from their constituents. The view was expressed that the department's operational capacity should not be hampered by dealing with administrative requests.
72. The Streetscene Services Manager advised that the number of reports received via the Contact Centre could also be reduced by improving the scripts used by Contact Centre staff. For example, any calls received in April relating to hedge cutting should automatically be advised that the hedges cannot be cut in the period March to August as it is bird nesting season. It was also advised that the department's service promises need to be refreshed.
73. Reference was made to the NI 195 street cleanliness performance indicator and it was explained that this is an independent method of calculation of street cleanliness. It was advised that three surveys are conducted on an annual basis and 300 areas are included in each survey. Prior to the Mayor's statement in 2014

Middlesbrough's performance for NI 195 was 92%, which was top quartile in the country. In 2014/15 £198,000 has been taken out of the budget and it is anticipated that the Council's performance this year will reduce to 88%. However, this figure is still significantly higher than the 46% recorded in 2008.

74. Information on the number of reported fly tipping incidents over the period July 2013 to July 2014 was also provided. The data highlighted that there has been increase in the number of incidents reported over this period.

**Fly tipping incidents reported July 2013 – July 2014**



75. Reference was made to the levels of fly tipping observed on the panel's site visit particularly at the recycling bring sites and the panel queried whether those incidents are included in the figures for fly tipping. It was confirmed that they are not included in the figures as the Area Care teams visit those sites on a daily basis.
76. The point was made by a Member of the panel that the requirement for Area Care staff to visit the recycling bring sites on a daily basis has cost implications for the Council and is an issue that needs to be addressed. Reference was made to the recycling bring site at the Parkway Centre, which was the worst of the sites visited by the panel and it was suggested that cameras be installed at the site to carry out enforcement action against those who fly tip at the site.
77. The panel was advised that cameras are available and negotiations are taking place between Tesco and Council enforcement staff in respect of undertaking enforcement action. It was noted that contractors are responsible for collecting recycling at the three bring sites and it is not the Council's responsibility. However, as all three recycling bring sites in the town are problem sites Area Care staff undertake visits to the sites on a daily basis to remove rubbish. It was also advised that there is a cost to taking the rubbish collected to landfill and that this is an issue for the Council.
78. The Streetscene Services Manager advised that Environmental Enforcement would soon be transferring to his remit and he intended to explore the possibility of training Area Care Managers in recording evidence in relation to fly tipping incidents.
79. The panel was advised that the Environment Service area has produced a map highlighting the approach adopted in Middlesbrough in relation to the removal and

reduction of bedding plants across the town. The map was provided for the panel's inspection and Members were advised in relation to which flower beds are to be removed. It was advised that the intention is to maintain flower beds at gateway roundabouts to estates and town centres, the Cenotaph, Albert Park, Stewart Park, in the town's cemeteries and crematorium, as well as in principal town centre displays.

## **TO EXAMINE HOW THE COUNCIL'S GROUNDS MAINTENANCE STANDARDS COMPARE WITH THOSE OF ERIMUS HOUSING**

80. In accordance with the panel's request an invitation was extended to the Head of Operations at Thirteen to consider and examine how the Council's current ground maintenance standards compare with those of Erimus Housing.
81. The panel was advised that Erimus' grounds maintenance service is divided into two specific service provisions. The summer provision, which operates from March to October, covers the following:-
- Amenity Grass Cuts (open spaces) – cut every visit, 16 visits per season
  - Communal Gardens - cut every visit, 16 visits per season
  - Litter Picking – pick every visit prior to cut
  - House Gardens ( Concessionary gardens ) – cut once per month, 8 visits
  - Low Maintenance backlands (land lock sites) – 1 cut every 6 weeks
  - Hard standing areas – 1 clean every visit, fortnightly
  - Hedge and amenity shrub cuts – 1 cut September
  - Weed Spraying – 2 visits as required

The winter provision, running from November through to March includes the following:-

- Hedge and amenity shrub cuts – full cut back
  - Litter Picking – 1 pick every 2<sup>nd</sup> week
  - Hard standing areas – 1 clean every visit, fortnightly
  - Path Edging – December to March
  - Weed Spraying – 2 visits as required
82. The Head of Operations advised that the Erimus Ground Maintenance Programme and service specification have been developed in partnership with tenants, who through rent and service charges pay for the service provision. The Programme document aims to give an indication to residents as to when the operations staff will be undertaking work in their area. However, the Programme is not as developed as Erimus would wish it to be, as ideally resident spotters would be identified in each area and real time information would be sent out electronically to let residents know what work would be undertaken in their area, as well as to request any feedback. The feedback received would then be used to further enhance future service development.
83. In terms of monitoring the Grounds Maintenance Programme it was advised that the service is monitored and scrutinised on a quarterly basis by Erimus Housings Environmental Residents Group. The group carry out inspections on all sites and

score the standard of the work based on set criteria. In addition the group identify any improvements required.

84. Recent observations from this group have included:-
- An increase in fly tipping on land owned/managed by Erimus Housing
  - An increase in side waste (bin bags) being dumped on land owned/managed by Erimus Housing
  - A noticeable difference in the standard of land owned and managed by Erimus Housing and that of Middlesbrough Council.
85. It was stated that although difficult to confirm the perceived reasons for these changes were:
- The Council charge customers for removing household items and therefore if the items are dumped no charge would be incurred by the customer.
  - Side waste is not removed and therefore dumping is the only way to get rid of it without incurring a charge.
  - The Middlesbrough Council grounds maintenance standard is not as high as the Erimus standard.
86. The suggestion was put forward by the Head of Operations that a possible solution to resolve some of these issues could be an agreement from both organisations to undertake joint inspections/walkabouts of adjoining pieces of land/open spaces. The panel was advised that the Council has in the past carried out joint inspections with Erimus and the Assistant Director Environment, Property and Commercial Services advised that the Council would be willing to reinstate this practice.
87. A Member of the panel queried whether the increase in fly tipping has occurred since the Council's introduction of a charge for junk job collections or whether this increase is simply a recent observation. The Head of Operations advised that he was unclear as to when the Council had first introduced a charge for junk job collections but that the increase has been a recent observation. The view was expressed that the increase in fly tipping may coincide with the Council's introduction of a policy of non-collection of side waste.
88. The Assistant Director Environment, Property and Commercial Services advised that there has been an increase in fly tipping observed recently however there is no correlation with charges being introduced for junk jobs. Junk job charging commenced on 1 April 2012 and has not ceased nor been reintroduced since. Income from junk job charging has increased in the first six months of 2014 by 4 per cent against the same period in 2013. It is therefore unlikely that this is a contributory cause for the increase in fly tipping.
89. It was also advised that the fact the Council no longer collects side waste has encouraged residents to recycle more of their household waste and the waste bins provided for the non-recyclable waste appear to be adequate for the vast majority of residents' needs. It was highlighted that there has been some issues with fly tipping in pockets of the town but this issue is not epidemic across Middlesbrough. According to the statistical information collated by the Council there are approximately 250 - 300 reports a month recorded in respect of fly tipping.
90. The panel queried whether there had been an increase in the number of reported incidents of fly tipping to the Council since the issue was considered by the

Overview and Scrutiny Board in December 2012. The panel was informed that since that report was prepared fly tipping has increased by 6 per cent from 1891 reported incidents in 2011/12 to 2006 reports in 2013/14, an increase of 115 reports. This equates to an average of 9.5 additional reports per month across the town. Across all wards this represents a 6 per cent increase, however, within the 5 Wards in East Middlesbrough, Beckfield, North Ormesby and Brambles Farm, Pallister, Park End and Thorntree there has been an overall increase of 28 per cent, compared to a decrease of 4 per cent across the rest of the town.

91. It was advised that there may be a number of reasons for the increase. For example, all residents were provided with leaflets explaining the no side waste and closed lid policy when the roll out of the new wheeled bin system was implemented. Unfortunately due to some residents not adhering to these procedures many reports of contaminated wheeled bins and side waste were received, and were classed as fly tipping. It is anticipated that the numbers will subside as residents become more used to the new recycling service. It is felt that the recent integration of the Environmental Education and Enforcement Teams into the Environmental Services Department will allow for targeted campaigns in problematic areas in order to address these issues.
92. The question was posed as to whether Erimus Housing has any statistical data, which demonstrates the recent increase in fly tipping on Erimus land. In response to this query the Head of Operations has subsequently provided information relating to the number of fly tipping incidents, which have been reported directly to Erimus grounds maintenance staff during 2013 and 2014.
93. It must be noted however that the figures provided may not be a true reflection of the number of incidents that are dealt with by Erimus. As Erimus Area 1 and 4 receive the majority of their work directly from the areas (west Middlesbrough – Coulby Newham, Easterside, Grove Hill, Whinney Banks etc). The figures also do not include any of what the teams pick up on their daily rounds of the “hot spot areas”.

**Fly tipping incidents reported to Erimus January 2013 – September 2014**

	2013	2014
Jan	6	66
Feb	23	60
Mar	12	116
Apr	37	92
May	31	117
Jun	46	89
Jul	47	91
Aug	42	62
Sept	45	82
Oct	41	
Nov	40	
Dec	57	



94. The information provided highlights that there has been an increase in the number of fly tipping incidents recorded by Erimus from a very low base of 6 incidents in January 2013 to a peak of 117 incidents in May 2014. The data further highlights that the number of incidents per month has not fallen below 60 incidents this year. In contrast in 2013 the number of incidents never rose above 57 and progressively increased to this level over the course of the year.
95. The panel was also keen to find out how fly tipping in Middlesbrough compared with neighbouring authorities. The Defra report for 2013/14 shows the following information for other Tees Valley Local Authorities with regard to fly tipping statistics:-
- |                          |      |
|--------------------------|------|
| Redcar and Cleveland     | 2724 |
| Stockton Borough Council | 2030 |
| Middlesbrough            | 2006 |
| Hartlepool               | 893  |
| Darlington               | 2914 |
96. The figures demonstrate that fly tipping in Middlesbrough is not inconsistent with the general trends across the region.
97. A Member queried whether there is still a degree of uncertainty in terms of responsibility for specific areas of land between the Council and Erimus or whether this issue has now been fully resolved. The Head of Operations at Thirteen advised that he was aware of a recent incident where clarification had been sought in respect of land ownership, due to a misunderstanding between the Council and Erimus. In his view further work was needed on this issue.
98. The Streetscene Services Manager reassured the panel that queries in respect of land ownership of sites are now an exception. It was advised that when fly tipping incidents and grass cutting requests are submitted checks are undertaken to establish whether the land is owned by the Council, Erimus or is in private ownership and there are very few occasions when the ownership of land is disputed. It was also advised that following the Stock Transfer some estates were transferred in their entirety to the Council and others were transferred to Erimus. The panel was informed that Streetscene Services hold over 200 maps showing the overlay of responsibility and an invitation was extended to Members of the panel to view the maps which are stored at the Cargo Fleet Lane offices.
99. The Assistant Director Environment, Property and Commercial Services acknowledged that as the Council has reduced grass cutting frequencies from 16 to 13 times per year, the Council's cutting cycle is 2 to 3 days adrift compared to Erimus' grounds maintenance programme. The panel was reminded that the timing of cuts is also dictated by the weather but that the reduction in grass cutting frequencies has inevitably had an impact on standards. A Member of the panel commented that the panel needs to be mindful that the Council has taken a conscious decision in respect of the frequency of grass cutting provision. Neighbouring local authorities have retained and even increased the frequency of cuts.
100. In examining the varying service standards between the Council and Erimus the Streetscene Services Manager made the point that it is not a straightforward

comparison. The Council is responsible for maintaining 10 million square metres of land, which includes 7 million square metres of grass, 6 cemeteries and 3 formal parks. In contrast Erimus has responsibility for maintaining 463,000 square metres of land across the town. The demands and complexities of service provision are entirely different. It was also advised that the provision of three extra cuts per year for the Council would cost in the region of £100k compared to £10k for Erimus.

101. A Member of the panel queried why in the current climate there are two different organisations effectively providing the same service. The question was raised as to whether there would be any advantage in Erimus exploring the possibility of the Council maintaining all open spaces areas across the town.
102. The Streetscene Services Manager advised that Erimus had approached the Council previously and offered a capital sum, which equated to 11 years maintenance charges (approximately £2m) if the land was transferred over to the Council for maintenance purposes. The Council would then have responsibility for maintaining all areas of open spaces across the town, with Erimus retaining responsibility for house gardens and communal areas. The Assistant Director Environment, Property and Commercial Services advised that the Council would still be interested in such a proposal, although discussions would have to be held with regard to the specification for frequency of grass cutting.
103. In response to a query with regard to the timescale for responding to fly tipping, the panel was advised that the current timescale for both organisations is 24 hours from notification of the issue. The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Board commented that there is an issue with regard to Member One Stop enquiries being directed to the relevant officer at Erimus. It was also stated that it should not matter which organisation is responsible for maintaining the land all fly tipping incidents should be responded to in a reasonable timeframe.
104. The Streetscene Services Manager commented that Erimus could also assist the Council by reminding their tenants that bins which are not collected are tagged to inform the resident as to the reasons why and for their tenants to do as instructed on the tag. The Head of Operations confirmed that he would take this suggestion on board.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

105. Based on evidence given throughout the investigation the panel concluded:
  - a) Overall maintenance standards across the town are good and effective management arrangements are in place thanks to the dedication and commitment of staff and volunteers across the town who are passionate about preserving the environment for future generations. The panel accepts that overall maintenance standards are not as high as has been the case in previous years. However, these are challenging times for the local authority. Although the Council has greater autonomy over service provision this autonomy comes with significantly reduced resources. So how does the Council safeguard and maintain the service and quality expected by local people with less money?
  - b) In May 2013 the Mayor stated that “we are trying to protect the vulnerable, the elderly and younger people. This town will fray at the edges because we have

not got the money.” Over the course of this review it has become apparent that in order to maintain / improve environmental standards across the town with significantly reduced resources the Council will have to deliver these services differently in the future. The proposed Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) for Environment, Property and Commercial Services (EPCS) will potentially offer the opportunity to protect and even enhance future service provision in this area.

- c) The outcome measure for the department of Environment, Property and Environmental Services is to ensure that “the quality of place supports the needs of residents, visitors and businesses.” Prioritising what aspects of service provision residents want to protect is of the up most importance in taking forward this agenda. The panel is also of the view that Middlesbrough residents have a key role to play in keeping the town clean and tidy. The most effective solution to maintaining high standards in terms of open space management is to encourage residents to take pride in their local area and to promote responsible citizenship. If residents in Middlesbrough take ownership and responsibility for ensuring that littering is reduced, fly tipping is reduced and the areas directly outside of their premises are well managed everyone in the town benefits.
- d) The view has also been expressed by the panel that when the budget cuts were first introduced blanket cuts were made across the board. Although the panel has no concrete evidence there is a feeling from the panel that to date Middlesbrough has not fully explored alternative forms of provision such as wildflower projects / the possibility of increasing the frequency of grass cutting and investing in prominent roundabouts. In contrast neighbouring authorities have prioritised the aspects they wished to retain including maintaining a minimum of 16 amenity grass cuts per year, along with introducing ‘invest to save’ programmes and launching innovative projects. The panel is of the view that there has been some reluctance from the department to consider the aforementioned options, although the panel is keen to point out that it is not attempting to apportion blame but to determine the best way to make progress under difficult circumstances.
- e) The panel acknowledges that Members are responsible for approving budget reductions and in agreeing to the cuts proposed Members did not fully appreciate what the full effects would be. It is also clear that the cuts have affected different areas in different ways. Given that next year further cuts in the budget are needed the panel is of the view that there is a need to be more strategic in the approach adopted. As referenced above the proposed ADM for Environment, Property and Commercial Services may well be the solution to achieving sustainable future service provision. In considering this topic the panel has also questioned whether the reduction in grass cutting frequency, below the standard introduced as part of compulsive competitive tendering, is effectively a false economy, given the noticeable increase in the number of complaints from residents in relation to the maintenance of open spaces.
- f) The panel has expressed the view that the presentations given by Stockton Borough Council and Hartlepool Borough Council were both interesting and informative. The panel acknowledges that Stockton is in a different position to Middlesbrough but Hartlepool is in a very similar position. The panel is particularly impressed by the positive way in which Hartlepool has responded to the budget reductions and even increased the frequency of grass cutting by

making substantial savings in other areas of their Street Care Services budget. Innovative ways of achieving financial savings through the provision of bulb planting schemes and wildflower projects, whilst simultaneously providing interest and colour in the town, have proved popular in Stockton and Hartlepool. There has also been a noticeable shift from more traditional forms of horticulture to a much more light touch approach. The panel feels it would be beneficial to consider these options in Middlesbrough.

- g) In light of the evidence received to date the panel is of the view that opportunities for income generation should also be explored further. Hartlepool Borough Council advised that they have invested in the Council's Garden Centre and transformed it into a retail outlet for public use. The Centre now includes a coffee house and function room, which is proving popular with residents. This is an area that potentially could be considered further in Middlesbrough. Similarly roundabout sponsorship has successfully generated income for the Council in previous years and there has been a clear commitment by local businesses to invest in ensuring a quality environment is maintained in the town. The panel is of the view that there is a need to build on and strengthen this work in Middlesbrough.
- h) Reference has also been made, over the course of the review, to the possibility of the department taking on additional work, for example, maintaining the open space land currently maintained by Erimus. The Environment Scrutiny panel has previously looked at the issue of income generation and put forward the recommendation that "new trading opportunities are actively sought to maximise external income for Middlesbrough Council's Trading Services." At that time the panel considered that there was still an opportunity to explore trading activities in some areas. Grounds maintenance was identified as an area worthy of exploration. The proposed ADM will provide an opportunity for increased flexibility in staff recruitment, which could be beneficial in securing short term contracts and generating additional income for the Council. The panel is of the view that the possibility of one organisation having responsibility for the maintenance of open space land across the town should be considered.
- i) A further issue that came to light during the panel's site visit was that fly tipping is an issue at the bring sites in the town and this is an activity the panel will not accept. The panel is of the view that strong enforcement action is needed in this area to send a clear message to the perpetrators that such behaviour is not acceptable. Enforcement action needs to be taken against those who commit this offence and the panel is of the view that a targeted enforcement campaign should be undertaken at the various bring sites located across the town.
- j) With regard to the suspension of the apprenticeship scheme the view was expressed by Members that the Council must actively promote apprenticeships and support getting young people into employment at every opportunity. The panel is therefore keen to ensure that young people in Middlesbrough are provided with the opportunity to secure apprenticeships and gain employment in this area of work to ensure that protecting and promoting environmental standards in the town remains a priority in the future.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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106. That the Environment Scrutiny Panel recommends to the Executive:

- a) That the scripts used by the contact centre be updated in light of the recent budget reductions to ensure that accurate advice is given to residents when enquiries relating to the maintenance of open spaces are submitted. The department's service promises should also be refreshed and updated to reflect the current budget position.
- b) That guidance be produced and published in the Love Middlesbrough magazine and on the Council website which advises residents of the actions they are legally entitled to undertake directly outside of their premises in respect of tending grass verges, weed removal and litter picking.
- c) That a wild flower initiative is undertaken on a key grass verge gateway into Middlesbrough as a trial project in an effort to fully assess the potential benefits of introducing this type of scheme in Middlesbrough.
- d) That Community Councils be approached by the department to establish if there is interest from individual Community Councils to fund / sponsor the provision of bedding plants / wildflower projects / bulb planting schemes in their respective wards and to inform Community Councils of the individual beds that will be grassed if the necessary funds cannot be raised.
- e) That the contract for business sponsorships for roundabouts be retendered in an effort to generate additional income for the Council.
- f) That work be undertaken to establish the feasibility of developing new business opportunities (e.g. public sale of plants) at the Council's nursery for the benefit of Middlesbrough residents.
- g) That a targeted enforcement campaign be undertaken at the recycling bring sites to send a clear message to perpetrators that this behaviour is not acceptable.
- h) That the creation of apprenticeship opportunities be included in the business planning process for the ADM for EPCS, in an effort to increase the number of employment / apprenticeship opportunities for young people in Middlesbrough in this area of work in the future.
- i) That when new roundabouts are installed careful consideration is given to future management requirements and that an 'invest to save' approach is adopted in respect of prominent roundabouts in Middlesbrough with a view to reducing ongoing revenue costs.
- j) That discussions be held with Erimus Housing in respect of the future arrangements for the maintenance of open spaces across the town. The feasibility of the responsibility for the maintenance of all open space land across the town to be managed by the Council in the future should be explored. The joint visits previously undertaken by Erimus and Council officers should also be reinstated.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

107. The Panel would like to thank the following people for their help with this review: -

Tom Punton – Assistant Director Environment, Property and Commercial Services  
Keith Garland – Streetscene Services Manager  
Andrew Mace – Operations Manager  
Geoff Robinson – Senior Area Care Manager  
Alastair Smith – Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods)  
Jamie McCann – Head of Direct Services, Stockton Borough Council  
Wendy Langley – Service Performance Officer  
Sarah While – Communications System Co-ordinator  
Chris Joynes – Head of Operations at Thirteen

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

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

- Report to and minutes of the Environment Scrutiny Panel meetings held on 11 August, 8 September, 29 September and 20 October.
- Managing green spaces; seven ingredients for success – CABI space 2010
- Understanding the Contribution Parks and Green Spaces can make to Improving People's Lives Full Report – Greenspaces 2011
- Community led spaces - a guide for local authorities and community groups – CABI space 2010
- The Value of Public Spaces – How high quality parks and public spaces create economic, social and environmental value
- Middlesbrough Council's Green Spaces Strategy - Public Places: Green Spaces 2007 - 2012
- Summary of key achievements from the Green Spaces Public Places Action Plan 2007 - 2012

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