

## **Item 16a: Grounds Maintenance Vehicle hire or purchase**

### **CNTC Grounds Maintenance Vehicle Proposals**

On 1st April 2025 CNTC is moving from undertaking its grounds maintenance operations via a third party contractor to an in-house team. This has been agreed primarily due to dissatisfaction with the arrangements that have been in place for the past 5 years but also a recognition that having a directly employed team, with associated infra-structure, will bring benefits such as flexibility, response improvements, more control and adaptability and so on to the wider council needs. The bringing in-house of teams such as this is becoming more and more common across the sector as councils seek out more local control and flexibility in the services and activities that they provide, driven in part additionally by the increasingly influential devolution agenda nationally.

Much of the initial setting up work is at an advanced stage - a new depot has been acquired, two new Maintenance Operatives have been appointed and much of the behind the scenes requirements are in-hand to acquire or bring to fruition (hand tools, depot arrangements, sign writing, ppe etc).

The three key areas are the vehicles being supplied, the key machinery being supplied and having the three staff members all focused on providing a good job and, most importantly, working as a team together in order to maximise output.

The council has numerous options available to it as regards vehicles. It is my view that with a small team such as at CNTC, two vehicles are required so that staff can work in different areas at any given time. With a few exceptions, it is unlikely that all three Maintenance Operatives will need to be in the same location at the same time for work purposes. The aim with choosing suitable vehicles is to provide flexibility in what they offer and provide, hence the suggestions:

- A Ford Transit Custom type panel van - single cab for up to three operatives, secure, weathertight and boarded out rear load area. Tools, smaller machines, equipment etc can be carried around and the van locked securely should staff be away or out of sight of it whilst working. It also means that it doesn't need to be loaded and unloaded every day. This vehicle also allows council equipment to be moved around between premises for storage, event setting up etc. A vehicle that will prove totally flexible day-to-day for the vast majority of the council's needs.
- Such a vehicle can be supplied fully electric should the council so wish though there is around a 30% price difference (£32,280 v £43,380, ex vat, - official Ford website). Mileages per day will be low and so range is not an issue, and re-charging can be undertaken overnight as required at the depot. It is unlikely that

weight will be an issue either and so if the council wishes to meet the additional cost implications then this is an option.

- Alternatively, Eco Blue (circa £38,000 ex vat) is the most modern, and as the name suggests, eco friendly new range of diesel engines which meet all the latest EU emissions requirements - these are supplied in almost all new vans from the differing manufacturers now.
- The second proposed vehicle is a Ford Transit style flatbed with drop sides. This can be supplied with a tipping function (at a cost supplement) and also a tall cage arrangement. Coming with a single cab for up to three operatives, the vehicle offers an open back loading area for collecting rubbish, prunings, materials etc as well as the ability to transport around anything tall or ungainly that will not fit the panel van. It offers up a very wide degree of flexibility in use, not just in relation to grounds maintenance but again, in the context of the wider council needs. It is suggested this vehicle is supplied with a towbar fitted ready for a trailer to transport the ride behind mower being sourced. Obviously, being open at the rear, this vehicle cannot be left unattended with equipment and tools etc on view. For small tools, it would be possible to fit a secure tool store behind the cab but this would only be for hand tools and will utilise space on the flatbed, thereby reducing its capacity to a degree.
- Due to the weight of the potential towing requirements and indeed what may be moved around on the flatbed, the electric option is more of a risk, not because of range, but power required. Choice is also far more limited, and again, there is a significant price differential, made more acute by the fact that these vehicles are more expensive to acquire in the first place.
- I have also looked at HVO (hydrogenated vegetable oil) as an alternative fuel to diesel. Whilst feasible as a drop-in fuel, there are no fill up stations in or near Chipping Norton and so some form of fuel storage facility would be required, probably at the new depot. At this time this option is not recommended due to the safety requirements and obligations that such an option would require. It could, however, be considered at a later stage should the council so wish.

Please note, the prices highlighted above are for example only, it is highly likely that discounts on these RRP levels will be available, though the differentials will likely remain similar. It is also likely that other manufacturers will be less costly.

I would suggest that initially, CNTC source an electric panel van and an Eco-blue engined flatbed van. This combination appears to offer the best compromise at this time and ensures that CNTC is able to meet all requirements when it comes to vehicles.

In coming to this view, I have spoken to seven other Town Councils who have in-house grounds maintenance teams. All are larger set-ups than CNTC, and are well established, but give a good insight at this time with their experiences of differing vehicles. All are moving, where feasible, toward electric provision as existing vehicles need replacing. All purchase rather than lease and then depreciate the costs, and in many cases, set up a sinking fund toward replacements in the future. Where run around vans and panel vans are concerned, all either have or are moving to have electric vehicles. Where heavier duty vehicles are required then none have moved to electric at this time. This is echoed by van suppliers I have spoken to who say that it is now common for panel vans to be supplied fully electric but anything requiring more substantial needs, such as towing machinery etc, are still very rare in electric form.

Councillors must be aware and recognise the fact that the new team, and indeed a different way of working for the council itself, will take time to bed in fully and that things and issues will certainly arise which will need to be addressed or acquired as and when during the first six months or so but the fundamental arrangements being put in place mean that the council, and of course the residents, should see an improvement almost from day 1 in the most key areas.

I understand that a sum of £18,490 has been earmarked for spending towards the grounds maintenance project for this financial year. I would recommend that an additional £10,000 is set aside for the vehicles to ensure flexibility, and that this could be returned to the general reserves if unspent.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That Councillors decide on the following, to ensure that vehicles can be sourced without delay;

- Whether they wish to purchase or lease the vehicles;
- Whether they wish to choose electric or diesel vehicles (the exact make and model of vehicles may be delegated to officers and a group of Councillors to decide);
- That the method of purchase or lease is decided, whether through reserves or via borrowing. If borrowing is required then this must be actioned without delay.
- Whether they wish to set aside an additional £10,000 for the vehicle purchase or hire to ensure flexibility. If these funds are unused they will be returned to the general reserves.