

Subject: Grounds Maintenance Review. Progress update
Date of Meeting: 13 December 2010
Report of: Strategic Director of Place
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Key Decision: No
Wards Affected: All

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

- 1.1 To provide a progress report on the review of grounds maintenance service on housing management owned land. The revised specification for the grounds maintenance service is being developed with CityParks using pilot locations to test and cost out the service improvements.
- 1.2 The scope of the review is large and complex and the original aim was to have the revised service in place by April 2011. The project has made good progress and some positive changes to service arrangements have already implemented delivering better value for money. However in the course of the project we have realised that to make the changes that will deliver an improved service without additional cost for the long term more time is required. We will continue to develop the service and implement improvements but need to extend the lifetime of the project with a view to have a fully revised and computerised specification by October 2011.
- 1.3 The Grounds Maintenance contract was last looked at in 2004 as part of the wider citywide contract, so this current project seeks to draw out what changes may have taken place on affected housing land.
- 1.4 The revised service will be benchmarked with other local authorities in order to demonstrate the new service delivers value for money.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) That members of HMCC note the contents of the report.

3. RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION/CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS:

- 3.1 The project officer has been working alongside the Estate Service Monitoring Group which consists of two representatives from each of the four panels, a leaseholder, sheltered housing action group and high rise action group member.
- 3.2 The group includes the Operational Managers for CityParks and Estate Services. Collectively we have explored with this group of residents their concerns and identified what are the core issues with the service.
- 3.3 The grounds maintenance plans for all housing sites (approximately 250) have now been checked by CityParks team leaders. Seventy sites have been identified where the 2004 plans are incorrect. These sites now need to be redrawn to enable us to share meaningful plans with residents and remeasured to enable adjustment of the Bill of Quantities.
- 3.4 Ownership of any additional areas to be maintained will need to be verified with property services records to ensure areas being added are on Housing Land.
- 3.5 It is worth noting that if we continue to allow residents choice and flexibility in the future the plans and Bill of Quantities will keep getting out of date. We will have an officer focusing on putting the information on a computer data base over the next 3 months, so we will be able to make changes more easily in future. When the Bill of Quantities is complete we will be able to carry out in depth financial analysis of costs and target existing resources more effectively to achieve better value for money.
- 3.6 Checks made by the Grounds Maintenance Review Group (ESMG) have uncovered some further confusion over who maintains some beds. All Housing Offices have been given a set of the Grounds Maintenance Plans so that officers can flag up any discrepancies.
- 3.7 Although the overall effect of these adjustments on the grounds maintenance cost for Housing are likely to be small the recharge being made to Housing on some sites will change dramatically.
- 3.8 Since the last report on 14 June 2010 we have initiated pilot areas successfully and details are in the appendix attached which summarises some of the service developments. Residents surveyed are demonstrating extreme views about their grounds maintenance service. ESGM members are supportive and proactive and have strong views about the service, but the group are often able to achieve a consensus of opinion, despite these differing views.
- 3.9 The Grounds Maintenance Review has raised much interest amongst residents groups. When the Project Officer and CityParks Operations Manager have been contacted by resident groups, these officers have attended walkabouts. This has given residents the opportunity to ask questions and comment on the standards of the grounds maintenance. On

some sites, officers have acknowledged that the standards need to be improved and an action plan has been agreed and put in place. On other occasions, resident's expectations are found to exceed what should be achieved under the service contract.

- 3.10 The project has identified overlapping services that are not properly integrated between CityParks and Estate Services. Improvements have been made around the areas of litter picking and maintenance of hard surfaces. Estate Services staff are now litter picking beyond the immediate circulation routes and including shrub beds. This helps to keep the estates litter free and assists CityParks operatives to concentrate on maintaining the grounds.
- 3.11 Weed control on hard surfaces is not included within the contract. Estate Services have identified the ten worst sites for weeds that present a Health & Safety trip hazard for pedestrians. Arrangements are being trialled whereby CityParks operatives are now spraying paths and hard surfaces and Estate Service staff return and remove and dispose of the dead weeds. The desired outcome is to develop a programme of weed control across housing sites.
- 3.12 Within our housing sites we have some 2,500 garages and car parking spaces that are managed by the Car Parks & Garages team. They are currently investigating the possibility of the weed control of these areas being included in the Highways contract. Currently weed control is carried out on an ad hoc basis by CityParks on request. This is expensive and does not present value for money on large sites. The Highway contractors use quad bikes that have extendable arms that are much more cost effective when spraying large car parking garages and forecourts. The square meterage of these sites is being measured so a cost can be calculated.
- 3.13 The project is focusing on achieving value for money, by providing more of the same for no extra money. For instance, CityParks are not charging for the weed control of hard surfaces and Estate Services are scheduling regular litter picks beyond the immediate flats.
- 3.14 The project is promoting access, customer care and diversity to enable residents a real opportunity to make their views known about the service. The Project Officers are attending residents meetings, responding to telephone, email enquires and collate data from the questionnaires returns.
- 3.15 Some resident groups are receiving a lot of officer time which is good in respect to customer care and providing the service that those groups want, but this cannot be sustained beyond the term of the review. Housing officers will be expected to take an overview of the grounds maintenance service when out on the estates as some things are apparent, i.e. shrub beds not maintained or verge edgings not cut to liaise closely with CityParks. CityParks Managers also have a responsibility to check that standards are met.

- 3.16 The project group have been working closely with the Housing & Estate Forum which operates within the Turning the Tide Project covering Moulsecoomb, Bevendean and Coldean areas. Local residents, including ESMG members have been trained up as resident assessors to score their estate under an initiative called 'Rate your Estate'. The inspection process and arrangements are being finalised and will be rolled out to all housing offices across the City. These inspections will not replace the quarterly estates inspections currently carried out by Housing Officers, but will enable residents to have some control over the standard of services provided by Estate Services and CityParks.
- 3.17 A Tree Warden scheme is being developed which will utilise Community Wardens to fulfil this role. The Community Wardens will receive basic training in Spring 2011 from the Arboriculture team regarding what to look for re dangerous and diseased trees, which they could refer through to the team for action.
- 3.18 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.
- 3.19 A grounds maintenance service pledge has been established that we will consider wildlife and bio- diversity when completing works such as planting wildflowers and ensuring new shrub planting is suitable for wildlife.

4. CONSULTATION

- 4.1 Set out the Appendix – 'Evaluation of Phase 1 Grounds Maintenance pilot areas' are the results of the questionnaire and consultation with residents of Nettleton Court & Dudeney Lodge and Wickhurst Rise Maisonette Flats.

5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 5.1 The costs associated with carrying out this review are being met from within the 2010-11 and 2011-12 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budgets with no additional resources being necessary. Paragraph 3.7 states that the service is likely to cost the same overall and therefore there should be no financial impact on the HRA as a whole. However, the current grounds maintenance service charges paid by tenants and leaseholders are based on the original specification with City Parks on a block by block basis. Therefore, if any changes are made to the contract specification, service charges will need to be re-calculated in order to reflect the new service.

Finance Officer Consulted: Monica Brooks Date: 15th November 2010

Legal Implications:

- 5.2 As the report is for noting only, there are no significant legal or Human Rights Act implications to draw to Members' attention.

Lawyer Consulted: Liz Woodley Date: 17 November 2010

Equalities Implications:

- 5.3 Research suggests that there is a strong correlation between economic and environmental deprivation and poorer communities tend to live in more polluted and less green locations. Residents of social housing are therefore more likely to live in areas of poor environmental quality (Neighbourhoods Green (2004) Decent Homes Decent spaces). In order to minimise any negative impacts throughout the city an impact assessment will be undertaken during this review

Sustainability Implications:

- 5.4 This project supports the council's sustainability strategy and clear environmental benefits could be gained from the development of a new specification including reducing the cities carbon footprint and protecting and enhancing nature conservation interest within the city.

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 5.5 Through the development of a new specification there is an opportunity to ensure that issues of community safety are considered in the design and maintenance of green spaces and communal areas

Risk & Opportunity Management Implications:

- 5.6 None

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 5.7 The development of a new specification for the delivery of our grounds maintenance service will have citywide implications for council tenants and leaseholders

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

1. Evaluation of the first phase of Grounds Maintenance pilot areas - Questionnaire results from Nettleton Court & Dudeney Lodge and Wickhurst Rise Maisonettes

Documents in Members' Rooms

1. None

Background Documents

1. None