

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO DLT

1.	Meeting:	Cabinet Member Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods
2.	Date:	14th July, Installation of Wood Burning Stoves or other solid fuel appliances in Council Properties 2014
3.	Title:	Grounds Maintenance
4.	Directorate:	Neighbourhoods and Adult Services

5. Summary

Streetpride deliver grounds maintenance services to Council administered land as a general service offer. The service is financed solely from the General Fund. The service includes grounds maintenance to Housing Revenue Account administered land and includes grass cutting to communal areas of flats and aged persons bungalow complexes, incidental green space within Council housing estates and miscellaneous land assets, such as sites awaiting redevelopment.

The current pressure upon the General Fund has resulted in a reduced service offer, with the periods between grass cutting being extended. This is resulting in a number of issues which are adversely impacting upon the quality of the environment and the quality of life of residents.

The quality of green open spaces can impact significantly on how places are perceived and are valued locally. In addition, access to quality green space supports the health and wellbeing of the community, particularly the most vulnerable and those living in areas of acute deprivation. Effective neighbourhood stewardship is therefore an integral part of maintaining a sustainable and cohesive neighbourhood.

In the light of this summer's experience and concerns expressed from tenants it is proposed in to enhance the borough wide approach to grounds maintenance for council housing areas with funds being provided for a limited period from the Housing Revenue Account.

6. Recommendations

That Cabinet Member Safe and Attractive Communities agrees:

- 6.1 To enhance the borough wide approach to grounds maintenance for housing land up to an annual cost of £286,000 (or part thereof) for the financial years 2014/15 and 2015/16.**
- 6.2 That a review is undertaken to consider the appropriateness of continuing this service beyond 2015/16**
- 6.3 To receive a further report on the opportunities to undertake environmental improvements in respect of shrub and flower beds for the 2015/16 year**

7. Background – current service offer

Streetpride delivers a general grounds maintenance service to Council land assets including those administered by the Housing Service.

The Streetpride service is fully funded from the General Fund. As such, Council tenants in common with all residents in the borough, contribute towards the cost of this service via their Council Tax charge. Due to the financial ring fencing arrangements governing the use of the Housing Revenue Account; as this is a general service offer to the community, there is no budgetary contribution from the Housing Revenue Account, as the service is not exclusively provided to Council tenants.

General amenity grassland and communal gardens tend to be the prevalent types of green spaces maintained by Streetpride, on behalf of Housing Services, within our housing estates.

The grounds maintenance service delivered to HRA sites can be summarised as follows:

- RMBC bungalow complexes (200 sites) – 5 grass cuts between April and October, including litter picking prior to cut and removal of cut grass from pathways.
- General housing land - 5 grass cuts between April and October including litter picking prior to cut and removal of cut grass from pathways.

In addition, to grass cutting, Streetpride also undertake hedge cutting once per year to hedges bordering communal areas. Shrub beds on Housing administered land are also pruned periodically in 92 locations around the Borough.

7.1 Current service issues

Due to General Fund budget pressures the grounds maintenance service is having to operate with reduced resources and this has inevitably lead to a revised approach to maintenance. This includes for example:

- Extending the duration between grass cutting.
- Some areas of green space being left uncut and allowed to develop into meadow land, with walking routes cut through these areas.
- Wild flower planting replacing previously grassed or shrubbed areas
- The method and sequencing of cuts being revisited to deliver the most efficient use of the machinery and manpower available.

Budgetary pressures have resulted in a revised (and perhaps not fully understood by the community at large) approach to grass cutting. This is resulting in a visible reduction in the quality of open spaces within our neighbourhoods and declining customer satisfaction with the service.

7.2 Housing related issues

From a Housing Services perspective, customer feedback is generally negative about the impact on the open spaces within their neighbourhoods and immediately surrounding their homes. In various forums, such as the recent Leaseholder Workshops, Area Housing Panel Chairs Meeting, Area Housing Panel meetings and Quality and Standards Challenge Group Estate Inspections, the quality of grounds maintenance is being raised as a common concern. Generally, it is perceived that the quality of service has declined. Whilst recognising improvements are being made in other services such as estate caretaking for example; the quality of grounds maintenance is not, consequently there have been numerous requests from tenants for improvements in grounds maintenance.

This request is particularly acute in areas with communal grounds such as blocks of flats and aged persons complexes. A high proportion of complaints regarding the quality of grounds maintenance are from residents living in these locations. This is not unsurprising as,

- In aged persons complexes with communal grounds, the amenity value of quality open space is highly important to residents feelings of wellbeing. It is particularly important in the absence of private garden space and for those who are housebound, have poor mobility or cannot access more formal green space within the area. Many residents use these areas for drying clothes and are walking in inches high grass between cuts to hang washing, with all the associated issues that creates, particularly in wet conditions. Their ability to access open spaces for amenity purposes becomes impaired by the height of grass and ground conditions. The presence of loose cut grass presents its own issues with regard to potential for trips and falls. In these locations, residents may also struggle to cut the grass themselves, due to their physical health.
- Apartment blocks, containing tenants and leaseholders, are designed with communal grounds, which is their only amenity space for sitting out, hanging washing and engaging with their neighbours. The quality of that space matters to them, as it is the setting within which their homes sit and is a reflection of their home to themselves and visitors. It is also a reflection of the quality of service they receive from their landlord/Council and drives their perceptions of service delivery and value for money.
- Anecdotally, Area Housing Officers are reporting that in enforcing tenancy conditions with regards to enclosed gardens of tenanted properties, the Council's approach to maintaining its own grounds is being raised by some tenants. The implication being that we should 'get our own house in order'.

7.3 The importance of sustaining quality open spaces

The green spaces around aged persons complexes, blocks of flats and the estates in general were designed to provide important quality amenity areas for residents, particularly on 'open plan' Radburn estates and bungalow complexes. With regard to the latter, elderly residents are often less able to maintain private garden spaces

themselves or easily access more formalised parks and recreation areas. For these reasons, communal grounds were created and managed by the Council for the benefit of tenants.

In sustaining our housing and neighbourhoods for the future, the provision of quality green space should be considered just as important as the quality of the housing offer which sits within it. Open spaces can contribute towards addressing physical, mental and social wellbeing issues. In this respect, effective stewardship of the environment should be considered a key component of any strategy to address areas of multiple deprivation and support to the most vulnerable within our communities. It also plays its part in maintaining sustainable neighbourhoods, contributing to improved resident satisfaction levels, perceptions of a neighbourhood as a safe place to live, improved social interaction and promoting opportunities for physical activity. There is a clear synergy here with our corporate priorities.

7.4 Proposals

In responding to comments from our customers and reflecting upon the issues detailed above, discussions have taken place between Housing Services and Streetpride. These discussions have focussed upon how the housing service could legitimately invest HRA resources into the Streetpride service, to deliver an improved service offer on housing administered sites. The following proposals have been formulated from those discussions:

1. Increase the frequency of grass cutting to aged persons complexes from 5 cuts to 10 cuts. A financial contribution of £50k would be required from the HRA.
2. Increase the frequency of cuts to general housing land from 5 to 10 cuts. A financial contribution of £236,231 would be required from the HRA.

These costs relate to the 14/15 financial year (full year).

In the light of this years' experience and taking into account the impact on the HRA, it is proposed to fund additional grounds maintenance for all housing land at a cost of £286,000 p.a. (full year cost) for the financial years 2014/15 and 2015/16. Further consideration will be required in the light of experience and budget availability as to the years 16/17 onwards.

Streetpride have also requested assistance to open up access to certain green spaces to allow drive on mowers to enable maintenance to be undertaken more efficiently. The costs for this have not yet been determined, but where this is practicable and accords with tenants wishes, this will be addressed.

Further consideration will need to be given to the opportunities for, and affordability of, undertaking further environmental improvements in respect of shrub and flower beds. It is proposed to bring a further report in respect of this issue in advance of summer 2015.

8. Finance

The Streetpride service is financed solely from the General Fund. There is no HRA contribution to costs at present.

The proposed additional 5 cuts to HRA land will require an investment of £286k p.a. from the HRA.

Limited additional but as yet not identified HRA capital resources will be required for fence alterations to enable wider access for lawnmowers.

Financial provision from the HRA has been made for these two items for 14/15 and 15/16.

9. Risks and uncertainties.

In order to comply with CIPFA regulations with regard to use of HRA resources, HRA funding could only be used to support an enhanced service offer specifically to tenants.

The proposal will create a two tier service offer, with Council housing areas receiving a superior service to non-housing areas. The public presentation of this would need to be carefully considered.

Removing the service beyond the two year period is likely to result in environmental decline and concerns for tenants.

10. Background Papers and Consultation.

Financial Services have been consulted with regard to the proposals. Discussions have been held with Streetpride to formulate the proposals detailed above.

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