

Date: 26 July 2013
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To: Members of the Grounds Maintenance Task and Finish Forum:
(Susie Bond, Christine Drew, Douglas Hull, Jim Knight, Pat Rous,
Sue Saunders, Pauline Stott, Peter Sullivan)

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Andrew Hancock – Street Scene Manager
Andrew Harris – Street Scene Area Manager West
Tim Harris – Street Scene Area Manager East
Joyce Murphy – Estate Management Officer
Mark Pollard – Parks Development Officer
Graham Symington - Housing Asset & Business Development Officer
Mandy White - Accountant

For information:

Councillor Jill Elson – Portfolio Holder, Sustainable Homes and Communities

Councillor Stephanie Jones – Deputy Portfolio Holder, Sustainable Homes and Communities

Meeting of the Grounds Maintenance Task and Finish Forum

Friday 2 August 2013 at 10am

Committee Room, Knowle, Sidmouth

Councillors and members of the public are reminded to switch mobile phones to silent during the meeting.

AGENDA

Page/s

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|----|--|--------------|
| 1. | To receive any apologies for absence. | |
| 2. | To receive the notes of the meeting held on 26 April 2013. | 4 - 7 |
| 3. | To receive any declarations of interest relating to items on the agenda. | |
| 4. | Grounds maintenance benchmarking – how do we compare with other social landlords? - Landlord Services Manager. | 8 - 12 |
| 5. | Financial and contractor benchmarking comparisons - Housing Accountant & Street Scene Manager. | presentation |

6. Do the current arrangements provide value for money, and if not, what are the alternative options? Discussion
7. Work programme and date of next meeting.

Decision making and equality duties

- The Council will give due regard under the Equality Act 2010 to the equality impact of its decisions.
- An appropriate level of analysis of equality issues, assessment of equalities impact and any mitigation and/or monitoring of impact will be addressed in committee reports.
- Consultation on major policy changes will take place in line with any legal requirements and with what is appropriate and fair for the decisions being taken.
- Where there is a high or medium equalities impact Members will be expected to give reasons for decisions which demonstrate they have addressed equality issues.

Members and co-opted members remember!

- You must declare the nature of any disclosable pecuniary interests. [Under the Localism Act 2011, this means the interests of your spouse, or civil partner, a person with whom you are living with as husband and wife or a person with whom you are living as if you are civil partners]. You must also disclose any personal interest.
- You must disclose your interest in an item whenever it becomes apparent that you have an interest in the business being considered.
Make sure you say what your interest is as this has to be included in the minutes. [For example, 'I have a disclosable pecuniary interest because this planning application is made by my husband's employer'.]
- If your interest is a disclosable pecuniary interest you cannot participate in the discussion, cannot vote and must leave the room unless you have obtained a dispensation from the Council's Monitoring Officer or Standards Committee.

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- From Exeter – 52A, 52B**
- From Honiton – 52B**
- From Seaton – 52A**
- From Ottery St Mary – 379, 387**

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EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Notes of a meeting of the Grounds Maintenance Task and Finish Forum held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 26 April 2013

Present:

Councillors:

Christine Drew
Pauline Stott

Tenants:

Pat Rous
Sue Saunders

Officers:

Sue Bewes – Landlord Services Manager
John Golding – Head of Housing
Andrew Harris – Street Scene Area Manager, West
Tim Harris – Street Scene Area Manager, East
Joyce Murphy – Estate Management Officer
Mark Pollard – Parks Development Officer
Graham Symington – Housing Asset & Business Development Officer
Alethea Thompson – Democratic Services Officer
Mandy White - Accountant

Apologies:

Councillors:

Douglas Hull
Jim Knight
Stephanie Jones

Tenant:

Pat Rous

Officers:

Andrew Hancock – Street Scene Manager
Nick Wright - Economy Practice Manager

The meeting started at 10.00am and ended at 11.45am.

*9 Minutes

The notes of the meeting held on 15 March 2013 were confirmed as a true record. The Housing Accountant commented on minute 7 which stated that tenants currently paid twice for grass cutting, through their Council Tax and also through their rents. She reported that tenants paid for grass cutting on housing land through their rents, but grass cutting on all other areas of land would be paid for through Council Tax. It was noted that approximately £1.40 of rent per week related to grounds maintenance, for every tenant across the whole district.

*10 Declarations of interest

Board Member	Minute number	Type of interest	Nature of interest
Sue Saunders		Personal	She is a sheltered housing tenant.
Pat Rous		Personal	She is a Council housing tenant.

*11 Down to Earth system demonstration

The Forum received a presentation from the Parks Development Officer on Street Scene’s Down to Earth (DTE) system.

The system contained all the information that Street Scene had on all the Grounds Maintenance services carried out, and a section specifically for Housing. The DTE system contained a customer list, which included the EDDC grounds maintenance service level agreement (SLA). The district was split into East and West. The system also contained details of the individual garden maintenance schemes, which tended to change on a weekly basis.

During the demonstration the Parks Development Officer showed the TaFF how the grounds inventory contained everything that Street Scene did for EDDC. It was used as the basis for all the scheduled routine work. Areas were listed by towns and villages. Each housing site had its own listing and internal codes. These codes represented the frequency of grass cuts, the rate per square metre, the total area and the cost per year for the job per site. On average grass was cut 15 times a year, but this was weather dependent. It was noted that obstacles slowed down the mowing process and that these were factored into the cost and inventory. There was a separate section for requests for extra work. The inventory was kept up to date with changes, such as land being sold off, or a Council housing being built on some land.

An example of an inventory location summary was circulated at the meeting.

A 16.78% inflationary increase (based on RPI) had been added since the original pricings had been agreed. Prices had been tendered and market tested in the early 1990s and reset in 2007 when the service went on to DTE. The Parks Development Officer demonstrated the inflationary figures applied over the last few years and confirmed that there was an audit trail of the increases. It was noted that the tendered rates were the same for all EDDC customers/services. Outside customers paid a higher charge.

The Parks Development Officer went on to explain that Street Scene had eight gardening teams who worked according to a list and recording system. The teams each had established rounds, with a variety of priority categories. Additional works could be requested by Housing. There were no regular checks on the work carried out or frequency of grass cuts, the service instead used the level of complaints received to monitor its work. Managers dealt with the teams daily. The general assumption was that if complaints weren’t being received then the work being carried out must be satisfactory. The DTE system had a reporting facility and

monthly valuations were produced based on the schedule of works and any additional works added on to it (and charged to Housing).

*11 Down to Earth system demonstration (cont'd)

The Parks Development Manager reported that land would only be taken out of Street Scene's work programme if the service was officially notified of the change by Housing. As soon as a change was made the DTE system would recalculate it and the charge would be adjusted.

It was noted that properties on the individual garden maintenance scheme received ten visits and the work was monitored via a new smart phone app. A demonstration of this monitoring system was given to the TaFF.

DTE was an external system but it was hoped that it could be integrated with the new housing management software system.

The Parks Development Officer was thanked for his very interesting and informative presentation.

12 Garden licences

Consideration was given to a list of garden licences held by Housing. This consisted of around 140 licences which could be split into three categories:

- Those on Housing land in tenanted areas.
- Those on Housing land in non tenanted areas.
- Those on non Housing land.

There were also some examples, not on the list, where consent to use part of a communal area had been granted to individual tenants without the security of a licence agreement.

Invoices for the garden licences were automatically sent out by the Income and Payments section on the annual anniversary of the licence. Housing had no correspondence with the licensee at that time. There did not appear to have been any price increases made to the garden licences and the fees varied. The legal team had redrafted the garden licence document.

The Housing Landlord Services Manager highlighted the areas with garden licences that were not thought to be housing land. She cautioned the collection of rents by Housing on these areas not belonging to the service, which may then be held responsible for them when problems occurred. She suggested handing these areas back to the Estates team for their management.

The Forum agreed that it was an asset management issue and an opportunity to review what the Housing service had in terms of land and the purpose of the garden licences. The licences were easy to terminate. They considered from an estate management point of view whether multiple garden licence areas would be better taken back into the Council's control and grassed over as a communal area. This would be in line with Housing policy which limited a tenant's request to claim a piece of a communal area for themselves, if granted at all, to 1metre from the edge of the curtilage of their garden. It was noted that problems sometimes occurred where there was a change of tenancy and a previously licensed area needed to be reclaimed and put back to grass at a cost to the Council.

12 Garden licences (cont'd)

It was suggested that the licences on Housing land in non tenanted areas should be investigated to see whether the income they provided the service outweighed the cost they would otherwise require to upkeep. If this was the case the licences could be retained, but if this was not cost effective the areas of land could be claimed back. The Forum also felt that consideration should be given to increasing and regularising the fees charged for garden licences.

It was noted that many of the areas had been considered in the past for possible housing. It was suggested that these be investigated again with the Housing Enabling Officer, with particular attention being paid to communal areas and small individual pieces of land.

RECOMMENDED: that garden licences be reviewed, in terms of the land they were on, the purpose of the licence and the fee charged..

*13 Programme of future meetings

It was agreed that the next meeting would consider benchmarking and customer feedback from both Housing and Street Scene Services.

The Chairman thanked all those present for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED: that the next meeting of the Grounds Maintenance Task and Finish Forum be held at 10am on Friday 12 July 2013.

Agenda Item: 4

Grounds Maintenance TAFF

2 August 2013

SB/EC



Grounds maintenance benchmarking – how do we compare with other social landlords?

Summary

This report follows on from the report given to the Board on 10 January 2013. It explores further the current information we have on tenant satisfaction with the grounds maintenance service, reviews initiatives being taken by other housing authorities and suggests possible further steps that could be taken by us to improve the current service we offer.

Recommendations

- 1 Increase the level of tenant involvement with the service by:
 - Ensuring there are always opportunities for tenants as well as staff to be involved in estate walkabouts
 - Training tenants to be 'green inspectors' (similar to Affinity Sutton and Marshes Housing Association)
 - Setting up a new Service Review Group to look at grounds maintenance, or extend the remit of the Estate Management Service Review Group to cover this area
 - Ensuring tenants are always involved in any changes to the service, prior to implementation.
- 2 Consider using the Housemark 'photobook' to record and improve the appearance of our estates
- 3 Consider charging properties sold under the Right to Buy an 'estate rent' charge (would need to be in the deeds at time of sale). Legal advice would need to be sought on this.
- 4 Investigate joining the Housemark estate management benchmarking club
- 5 Use our website to give information about the level of grounds maintenance provided, the service tenants can expect, and if possible information about when the service was/will be carried out in their area.

a) Reasons for Recommendation

To enhance the quality of the grounds maintenance service

b) Alternative Options

To keep the grounds maintenance service in its present form

c) Risk Considerations

Damage to reputation; reduction in levels of tenant satisfaction with the service

d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations

Less than £1,000 for Housemark club membership, the remainder to be found from current budgets.

e) Date for Review of Decision

1 Background

- 1.1 The report presented to the Board on 10 January 2013 outlined what was carried out under the current service, the costs involved and customer satisfaction with the service.
- 1.2 This report aims to build on this to suggest ways in which we can take forward the service to make improvements for tenants, encourage tenant involvement, and improve the level of tenant satisfaction with the service.

2 Costs of the service

- 2.1 As a reminder, this is the information I presented to the Board in January this year on costs. Normally one would expect the cost of the grounds maintenance service to increase annually in line with the RPI of 3% less any variations (where land has been deleted from the contract) as applied corporately at this time of year. Amounts recharged to Housing by Street Scene over the past few years have been variable.
- 2.2 In 2010/11 the cost was £306,170, and in 2011/12 this decreased by 1.23% to £302,390, and in 2012/13 it increased by 3%.
- 2.3 The cost of the service for 2012/13 was set at £311,470.
- 2.4 The budget for 2013/14 was set at £320,170 representing an increase of 2.79%.
- 2.5 It is recognised that this is still likely to represent good value for money. However, we have not tested the market to ensure that we are getting the best price and quality for the work, therefore our accountant has been working with Street Scene to present us with more detail in this area. There is no clear formula to calculate the base contract price and the effect of variations. However as we have seen Streetscene's recharges are based on an inventory of sites (DTE) and the cost of each task undertaken at each site.
- 2.6 The Neighbourhood and Community Standard set by the Tenant Services Authority require that landlords manage our estates and communal areas to standards agreed with tenants at a local level. According to the HouseMark benchmarking service to which we subscribe, our 'estate services' (including estate lighting, cleaning and grounds maintenance) are ranked in the top quartile when looking at customer feedback and costs for

2011/12, ranking us sixth out of the 37 landlords compared. We were ranked eighth the previous year, but both represent good performance.

3 What our customers think about the current service

- 3.1 We do not have a large amount of direct information about what tenants think of our grounds maintenance service, but we can gain an insight on this from what they are telling us about our overall services.
- 3.2 Customer feedback through our recent STAR survey commissioned earlier this year suggests that we are improving in our overall delivery of services.
- 3.3 Satisfaction in general needs with the overall service and the neighbourhood as a place to live has improved since 2008 such that both now sit at 89%. 58% of these respondents were very satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live. More than two fifths (43%) of respondents consider rubbish or litter to be a problem. To improve these scores further we are advised by HouseMark that we need to target those aged under 35, as this group of our tenants is most likely to express dissatisfaction, probably due to higher expectations.
- 3.4 In sheltered accommodation the picture is even brighter with 93% of all respondents satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live, and 68% of these very satisfied. More than a quarter (28%) of respondents consider rubbish or litter to be a problem in their neighbourhood.
- 3.5 In terms of complaints we rarely receive formal complaints about the grounds maintenance service (none in the five years since April 2008) although it is recognised that as Street Scene deal with many of these directly and informally, we do not always become aware of them.
- 3.6 During 2012/13 our Estate Management team received 7 complaints to do with garden nuisance and 25 complaints to do with litter, rubbish and fly tipping.
- 3.7 We do however receive a lot of feedback through our TP (tenant participation) network of constituted groups, as well as from individuals we talk to when working out on site on our estates, and this is generally to do with the following:
- Breakages or damage to residents' property during grass cutting
 - Non removal of grass cuttings
 - Frequency of cuts
 - Quality of work
 - Edging of grass around borders
 - Weeding of borders
 - Quality of work varies according to which team is operating and therefore in which part of the district
 - It would be helpful for information to be supplied in advance as to when teams will be in which part of the district
 - Issues are always raised by tenants about grass cutting standards and removal of cuttings at the Tenants Conference and Garden Competition

4 How other local authorities have approached improving their grounds maintenance service

4.1 A review of some of the improvements made by other providers was carried out through Housemark and the results are set out below.

4.2 Changes have included:

- Using local area based contractors to carry out the work
- Training residents to be 'green inspectors'
- Using the Housemark 'photobook' approach to record and score during estate inspections
- Using tenant assessors to monitor performance and involving both tenants and staff in assessing performance of the service
- Charging properties sold under the Right to Buy an 'estate rent' charge (would need to be in the deeds at time of sale)

4.3 We do not currently have any information on our website (under housing) about the grounds maintenance service provided on our estates. Some providers give good information for example Poole Housing Partnership www.yourphp.org.uk/364 and Mid Devon District Council www.middevon.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=5368.

4.4 Poole Housing Partnership provide a link to their contractor's website and from this tenants can see when the grass in their area was last cut www.continental-landscapes.co.uk/websites/borough-of-poole/grounds-maintenance/grass-maintenance/

5 Involving tenants more in the service

5.1 Involving tenants further in the setting of standards and the monitoring of performance should lead to increased tenant satisfaction and is in line with our aims around tenant involvement as set out in the Resident Involvement Strategy.

5.2 Tenants are involved to some degree already through the Tenant Representative Group, the Estate Management Service Review Group and by taking part in estate walkabouts.

5.3 We could increase the level of involvement by:

- Ensuring that where possible there are tenants as well as staff involved in estate walkabouts
- Training tenants to be 'green inspectors' (similar to Affinity Sutton and Marshes Housing Association)
- Setting up a new Service Review Group to look at grounds maintenance, or extend the remit of the Estate Management Service Review Group to cover this area
- Ensuring tenants are always involved in any changes to the service, prior to implementation.

6 Using benchmarking to compare our services

6.1 We currently benchmark our overall performance with similar types of housing providers through Housemark

6.2 We could investigate joining the Estate Management benchmarking club which would allow us to compare ourselves against other providers in relation to:



- Cost per unit of delivering the grounds maintenance service
- Cost per unit receiving grounds maintenance including tree management
- Direct cost per property of estate services
- Satisfaction with grounds maintenance
- Total costs per property

7 Conclusions

- 7.1 Customer satisfaction feedback, while not particularly specific, does indicate that we could make improvements to our service which would help to meet tenant expectations
- 7.2 Comparison with other authorities highlights potential improvements which could be considered.

8 Recommendations

- 8.1 Increase the level of tenant involvement with the service by:
- Ensuring there are always opportunities for tenants as well as staff to be involved in estate walkabouts
 - Training tenants to be 'green inspectors' (similar to Affinity Sutton and Marshes Housing Association)
 - Setting up a new Service Review Group to look at grounds maintenance, or extend the remit of the Estate Management Service Review Group to cover this area
 - Ensuring tenants are always involved in any changes to the service, prior to implementation.
- 8.2 Consider using the Housemark 'photobook' to record and improve the appearance of our estates
- 8.3 Consider charging properties sold under the Right to Buy an 'estate rent' charge (would need to be in the deeds at time of sale). Legal advice would need to be sought on this.
- 8.4 Investigate joining the Housemark estate management benchmarking club
- 8.5 Use our website to give information about the level of grounds maintenance provided, the service tenants can expect, and if possible information about when the service was/will be carried out in their area.

Legal Implications

Not required for TAFF consideration

Financial Implications

Not required for TAFF consideration

Sue Bewes
Landlord Services Manager

