

## CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN IN TERMS OF QUALITY & STANDARDS



Over recent months, the Forum has conducted a consultation amongst its membership. This was initiated following expressions of concern about potential reductions in standards in the offer of tenders for amenity work. The launch of the consultation was in mid July and was accompanied by the issue of a press release, a copy of which was circulated to members at the time.

To quote from the press release:

*“The economic pressures facing authorities and other organisations may be resulting in re-writing of tenders increasing the emphasis on cost and consequently reducing the attention on standards and potentially health and safety. Whilst recognising the need to undertake amenity work efficiently and economically, it is important that those responsible for awarding contracts maintain current standards in terms of effectiveness of the operations and ensuring fully trained and qualified staff are used to undertake the tasks.*”

*Professor John Moverley OBE, Chairman of the Forum, said, “The amenity sector is a very important one and covers a wide area including maintenance of our parks and pavements, our sports areas, our transport networks and much more. Members of the Forum have worked hard to drive up standards and through its good practice guides, sought to ensure essential operations required are undertaken both safely and effectively. We recognise that we need to continue this and reach an even wider audience of users. It is in this context that we express concern, having been made aware of some recent tenders which may be working against this aim”*

*Earlier in the year, the Forum wrote to the Secretary of State at DEFRA expressing concern about the implementation of the Sustainable Use Directive urging that it did not diminish standards and the level of training requirements in the amenity sector. The Forum has been advocates for improving access and availability of training.*

*Professor Moverley said “The maintenance of our amenity areas to required standards involves a skilled approach making proper use of essential pesticides and other controls. We urge all those involved in this, and especially those issuing tenders, to seek out properly skilled and trained operators”*

The consultation is now complete and a summary of the main outcomes is provided below



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### SUMMARY OF KEY OUTCOMES ARISING FROM THE CONSULTATION ON QUALITY & STANDARDS

There is a consensus among Amenity Forum members who responded to our consultation that contracts are being awarded more on price and less on quality of service.

One respondent says "there is no doubt that many contractors are looking to economise on the unit cost of product used and will revert to lower safety specification products." Much of the evidence produced is anecdotal and might be refuted by councils but there are instances of current suppliers losing contracts which they have themselves priced to make minimal profit and even references to a "race to the bottom in terms of price".

One respondent says he has seen a greater percentage of evaluation of bids going to price. This is being done by requiring less information about quality aspects, often by restricting the number of pages used for bids which limits contractors' ability to demonstrate their skills, experience and innovation. There are also indications that some clients lack the ability and knowledge to evaluate accurately and, as a consequence, award contracts to contractors who do not have the resources to deliver a sustainable service.

Another approach being taken is to reduce the amount of work contracted for. For instance, for highway hard surface herbicide spraying, the Forum has seen evidence of Councils reducing the number of times areas are being sprayed and one has stopped spraying altogether. The amenity value of areas will be significantly reduced if inadequate programmes are used and the resulting weed growth may produce trip hazards in areas used by the public.

All this means that "cheap operators are winning work regardless of quality and, more worryingly, safety and compliance - at the expense of quality contractors," says another respondent, "the unfortunate upshot of this will be that those companies that do adhere strictly to good health and safety and working practices will be penalised unfairly and lose market share."

Industry bodies are also criticised: "they do not force compliance on highway authorities to enforce the rules within their memberships. We need to "root out cowboy contractors," says one respondent.

The Amenity Forum has been encouraged to work "with its members and the representative bodies in the amenity industry to try to encourage a balance between quality and price, not the reduction of quality against price" and an agreed approach between customers and contractors in terms of maintain good practice.

The Amenity Forum wants to work to ensure that contracts are based on Amenity Assurance standards and use wherever possible only Amenity Assured contractors.



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The Chairman has written to the Rt Hon Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government. The response says that “the Government is committed to encouraging a more open and level playing field for small and medium sized businesses to bid for contracts” but as “individual local authorities take their own procurement decisions we cannot comment on specific decisions by authorities. However, they must adhere to the requirements of Best Value legislation and to the EU and UK regulatory framework and also ensure contracts meet health and safety requirements.”

Professor Moverley, Chairman of the Amenity Forum, said “ The maintenance of our parks, pavements, sports areas, transport networks and indeed all our amenity areas is very important. This requires an integrated approach including the essential use of chemical weed control. This allows everyone to enjoy such facilities safely and to a standard expected. Our members seek to provide such services at a very high standard and follow guidance and good practice established through full consultation throughout the sector and with Government. We recognise that these extremely difficult times economically but wish to ensure that this does not result in those commissioning work seeking to reduce standards and quality”

”The maintenance of our amenity areas to required standards involves a skilled approach making proper use of essential pesticides and other controls. We urge all those involved in this, and especially those issuing tenders, to seek out properly skilled and trained operators”

Alan Spedding, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2011

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