
17 January 2023

Economy and Place Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Head of Environmental Services
Portfolio of the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change

Public Realm – Service description and update

Summary

1. This report provides an overview and update on the services and functions managed by Public Realm. This includes delivery through in house provision, the private sector and through a variety of arrangements with the community and voluntary sector.

Recommendations

2. The Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

Review the content of the overview and provide any recommendations to the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change

Reason

To improve the care and maintenance of the local environment including roads and streets, the city centre and parks and green space.

Background

3. Public Realm is one part of Environmental Services within (Directorate of) Transport, Environment and Planning. Environmental Services comprises Public Realm, Waste Services and Fleet Services.

4. Public Realm has existed in its present form for about 10 years and includes, as core functions, highway verge grass cutting, cleansing (including dog and litter bins), city centre cleansing, parks and open space management, and public toilets.

Service

5. A comprehensive breakdown of the services provided and managed are detailed in Annex 1. This includes information on what, who, where, when and in some cases with what. Where a service has a defined budget, this is also provided.
6. Most of the areas of responsibility for Public Realm are delivered through the in-house service (this covers grounds maintenance and horticultural activities across the city, litter and dog bin provision and emptying, litter picking, grass cutting, hedge cutting etc). The service also manages these services on Housing land.
7. The Public Realm service covers the following activities; highway verge maintenance, street cleansing (through manual and mechanical means), emptying of litter / dog bins, maintenance of housing land and shrub beds etc, cleansing of city centre and river walks, provision of parks and open spaces. It also covers Arboriculture (this covers the planting of new trees but also the requirements to survey (once every four years) council owned stock, management of Strays, closed churchyards, play areas, de-leaving works, cleansing on the A64, the treatment of weeds etc, management of public conveniences (toilets) and opening /closing of the bar walls. The service also delivers an estate worker service (delivered for Housing).
8. To support the work of the Public Realm service, there are a number of dedicated Friends of Groups that undertake work through various communities. The Environment and Community Officers from the Communities and Equalities Team provide the link to and coordinate the actions of local volunteers (e.g. Good Gym, York Cares / corporate days, Friends of and similar community groups). Annex 2 provides details of the volume of work undertaken and sample tasks between April to November 2022. The service also provides venues for Community Payback (delivered through the Probation Service). During 2022 the following areas were used as a base for their activities; Hull Road Park, Rowntree Park, Glen Gardens and Clarence Gardens.

9. As well as the work by the operational Public Realm staff, the care and management of parks and green spaces also involves a multitude of “landlord” functions. These include the proactive and reactive tasks such building maintenance, fence repairs, stonework repairs and ditch clearance. Such work is commissioned either through other Council services or local contractors.
10. Over several years, services and facilities traditionally provided by Public Realm have been transferred to the community under the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) process, e.g., allotments, tennis courts, pavilions. Such transfers often require ongoing support to become fully established and have residual landlord obligations.

Questions submitted in advance by the Chair

11. How is performance monitored for each of those jobs/functions?
Response:
 - Service performance is monitored across the board via a range of methods including management / supervisor inspection / site visits and elected member and public feedback. KPI's are also used to track the responsiveness of the service to dealing with urgent jobs (e.g. reports of needles, environmental hazards etc).
 - All works areas have appropriate risk assessments and SSOW's (safe systems of work). As a number of the work areas require machinery and detailed training then all staff go through work placed instructions, receive regular and detailed refresher training and have all training activities logged and certified.
 - Where the service provided requires recorded inspection entry (e.g. play area equipment, river safety equipment, tree inspections etc) then information is kept on a dedicated data base(s).
 - For five of the main parks and gardens in the city, external validation is sought through the Keep Britain Tidy 'Green Flag' award. The Award is held at Rowntree's Park, West Bank Park, Glen Gardens, Clarence Gardens and Rawcliffe Country Park.
 - Through any awards of accreditations; for example the Purple Flag award for the city centre.

12. How are we dealing with / plan to deal with any aging workforce concerns and recruitment pressures? Response:

- A restructure of Environmental Services has been undertaken with final implementation expected in February 2023. As part of the restructure the service has sought to offer new opportunities at a supervisory and management level. Part of the work will be to implement succession planning activities across the service (including Public Realm) to ensure that the service remains fit for purpose and primed to deliver services over the coming months and years.
- As part of planning for the future, the Public Realm service recruited to six general operative posts in 2022 with a further recruitment exercise scheduled to take place in the coming weeks.
- Plans are in place to further increase staff training to ensure we have the greatest provision possible of multi-skilled staff
- Offer opportunities for staff to learn new skills (e.g. HGV through dedicated training programmes which the Council will fund through a training agreement)
- Seek to recruit apprentices through new apprenticeship opportunities that have been launched for grounds maintenance based work

13. How well “equipped” we are to do the jobs that need doing, from fleet, to apparatus and equipment, to basic tools? Response:

- Fleet
This is an area which has been recently addressed as the fleet across Public Realm was very old. The service has recently procured 10 new electric caged vans with a further set of vehicles due to be procured in the 2023/24 financial year. Two new tractors have been procured in 2022/23 along with a new telescopic arm for hedge cutting activities. A new articulated mini-sweeper has also been ordered for the city centre. All vehicles are maintained in-house and have regular inspections, services and MOT's. All staff receive familiarisation training when vehicles are replaced. Staff perform a daily vehicle check and clean vehicles on a regular basis.

- Equipment
The service has a large number of tools and apparatus required to undertake various tasks. These include hedge cutters, leaf blowers, leaf vacuums, strimmers, lawn mowers, ride-on mowers, trailers etc. All pieces of kit are asset tagged and have a replacement schedule. All pieces of kit are regularly inspected and cleaned. The service has recently undertaken an exercise to manage all equipment as well as vehicles through the 'Tranman' system.

14. Any other "live" matters, in your view, for consideration - sickness/injury rates, possible synergies between one service area to another, ability to meet residents' demand with ever declining budgets. Response:

- Meeting residents demand is always a challenge for any service and Public Realm is no different in that regard. Throughout covid, the service adapted its delivery to meet demand (through the various stages of lockdowns and saw demand fluctuate accordingly).
- The service continues to take steps to address sickness absence with most long-term sickness cases addressed and managed in line with Council procedures.
- One of the challenges in this area concerns residents' views on the local environment with often polarised views on what constitutes a 'pleasant local environment'. For example, some residents welcome grass being left longer to meet aspirations as part of the Pollinator Strategy with other resident's complaining if grass is not regularly cut on highway verges/open spaces etc. How we 'harmonise' these views is a challenge for the service moving forward.
- Mechanisation of services – investing in new machinery is vital to ensure we deliver an even more flexible and adaptable service as we move forward.
- HGV – a number of staff have 'grandfather rights' to drive such vehicles (road sweepers, path sweepers etc) and there is a national shortage of HGV drivers. A new training programme is planned but it is a risk for the service with an ageing workforce.

Council Plan

15. This report supports and contributes to the following Council Plan priority – a greener and cleaner city

Implications

- **Financial** - The total net revenue expenditure budget for public realm for 2022/23 is £3.3m. This covers the functions outlined within the report and annexes.

Contact Details

Authors:

Ben Grabham
Head of Environmental
Services
Tel No: 07749 710152

Dave Meigh
Strategy and Contracts
Manager
Tel No:

Chief Officer Responsible for the report:

James Gilchrist
Director of Environment, Transport and
Planning

Report **Date** 09/01/2023
Approved

Wards Affected:

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background papers

None

Annexes

Annex 1: Public Realm Services

Annex 2: Environment and Community Officer activity April to November 2022