

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-019-2023/24

Date of meeting: 9 October 2023



Portfolio: Regulatory & Technical Services

(Cabinet Portfolio Holder Cllr K Williamson)

Subject: Update on the transfer of services (Grounds Maintenance) to Qualis Property Solutions Ltd.

**Responsible Officer: Mandy Thompson/Interim Service Director
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Democratic Services Officer: V Messenger (democraticservices@eppingforestdc.gov.uk)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

1. To consider and comment on the contents of the report.

Executive Summary:

The planned transfer of the Grounds Maintenance service to Qualis Property Solutions (QPS) successfully took place in May. Post transfer, this report provides an update on the transfer and service delivery.

Reasons for Proposed Decision: N/A informative report

Other Options for Action: N/A informative report

Report:

1. There was some apprehension amongst staff at the prospect of transfer into the Council's Local Authority Trading Company (LATC), particularly for members with long service with the Council. To provide reassurance to staff and facilitate a smooth transition, both Epping Forest & Qualis management team worked closely together to ensure staff were consulted at all stages of the process and kept informed regarding the TUPE process particularly to their employment terms & conditions. This process took the form of both team meetings and individual staff 1-2-1 discussions. At the time of the transfer there were 5 vacant FTE posts (25%).
2. Staff have had to adapt to the new working arrangements in terms of Qualis administration processes and IT operating systems, which was expected and mitigated with support. The staff have received relevant training and there is on-hand assistance from Qualis leadership team and experienced colleagues, to ensure the GM team are quickly brought up to speed.
3. A Contract Compliance Officer (CCO) role was created to monitor the contract and performance of the team for service delivery and to maintain good productive partnership working and collaboration. The focus from the outset was to ensure a seamless transfer was

achieved and that frontline operations and the level of quality would be unaffected by the change. To facilitate this, it was deemed vital to cause the least disruption to both staff and service delivery and therefore, previous proven ways of working have remained largely unaltered.

4. The transfer in May alongside the commencement of the mowing season presented some service challenges and the commitment and effort of the staff involved to manage this is acknowledged. There were 2 key factors that had the most impact on the service, these were the extreme variance in spring weather conditions and reduced staffing levels.
5. The wet weather experienced early in the season followed by a very warm spell produced some exceptional growth rates. This in turn, created some difficult mowing conditions resulting in the grass verges and open spaces becoming longer than usual between cuts and grass clippings remaining on the mown areas for much longer. Despite all available staff being deployed to try and counter this, agency support where possible and overtime working, that resulted in an increased number of complaints being received.
6. Recruitment for grounds staff has been an ongoing issue for the Council in recent years and this remains the same for Qualis, with 7 FT posts currently vacant. Some key vacancies have been filled by internal restructuring and a full management structure is now in place. Several operational posts are still being temporarily covered by agency staff, QPS are currently running adverts to redress this issue and have been successful in recruiting their first new gardener this month. Whilst operational levels remain reduced, it will continue to present challenges in the team's ability to deal with seasonal demanding tasks and reactive issues.
7. During the embedding period for Qualis, there was a need to establish new systems of working for both the client and contractor in terms of managing, monitoring, and recording performance. Ongoing team meetings with Qualis enabled various trials to take place in this area of work and a suitable method agreed. With these systems now in operation, it is anticipated going forward that a more consistent view of performance will be achieved for both parties.
8. The Service Level Agreement (SLA) has been drafted in agreement with EFDC and QPS and will incorporate an overarching 'umbrella' SLA with individual SLAs for individual services that have transferred into Qualis.
9. The CCO carries out independent and joint inspections, the following is a summary sheet of inspections, member enquiries and complaints. Performance of the contract will be reported on a quarterly basis to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. An inspection incorporates several different elements including:
 - Playgrounds
 - Lawns and Grassed Areas
 - Flowers, Shrub & Rose Beds
 - Hedges
 - Weeds – Hard surface areas

they are assessed and graded individually to enable robust monitoring and emerging trends identified.

	May	June	July	Totals
Member/Cllr GM Enquiries	2	8	6	16
Stage 1 Complaints	0	1	2	3
Stage 2 Complaints	0	0	0	0
Inspections	0	4	5	9
Category A	0	0	0	0
Category B	0	11	7	18
Category C	0	2	3	5
Category D	0	0	0	0
Rectification Notices	0	0	0	0
Default Notices	0	0	0	0

KEY - Cat. Insp Std A – Desired Standard – Good
B – Satisfactory Standard – Average
C – Unsatisfactory Standard – Poor
D – Unacceptable Standard

Prior to transfer, the number of GM Enquiries and complaints are comparable for the current season in previous years. A benefit of the transfer is that a regime has been developed to monitor standards across the district and ensure acceptable standards are maintained and poor performance identified and rectified as necessary.

10. QPS continue to strive to improve performance and customer satisfaction, improving services to customers where they can. An Action Plan is in development by QPS outlining improvements over the next 12 months that will be shared with EFDC for approval.

Scrutiny Comments

Scrutiny considered the report alongside the Grounds Maintenance Service Update (Qualis Property Solutions Ltd) and was supportive of the progress made, the improvement plan to map the different areas of responsibility onto the GIS mapping system and the collaborative partnership between EFDC and Qualis.

Resource Implications: N/A informative report

Legal and Governance Implications: N/A informative report

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Consultation / Scrutiny Undertaken: N/A informative report

Background Papers: N/A informative report

Risk Management: N/A informative report

Equality: N/A informative report