

HOUSING CABINET MEMBER MEETING

Agenda Item 57

Brighton & Hove City Council

Subject:	Grounds Maintenance Review		
Date of Meeting:	1 December 2011		
Report of:	Strategic Director of Place		
Contact Officer:	Name:	Graham Page	Tel: 293354
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Key Decision:	Yes	Forward Plan No: HSG 14247	
Ward(s) affected:	All		

1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

- 1.1 The Social Housing Regulatory Framework has set National Standards for Social Landlords to have policies that outline how neighbourhoods will be looked after. The Grounds Maintenance Policy is one of a range of policies that will sit beneath the Housing and Social Inclusion Neighbourhood policy.
- 1.2 The new Corporate Plan has set priorities around reducing inequality, creating sustainable communities and increasing community empowerment. These are central themes of the Grounds Maintenance Policy.
- 1.3 The report sets out the keys service improvements that have come out of the Grounds Maintenance review following partnership working with residents.
- 1.4 The Grounds Maintenance Policy (appendix 1) has been developed using the key themes that residents raised in the pilot areas about how the grounds maintenance service should be delivered. This policy is one of a range of Neighbourhood Policies which set out how Housing and Social Inclusion seeks to work with residents to look after our housing estates and land which are the responsibility of the Housing Revenue Account
- 1.5 We have reviewed 250 housing sites with City Parks and recalculated the Bill of Quantities. This has enabled us to ensure that residents will be paying for the service that they receive. There will be a slight decrease in the overall cost of around £10000.
- 1.6 It is also proposed that the Health and Safety Maintenance of Trees is included within the Bill of Quantities and relevant service charges and recharges are made to residents rather than the current situation where these are paid for from the wider Housing Revenue Account and thus subsidised by residents who do not have trees.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- .2.1 That the Cabinet Member for Housing agrees to the new Grounds Maintenance Policy which has been developed by the Estate Services Monitoring Group (ESMG).
- 2.2 That the Cabinet Member for Housing approves a rolling programme of site by site grounds maintenance reviews.
- 2.3 That the Cabinet Member for Housing approves the continuation of current arrangements with City Parks for grounds maintenance services.

3. RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION/CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS:

- 3.1 Five pilot areas were identified across the City which were all very different to reflect the diversity of our housing sites. These pilots were used to explore what improvements residents wanted to see from the service
- 3.2 Due to the complexity and numbers of residents involved in the pilot areas, the areas were split into phases. Phase 1 was completed in October 2010, and phase 2 in November 2010 with phase 3 completed in December 2010. The five pilot locations were;

Wickhurst Rise Maisonettes	Mile Oak Portslade	West Area	Phase 1
Nettleton Court & Dudeney Lodge	Upper Hollingdean Road	North Area	Phase 1
Fitch Drive, Ryelands Drive and Thorndean Road	Bevendean and Bates Estate	East Area	Phase 2
Elwyn Jones Court (sheltered scheme)	Carden Avenue Patcham	North Area	Phase 2
Essex Street, Hampshire Court and Wiltshire House	Eastern Road area	Central Area	Phase 3

- 3.3 Residents in the pilot areas were given the opportunity to complete a questionnaire that presented a 'menu of services' (appendix 2). The group were keen to include questions on food growing and increasing biodiversity and conservation. Residents were given feedback on the pilot outcomes and the opportunity to attend resident forums' and put questions to officers
- 3.4 Walkabouts were undertaken allowing the opportunity for residents to scrutinise the standards of the grounds maintenance. On some sites, officers have acknowledged that the standards needed to be improved and an action plan was

agreed and put in place. On other occasions, resident's expectations were found to exceed what should be achieved under the service contract.

- 3.5 All pilots were evaluated but it proved difficult to establish any real consensus among residents about the grounds maintenance service. Residents had varying views of the grounds maintenance service depending on their experience of the service they received and what their expectations were.

Pilot Area	Issue identified by Tenants	Proposed Solutions
Nettleton Court & Dudeney Lodge	Low satisfaction with shrub bed maintenance, shrubs have died	Residents encouraged to make bids through EDB when replanting is required
	Sycamores undermining boundary wall	Felled for Health & Safety reasons
	Residents interested in promoting wildlife and conservation	Trees pruned by arboriculture team, wildlife area set up in wooded area within the grounds (with support from Sussex Wildlife Trust)
Wickhurst Rise	Grounds reasonably looked after, but trees and shrubs lacked interest	Resident EDB bid for raised beds for vegetable growing and fruit trees on grass bank
	Dog fouling a problem	Local event in Sept 2011 with Animal Welfare Officer to raise awareness
Bates Estate	Shrub beds below standard. Housing site plans out of date	Revised site plans produced
Fitch Drive	Difficult to maintain due to steep banks	Community Payback Team cleared area of rubbish and fly tipping with the support of the estates service City Parks side flailed the bank of brambles from the car park, leaving the top part for wildlife Maintaining steep bank remains difficult for health and safety reasons
Elwyn Jones Court	Resident dissatisfaction with planting	Community Payback team cleared site and City Parks replanted with flowering plants Sussex Wildlife Trust gave advice to residents on planting and attracting butterflies and other wildlife Improvement marked by Garden

		Party in July 2011, opened by the Chief Executive
Hampshire Court	Successful community gardening club that has won 'City in Bloom' competition in previous years. Confusion over which beds are maintained by residents and which by the council	Resolved through meeting with Chair of resident association
	ESMG and residents on the pilot areas want the Council to consider wildlife and biodiversity when planting wildflowers and shrub planting is suitable for wildlife	Grounds Maintenance Service pledge established

Project outcomes that will shape service improvements

3.6 The 250 site paper plans were checked by Housing and City Parks staff and 75 were found to have discrepancies. These particular sites were re-measured and the Bill of Quantities adjusted to calculate the revised cost of the grounds maintenance service. The adjustments also ensure that residents will not be charged for areas that they are maintaining themselves. They have now been put on an electronic database which can more easily be updated. This means that we can review the way each site is maintained with residents and make changes to the Bill of Quantities and service charges accordingly. We are hoping to make this system available on the website so that residents can see what to expect in relation to the maintenance of their communal areas.

3.7 We have produced a revised specification for the grounds maintenance service developed with City Parks using pilot locations to test and cost out the service improvements.

As a result of the review the following service improvements have been implemented:

- Staff in Housing and City Parks have received additional training for example in Tree assessment and Shrub Maintenance.
- Formal joint working arrangements between Housing Estates Service and City Parks has improved. An example of this is the extension of litter picks carried out by the Estates service to include shrub beds and car parking areas.
- Following trials with City Parks and Estate Services we have established that we only need to spray once on most sites in order to control weeds on hard surfaces. This treatment is followed some weeks later by Estate Services staff who remove dead weeds and sweep away the soil from hard surfaces. This is an informal arrangement at present which we intend to formalise with a programmed schedule of works. Housing Officers will be briefed so that a reactive spray only occurs if necessary.

- Consideration is being given to using the Highways department weed spraying vehicles to treat our garage and car parking sites. Further work is required on the maintenance of car parks and garages sites and this will be the subject of a future report.
 - Active involvement of residents in promoting wildlife and conservation is being supported. Residents have responded positively by engaging with Sussex Wildlife Trust through the Access to Nature Project Officer.
- 3.8 The possibility of giving tenants greater control of certain grounds maintenance tasks (such as grass cutting) is being piloted with Wellington Road Estate. Work is taking place with Health & Safety and Insurance teams to ensure risk assessments, training and insurance cover is in place. If residents agree to the proposal, this will be piloted and will form the template for a Local Management Agreement. This could be extended to other areas if residents show an interest.
- 3.9 The Project has provided an excellent example of joint working between different Council Departments, residents, Community Payback and the Voluntary Sector to provide a Value for Money service that residents want. Under the direction of the Chair of the Bristol Estate, the Community Payback Team have been involved in painting public ways, marking steps, painting handrails and cutting back bushes that has improved the appearance and feel of the estate

Maintenance of trees on housing sites

- 3.10 The maintenance of trees on Housing Sites is not currently included in the grounds maintenance bill of quantities. City Parks Arboriculture team manage health & safety tree work. Last year, housing staff were given training to enable them to identify potential health and safety problems with trees and working with residents identified a number of long term tree problems which have now been addressed. The budget for tree maintenance was £21,260 for 2011-12 but has been increased to £40,920 for this year only to allow for these extra tree works.
- 3.11 Currently tree maintenance for communal areas and for individual gardens is paid from the HRA and is therefore being subsidised by residents who do not have trees in their gardens or communal areas. A fairer way of covering this cost might be for the costs to be included in the grounds maintenance service charge for communal areas and to be directly recharged to council tenants who have trees in their private gardens.
- 3.12 Any new planting or maintenance of trees that is not health and safety related will continue to need to be funded through the Estates Development Budget
- 3.13 The grounds maintenance services for housing land are currently provided by the Council's in-house service, City Parks, under a service level agreement. The arrangements have worked well and the Service Level Agreements are designed to deliver value for money, including improvements in the quality of service through reviews of the type set out in this report. It is therefore recommended that the current arrangements continue in place.

4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

- 4.1 Resident involvement has been crucial in reviewing the Grounds Maintenance Service which was last looked at in 2004 as part of the wider citywide contract.
- 4.2 The review was undertaken and the policy developed in partnership with Estate Services Monitoring Group, Housing and Social Inclusion and City Parks. Collectively we explored residents concerns and identified what are the core issues with the service.
- 4.3 Initially, the Estate Services Monitoring Group focused on the three key aspects of the Social Housing Regulatory Framework National Standards, namely;
 - Emphasis on outcomes- what are resident's priorities for the grounds maintenance service
 - Initial assessment of strengths and weakness of the service
 - Score the service and identify parts of the service and geographical areas which should be prioritised for improvement
- 4.4 The group initially developed a Grounds Maintenance Action Plan to explore residents concerns, identify the core issues and consider recommendations. This included setting up 5 pilot areas

5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 5.1 The changes to budgets for grounds maintenance and tree maintenance to reflect the new bill of quantities will be included in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget report which will report in February 2012. The estimated budget savings as a result of the changes outlined in this report are £7,000,

As a result of the changes to the detailed bill of quantities and an inflationary increase, new service charges for grounds maintenance will be calculated and applied from Monday 2nd April 2012. Any changes will be included within the (HRA) Budget report as mentioned above. At this time a weekly charge for tree maintenance (for trees on communal land) will be added to the charge if agreed by this committee. The grounds maintenance service charges currently range from 4p per week to £2.45. Without the effects of inflation, most charges will stay the same or reduce slightly as a result of the changes outlined in this report. Any individual increases to charges will be due to increased levels of service receivable, agreed by residents.

Finance Officer Consulted: Monica Brooks

Date: 17/10/11

Legal Implications:

- 5.2 The proposals in this report are consistent with legal requirements and within the powers of the Cabinet Member for Housing under the Council's constitution. There are no adverse Human Rights implications arising from the report.

Lawyer Consulted: Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorghis Date: 25.11.2011

Equalities Implications:

- 5.3 An EIA has been completed and is (appendix 3) to the report. Key outcomes were to achieve a grounds maintenance service that offers value for money, allowing residents to have a greater say on what the grounds maintenance service delivers where they live. Being more responsive to resident requirements and letting them know what they are getting from the service. Elwyn Jones Court is an example where landscaping was not suitable for residents and flowerbeds were replanted with the plants they wanted.

Sustainability Implications:

- 5.4 ESGM members were keen for residents to be given the opportunity to consider increasing bio diversity and food growing on housing land. Although food growing has not been something that residents have shown an interest in on the pilot sites, residents have shown keen interest in increasing bio diversity. On a number of sites schemes have been introduced, such as conservation areas and wildflower planting facilitated by Sussex Wildlife Trust engaging with Community Groups. Recognised the value of scrub for wildlife and altered shrub bed maintenance to reflect this.

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 5.5 It is well documented that the real and perceived safety and well being of residents is improved when the area where they live is looked after. This reduces fly tipping, vandalism and criminal damage. Encouraging residents to participate in grounds maintenance empowers them to take an interest and make improvements. Related services are more integrated on our estates so the council can respond to what residents want.

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 5.6 Opportunity for good partnership working across council departments with the voluntary sector and residents being involved. The review has provided a good opportunity to pilot a Local Management Agreement. Risks have been reduced by having more up to date electronic mapping and specification that can be easily monitored and adapted. A major step in managing trees to decrease the risk has been taken. Not able to have all trees inspected, but a basic level of training has been given to officers and some residents to identify those trees that pose a potential risk. Taken the opportunity to add value by supporting residents and facilitating them to make changes to their estate for the better.

Public Health Implications:

- 5.7 Promoting opportunities for residents to get involved in gardening or growing their own food. Promoting opportunities for community working which can reduce social isolation. Ensuring areas are well maintained reduces the risk of vermin and associated risks. Only a few housing sites on the pilot area were affected by fly tipping. Some sites that had problems have been solved, but on others made people aware so that it can be dealt with by the agencies concerned. The introduction of quarterly estate inspections, cleaning teams on sites with blocks of flats and officers being out on the estate has helped to identify and tackle problem areas.

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 5.8 Revised grounds maintenance specification will provide a more consistent service across the city. The proposals clearly links to priorities in the Corporate Plan to tackle inequalities by involving residents, communities and voluntary groups in everything we do i.e. growing projects. Make Brighton & Hove Britain's greenest City by using sustainable products and methodology to improve the biodiversity of our neighbourhoods. Engage with residents and be more transparent about the service by providing choices and by recognising that 'one size does not fit all'

6. EVALUATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTION(S):

- 6.1 The Project officer is a member of the HouseMark Performance Improvement and some preliminary investigations have been undertaken to benchmark grounds maintenance service against other local authorities. However, this is proving difficult as authorities do not provide, measure or cost services consistently. As we have developed close links with Crawley BC by reciprocating resident inspections of our estates we will utilise this opportunity to look at benchmarking our grounds maintenance and estate service against theirs
- 6.2 Residents to take over the management of all Grounds Maintenance on housing sites. Residents have not expressed interest so far. Local Management Agreement is piloting this approach. Could be considered for the future if resident want this.
- 6.3 Contracting out to another organisation. Residents have not expressed an interest in this option, but could in the future. The advantages of keeping it 'in house' are the economies of scale, consistency and continuity of service across council owned land. City Parks as a whole has been subject to its own tendering process.

7. REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 The arrangements for City Parks to maintain housing land is working well and as a result of this review officers are satisfied that this option provides the best Value for Money for residents and the council.
- 7.2 An ongoing programme of grounds maintenance review allows residents to be involved in decisions about their local environment and the extent to which they want to be involved or pay a service charge for this service to be provided.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

1. Grounds Maintenance Policy
2. Grounds Maintenance Questionnaire
3. Equalities Impact Assessment

Documents in Members' Rooms

1. None

Background Documents

1. Decent Homes, Decent Spaces
2. Cleaner, Safer Greener Communities agenda
3. Bill of Quantities and Specification