

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:-	Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods
2.	Date:-	29th September 2014
3.	Title:-	Evaluation of Vulnerable Tenants Gardening Scheme
4.	Directorate:-	NEIGHBOURHOOD & ADULT SERVICES

5. Summary

On the 21st May 2013, the Directorate Leadership Team received a report which detailed recommendations to provide alternative delivery arrangements for the vulnerable tenants gardening scheme.

This report provides an evaluation of the alternative delivery arrangements implemented.

6. Recommendations

That Cabinet Member,

- **Agrees to allocate £5000 from the Housing Revenue Account to cover any future garden rectification works required by Council tenants who approach Age UK Rotherham for a regular garden service.**

7. Details

7.1 Background

Up until 2nd 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 was 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 introduced 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)
- Morrison FS 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 these 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).

7.2 Implementation

On 21st 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 the Directorate Leadership Team's decision, Rotherham MBC gave the existing clients prior notice of the intention to transfer services to Age UK Rotherham as from 3rd June 2013 as well as details of the charging system to enable them to opt out if so required.

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 Rotherham MBC's 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 tenant's garden is approximately 30m long, the revised charging scheme would have had a major financial impact on him. Officers liaised with the tenant and carried out mutually agreed remediation work to make the garden more manageable and therefore ensuring the new charging system wouldn't financially impact the tenant.

7.3 Evaluation

Since Age UK Rotherham started the service in June, all tenants were contacted at least twice to establish relationships and need. Final letters were sent to everyone they had been unable to contact to aim to evoke a response.

Throughout the project, details of 190 council housing tenants were transferred over to Age UK Rotherham and of these; 86 tenants accessed the gardening service during the 12 month project. Of the 86, 79 have requested / accessed the gardening service beyond the end of the project. (49 monthly cuts and 30 3xyear)

Age UK Rotherham has maintained a record of the 111 tenants who declined the service and where possible, indicated reasons why service was not taken up.

These reasons included;	40	unable to contact
	13	family help / managing themselves
	12	using other provider
	8	service too expensive
	4	tenants deceased.

During the project Age UK Rotherham identified where tenants had not received an adequate service from the previous contractor to keep their gardens tidy. Rotherham MBC supplied additional funding that enabled Age UK Rotherham to undertake 'one off' garden rescues to bring tenants gardens back to a manageable state. Tenants were then able to make an informed choice as to what service they wanted to access on a regular basis to ensure their gardens remained tidy. A case study from one of the garden rescues is detailed in Appendix 1.

In total Age UK Rotherham undertook 24 half day rescues and 24 full day rescues.

The funding provided by Rotherham MBC has enabled Age UK Rotherham to offer gardening services to more older people across the borough, supporting them to maintain their gardens and continue to live independently and safe in their own homes. Age UK

Rotherham gardening client base has substantially expanded, making their service more sustainable long term.

7.4 Next steps

Going forward there is the potential for Rotherham MBC to fund further garden rectification work for council tenants who approach Age UK Rotherham for a regular garden service. This rescue work would cost in the region of £150 per day plus disbursements and be agreed on a case by case basis.

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 was 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

The cost of enabling Age UK Rotherham to undertake the garden rectification work due to the gardens not being duly maintained as part of Rotherham MBC's gardening scheme was £6,140.00

Age UK Rotherham has confirmed that the project has developed sufficiently so that they are able to operate the scheme within its own financial arrangements and no further funding is required. However, there may be the need to provide Age UK Rotherham with further funding to undertake garden rescues for Council tenants who want to take up a regular garden service. It is therefore recommended that Rotherham MBC allocate £5000 from the Housing Revenue Account to cover any future garden rectification work for council tenants

9. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

This scheme supported Council priorities;

- CP2 – Protecting our most vulnerable people and families, enabling them to maximise their independence
- CP3 – Ensuring all areas of Rotherham are safe, clean and well maintained

10. Background Papers and Consultation

DLT – 21st May 2013 - Vulnerable Tenants Gardening Scheme
Appendix 1 – Garden Rescue Case Study

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Garden Rescue Case study

About the person...
Mrs ██████ lives in a council property with her husband on ██████. She and her husband had been placed on the RMBC vulnerable list to receive assistance with their garden due to their disabilities.
What were the problems?
<p>Mrs Holden has spondylosis of the spine and epilepsy and her husband is registered blind, so they struggle to maintain the garden to satisfy their tenancy agreement.</p> <p>Although Mrs Holden is under 55, we were able to support her under the grant funding supplied to Age UK Rotherham by Rotherham MBC. We identified that Mrs Holden had not received gardening services from the previous provider for over a year and her garden had become very overgrown and was causing her some distress.</p> <p>The assessment by the gardener identified a large garden - overgrown grass to the front, side and back of the property and hedges to the front and back of the property also needed cutting back.</p>
How did we help?
Utilising funding provided by RMBC, Age UK Rotherham were able to provide 2 gardeners to undertake a full day garden rescue to bring the garden back into a tidy state. They were able to offer Mrs Holden a suitable, affordable garden service, which would support her to maintain her garden on an ongoing basis.
WHAT OUTCOMES DID YOU ACHIEVE?
Mrs Holden is now buying in a monthly garden tidy service from Age UK Rotherham and is considering increasing this to a fortnightly service during the summer months. This service supports Mr and Mrs Holden to remain independent and safe in their property.
QUOTES/FEEDBACK FROM OLDER PERSON
<i>"I am very pleased with Age UK Rotherham's gardening service. I was quite upset at the state of my garden last year, when I'd been left, but when the garden rescue was done, it made me feel a lot better - I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I am having a monthly service now and Jack has been providing this – he's a lovely lad and gets done what he can in the hour I'm paying for. I appreciate with the size of the garden that he can only trim back and dispose of the grass and I'm pleased with what can be done in this time. I am now thinking about a fortnightly service to make the garden even better!"</i>