

	Meeting (No)	Full Council (4)	
	Date	21st January 2025	
	Document		
		Ranger Service – The Next Steps	FC5/64

As part of the Community & Environment Committee's Delivery Plan Objectives, the committee, and its officers, focussed time and resources on researching and developing an extensive job description and person specification for a full-time ranger post. On 21st October 2024, Full Council requested a revision of the job description to offer either a 15 or a 20-hour post to make financing the role less expensive. Council did not make a decision in October 2024, whether it wished to establish this post in 2025/26. At its meeting in November 2024, C&E Committee approved a job description for either a 15 or 20-hour post, along with a suggested pay scale range which was appropriate for the scaled down role. The C&E Committee could not request an amount for its 2025/26 budget because the role has not yet been approved by Full Council, and the specific working aspects of the role have not yet been fully defined by Council. However, with a reduction in hours, and diminished overall responsibility, the starting salary would be lower than first predicted, proposed SCP range: 5-8.

We have arrived at a situation where the job description and person specification have been defined, yet the task requirements and cost implications of this new role are still relatively unknown. Previously, members have been keen to link the ranger post up with the Council's greening contract, including basket watering, which currently runs until 2027.

If the lowest end of the salary scale was selected for a 15-hour per week role, including pension and NI oncosts, then the salary alone is £13,600. This is not taking into account the 2025 Pay Award which is yet to be defined, but could be in the region of 5% on top of the current salary scale if a lump sum amount is agreed. If Council selected the 20 hours per week option, then the salary costs would be £18,400 for an SCP5. The appointed person would also need an office in the Town Hall in which to be based and a PC with email capabilities and internet access. Following discussions in-house with the Mayor, Chief Officer, RFO and the C&E Manager regarding travel costs (assuming at this stage a ranger would use their own vehicle), purchase of equipment, computer, uniform, basic tools, PPE, and training costs, it has been estimated this would be in the region of £7,000. The increased insurance costs have not yet been specified, but would push the Council's annual subscription up considerably for a high-risk public-facing role such as this.

The Town Council will need to be mindful that the introduction of an in-house ranger service would likely see costs from other areas needing to be reduced which would be difficult since committee budgets across the board have been

stretched to capacity and some unexpected repairs and maintenance work has already arisen across allotment sites.

One option presented to the C&E committee, was to consider making the post temporary for 12 months in order to ascertain the need and demand of the service. However, it could be seen as remiss of the Town Council to set up a brand-new role, purchasing equipment, recruiting, and investing in training, if the post was to be a temporary one. The role would need to be advertised as fixed term for one year with a view to continue upon a job review. If the role was not to continue after one year, then the set up costs would be a waste of tax-payers' funds. Without trialling the role first, the Council could continue in a cycle of not being able to ascertain a reasonable spread of tasks required throughout the year, and costs needed to deliver the service.

Due to the Council's 2025/26 precept base figure being slightly higher than expected, along with the proposed precept currently sitting at 3.9%, Council does have an amount of money which could be allocated for special projects in the new financial year. Other financial burdens the Town Council needs to consider for this contingency fund in 2025/26 will be allotment site repairs, repairs to Christmas lights and storm damaged Christmas tree facilities, as well as a new Town Hall server and work on a Town Hall Business Plan. Additional town maintenance could also be one of these projects. By acting as a pre-cursor to establishing an in-house paid ranger service, Neston Town Council could work closely with a variety of local, specialised, contractors to provide specific ranger-style projects for the town over the coming 12 months. The Town Council would be able to provide branded high-visibility waistcoats to show that the work was being undertaken in paid partnership with NTC. By selecting this route, the Town Council could engage the skillsets required for the specific task in hand, whilst keeping a record of what is achieved in the timeframe, along with costs, to ascertain specific areas of requirement and need for a future in-house ranger service.

Subsequently, by the end of the 2025/26 financial year, the Town Council would have a set list of accomplishments through smaller, more manageable projects, which had been achieved and delivered over the year. The cost breakdowns would also be easier to produce, with the Council receiving specific invoices for each project and no associated on-costs. Data would be recorded for how long each task takes to complete and the total outlay. Neston Town Council would then have a clearer insight into what can be achieved in the timeframe and the costs, evidencing the need. If a higher percentage of the costs were amassed in the summer, this would also provide very useful data when establishing a more permanent service. Once the budget had been exhausted the service would be paused.

However, if operating in this way, the cost per individual project would be higher. Crucially, the financial burden to the Town Council in risk: set up fees, insurances,

equipment, travel, PPE, etc. would be zero. Equally, if anything remained unspent from this allocation at the end of the financial year, the budget could be earmarked, whereas this is not possible with salaries. Due to the increasing pressure the Town Council is under from the electorate to deliver additional projects without an increase in the staffing/wages budget. This could be an excellent compromise for the new financial year, allowing the Town Council to gain a firmer footing whilst establishing the local appetite for a more permanent role at the same time. Ranger Services could be advertised on social media and appropriate NTC branding utilised to raise the profile of the Council's work and provide some good news stories as progress is made on public spaces in Neston.

In order to expediate the process, I would recommend providing the C&E Committee with delegated authority to approve which specific ranger service works are undertaken. These would be guided by the overall objectives set by Full Council, through management of the service, preventing loss of effectiveness through lengthy approval chains. C&E Committee would need to be given the authority to use a series of approved contractors for projects below a maximum amount set by Council, for example for spend under £1,000, in direct liaison with the C&E Committee Chair. This would enable the ranger service to be nimble and responsive for less expensive tasks and urgent arising issues.

The Town Council could look to extend the maintenance service or recruit in 26/27, based on actual knowledge and research gathered in 25/26, having established a partial service and measuring the public's appetite for it. In the short term, outsourcing to contractors for specific tasks and smaller-scale projects is likely to achieve faster results and build up a more positive public perception with no set up fees or long-term financial burden to the Town Council. After 12 months, it will be simple to identify whether operating the service in this manner has been successful and establishing need for a future in-house ranger service.

For decision by Full Council:

- a) To approve the draft job description and person specification for the Ranger, as recommended by the Community & Environment Committee.

- b) To decide on a way forward for 2025/26:

It is recommended that the Town Council provides overall guidance, setting a maximum budget for the Ranger Service and deciding objectives to enable focus, in order to establish an outsourced ranger/maintenance service in the town for the new financial year.

- c) To delegate authority to the C&E Committee for management of the service. To agree the use of approved contractors, in liaison with the Chair of the Committee, for tasks under £1,000 for efficiency.

The alternative would be to pause the project for one year and focus on other urgent matters in the town which need attention and upgrading, for example, Christmas lighting and allotment site repair work.

Zoë Dean
Locum Chief Officer
January 2025