

CABINET MEMBER UPDATE REPORT		
Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Regeneration and Skills)		
<i>COUNCILLOR</i>	<i>PORTFOLIO</i>	<i>DATE</i>
Mhairi Doyle	Public Health and Well Being	August 2024

Green Sefton update

Overview

Overall, the service continues to perform well under the pressures of expectation on service delivery, within the resources made available.

It is clear that several areas of the service are struggling to meet expectations / basic standards within resources available and efforts are being made to address this. This has resulted in further increase in complaints, and negative press coverage for several areas of the service into the peak season of 2024/25.

To start to address this, an increase in revenue budget was approved by Full Council as part of the budget setting process for an additional £200k into the management of play areas / facilities from 2022/23 onwards (increasing the budget from £45k per year), and for several of the actions from the Coast Visitor Action Plan for the delivery of those actions on a permanent basis with a further £300k annual uplift – to include additional daytime and evening ranger staff, a full time Community Ranger for the Coast, increased litter management at key gateways, ongoing provision of temporary toilets at beach entrances, and a communications plan to encourage appropriate visitor behaviour. Further, the unachievable income targets were removed from April 2023, which allowed the service to present a balanced budget for 23/24 and onwards. Further, the replacement of machinery and equipment tender has been concluded, with the anticipated shortfall being met with the ring fencing of fees and charges increases (including those of the Burials and Cremations service, see later) – this has all been approved by Cabinet Members for Health and Well Being, and at Cabinet and Budget Council also, and orders have now been placed to a range of new machinery which has started to arrive (some has significant lead in periods).

In addition, to develop the service / and undertake improvements, external grants and other funding are being sought such as;

- the 500k Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier funding for conservation works over the next 5 years along the coast was accepted in February 2022, and the first two years work have proved successful attracting regional media attention
- a major bid for Botanic Gardens is in early development, with a Task Group set up (chaired by Cabinet Member, and with ward councillors and community reps), and approval to consult publicly given at the Consultation and Engagement Panel in March 2022. Further, a successful pre-development bid to the HLF has provided resource and capacity to lead and deliver this consultation from Winter 2022 to Summer 2023, and to undertake the required surveys and analysis etc,

all in order to be able to make a bid some time afterwards (whenever match funding has been secured). In late 2023, this consultation has completed and design workshops have taken place with the Task Group to develop and understand the scale and scope of the project, with the outcome of the consultation in mind – the formal report to note this and agree next steps with Cabinet Member has been published as an approved decision by Cabinet Member.

- consultation has been completed for the allocation of 'legacy' monies left for Hesketh Park in a residents will, and cost estimate / details for priority projects have been developed and a contract has now been signed with the trustees to formalise this suite of projects to be developed and delivered. Officers have now appointed the part time, fixed term, project manager. The fixed term gardener posts have also been appointed, with the Ranger 3 (lead) gardener, and new apprentice post, commencing in April 2024 and already making a positive impact on the ground. A contractor has been commissioned to undertake the Sensory Garden improvements, and these have been completed in Summer 2024 also.
- the Ainsdale Beach gateway schemes reached various blockages, and so a paper was presented in June 23 which agreed to pause all, and to seek resources for development of an overall 'vision' document for the area instead. A consultant has now been appointed, stakeholder engagement is ongoing, and a new 'vision' for the area should be published later in 2024
- Cabinet gave formal approval to seek tenders for the future investment in Southport Golf Links in March 2022. The White House Café reopened in May 23 (with SHOL operating), and the course tender itself remains in abeyance, awaiting capacity and resources to proceed. Meanwhile, it has been noted that a local private golf course is developing an investment plan for their site with a very similar model – a watching brief is to be adopted to learn lessons from their efforts
- An unsolicited Expression of Interest has been received by a group of golfers at Bootle Golf Course who are interested in seeking external funding to renovate, and then operate, the clubhouse building at Bootle Golf Course. Officers are assessing their proposal at the time of writing, and which will be discussed with/ reported to Cabinet Member in due course (noting however that they were targeting central governments Community Transition Fund (part of the Levelling Up agenda), which may no longer be available since the general election in early July).
- the FCERM team continue to work with the Environment Agency and other partner agencies on seeking capital monies to reduce flood risk. Public consultation on the 'Making Space for Water' project in Churchtown/ Crossens commenced in September, and has now concluded – this will lead to a Planning Application to be submitted shortly, together with a funding bid to the Environment Agency early in 2024.
- The FCERM team are also leading on the development of the major Crosby Coastal Defence scheme – although the funding model requires that the main works cannot start until at least 2027+, monies have been allocated for interim works, on which consultation has begun in March 2024, with an intention that works may commence later in the year.
- A review and audit undertaken on our approach and resourcing for tree management has given rise to funding being allocated for an additional two tree officers to be appointed from 24/25 (one permanent and one fixed term) both of whom have now started. This will add much needed capacity to start to meet HSE standards on regularity of inspection regimes, responding to recent court rulings also, and will also allow officers to explore and understand the tree management of land owned by the Council, but not in the Green Sefton portfolio.

This 'discovery' work will undoubtedly lead to more practical management works needed in time, and discussions will need to assess the resourcing of such.

What is performing well

The 2023 Annual Review was presented to the Overview and Scrutiny (regeneration and skills) committee at the November 2023 meeting. This was well received, and outlined some of the successes for the service in the last year, and also explained some of the challenges. A narrated version of the presentation has been uploaded on the website here: www.sefton.gov.uk/greensefton

The 2022 review led to the refresh and launching of the Service Vision in April 2023 which was adopted by Cabinet Member, and included taking on board comments from the O+S Committee, Cabinet Member, and the wider team of Green Sefton.

This has then flowed into revisiting the Service Plan, which was adopted by Cabinet Member in October 2023, and officers now continue to develop the suite of Key Performance Indicators which will flow from this (although we await the updated corporate Performance Framework to inform this).

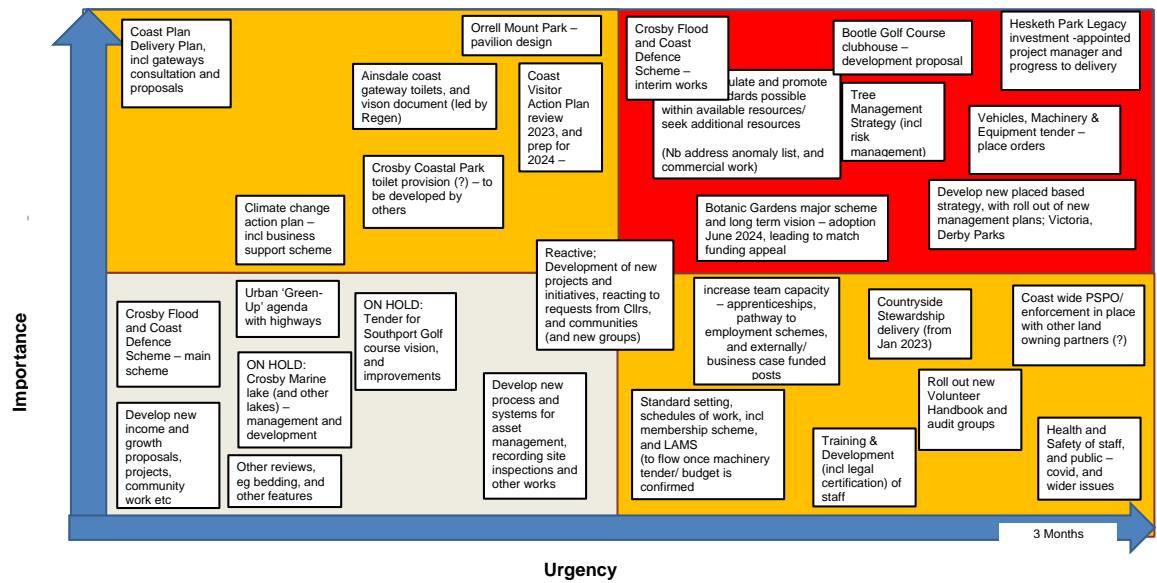
What requires improvement and what action is being taken

Overall work programming

The Annual Report highlighted the tracking of the services overall performance against the actions contained within the previous Service Plan which was RAG rated over the previous two years. This clearly showed that many actions slowed down or stalled since the pandemic started due to a reduced staffing capacity to deal with developmental issues, and new operational demands being placed upon services as the 'staycation' phenomena resulted in massive increases in visitor numbers and other pressures on our sites. The approach of tracking progress will be replicated moving forwards, measuring progress against the newly adopted Service Vision, and Service Plan

The action taken to address this has been to develop a more sophisticated work programming approach for the service, with an 'urgency / importance' matrix developed, as below. This was presented to O&S Committee within the Annual Review, but has also led to each sub-team within Green Sefton creating their own version, with updates being discussed at team meetings, and individual monthly 1:1's. The overall team matrices now also form part of regular updates.

GREEN SEFTON STRATEGIC WORKLOAD MATRIX – as presented to O+S Oct/ Nov 22, and updated 25.11.22, 10.2.23, 10.3.23, 25.7.23, 15.9.23, 19.3.24, 30.5.24
(to be reported to Cabinet Member on a regular basis, and updated through the year)



Working with Volunteers

A specific challenge in recent times has been ongoing issues arising with some of our volunteer groups. Probably symptomatic that the service no longer undertakes land management and maintenance to the standards previously seen, and that there is less officer capacity available to respond to complaints, nurture groups, and pro-actively keep them aligned – several groups have become dissatisfied with the Council and / or have suffered from internal issues leading to corporate complaints being raised.

The action taken to address this is to refresh the Volunteer Handbook – this guiding document introduces volunteers to setting up a group, however it also now goes much further in terms of setting out expectations to be placed on volunteers about their Policies and Procedures expected of a group, including Equality and Diversity, Safeguarding, and overall Code of Conduct – both in terms of the way volunteers treat each other, and also about how they deal and interact with Council officers.

Following discussion with Cabinet Member during 2022, and comments received (including those from CVS, legal and personnel colleagues), the final version was approved in September 22. This has since been shared with all volunteer groups, with a request that the sign up to the updated document, and expectations contained therein.

Defining Standards

As part of addressing some of the frustrations from the community referred to above, we have also instigated a piece of work to define our maintenance service standards that we are currently resourced to provide. This is initially being prioritised on the inland parks and greenspaces maintenance aspects of the service, but team leaders are working up thoughts on defining standards across wider areas too. The first draft of this new document was shared with Cabinet Member at the April 2022 meeting, and final amendments are being made before releasing this wider in the coming months.