

Date: 26 September 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,
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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

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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 4 October 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
1. To receive any apologies for absence.	
2. To receive the notes of the meeting held on 2 August 2013.	4 - 9
3. To receive any declarations of interest relating to items on the agenda.	
4. Presentation from Devon County Council Highway Asset Principal Officer on the DCC grass cutting service.	
5. Feedback from the Housing Review Board – Landlord Services Manager.	Verbal

6. To consider the next steps required to identify and re-measure all the housing areas maintained under the grounds maintenance service.
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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EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Notes of a meeting of the Grounds Maintenance Task and Finish Forum held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 2 August 2013

Present:

Councillors:

Susie Bond
Douglas Hull
Pauline Stott
Peter Sullivan

Tenants:

Pat Rous
Sue Saunders

Officers:

Sue Bewes – Landlord Services Manager
Andrew Hancock – Street Scene Manager
Mark Pollard – Parks Development Officer
Alethea Thompson – Democratic Services Officer
Mandy White - Accountant

Also present:

Councillor Jill Elson – Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities

Apologies:

Councillors:

Christine Drew
Jim Knight

Officers:

Pauline Druce – Street Scene Finance Officer
John Golding – Head of Housing
Andrew Harris – Street Scene Area Manager, West
Tim Harris – Street Scene Area Manager, East
Joyce Murphy – Estate Management Officer
Graham Symington – Housing Asset & Business Development Officer

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

***14 Welcome and introductions**

The Chairman welcomed all those present to the meeting and invited everybody to introduce themselves. Particular welcome was given to new members of the TaFF, Councillor Susie Bond and Councillor Peter Sullivan. The Chairman informed the Forum that Councillor Jim Knight had fallen badly the previous week and suffered a broken pelvis. She would send a get well soon card to Councillor Knight on behalf of the Housing Review Board.

***15 Minutes**

The notes of the meeting held on 26 April 2013 were confirmed as a true record. The Landlord Services Manager commented on minute 9 following a comment made at the previous meeting by the Housing Accountant (minute 7, 15.03.13 refers). Ex-Council properties did not pay for a grass cutting service on communal housing areas; this was paid for from existing Council tenants' rents. It was acknowledged that there was nothing that the Council could do to charge residents that had already bought ex council properties, but the Landlord Services Manager suggested that in the future a service charge could be added when a Council house was sold so that the situation was not perpetuated.

***16 Declarations of interest**

Board Member	Minute number	Type of interest	Nature of interest
Douglas Hull	All	Personal	His sister is a Council tenant.
Pat Rous	All	Personal	She is a Council housing tenant.
Sue Saunders	All	Personal	She is a sheltered housing tenant.
Sue Saunders	17	Personal	She is a member of the Littleham Residents' Association.
Peter Sullivan	All	Personal	He is a sheltered housing tenant.

17 Grounds maintenance benchmarking – how does EDDC compare with other social landlords?

The Forum considered the report of the Landlord Services Manager which:

- Explored current information the Council had on tenant satisfaction with the grounds maintenance service.
- Reviewed initiatives being taken by other housing authorities.
- Suggested possible further steps that could be taken by the Council to improve the current service it offered.

The report demonstrated that the service was performing well, with good overall tenant satisfaction. According to the HouseMark benchmarking service the Council was ranked 6th out of 37 landlords when looking at customer feedback and costs.

The report went on to detail concerns raised by tenants about the service, which included:

- Breakages or damage to residents' properties during grass cutting.
- Non removal of grass cuttings.
- Frequency of cuts.
- Edging of grass around borders and weeding of borders.
- Quality of work varied according to the teams operating across the district.
- It would be helpful for information to be supplied in advance as to when teams would be in which part of the district.

17 **Grounds maintenance benchmarking – how does EDDC compare with other social landlords? (cont'd)**

The Landlord Services Manager demonstrated how other local authorities had improved their grounds maintenance service and the Forum discussed issues such as; producing a 'photobook' to compare with other social landlords and; involving tenants more in the service and training them in inspections and a reasonable standard to be expected.

It was noted that the whole of the Council's website was being redesigned and that officers should input into the process to encourage more grounds maintenance information to be provided online, such as how the programme worked and when areas would be cut.

Councillor Hull asked three questions regarding different areas of land in Axminster and requested that officers supply him the answers outside of the meeting.

The Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities reported that the land between Rodney Close and Littleham Village Hall (Exmouth) had been granted Village Green status by Devon County Council (DCC). As this land was no longer available for housing it should not be maintained through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget. The District Council would need to decide whether it wished to retain the land and maintain it through an alternative budget, or to relinquish it to Exmouth Town Council or to Littleham Residents' Association.

- RECOMMENDED:**
- 1 that the level of tenant involvement with the service be increased by:
 - a) Ensuring that there were always opportunities for tenants as well as staff to be involved in estate walkabouts.
 - b) Training tenants to be 'green inspectors'.
 - c) Setting up a new Service Review Group to look at grounds maintenance or to extend the remit of the Estate Management Service Review Group to cover this area – the Landlord Services Manager to explore the options further.
 - d) Ensuring that tenants were always involved in any changes to the service, prior to implementation.
 - 2 that consideration be given to using the HouseMark 'photobook' to record and improve the appearance of Housing's estates.
 - 3 that the Council considers charging properties sold under the Right to Buy scheme an 'estate rent' charge and to seek legal advice on this.
 - 4 that the Landlord Services Manager investigates joining the HouseMark estate management benchmarking club.
 - 5 that the Council's website be used to give information about the level of grounds maintenance provided, the service tenants could expect and about when the service was/would be carried out.

- 6 that newly designated Village Green land at Littleham, Exmouth be removed from the HRA and the Council asked to consider whether it wished to retain the land or relinquish it to Exmouth Town Council or Littleham Residents' Association.

18 **Benchmarking of the grounds maintenance service by Street Scene**

The Forum received a presentation from the Street Scene Manager on the benchmarking of Street Scene's grounds maintenance service, using data taken from Value for Money (VFM) benchmarking & the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) statistics, which covered:

- Comparisons with nearest neighbours – Exeter City Council and Mid Devon District Council – on:
 - the overall cost of the service
 - specifications
 - recharges to the HRA.
- Accounting for the cost.

It was noted that East Devon had areas of green space spread over a large rural district, with large towns which included prime parks (Manor Gardens, Exmouth and Connaught Gardens, Sidmouth) and recreation grounds. Compared with Exeter City and Mid Devon, EDDC offered a good value and enhanced service (to a higher standard) with over £110,000 of extra works included. Time and travel costs were increased due to the rural area.

The need to benchmark with similar authorities, like for like, rather than with nearest neighbours was acknowledged. The Forum was asked to consider joining the Estate Management benchmarking club which would allow comparisons on cost per unit of delivering the grounds maintenance service, although there would be a cost involved.

The benchmarking presentation had also highlighted inaccuracies regarding the size of the housing areas maintained by Street Scene. An example was given where the square meterage at Lymbourne, Sidmouth had been underestimated and was therefore being undercharged. The areas had last been measured in 1998 and there were discrepancies between the DTE (Down to Earth) system used by Street Scene and EMap. The Forum agreed that more information was needed on what the rates were based and were aware that if all the areas were re-measured the overall cost of the service could increase. The Parks Development Manager reported that when Street Scene was informed of any changes, adjustments were made to the DTE system and were immediately effective.

The Forum agreed that all of the housing areas maintained by Street Scene should be re-measured and that some of the areas should be off set back to the General Fund, where relevant. They also agreed that garden licences should be reviewed and a policy put in place for future use. It was acknowledged that there was a cost implication for undertaking this work and the Forum felt that a budget should be sought from the HRA. The Street Scene Manager reported that it was possible to input data on site via a tablet computer directly onto the system and compare figures with 'live' EMap.

18 **Benchmarking of the grounds maintenance service by Street Scene (cont')**

The Forum then considered an inventory of tasks produced by the Parks Development Officer which demonstrated a breakdown of the tasks undertaken by Street Scene, the number of places these happened and the total annual cost of each task. It suggested that to provide an enhanced 'cut and collect' grass cutting service would increase the cost of the service between three and seven times across the district.

On behalf of the Forum, the Chairman thanked the officers for a very interesting presentation.

- RECOMMENDED:**
- 1 that a budget be provided from the HRA to identify and re-measure all the housing areas maintained under the grounds maintenance service.
 - 2 that garden licences be reviewed, in terms of the land they were on, the purpose of the licence and the fee charged.

19 **Do the current arrangements provide good value for money?**

Overall the Forum agreed that the Street Scene grounds maintenance service did provide good value for money. However it was difficult to clarify this until it was known specifically what land the Housing service owned. They felt that the right amount was being paid for the service provided but wanted to ensure that the charges were being allocated to the correct budgets. Further investigations were required into the correct meterage of the areas being maintained.

The Forum also wanted garden licences to be reviewed in terms of the land they were on, the purpose of the licence and the fee charged. It was suggested that some licences be revoked if they were preventing access or making Street Scene maintenance more difficult/costly. Alternatively some pieces of land could be sold off if there were of no use to EDDC. This had been considered at the previous TaFF meeting, which had recommended a review of garden licences.

The Forum went on to discuss grass areas maintained by DCC which bordered EDDC housing land. DCC provided a reduced grass cutting service and this sometimes led to complaints about the untidy or irregular appearance of an area. The Street Scene Manager had previously been in discussions with DCC about EDDC taking on DCC grass cutting in urban areas. However the budget provided would only allow four cuts per year, in contrast to the 10-12 cuts currently provided by EDDC. The Forum felt that it would be useful to invite a representative from Devon County Council to the next meeting of the TaFF to discuss this.

The Forum agreed that before it could consider the cost of any service improvements it needed to know what areas of land were maintained under the HRA.

- RECOMMENDED:** that a representative from Devon County Council be invited to a future meeting to discuss the grass cutting service in urban areas.

*20 **Programme of future meetings**

It was agreed that the next meeting would consider grass cutting options, ideally with a Devon County Council representative in attendance.

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 4 October 2013.