

## ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	<b>Meeting:-</b>	<b>Improving Places Select Commission</b>
2.	<b>Date:-</b>	<b>Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2013</b>
3.	<b>Title:-</b>	<b>Vulnerable Tenants Gardening Scheme</b>
4.	<b>Directorate:-</b>	<b>NEIGHBOURHOOD AND ADULT SERVICES</b>

### 5. Summary

Up until 2<sup>nd</sup> June, Rotherham MBC provided a partial gardening scheme to some vulnerable tenants across the borough. The service, delivered by Morrison FS, was insufficient and impacted on the contractor's core work of delivering estate based caretaking services. The service was transferred to Age UK, to ensure that it could provide an enhanced service to existing customers and have the potential to expand in line with demand.

This report provides detail on the alternative delivery arrangements implemented to alleviate these issues.

### 6. Recommendations

#### That Improving Places Overview and Scrutiny Select Commission

- **Note the decision to expand the gardening scheme to enable it to provide an enhanced service to appropriate council housing tenants, and enable caretaking staff to focus on core responsibilities.**

## 7. Background and Details

Up until 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2013, Rotherham MBC provided a partial gardening scheme to help Council tenants over 65 and those with disabilities of any age with basic gardening, for example mowing the lawn and trimming hedges. The scheme was only open to people who did not have a relative to help them.

The scheme was at full capacity with 185 tenants receiving a basic gardening service, there were also 18 tenants on the waiting list. Tenants paid £10 - £20 per visit and received 2 – 3 cuts per annum.

Following the transfer of the repairs & maintenance service to external contractors, the gardening scheme has been delivered by Morrison FS. Morrison FS ran the scheme using estate based caretakers rather than employing dedicated gardeners as the scheme was only needed between March and November (the growing season).

Up until March 2013 the caretaking service itself was largely reactive, relying on individual reports of problems as a means of allocating work. As a consequence of this approach there was no routine scheduled maintenance of estate and garage sites by the caretaking service. In this context it was possible to prioritise gardening within the caretakers workloads. However following a review of the caretaking service it was felt that a reactive approach was inadequate as work was only being undertaken if it was identified and reported. As a means of improving the quality of estates, a cyclical planned work programme was introduced borough wide. This approach meant it was difficult to release the 2 caretakers required for the gardening scheme.

As well impacting on cyclical caretaking works, there were also other issues with how the scheme was being delivered;

- Not enough capacity to maintain gardens to desirable standard i.e. grass cutting was relatively ad hoc and resources not sufficient to cut at least every six weeks
- The service was heavily subsidised by RMBC i.e. cost of two caretakers on a seasonal basis (March to November). This introduces equity issues for tenants in effect paying for a caretaking service they did not receive.
- Poor income recovery by Morrison FS who did not have the resource to chase debts from tenants who didn't pay upon completion of works
- No assessment criteria. (in effect it was first come first served system)
- MFS were unable to accept new requests for service due to their limited capacity
- No process for informing when tenancy ended.

As the roll out of the cyclical works programme was due to commence in April 2013 and with the start of the growing season, a review of the gardening scheme was urgently needed.

3 options were initially identified for the continuation of the garden scheme;

1. Continue use of Morrison FS
2. Tender works
3. Investigate options for delivery through a social enterprise/CVF sector organisation

Option 1 wasn't viable as this didn't resolve the current issues with the scheme. Option 2 was considered as this would resolve the current issues with the scheme however there were concerns that a commercial company would be more profit focussed rather than customer focussed and this could potentially be a lengthy process. Option 3 was the preferred option however assistance with start-up costs was anticipated. Whilst there was a cost attached to option 3, building social capital and adding to and developing skills and knowledge in the local community would offset these costs.

Rotherham MBC requirements for a CVF sector organisation to develop a scheme that could take forward the vulnerable tenants gardening service were identified as;

- Needed to be independently set up and ran
- Needed to be able to implement the gardening scheme by Summer 2013
- Needed to charge and become sustainable over a reasonable timescale
- Needed potential to develop over time to offer a service borough wide to those that needed it – not restricted to social tenants

Rotherham MBC approached Voluntary Action Rotherham to see if there was the potential for a CVF sector organisation to develop and take forward a gardening scheme for social tenants which would become sustainable over a reasonable timescale. After undertaking borough wide research of the sector, Voluntary Action Rotherham identified Age UK Rotherham as the most suitable provider as they met the requirements and already had a gardening scheme in place.

Following discussions with Age UK Rotherham in March 2013, they expressed an interest in expanding their operations to carry out this work.

To enable Age UK Rotherham to expand their operation and take over the existing client base on the gardening scheme, pump prime funding was required to support the costs of purchasing/hiring additional equipment and resources.

Age UK Rotherham already offered gardening to clients on a monthly basis (more regularly if required) at £15 per hour. Age UK Rotherham expressed concerns that the frequency of visits (2 – 3 time per year) on Rotherham MBC's scheme allowed gardens to become unkempt before each visit and would become too time consuming to be maintainable within a reasonable cost. It was therefore proposed that existing service users would be encouraged to take up Age UK Rotherham's provision of a monthly visit. Those that wished to stay with 3 visits a year were advised of a higher pricing structure (£20 per hour).

On 21<sup>st</sup> May 2013, DLT supported the expansion of the Age UK Rotherham gardening scheme to enable it to provide a service to appropriate council housing tenants.

Aware that many gardens on the scheme wouldn't have received a cut in 2013 and would become unmanageable, there was an urgent need to transfer the scheme as soon as possible. Therefore immediately after DLT's decision, Rotherham MBC gave existing clients prior notice of the intention to transfer services to Age UK Rotherham as from 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2013 and details of the charging system to enable them to opt out if so required. Tenants on the waiting list were also notified of the transfer as Age UK Rotherham had the capacity to accept them onto the scheme.

Age UK Rotherham was issued with a small grant agreement and service specification to ensure monies were spent accordingly and work was undertaken in line with RMBC local offers to customers;

- Contact those on the vulnerable tenants gardening scheme to arrange an appointment at least three days before carrying out works to the garden, provide you with a receipt for your payment and carry out at least 3 visits per year to those registered on the scheme
- Cut your grass, trim hedges that are no higher than two metres and remove all gardening related rubbish on each visit for those on the gardening scheme

Following the transfer of services, one stage 1 complaint was received which related to the change in the charging system (from per visit to per hour). The charging system was justifiably changed to enable the scheme to become sustainable however as this particular tenants garden is approximately 30m long, the revised charging scheme would have a major financial impact. Officers are currently liaising with the tenant and investigating remediation work to alleviate this issue.

Since Age UK Rotherham started the service in June, all tenants have been contacted at least twice to establish relationships and need. 84 people have since signed up to the service and 41 declined. Final letters have been sent to everyone they have been unable to contact to aim to evoke a response. Age UK Rotherham are providing grant monitoring information as a minimum, quarterly, but it was agreed between both parties that for the first 3 months, this is provided monthly.

## **8. Finance**

The costs of enabling Age UK Rotherham to expand their current operation and provide a gardening service to appropriate council housing tenants was £22,727.24

The funding is being used for the following activities:

- To support the cost of short term hire of vehicles and the purchase of short life gardening equipment.
- To support the cost of the short term Coordinator time to cover the initial transfer of clients

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