

## **REPORT TO EXETER BOARD**

**Date of Meeting: 30<sup>th</sup> July 2015**

**Joint Report of: Assistant Director Public Realm, Exeter City Council and Head of Highways, Capital Development and Waste Management, Devon County Council**

**Title: Highways Vegetation Management**

### **Is this a Key Decision?**

**Yes**

One that affects finances over £1m or significantly affects two or more wards. If this is a key decision then the item must be on the appropriate forward plan of key decisions.

## **1 What is the report about?**

- 1.1 To inform the Exeter Board of an agreement between Devon County Council and Exeter City Council jointly to fund a solution to mitigate the impact of budget reductions and prevent unsightly highways grass and weed growth in Exeter.
- 1.2 To request financial support for this solution from the Exeter Board for 2015/16 and the following two financial years.

## **2 Recommendations:**

- 2.1 That the Exeter Board welcomes and supports the agreed solution for the maintenance of highways grass and control of weed growth in the City with a contribution of £10K per annum in 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18.
- 2.2 That an update report on the expenditure situation be made to the Board later in 2015/16

## **3 Background**

- 3.1 In preparing for the challenge of reducing revenue funding in 2015/16 and beyond, the Devon County Council's Highway Service identified a number of themes for reducing costs:

Efficiency savings,  
Invest to save initiatives,  
Income generation to cover service costs where appropriate,  
Service reductions,

- 3.2 The service reduction theme involved reducing aspects of the service to the minimum standards compatible with maintaining a safe network. The proposal for grass cutting fitted into this theme.
- 3.3 The grass cutting proposal was for a reduction of £0.70m from £1.18m in 2014/15. It was included in the Tough Choices consultation. The narrative explained that grass cutting would be limited to visibility splays and to visibility lines for signs. Verges would remain uncut if not essential for visibility. The highways self-help scheme was highlighted as an enabler of community action to fill the gap left by the grass cutting budget proposals.
- 3.4 There were 497 responses to the highway budget consultation, of which 39% wished Devon to consider alternative cost savings, and 48% to reduce the service as proposed. Respondents raised issues around safety and visual impact.

- 3.5 It was concluded that in the context of the overall budget pressures and having considered alternative highway proposals and the consultation responses, that the proposal should be recommended for implementation in 2015/16
- 3.6 The proposal was agreed by Devon's cabinet as part of the budget report (CT/15/18) on 13th February 2015 and again as part of the County Road Highway Maintenance Revenue Budget report (HCW/15/27) on 8th April. The latter included a new Policy for Grass Cutting in line with the Tough Choices proposal, which was also approved.
- 3.7 Similarly, due to budget pressures, the previous year allocation of £344k for weed treatment was reduced to £94k in 2015/16.
- 3.8 The Community Payback scheme was enhanced, and community payback teams are deployed to mitigate the impact of the weed treatment cut as far as possible.
- 3.9 The way in which the grass cutting service is being delivered in 2015/16 is through a series of separate arrangements, including delivery by the Term Maintenance Contractor, and through agreement with Town and Parish Councils and through community self-help groups.

#### **4 Reasons for the recommendation:**

- 4.1 Devon County Council and Exeter City Council have been in discussion about entering into an agreement on the funding and delivery of an enhancement of the County Council's grass cutting programme in the City.
- 4.2 The enhanced programme would mitigate the impact of budget reductions and prevent unsightly highways grass and weed growth.

#### **5 What are the resource implications including non financial resources.**

- 5.1 It is estimated that £84,000 is required to maintain highway vegetation standards in the City. The County Council's budget for this work in 2015/16 is £24K.

#### **6 Report details:**

- 6.1 Last year's excessive weed and highway vegetation growth in Exeter were well documented. The Exeter Board considered the issue in April and September 2014 and in September 2014 the Exeter Board agreed "*the use of £20,000 from the Exeter Board's budget for early weed spraying in 2015*".
- 6.2 Provision was made by the County Council from their 2014/15 budget for a citywide weed spray, which was undertaken in March 2015. A second citywide weed spray is planned for July 2015 using the agreed contribution from the Exeter Board.
- 6.3 This year, Devon County Council announced that weed spraying had been removed and replaced by targeted interventions by a Community Payback team. The team cannot however provide a comprehensive citywide service.
- 6.4 The new Devon grass cutting policy limits work to maintaining visibility splays and keeping road signs visible. This has raised concerns about the look and feel of the City, particularly in view of the imminent Rugby World Cup Tournament.
- 6.5 As a result, a special funding arrangement has been made between the County

Council and Exeter City Council, with both providing extra funding for a limited period to enhance the highways grass cutting budget for the city. This is estimated to go some way towards providing sufficient funding to address highway grass and weeds in the City (excluding dual carriage way work) which the County will continue to cut due to the onerous traffic Management requirement, until March 2018.

- 6.6 Subject to the City Council signing of the necessary Agreement (which is similar to the agreement with other Councils), as in other communities in Devon, the City Council will be able to carry out the service on behalf of the Highway Authority. Under the agreement:

**Devon County Council will:**

- Honour its commitment of £24k in 2015/16 in 2016/17 and 2017/18 subject to County Council approval of future year budgets, (noting that future year budgets are the subject of annual scrutiny and elected Member approvals)
- Provide a special fund of £25k in 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18
- Subject to County Council approval of future year budgets, continue with the supervision of the Community Payback scheme at cost of £16k in 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18

**Exeter City Council will:**

- Contribute £25k in 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18 to fund an enhanced highway vegetation management service.
- Entry into an agreement with the County Council to enable it to carry out grass cutting and weed treatment on the highway on behalf of the County Council.
- Provide information to the County Council on its works on the highway and drive annual efficiency in the delivery of the service it delivers on behalf of the County Council so that the agreed service can be delivered for less in over the life of the agreement.

- 6.7 The estimated cost of a comprehensive vegetation management service in the City is £84k in 2015/16. The total funding provided by the County and City Council is £74k.
- 6.8 This report seeks the approval of the Exeter Board to co-fund the service in 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18 by allocating £10k per year.

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**Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)**  
**Background papers used in compiling this report:-**

None.

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