

Report to Tenant Services Management Board 25th September 2017

Recommendation on Specification for the Grounds Maintenance Service and proposed weekly charge to tenants from April 2018.

Report Authors: Neil Anderson Strategy and Partnership Officer and Richard Burge Open Spaces Manager.

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides detail on the work that has taken place to date into the review of the current content and arrangement for the delivery of grounds maintenance service to land.
- 1.2 The report describes the work that has taken place since the progress report provided to the TSMB in October.
- 1.3 The report is based on consultation that has taken place with representatives of the 3 main Tenants Groups
- 1.4 Provides detail of proposed improvements to the specification and potential savings to the service that could be made.

2.0 Background.

Taunton Deane Housing and Communities established a project team in September 2016 to review the current grounds maintenance agreement that is in place with the TDDB Deane DLO Open Spaces Team.

The work the Open Spaces team currently undertake on behalf of the Housing and Communities Service is based on the original 1997 Specification of the Contract that was updated to a new agreement in 2006. Since this time, the Open Spaces team has provided services as instructed by the Housing and Communities Service.

Since the last report to the Tenant Services Management Board (TSMB) on the 27th of March 2017 outlining progress that had been made, further work has taken place involving tenants in the review including a tour of the district, the establishment of a tenants panel made up of representatives from the TSMB, Sheltered Housing Development Group (SHDG) and Tenants Forum (TF).

There has also been a demonstration of a mulching mower in August which tenant representatives also attended.

The content of this report and the recommendations relating to the proposed specification and increase in service charge have all been before and agreed by the Tenants Forum at their meeting on the 12th of September.

3.0 Work that has taken place.

The project group has continued to meet approximately monthly to report on progress made in the review and to identify issues that require further research.

The report presented to the TSMB in March was also presented to both the TF and SHDG.

In May 2017 a tour of various sites throughout the district took place at which tenants from the TSMB, TF and SHDG attended with staff from Housing and Communities and Open Spaces.

The purpose of this tour was to inspect areas to see examples of good and bad practice and to agree between the various parties what tenants felt was an acceptable standard.

Following this tour it was decided to establish a task group of tenant representatives from the TSMB, SHDG and the TF.

This group has now met twice, at the meetings the group has been provided with detail on the costs of each part of the specification and of how the inclusion or exclusion of different items from the grounds maintenance specification effects the overall weekly charge to tenants.

Discussion with those tenants present took place on what panel members wanted to be included in the specification. Council officers made recommendations on what should be included to protect the council's assets and ensure the health and safety of tenants

The final recommendation of this group on the items that they wish to be included in specification and resultant weekly charge is shown in appendix 1.

The group last met on the 22nd of August. Prior to the meeting of this group, the panel members were invited to attend a demonstration of 4 different methods of cutting grass including a mulching mower at Wellsprings Road.

Due to the condition of the grass, which was deliberately left long to show how various machines performed, the demonstration of the mulching mower was not as successful as hoped as it is designed for shorter grass. However, further investigation into the use of this type of mower and potential cost savings to the service will continue. The ultimate decision as to which mowers will be required to best deliver the agreed service specification will rest with the Open Spaces Manager. New mowers will be leased so that they can be returned or changed if required.

3.1 Chosen Specification.

As described above the tenants group have recommended that the choice of the specification is as shown in appendix 1.

This would result in an annual cost to the council of £538,996.14 at weekly service charge of £ 1.84.

The council and tenants group recognise that this represents a substantial increase on the current weekly charge of **£0.81p**, but collectively officers and tenants are confident that this will result in improvements to the service and ensure the long term sustainability of the service, which until now has been underfunded. It should be noted that although the current weekly charge has only been 81p, the actual weekly cost has been £1.12 per week (as shown in Appendix A), with the annual budget overspend being taken from other HRA budgets. In context, comparisons from other Somerset social landlords show that their charges range from £1.50 to £2.50 per week. This is significantly more than TDBC tenants have been charged and helps explain why our service has been unable to afford to meet the standards that tenants might expect until now.

For those tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit, service charges are covered by this benefit so they will not have to pay for the increase in level of service charge.

The specification also reflects those areas which are the cause of the highest number of complaints, that is: trees, bramble (plus hedges and bushes) and grass cutting. The panel and officers have recognised the necessity of ensuring that these elements are included in the specification and are properly resourced. In particular, in relation to trees, this is one area of work which both officers and tenant felt had to be resourced to protect both the health and safety of tenants and the council's assets.

The specification maintains the current level of grass cutting of a maximum of 15 cuts for non-supported housing areas and a maximum of 15 of cut and collect on supported housing schemes (this definition includes both sheltered housing and extra care housing).

The panel have also made the decision to remove the following items from the current specification in order to make savings to the overall cost of the service and to prevent the service charge rising further. These items are as follows:

The provision of hanging baskets, removal of existing rose beds, this will provide a saving of just over £18,000 to the total overall cost.

We are confident that if the Tenants Forum accepts the need to increase the service charge and adopt this specification it will improve the standard of ground maintenance on our estates and lead to noticeable improvements in the appearance of land owned by Housing and Communities, in particular in the communal areas.

3.2 Service Standard

The agreed Service Standard is shown in appendix 2. This is the standard which will be published to tenants and made available on the Council's website.

Alongside the service standard is a new clearer and simpler Service Specification, shown in Appendix 3, this is the specification that Open Spaces will deliver and be monitored against.

The new specification and service standard will have the following benefits:

- Provide a clear, costed, improved service standard for tenants.

- A clear service standard for both Open Space staff and Housing staff to work with,
- Make it simpler for all involved to understand the expected service standard that will be delivered.
- Enable improved monitoring of contract.

3.3 Provision of budget for clearing back log of works.

Work is currently underway to establish a costed programme of work to tackle those areas in our Housing Estate which we believe require additional attention to bring them up to the agreed standard. These works are above and beyond the normal maintenance works that the service standard will deliver and will address a backlog of work which has not been carried out over recent years. Once this programme has been identified we will need to work with the HRA Accountant to try and identify a budget to tackle these areas, or at a minimum the areas that are 'top of the list' and most need attention.

Once a budget can be found and this backlog of work addressed, the new grounds maintenance specification will then be able to keep all areas of Housing land in good condition as described in the new service standard. Dependent on the size of the budget available and the length of the list of works, we anticipate that it will take between one and two years to complete works on these areas.

If approved, this budget will allow the Open Spaces Team to take on additional staff to tackle the backlog of work, without affecting service delivery. This is something which has not been possible before, since diverting staff to tackle e.g. an overgrown area has resulted in failure to provide the service to another area.

Once this programme of work has been identified it will be published and made available to tenants. TSMB should be aware that although the new service standard will be applicable from April 2018 and that work will be carried out to that level, areas where there has been a backlog (e.g. significantly overgrown trees) will not meet the standard until the backlog has been addressed.

3.3 Mulching Machines

The effectiveness of mulching mowers is still under investigation but it is anticipated that they will be trialled from April 2018 and used alongside conventional mowers.

The introduction of mulching machines will improve efficiency of cuts and lead to cost savings through Open Spaces not having to dispose of grass cuttings which currently results in an annual cost of £30,000.

4.0 Recommendations of Tenants Forum

The contents of this report and the recommendations of the Tenants Panel have all been before the Tenants Forum at their meeting held on the 12th of September

The Forum unanimously approved the new specification and the increase in service charge, but did raise a number of questions including the level of contribution towards the cost of the service from the General Fund, how will the service be

monitored and how will the Council ensure that the standard of service meets the new enhanced specification.

5.0 Conclusion

Housing and Communities and Open Spaces are confident that the recommended increase in service charge, while recognising the increase in service quality and cost is substantial, will provide sufficient budget for the service to be properly resourced. The project has highlighted that the service has been consistently underfunded, which has led to the current situation where the staff who provide the service have been stretched beyond the capacity to provide the standard of service expected by tenants and that the staff aspire to.

The review and the recommendations of the project group are also a direct result of the concerns raised by tenants regarding the provision of the Grounds Maintenance Service. Those enhancements to the service are the result of the consultation carried out so far with tenants and reflect their wishes for an improved service.

The improvements to the service cannot be made with increasing the cost of the service but which will benefit all tenants.

The project has also shown that in comparison to other providers the level of the proposed service charge is well below that charged by other social housing providers.

With the increase in the level of service charge and together with the budget to tackle the backlog of work, we are confident that the issues of inconsistency and variable standard of the service will be addressed.

We recognise that further work will be needed to develop how we monitor the quality and delivery of the contract and this will be more robust than what has happened in the past. We expect tenants will play a significant role in this. Following approval of the service standard and service charge, the next step of this project is to focus on how we will monitor and hold the service to account, as well as how we communicate this standard to everyone.

The authors of the report wish to work with staff involved in providing and monitoring the service to develop this, but we also recognise the important role tenants have to play in this. Therefore, we recommend that the current Tenant Panel, that was established to assist with the review, is invited to perform this role.

For example The Panel could take part in estate walkabouts, spot inspections and a whole array of other potential possibilities.

One way that the standard can be verified in future will be to instruct the Open Space operatives to take pictures of the areas where they have just completed work to compare against the approved standard.

There are many opportunities for using digital technology to assist with performance monitoring and to ensure that the standard is met.

We recognise that there is still work to be done in producing an effective monitoring process, but the project team are confident a structure can be put in place for April 2018 to achieve this aim.

The project group recommends that the contract should be reviewed every 3 years, however, with effective contract monitoring this may not be necessary since the monitoring process should deal with issues so that the specification accurately reflects any concerns of tenants and they are addressed without unnecessary delay. The period between implementation of the new specification and the next review is something that can be agreed between the project group and the proposed Tenants Panel.

The project group is also keen to ensure that both the increase in the service charge (if approved) and the implementation of the new specification is publicised and made available to as many tenants as possible through all available media, e.g. the newsletters and Taunton Deane Web page. Work will continue on this part of the project in the next 6 months.

The improvements in the standard of service delivery will lead to an improved visual appearance of the landscaped areas on our estates, in particular in areas which have previously been neglected. While the increase in the level of service charge will ensure that the service is properly resourced.

Both Housing and Communities and Open Spaces are committed to ensuring the successful implementation of the specification and recognise that this is an ongoing process, with the long term aim of improving levels of satisfaction with the service and a reduction in number of complaints.

The service will be proactive in identifying issues before they become a problem rather than reacting to tenant's complaints. This will result in savings to tenants through not having to report problems as they will be dealt with in advance through staff taking a proactive approach.

There will be a need to review the level of service charge made each year and to ensure that it keeps pace with any increase in cost of delivery.

It is important for members of the TSMB to recognise that despite the improvements that will result from the introduction of the new specification and increase in service charge the Council is providing a grounds maintenance service not a gardening service. Therefore, the standard that will be provided will not be the equivalent to that provided in a park or for a formal garden.

However, we are confident this specification and the proposed increase in the annual charge will result in real improvements to the service.

6.0 Supported Housing Development Group

The recommendations of the Panel, the Forum and TSMB will also be reported to the next available meeting of the SHDG on 3rd of October, their comments can then

be reported back to the TSMB on the 16th of October when final approval for the increase in the level of service charge will be sought.

7.0 Finance Comments

The increase of costs to £538,996 results in an increase of the service charge of £1.03 per household. The greatest increase in costs are:

- Weed killing costs as a new service provision. This is broken down by weed kill on grass areas of £54,062 and weed spraying of paths at £23,844. This is a total of £77,906 or 27 pence per household per week.
- Annual tree maintenance as a new service provision at £63,326 or 22 pence per household per week.
- An additional 2 cuts of grass at an increase of £62,329 or 22 pence per household per week

The overall cost of the service continues to be offset by a contribution of £198,000 from the general fund which reflects that a proportion of properties have been subject to right to buy over the years.

There is no impact on the capital budget.

The prepared service schedule is intended to reflect on-going costs to ensure that the service provided does not result in a backlog of works. It is reasonable to expect that these costs will continue for the foreseeable future.

Historically approximately 50% of tenants are on housing benefit. Currently 2,751 households are on housing benefit and therefore they will have their increased contribution covered by their housing benefit. Service charges remain an eligible cost under the Universal Credit benefit system.

There are no investment or borrowing implications with this project.

8.0 Recommendations:

That the Tenant Services Management Board approves the following recommendations:

- 1. The implementation of the new specification from the 1st of April 2018**
- 2. The increase in the level of the service charge to £1.84 per week from April 2018.**
- 3. That Council Officers carry out further work on establishing a robust system of monitoring, the outcome of which is reported back to TSMB in March 2018.**
- 4. The Current Tenant Panel is invited to become Tenant monitoring panel for the new specification which will be responsible for reporting on a regular basis to the TSMB on the performance the contract.**
- 5. The appropriate officers of the Council provide a progress report to the TSMB on how any new charges and new specification will be publicised to tenants in January 2018.**

- 6. Officers from both Housing and Communities and Open Spaces will report on a quarterly basis on progress of the new specification commencing April 2018.**

Appendix 1 TSMB

CURRENT SCHEDULE

	Number	Unit Cost	Total Cost
Standard Grass Cutting - General Needs	13	£ 14,737.90	£ 191,592.70
Standard Grass Cutting - Sheltered	0	£ 2,350.65	£ -
Premium Grass Cutting - General Needs	0	£ 44,213.70	£ -
Premium Grass Cutting - Sheltered	15	£ 7,051.96	£ 105,779.40
Selective Weedkill of Grass areas	0	£ 54,062.00	£ -
Hedge Maintenance (Annual)	1	£ 40,209.98	£ 40,209.98
Pre-Season Trim of Hedges	0	£ 7,548.00	£ -
Summer Flower Beds (Annual)	1	£ 17,521.58	£ 17,609.83
Autumn Flower Beds (Annual)	1	£ 9,532.47	£ 10,944.22
Summer Floral Planters (Annual)	1	£ 2,751.14	£ 2,751.14
Autumn Floral Planters (Annual)	1	£ 550.46	£ 550.46
Rose Beds (Annual)	1	£ 14,939.13	£ 14,939.13
Hanging Baskets (per basket)	80	£ 45.71	£ 3,656.80
Shrub Beds (Per pruning)	12	£ 7,363.05	£ 88,356.60
Maintenance of Trees (Annual)**	1	£ 42,000.00	£ 42,000.00
Cleansing & Litter Collection (Annual)	1	£ 7,312.01	£ 7,312.01
Edging of paths	0	£ 22,644.00	£ -
Weedspraying of paths	0	£ 11,922.00	£ -
Weedkilling of all Hardsurfaced areas*	0	£ 3,000.00	£ -
Leaf Collection November - December	0	£ 30,192.00	£ -
General Fund Contribution (RTB)			-£ 198,000.00
		TOTAL	£ 327,702.27
Number of Tenants	5640		£ 1.12

ENHANCED SCHEDULE

	Number	Unit Cost	Total Cost
Standard Grass Cutting - General Needs	15	£ 14,737.90	£ 221,068.50
Standard Grass Cutting - Sheltered	0	£ 2,350.65	£ -
Premium Grass Cutting - General Needs	0	£ 44,213.70	£ -
Premium Grass Cutting - Sheltered	15	£ 7,051.96	£ 105,779.40
Selective Weedkill of Grass areas	1	£ 54,062.00	£ 54,062.00
Hedge Maintenance (Annual)	1	£ 40,209.98	£ 40,209.98
Pre-Season Trim of Hedges	1	£ 7,548.00	£ 7,548.00
Summer Flower Beds (Annual)	1	£ 17,521.58	£ 17,609.83
Autumn Flower Beds (Annual)	1	£ 9,532.47	£ 10,944.22
Summer Floral Planters (Annual)	1	£ 2,751.14	£ 2,751.14
Autumn Floral Planters (Annual)	1	£ 550.46	£ 550.46
Rose Beds (Annual)	0	£ 14,939.13	£ -
Hanging Baskets (per basket)	0	£ 45.71	£ -
Shrub Beds (Per pruning)	12	£ 7,363.05	£ 88,356.60
Maintenance of Trees (Annual)**	1	£ 98,124.00	£ 98,124.00
Cleansing & Litter Collection (Annual)	1	£ 7,312.01	£ 7,312.01
Edging of paths	1	£ 22,644.00	£ 22,644.00
Weedspraying of paths	2	£ 11,922.00	£ 23,844.00
Weedkilling of all Hardsurfaced areas*	2	£ 3,000.00	£ 6,000.00
Leaf Collection November - December	1	£ 30,192.00	£ 30,192.00
General Fund Contribution (RTB)			-£ 198,000.00
		TOTAL	£ 538,996.14
Number of Tenants	5640		£ 1.84

£10,000 Additional Service = 3.4p per week per tenant

*Patios, Garage Forecourts, Hardstandings

**Full time team of two assigned to Housing - Crown Raising, lifting to 2.5m, pruning back to prevent structural damage and quality of life improvements such as trees overpowering properties.

reactive repairs would be more responsive with a dedicated team able to deal with issues within days rather than weeks or months.



Housing Service Grounds Maintenance

Taunton Deane's Open Spaces team is responsible for cutting our areas of communal grass, the routine maintenance of communal shrub beds and hedges, and the weeding and moss removal on communal pathways. Grass cutting includes removing any litter before the cut and blowing all clippings from pathways back onto the grass and, for Supported Housing areas, the collection of any clippings.

Instead of choosing a frequency for tasks to be carried out, such as grass cutting, the Open Spaces team will make sure that a specified standard is met at all times. We are using this visual guide to set out the standard and we hope that it gives both you and the Open Spaces team a visual reference to ensure that the standard is being met.

Each of the tasks listed in this guide have a set of standards, Grade A is what the area should look like just after the Open Spaces team have finished work, Grade B is how it should look just before they return and Grade C is an indicator of when an area has been missed or maintained to an unacceptable standard. Over the course of the year hedges and grass will grow at different rates and during periods of peak growing weather this can put the Open Spaces team under pressure to keep up so we would appreciate your help to let the team know if any areas reach Grade C so they can be attended to as soon as possible. You can reach the team at parks@tauntondeane.gov.uk

Some points to bear in mind:

- We expect all dog owners to act in a responsible manner and pick up after their pets. If this isn't the case and the Open Spaces team are forced to postpone grass cutting due to excessive faeces in communal areas it will be reported to the Housing Team. Once the waste has been cleared the grass will be scheduled to be cut again.
- Our trees will be getting regular attention and maintenance from experienced and skilled staff, Trees will not be felled, cut back or pruned purely to improve TV or radio reception or to light a property.
- We will be introducing selective weed control to our green open spaces and paths, the Open Spaces team will never use any products that are not safe for pets and wildlife.
- All work will be scheduled and attended to in turn, we welcome any comments but would encourage you to give the team time to deal with Grade B areas and only report areas for attention if they reach Grade C.
- Bringing all areas up to this standard will take some time, both the Housing and Open Spaces teams are committed to achieving this goal and trust that you will support us while we get there.

Hedge and Shrub Maintenance



Grade A – Good

Shrubs and Hedges well maintained and of good appearance.



Grade B – Satisfactory

Shrubs and hedges are well maintained but in need of some maintenance.

Between April – July Hedges will show growth and will not be cut back.

You should not see a lower standard than this.



Grade C – Unacceptable

Shrubs or hedges not maintained for a considerable time,

Significant reduction in available path width due to overgrowth.

Trip hazard due to trailing brambles.

Grass Cutting



Grade A - Good

Grass has been recently cut, is level and no areas have been missed. Edges are well maintained and the area is predominantly weed free.

This standard should be found after each visit.



Grade A – Good (Sheltered Housing Only)

Grass has been recently cut, is level and no areas have been missed. Edges are well maintained and the area is predominantly weed free.

Grass clippings have been collected.

This standard should be found after each visit.



Grade B - Satisfactory

Grass is in need of some attention and the next cut should be within the next 1-2 weeks.

Weeds may be growing but not well established.

You should not see a lower standard than this.



Grade C – Unacceptable

Grass is overgrown, edges are not maintained and weeds are well established.

If you see areas in an unacceptable condition please contact parks@tauntondeane.gov.uk

Flower Beds & Planters



Grade A - Good

Good coverage from a variety of plants
Weeded and maintained regularly



Grade B – Acceptable

Good coverage but some weeds in evidence
Some variety of plants

This is the lowest standard that you should see



Grade C – Unacceptable

Plants insufficient to present an attractive display

Borders not maintained

Tree Maintenance



Grade A – Good

Trees crown raised appropriately providing clear views

Growth prevented from damaging buildings



Grade B – Acceptable

Tree in some need of attention but poses no health & safety risk

Maintenance would be needed within 6 months

No physical impact on nearby buildings

This is the lowest standard that you should see



Grade C – Unacceptable

Trees unmaintained for a significant period

Tree growth impacting on building

Health & Safety risk

Weed spraying of Paths & Hard Surfaced Areas



Grade A – Good

Weeds and Moss free

No encroachment of grass or plants onto paved area.



Grade B – Acceptable

Some recent weed or moss growth

This is the lowest standard that you should see



Grade C – Unacceptable

No Weed control in over 12 months

Significant growth and impact on available path width



Housing Service Grounds Maintenance

Appendix 3

Grass Cutting

- Grass will be cut 15 times each year evenly with a good finish with no areas being left uncut, this may vary based on weather and growing conditions. All communal grass areas will be cleared of litter and debris before cutting.
- With the exception of Sheltered Housing Schemes cut grass will not be collected but blowers will be used to clear clippings from pathways and hard surfaces.
- On Sheltered Housing Schemes cut grass will be collected and disposed of except for areas where mower access is not possible where strimmers will be used and clippings blown away from paths and hard surfaces.
- To improve the quality of grass areas moss and weeds will be treated with the appropriate weed killer. We take care to use products that are not harmful to humans, pets or wildlife.
- Borders between grassed areas, paths and hard surfaced areas will be defined and cut over the winter period to maintain a neat and pleasant appearance. Debris will be cleared following edging.

Hedge and Shrub Maintenance

- Hedges and Shrubs will be trimmed to a uniform standard providing clear sight for access with weeds and brambles cut back during each visit. Hedges will be trimmed once per year and shrubs on a monthly schedule.
- Obstructions to access areas and footpaths will be cleared.
- Due to legal restrictions hedges cannot be cut back between the end of March to the end of July with the exception of Health & Safety issues. Guidance is provided by the RSPCB.
- Weeds, brambles and overgrown shoots from Hedges will be trimmed back using hand tools mid-season to prevent obstructions to access areas and footpaths.
- Cuttings will be disposed of following trimming

Summer and Autumn Flower Beds & Planters

- Cultivate and provide a range of floral bedding plants to present an attractive display throughout the growing season
- Prepare beds and planters, rotavate, maintain edges and remove old bedding plants
- Weeding throughout the season
- Watering & fertilising three times per week during the summer and as needed dependant on weather conditions during the Autumn

Tree Maintenance

A proactive approach to tree maintenance including:

- Crown raising to 2.5m
- Pruning back of overhanging branches from housing structures
- Monitoring health of trees and carrying out necessary works
- Yearly inspection of all trees
- Trees will not be felled, cut back or pruned purely to improve TV or radio reception or to light a property
- Removal and disposal of all cuttings

Cleansing & Litter Collection

- Collection and disposal of litter
- Collection and disposal of sharps, needles and broken glass
- Removal of Fly Tipping
- Removal of dead animals
- Removal of animal faeces is not included, if the levels of faeces is widespread it will be reported to Housing and grass cutting may not be possible until the issue is resolved.

Weed spraying of Paths & Hard Surfaced Areas

- All paths, parking areas, garage areas, patios and hardstanding areas will be sprayed with selective weed killer twice per year.

Leaf Collection

- Between November & December each year leaves will be collected
- Disposal of leaves