



**Resources and Public Realm
Scrutiny Committee**
4 September 2024

**Report from the Corporate Director
of Neighbourhoods and
Regeneration**

**Lead Cabinet Member - Cabinet
Member for Environment and
Enforcement
(Councillor Krupa Sheth)**

**Review of Year 1 of the Grounds Maintenance Contract with
Continental Landscapes**

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Not Applicable
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
List of Appendices:	Three Appendix 1: Sample Lead Member Briefing from Continental Appendix 2: Sample Contract Monitoring monthly report from Continental Appendix 3: KPI's and Penalties
Background Papers:	None
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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report provides a review of the first year of the Grounds Maintenance Contract with Continental Landscapes. It covers information relating to the overall performance of the contract across Parks, BHM land and highway verges, and clarifies performance issues that have arisen and also those mitigations introduced to prevent re-occurrence. It provides information on the challenges faced in the first year of the contract, including the adverse impact of weather conditions, IT issues and staffing issues and the lessons learnt from this first year to allow improvements to be delivered going forwards.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

To note the contents of the report.

3.0 Detail

3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

The Grounds Maintenance contract supports the Council in delivering its Strategic Priority of being Cleaner and Greener. The new electric fleet and machinery is positively contributing towards the Council's target of carbon neutrality and ensuring that our green spaces are welcoming to encourage residents to utilise them. The contract also supports the [Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy](#) by ensuring that our green spaces are able to help manage the absorption of rainwater due to the increased heavy rains and help manage the heat island effect that occurs in cities.

3.2 Background

The Council's Grounds Maintenance Contract was re-tendered in 2023 and was awarded to Continental Landscapes, a specialist grounds maintenance company. The contract commenced on the 1st August 2023 and is an 8+8-year contract, with the first opportunity for renewal or extension in 2031.

3.3 The new contract consolidated operations around the areas of:

- highways verge cutting,
- parks maintenance, including sports pitches,
- allotments
- hedges and main pathways,
- housing estate grass and shrub bed maintenance
- hardstanding cleansing and
- four closed churchyards.

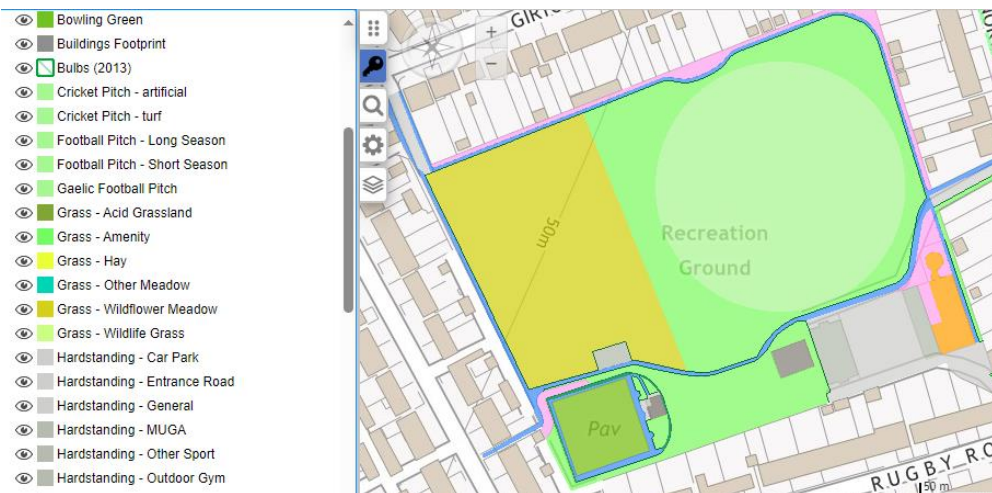
The specification was written to ensure that it included areas that had not been covered in the previous contracts such as pathway edging and included bank holidays as normal working days to reduce the additional charges for litter picking and bin emptying that were being incurred previously.

The edging schedule is a rolling 5-year plan to carry out 20% of grass edging on pathways in parks and on public highways, by removing grass creep. This

has been very successful in the first year and the teams have been able to use new sweeping machinery with a particular edging tool to carry out this edging work. The quality of the maintenance of the sports pitches in parks has also improved with the new contract and in general feedback from sports clubs has been positive.

- 3.4 The contract is groundbreaking in London, in that the request at point of tender was for all fleet, machinery and tools to be electric, significantly reducing the carbon footprint of the contract. Continental Landscapes delivered a 100% electric fleet and 90% electric machinery and tools, excluding only leaf blowers (for technical reasons) and tractors, as there are no available electric tractors on the market.
- 3.5 The first activity when staff transferred from the previous contractor, Veolia, was to undertake a comprehensive training programme including health and safety, toolbox talks on the new specification and training on the new tools and machinery as well as on the new IT system and handheld work programme reporting systems. Staff morale improved with this training, in addition to clear support for the work they were undertaking and brand-new equipment and vehicles. The new electric machinery had the added bonus of reducing hand and arm vibrations and so improving working conditions for the teams on the ground. Efficiencies were made in respect of a brand-new automated pitch line marking robot which reduced the time to mark out a sports pitch as well as increase the accuracy of the markings and a new remote controlled verge cutting machine which works on steep banks, reducing health and safety issues for staff mowing these areas.
- 3.6 There is a new and clear process of monthly contract monitoring in place, which allows for the review of operational and performance issues by a contract performance monitoring team.
- 3.7 All locations for the very first time were mapped on a GIS layer, allowing council staff and the contractor to clearly see which sites are on contract and what works are required at each site. This applies to all parks, housing sites and highways verges. Figure 1 shows an example of this breakdown of works in a park; with colour coded areas matching a linked legend.

Figure 1. Sample Park mapping



3.8 Continental's IT system, ATAK, has been a great improvement on previous operational spreadsheets that held location data and the system aims to allow staff to check any location at any given time to see what work has been completed and what work is outstanding. This system has worked well for litter bin collections, with data being readily available and photos of work undertaken being loaded onto the system.

However, there have been challenges with other aspects of the IT system, in way that the jobs are presented on the handheld devices for staff. An entire weeks' worth of activities were being loaded at once, which meant that whilst work was being undertaken, staff were overloaded with information and not uploading the photos and closing down the jobs on the system. This meant that performance figures were not reflective of the work that was being carried out and there were challenges in being able to check the ATAK system to confirm that work had been undertaken. This then led to a vast increase in e-mail requests for information from the Operations and Contract Managers at Continental regarding completed works and made accurate performance reporting more challenging. Weekly Operations review meetings have been put in place with the Contractor to address this issue whilst the relevant system changes are being made.

3.9 The Fix My Street reporting system has been integrated directly into ATAK IT system. This allows reports of littering, overflowing bins and verge issues to be reported directly to the contractor, streamlining the process. There are, however, still improvements to be made to the system, especially in the way that the free text detail integrates into the ATAK system and impacts the ability of the contractor and council officers to interrogate the data in sufficient detail.

3.10 There were other challenges during the first year of the contract. Whilst the contract mobilised in August (and there were a few weeks of grass cutting across parks and housing sites by the start of October) the weather worsened and by November there was frequent heavy rain. The contractor was able to cut and collect all wildflower meadows, verges and roundabouts and continue to work on general maintenance. But by January, there were three consecutive

high-pressure storms, which led to the water table being so high that the ground was completely saturated and many areas were flooded. Verge cutting was attempted in line with the intended schedule in March, but the heavy machinery was causing more damage to the verges and it was not physically possible to mow the grass. A delayed start to verge cutting was agreed with officers. As the weather got warmer and the rain continued, grass grew at a rapid speed and grass cutting across all aspects of the contract were adversely impacted by the weather and some issues with electric machinery.

- 3.11 The 'perfect storm' of conditions ensued from early 2024, which impacted service delivery in the first year. When grass cutting on verges and housing estates commenced, the electric machinery struggled to cope with longer wet grass. The actual battery run times were proving to be shorter than expected, as the much longer grass, which was also still wet, put additional strain on batteries which would last 1.5 hours compared to 4 or 5 hours. This led to less grass being cut in a day than expected. Whilst additional batteries were provided, the duration was still far short of the expected run time. This meant that verges and estates would be half completed, and the team would move onto the next location trying not to fall behind the schedule. The visual aspect of this led to complaints and teams having to return to cut areas, again delaying the cuts for other sites, which led to additional complaints. There were also some staffing issues which further compounded the issue although Continental worked quickly to seek additional staff.
- 3.12 Whilst many of the issues mentioned above were essentially compounded by a mixture of adverse weather conditions and electric machinery, Brent were not alone in this situation and other boroughs were also experiencing challenges with cutting verges through the spring and summer, leading to longer grass and higher levels of resident complaints. Brent's situation was exacerbated by the fact that every park, open space, highways verge, allotment, closed churchyard and all housing sites are on the same GM contract, so any issues experienced due to machinery impacted the entire operation.
- 3.13 However, when the scale of the issue was identified, regular review meetings were set up with Continental to ensure that issues were being managed effectively and that alternative solutions were being implemented. The Lead member was kept up to date on a regular basis and solutions confirmed, agreed and implemented quickly.
- 3.14 An example of this is the solution that was agreed to bring verges and housing land back within specification quickly. Continental Landscapes advised that they were in discussion with the manufacturers of the electric equipment, to work with them to find a long-term solution to avoid a repeat of the issues in future years. They also arranged for the delivery of replacement mowers and handheld tools that would run on an environmentally friendly fuel (Aspen) which produces 99% less emissions than fossil fuels. This machinery was implemented mid-July and allowed for a faster catch up on the backlog of work.
- 3.15 The contract specification requires Continental to litter pick verges prior to mowing. This was generally achieved well enough, even with the long grass.

On occasion, some litter was missed and a small number of enquiries were received about shredded litter on verges after a cut. When these reports were received, such as in Harrowdene Road, officers raised it with the contractor and an inspection carried out. The issue was not highlighted again in any successive verge cut, showing that concerns were taken seriously by the contractor and raised with the team on the ground. Whilst the majority of main verges were being cut on a schedule (albeit a slower schedule due to the weather), these delays and issues with machinery meant that some of the smaller sections of verge were missed on the scheduled cut, such as the raised grass area on Station Approach in Sudbury. When the issue was raised with the contractor, they ensured that the area missed was cut at the earliest opportunity. These areas are all mapped and there have been no further reports of these locations being missed on the next series of scheduled cuts.

- 3.16 Parks did not fare as badly during this time as the grass in these sites can be cut by tractors; however, there were still times during June where tractors were getting stuck because the ground had not dried out sufficiently in certain locations within parks such as Roe Green and One Tree Hill.
- 3.17 The new contract has set high expectations for the improved maintenance of all of our parks. Given the issues experienced during 2024, there was a higher volume of queries about maintenance than in the last year of the old Grounds Maintenance contract. One set of queries related to Gladstone Park. Queries were raised about the maintenance regime of the acid grassland area, the cutting of the playground grass, maintenance of the pond, weeds in pathways and the amount of litter across the park. A site visit was held with ward Councillors, Parks Service staff and the Contract Operations Manager. Clarifications were provided on the contract specification and timescales were provided for the remedy of the issues raised.
- 3.18 The general maintenance across all sports pitches has improved in quality with reinstatement works being carried out on football pitches at the end of the season and Continental worked hard to improve drainage for the Rugby Club. Cricket pitches received high quality maintenance before the start of the season and positive feedback has been received from sports clubs. One issue which has impacted some of our football and Gaelic Football pitches is that of sunken drainage lines. The image below shows the repairs carried out to the Gaelic Pitch at East Lane this year. The sunken drainage lines can impact pitch quality but is a known issue with clay soil. Although not included as a regular maintenance item in the contract, the Parks Service had identified the need to carry out works at some locations where underground drainage has led to compacted clay soil which had sunk. The only remedy for these is regular topping up of the sunken areas with soil. This issue was raised with the service by one of our Gaelic sports teams, concerned at the pitch quality given a recent renovation. The Parks Service updated the sports club with the work expected to bring the pitch back up to specification before the start of the season.



- 3.19 One issue that came to light in Housing grounds was the change in approach agreed with the contractor in principle for estates at commencement of the contract. Some estates have large verges surrounding them. There is no obvious boundary between these and the rest of the grounds and these look like part of each estate. The contractor agreed to maintain these verges in line with other highways verges, which is on a different cutting schedule to amenity grass.

However, the practical implication of this, for example seen in St Raphael's Estate, was that the verges were being mowed on a different frequency to the rest of the grass and residents were unhappy as it looked as though only part of the estate was being maintained. Upon investigation and discussion with the contractor, Continental proposed the realignment of the schedules for housing verges with the remainder of the estate amenity grass, resolving the issue of perception of non-completion of works.

- 3.20 Weed removal from Housing sites has been a challenge whilst staff were trained and awaited certification to allow them to carry out chemical weed spraying. However, there is a regular review of sites and Continental are working closely with Housing colleagues to remedy this situation.

- 3.21 Other operational issues in the first year include the removal of a large volume of fly tips and litter. The previous contract did not include detailed monitoring of tonnage. This contract provides monthly tonnage figures as well as the annual accumulated volume of flytips. Continental are collecting an average of 50 tonnes of litter and flytipped waste, per month, from our parks and open spaces.

To date, 360 flytips (around 500 cubic metres) have been removed from our parks. The teams are working closely with enforcement colleagues and much of the waste being left next to bins and flytipped in parks is household waste. Despite the large amount of waste that is being left in our parks, Continental have dedicated litter teams and there has been increased frequency of collection from some parks in the last year. Since the introduction of a dedicated park keeper at Roundwood, complaints about litter have reduced. This was a historic post that was re-introduced by the contractor to manage a particular

issue and there is not scope for dedicated park keepers in any other park location. There are proposals for the coming year to review the frequency of bin collections across all locations to understand whether the current system can be improved.

Changes and Improvements for the coming year

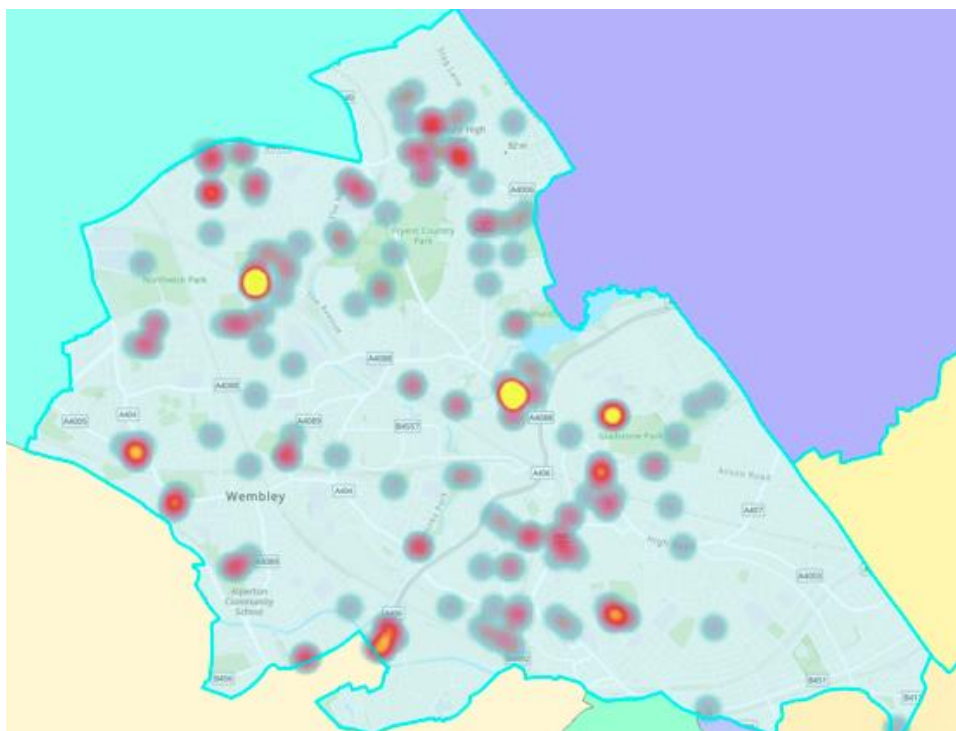
- 3.22 There is recognition of the need to publish a schedule for verge cutting and this will be provided for residents in early 2025. There will be changes to the way that Housing land is managed, by adopting a more comprehensive approach to works at each site in any given visit and ensuring that work is completed before moving on to the next location. Continental is working on the development of a new IT system, which will allow Housing tenants to be able to search directly for the dates of the last visit of the grounds team and the date of the next visit. There are also improvements being made with the delivery of the daily work schedule to the handheld devices of the grounds maintenance team allow them to provide updates once work schedules have been completed with greater ease. There will also be a new dedicated manager working with the Contract Operations Manager from the beginning of September. This is an additional post created by Continental to support the contract and be able to address issues and provide solutions even faster for the remainder of the contract.

Monitoring and performance management

- 3.23 There are a number of systems and processes in place to monitor the contract including monthly operational and contract management meetings, led by the Parks Service and Contract Management Teams respectively. Continental provide a monthly status report; a copy of this is in Appendix 2. There are also weekly operational meetings to work with Continental to address the works to verges and housing land, most of which are now back on track regarding scheduled maintenance work. There are a few sites where there are continued issues and Continental are working closely with Housing colleagues to resolve these issues quickly. Continental provide regular updates to Councillor Krupa Sheth at Lead Members Briefing meetings and a sample copy of this report can be seen in Appendix 1.
- 3.24 The contract has 31 Key Performance Indicators and relative penalties that set the baseline for the monitoring of the contract, see Appendix 3. There have been difficulties in monitoring some of these effectively during the first year relating to the ATAK system and the way in which Brent seeks to monitor the data. Much of the monitoring data is currently obtained through Fix My Street reports and the way in which the description of the information entered into these reports then feeds into the ATAK system, does not currently allow for interrogation of the information in the manner which we would like.
- 3.25 However, the system is currently undergoing a complete overhaul to allow for flexibility in interrogating the data to meet our requirements. In the short term, Continental are working to provide a dashboard that holds the key performance information that we need to assess contract performance. Continental's IT team are working with us to provide more detailed information, such as the flytipping

hotspot map below in Figure 2, which we can then use in the coming year to target available resources to try to reduce flytipping in particular locations.

Figure 2. Sample Heat Map of reported Parks fly tips in the last year



3.26 The data below in Figures 3 and 4 provides an overview of the year's performance to date; including compliance with the contract's performance figures and response figures to Fix My Street reports. The KPI's not included in this table are annual targets which do not require monthly monitoring.

Figure 3. A summary table of monitored KPI's

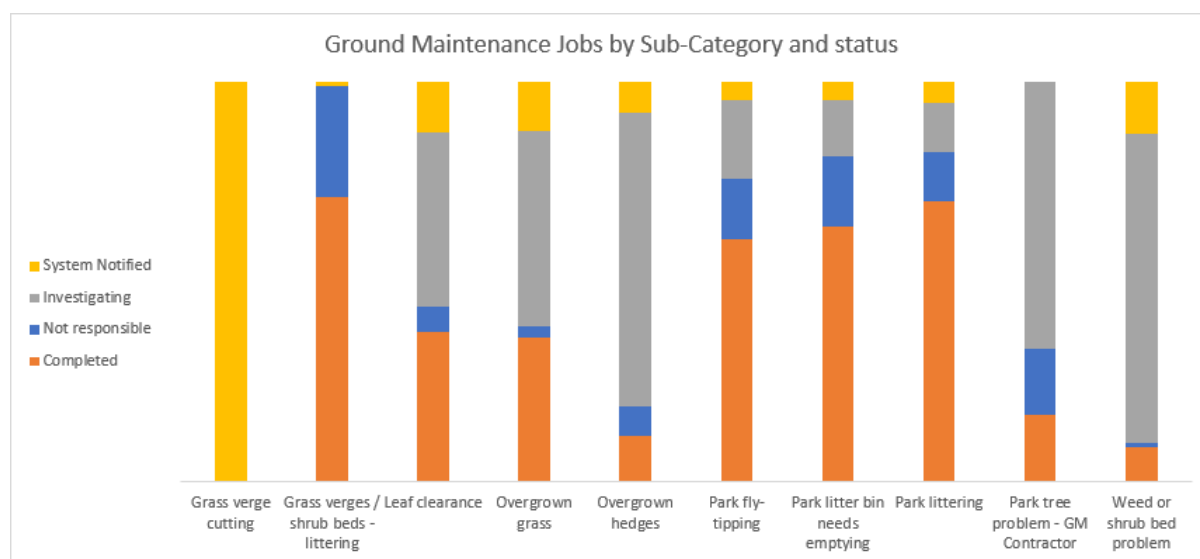
KPI title	FY 2023/24				FY 2024/25
	Q2*	Q3	Q4	Quarterly Average	Q1
No. of Complaints completed on time	83%	100%	80%	86.67%	Managed directly by the council
Freedom of Information completed on time	100%	100%	100%	100%	Managed directly by the council
No. of RIDDOR reportable incidents	1	5	1	2.33	0
(Weeds) Notify on the discovery of invasive weeds	18	15	0	11	60

Cleaning Hard standing areas (Asphalt path)	21	30	12	21	8
Tennis Court Maintenance	1	3	1	1.67	4
20% of Parks Edges restored per Year	N/A	N/A	N/A	Separate plan provided by Continental	Completed
20% of highway Verges edges restored per Year	N/A	N/A	N/A	Separate plan provided by Continental	Completed
Height of Grass (* No of reports)	28	14	4	15.33	304
Maintain Hedges	2	6	4	4	27
Removal of Branches	0	0	1	0.33	14
Repairs of Sport Pitches	5	1	1	2.33	0
Overflowing Litter Bin dealt with in sufficient time	89.71%	83.33%	66.67%	79.90%	100%

3.27 The data below highlights the type of task reported through Fix My Street and the percentage of those tasks that are updated on the system as being completed. The data below shows that 57% of all jobs are being completed. This does not necessarily mean that the tasks are not being actioned, as the category of notified means that the request has been passed to the contractor to resolve. If the work is not closed down on the system, then it will still show as being investigated. We are working with Continental to ensure that all requests received are being closed on the system as well as being actioned. Feedback received from the public in relation to any tasks that are marked as completed but have not been actioned are fully investigated. This allows better understanding of the reasoning and whether this is an operative error or a task that needs to be allocated to a different contractor to action, an option which is not currently available within the Fix My Street system.

3.28 To provide some context to the number of requests that are being sent to the Contractor, there is an average of around 100 Fix My Street reports a month, with the highest number; 472 reports, being received in June and 258 received as of the 21st August. The range of categories of reports being made can be seen below.

Figure 4. A summary of responses to Fix my Street reports



<u>Sub Category</u>	<u>Not responsible</u>	<u>Completed</u>	<u>Investigating</u>	<u>System Notified</u>	<u>Total Count</u>	<u>%</u>
Grass verge cutting				31	31	1.09%
Grass verges / shrub beds - littering	183	472		6	661	23.32%
Leaf clearance	1	6	7	2	16	0.56%
Overgrown grass	16	196	264	67	543	19.16%
Overgrown hedges	6	9	59	6	80	2.82%
Park fly-tipping	82	327	108	23	540	19.05%
Park litter bin needs emptying	50	181	39	13	283	9.99%
Park littering	72	407	72	29	580	20.47%
Park tree problem - GM Contractor	1	1	4		6	0.21%
Weed or shrub bed problem	1	8	73	12	94	3.32%
Total	412	1607	626	189	2834	100.00%
Column %	15%	57%	22%	7%		

Summary of first year

3.29 The challenges of the first year have been recognised and acknowledged by the Council and the contractor. These were mainly related to the adverse weather, challenges with electric equipment and the usual (and expected) challenges in implementing a new contract and a new contractor. Nevertheless, Continental have been quick to work with us and resolve issues and to identify positive solutions. The work that is being undertaken by the teams is of high quality and a good standard and is meeting the requirements of the contract. There is a very strong partnership ethos between the Council and Continental and when issues have been experienced, both have worked together to develop a practical, deliverable solution. The Parks Service and Housing Service have developed a much closer working relationship throughout this first year and the shared experiences with all parties this year have made that

relationship stronger and better able to deliver a comprehensive, quality service for the next seven years.

4.0 Member and Stakeholder Consultation

4.1 There has been none carried out for this report.

5.0 Financial Considerations

5.1 There are a number of Contract variations for new or missing locations that are being reviewed to determine any increase in the overall contract cost. The Pricing Schedule will be updated to reflect any changes.

5.2 There is no financial growth applied to year two of the contract. This may impact how the contract is managed and require changes to service delivery. At the moment, no changes are anticipated.

6.0 Legal Considerations

6.1 There are a number of Contract variations for new or missing locations being reviewed by Legal to allow for their permanent inclusion into the maintenance contract.

7.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

7.1 There are no equity, diversity or inclusion considerations with this review.

8.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

8.1 The grounds maintenance contract was tendered on the basis that the new contractor would be able to meet the Council's environmental objectives and ideally deliver as much electrification as possible in respect of fleet and machinery. The Continental contract offers a fully electric fleet, including all vehicles used to collect litter and carry out works across all parks and Housing land and all machinery including mowers and handheld tools, significantly reducing the carbon footprint of the contract. The only exclusions are tractors, as there are not yet electric versions available, and leaf blowers, which were trialled but found to overheat. One of the KPI's requires Continental to provide an annual report on emissions and we are expecting this report shortly, but there have been no issues with the electric fleet during this year. The use of ASPEN fuel in mowers to allow for catch up work on the verges and housing land will have a minor impact on the carbon emissions this year but will set a clear baseline position to monitor the remaining years of the contract against.

8.2 With biodiversity commitments, Continental have fully understood our requirement to minimise the use of pesticides across the contract. There are key performance targets in place for meeting the biodiversity requirements of the contract specification, which for clarity, are provided below.

BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Contractor is required to look at ways of reducing chemical usage, creating a circular economy by reusing materials, such as leaf mulch and creating their own compost, through the re-use of green waste, as well as water conservation opportunities.

New meadow areas may be considered by the Authority in any location and such proposals can be suggested by the Contractor for discussion, through the monthly Contract Management Group meetings.

New planting should be considered in the context of climate change, extreme weather conditions, drought and heavy flooding. Perennials are preferable in any new planting scheme and a wide variety of planting should be considered to ensure a range of seasonal interest.

Where possible, single bloom flowering plants and trees should be selected to encourage pollinators and ensure easy access to a food source for insects.

Mulching should be utilised wherever possible on shrub beds and around tree bases to prevent the use of chemicals and reduce the need for weeding.

The Authority may seek to introduce rain gardens in areas of known flooding in parks, open spaces or housing management land. Any such suggestions will be discussed in full with the Contractor.

- 8.3 In practice, Continental have worked with us to introduce new climate adaptable planting schemes in Heather Park and work with Highways colleagues to sustainably replant areas on the North Circular Road and in the South of the borough on Chamberlayne Road and we have many schemes programmed where they will be delivering new sustainable planting schemes.

9.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

- 9.1 There are no Human Resources or Property considerations with this review.

10.0 Communication Considerations

- 10.1 There are no communications considerations at this time.

Report sign off:

Alice Lester

Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and
Regeneration