



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	High Hedges update
Date:	13 February 2014
Reporting Officer:	Rose Crozier, Assistant Director of Parks and Leisure
Contact Officers:	Caroline Wilson, Neighbourhood and Development Manager Paul Barr, Landscape and Planning Manager

1.	Relevant Background Information
	<p>In March 2012, Committee was presented with a report on the implementation of the High Hedges Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 setting out the four key stages of the process.</p> <p>Committee agreed to grant delegated authority to the Director of Parks and Leisure to exercise all powers relating to the High Hedges Act (NI) 2011. It was also agreed that the High Hedges process would be reviewed after an appropriate period of implementation.</p>

2.	Key Issues
	<p>From April 2012 to date, the service has dealt with 149 complaints in relation to high hedges the majority of these by telephone. The vast majority of complaints have been dealt with informally. The three complaints that proceeded through the formal route were completed without any appeal with the service receiving the £1,050 required fee.</p> <p>The officers however have dealt with over 1600 calls requesting advice and guidance on the legislation. The experience to date is that the service is working hard with residents to resolve issues regarding High Hedges through the more informal route which is proving to be successful.</p> <p>In the report to Committee in March 2012, the view was that the High Hedge fee of £350 would cover the costs associated with administering this new legislation and the programme would be cost-neutral. Currently there are two fixed term officers providing advice and support in this area at a cost of £54k.</p>

The assessment is that realising this level of income over time is now unlikely, given the track record of informal dispute resolution. The role of the High Hedges Project Officer and Project Assistant has been more an advice and mediation role.

The costs for both officers have been offset against income from other projects, generated within the Landscape Planning & Development Unit. This includes the DRD Street Trees programme and DSD Environmental Improvement schemes.

More broadly, there is increased pressure on the Landscape Planning and Development Unit to deliver more information in relation to public liability claims in all areas and to significantly improve its processes, particularly inspections and records retrieval. In recent months, the High Hedges team has been assisting in this regard.

In order to release specialist technical staff to undertake more inspections and management of repairs, it is proposed that for a temporary period of 6 months, the High Hedges Project Officer undertake the following tasks:

- Dealing with telephone enquiries relating to high hedges, tree pruning requests and complaints
- Development and provision of High Hedges information as an online resource to enable the public to more easily access the information
- Drawing up (tree) planting plans for small scale environmental schemes
- Attending site meetings with DRD Roads Service Engineers, Parks Managers, Councillors and members of the public and giving tree advice
- Updating park and street tree details on the City Tree Management System software using information received from Contractors.

In addition, the Project Assistant will:

- Log all complaints/requests for work and allocate these to relevant officers within Landscape Planning and Development Unit, as part of the roll-out of digitised reporting by the Mobile Playground Inspectors
- Assist as a central resource with the recording and processing of invoices associated with the arboricultural and horticultural tenders, playground tenders, street furniture, fencing quotations, tracking spend and providing budget information on request
- Assist with the supervision and implementation of contracts across a number of work-streams
- Assist with information gathering associated with inquiries from Legal Services regarding horticultural and playground claims.

At the end of 6 months, it is planned that the advisory functions of the High Hedges team will be largely fulfilled by the information provided online. At that point, there would also be a review of the business support

	<p>functions within the unit, to determine longer term needs in the context of Local Government Reform and other improvement initiatives, including the recently agreed Claims Investigator post.</p> <p>The interim arrangement would remain cost-neutral offset against income from contracts with DSD and DRD.</p>
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3.	Resource Implications
	<p><u>Financial</u> The extension of the two fixed term posts will cost £30k for a period of 6 months. This will be funded through income from contracts with DSD (Open Site maintenance and Environmental Improvement schemes) and DRD Roads Service (Street Trees).</p> <p><u>Human Resources</u> Normal human resources policies and procedures will be applied in implementing all changes.</p> <p><u>Assets</u> Improved management of complaints, repairs and claims.</p>

4.	Equality Implications
	There are no equality implications.

5.	Recommendations
	Committee is asked to approve the extension of the High Hedges team for a time-limited period of 6 months up until end September 2014 for the tasks outlined above.

6.	Decision Tracking
	Responsible Officer: Landscape Planning and Development Manager. Actions to be completed by October 2014

7.	Key to Abbreviations
	DSD – Department for Social Development DRD – Department of Regional Development

8.	Documents Attached
	None