

## **Report to Tenant Services Management Board**

**March 27<sup>th</sup> 2017**

### **Progress report on the review of the Grounds Maintenance Service**

**Report Authors: Neil Anderson Strategy and Partnership Officer and Richard Burge**

**Open Spaces Manager.**

#### **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 owned by the Housing Revenue Account.
- 1.2 While it acknowledges the concerns raised by the standard of maintenance of land owned by the general fund and Somerset County Council, this is outside of the scope of the review.
- 1.3 The current grounds maintenance service has been delivered in house by the Parks & Open Spaces Service based on a specification originally drawn up in 1997.
- 1.4 A new agreement was established in 2006, since this time the contract has effectively been rolled on year on year and it has not been properly reviewed again until this time.
- 1.5 This review has involved investigation into how other social landlords deliver their grounds maintenance service and the charges these landlords make to their tenants.
- 1.6 Detailed analysis of the nature of customer contact with the Parks & Open Spaces Service has taken place in order to identify areas for improvements in service delivery.
- 1.7 The report sets out the work undertaken so far and identifies further areas for improvement and how tenants should be involved in both setting an agreed standard of service and an agreed level of service provision.

#### **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 TDBC Deane DLO Open Spaces Team.

The work the Parks & Open Spaces team currently undertake on behalf of the Housing Department 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 Department.

Additional works are requested by Housing or are undertaken when necessary at the Parks & Open Spaces Manager's direction, if these works are outside of the scope of the original specification they are charged as additional works.

This agreement has been in place since 2006 and is clearly due for review both in terms of understanding required scope of works, quality and true cost for delivery of the service.

The review group was established to address the concerns and dissatisfaction raised by tenants of Taunton Deane highlighted in the Star Survey of 2015, in which 63 per cent of tenants who responded to the survey were satisfied with the grounds maintenance service. (Acuity Tenant and Leaseholders Satisfaction Survey 2015)

The results of this survey together with the Council's review of the quality of its customer service provided the impetus for the review of the current grounds maintenance agreement.

### **3. Work that has taken place.**

A project group has been established with key personnel involving Assistant Director's from Housing and Communities and Operational Delivery, the HRA accountant, plus representatives from Housing and Communities and Parks & Open Spaces.

The group has met approximately monthly and has identified the cost of the service and research is continuing into issues around service delivery and costs.

Research has also taken place into comparative costs of grounds maintenance service in other housing providers and examples of good practice.

### **3. Delivery of Service**

#### **3.1 Grass Cutting**

Grass is normally cut between 13 and 15 times between March to October, however, when weather conditions are at their best for grass growth this can necessitate an additional cut or even two additional cuts. This changes the demand on the service and it can be challenging to maintain grassed areas at an acceptable standard within reasonable time frames when grass growth is at its quickest.

The current trigger for an additional cut is the length of the grass. If grass growth is particularly quick in a season the appropriate manager within Open Spaces will make the decision to increase the number of cuts should grassed areas reach 100mm.

The table below shows the number of cuts for both general HRA owned grass areas and those that receive the cut and collect service against the cost of providing this service.

	14/15	15/16	16/17
Number of Cuts Only	13	13	13
Cost of Cut Only	£179,848	£187,341	£191,053
Number of Cuts & Collect	15	15	15
Cost of Cut & Collection	£96,175	£98,724	£105,779*

\* Forecast

Although the average cost per cut for Cut Only and Cut & Collect are superficially similar this is due to the comparatively small areas requiring the Cut & Collect standard. The actual cost of Cut & Collect which includes transportation and disposal of clippings to the Recycling Centre is closer to three times the cost of Cut Only for the same surface area.

### 3.2 Arboriculture Operations

For tree maintenance the working assumption used across the TDBC tree estate is that the council do not undertake works for aesthetic purposes. Generally tree maintenance works are limited to proactive and reactive safety works.

We have been able to identify that the Parks & Open Spaces team received 212 requests for work on trees from tenants, this gives an indication of the requests by volume but has no bearing on the amount of work that is created or the eventual costs, with different jobs being of vastly different scales.

It is important to remember that much of this work is for public safety reasons and the Council has a duty to undertake it. Trees that are potentially dangerous or likely to cause damage to property have to be dealt with.

This work is not currently included within the specification and it is reasonable therefore, that the future contract should include an amount for this purpose and a contingency sum for dealing with emergencies which may occur because of storm damage etc.

## 4. Budget vs expenditure

The following section provides members of the Tenant Services Management Board with information on the budget set in previous years for the provision of the Grounds Maintenance service against actual expenditure, i.e. the real cost of delivering all elements of the service.

The figure for the budget for grounds maintenance compared to the income received for this service is shown in the table 1 below:

**Table 1**

<b>Income</b>	<b>2013/14</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>2014/15</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>2015/16</b>	<b>Budget</b>
General fund Contribution	189,000		198,000		198,000	
Service Charges	227,724		227,130		232,275	
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>416,724</b>	<b>359100</b>	<b>425,130</b>	<b>370,600</b>	<b>430,275</b>	<b>378,000</b>
Estimated Total Spend	658,209	Overspend on budget	479,190	Overspend on budget	530,222	Overspend on budget
<b>Shortfall</b>	<b>241,484</b>	<b>299109</b>	<b>54,060</b>	<b>108,590</b>	<b>99,947</b>	<b>152222</b>

The table above illustrates the shortfall in the level of income collected against actual expenditure. During the last 3 financial years in order to complete necessary works and achieve a minimum standard of service there has been an overspend on the budget. The income collected is insufficient to cover the actual cost of delivering the service.

Members of the TSMB should be aware that any shortfall in the budget for grounds maintenance comes from the general housing revenue account budget. Any overspend on the grounds maintenance budget has to be met from the HRA budget, which therefore means there is less money available for investment in the housing stock.

To account for this properly, now we are aware of this, this should be reflected in ensuring service charges properly reflect the cost of the actual service.

Appendix 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the cost involved in providing the current specification and shows the total cost of providing the service.

## **5. Service Charges**

The following section provides more detailed explanation on services charges and compares the level of service charge made by Taunton Deane to tenants for grounds maintenance, to that made by other social landlords.

Taunton Deane base the service charge for grounds maintenance on an average cost per property. Other landlords who provide a grounds maintenance service that were contacted base their service charge on the square meterage of grass that is to be cut that relates to that particular property together with the frequency and standard of that cut for a particular area. Therefore, a sheltered scheme which has a large area of grass, is cut more regularly than a general open space and has the grass clippings collected pays a much higher service charge than a property which does not benefit from a communal garden. Taunton Deane Borough Council is currently unable to charge service charges in a sophisticated property by property way and this would require a significant investment in resources to charge in this way. Furthermore, TSMB has previously supported the principle of equalising the cost across all tenants to ensure that the service is affordable to everyone.

Information has been obtained from other landlords on the cost and level of service charge made to their tenants.

**Table 2 Comparative figures**

<b>Landlord</b>	<b>General Needs Tenants Service charge</b>	<b>Sheltered Housing Tenants Service Charge</b>
TDBC	0.79 per week *(increasing to 0.81p week in 2017/18)	0.79 per week** ( no extra charge for cut and collect)
Knightstone HA	£1.50 (cut & collect)	£1.50 (cut & collect)
Homes in Sedgemoor	Cost of communal areas aggregated, average cost per tenant of £2.50 per week	£2.50. No cut and collect, higher frequency of cuts, with mulching machines.
Yarlington	£1.27 per mt2	No cut and collect.
Magna	Cost based on area to be cut. Average cost £0.94. Cut and collect first cut of season only.	Average cost £1.63. Cut and collect first and last cut of season only.

\* The HRA accountant has advised that the actual cost of the provision of the Grounds maintenance service per tenant is £1.12 (assuming a 2% void rate).

\*\*While the cost of cut and collect is £2.41 per week. Therefore based on these costs there is a shortfall in the service charge of between 33p and £1.62 per week (for cut and collect).

For 2017/18 service charges will increase to 81p per week, which still leaves a short fall of between 31p and £1.60 per week in terms of funding for this service.

Also the budget for grounds maintenance includes other items in addition to just grass cutting, it includes charges for communal paths and water courses.

These figures are based on maintaining the same services as currently provided. Part of this review is to identify more cost effective ways to provide some services and to provide Tenants with the opportunity to influence which of the non-essential services they wish to include in the future specification. This will allow tenants to decide on the standard of service and to have some control over the costs.

The table 3 below shows some examples of the standard of service provided by other landlords.

**Table 3 Service standards**

Landlord	Grass Cutting period	No. of cuts General areas	No. cuts sheltered schemes	Remove Litter	Paths	Weeds	Prune Hedges	Prune Shrubs
<b>KHA</b>	March to October	Every 2 weeks Grass Cuttings To be removed	Every 2 weeks Grass Cuttings to be removed,	Yes , unless too big for van	Y- check paths, parking areas etc.	Remove by hand Or chemicals	Twice a year by Sept, avoiding nesting birds.	November to February
<b>Mid Devon</b>	March to October	10 cuts	20 cuts	Yes, but not animal faeces	Cleared, also swept by in house team	No selective weed killing	Yes/ August-Sept.	4 times a year. Planning to Have monthly inspections
<b>TDBC</b>	March to October	13 cuts	15 cuts	Yes	As requested as Additional Works	Rose & Shrub beds cleared	Yes/ August - September	12 times per year

## 6. Complaints analysis.

This section describes the results of the analysis of the nature of the customer contacts made to the Parks and Open Spaces team.

Since May 2016 the Parks and Open Spaces Service started to collect detailed information on the nature and number of customer contacts received relating to various grounds maintenance issues.

In period May – December 2016 there were a total of 61 complaints recorded by the Parks department.

This was out of a total number of customer contacts of 556.

This total was made up of the following categories

Complaint: 61

Enquiry 57

Request 438

The largest single category for complaints, enquiries and requests was for issues around trees which resulted in 229 contacts.

Table 4 below provides a breakdown of the main categories which resulted in a complaint, enquiry or request for service during May – December 2016.

**Table 4 (May – December 2016)**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Grass Cutting</b>	<b>Brambles</b>	<b>Bushes/ Shrubs</b>	<b>Trees</b>	<b>Weeds/leaves</b>	<b>Total</b>
Complaint	24	26	2	8	1	61
Enquiry	23	23	0	9	2	57
Request	80	93	44	212	9	438
Total	127	142	46	229	12	556

While the number of complaints appears low, (they make up only 11% of the total number of contacts) requests make up 78% of all contacts.

This suggests that many people are ringing to request a service, which either they think the council should be providing or to request something which the Council does provide, but for which no information is available for the customer to form a judgement hence their enquiry.

If more information was made readily available about what the service includes and what it excludes and this was easily accessible, then the number of enquiries to the team may decline and satisfaction may improve.

More detailed analysis of the nature of the customer contacts regarding trees has been provided by the Parks and Open Spaces team. June, July and August have the highest number of customer contacts for issues concerning trees.

The largest single category of requests was overgrown trees. From the information provided by Parks, 96 percent of these enquiries were actioned validating the tenants report as both necessary and accurate. Tree maintenance is not currently included within the specification but this research would suggest that this type of work would need to be included in any new Specification or service level agreement and routinely completed on a regular cycle.

This would reduce the number of enquiries the Parks and Open Spaces Team receive minimising unnecessary work and in turn providing opportunities to further improve the standard of service. Customers would be reassured that that this is part of a regular cycle of tree maintenance, included in the Grounds Maintenance agreement and that they would not need to intervene.

If the work was programmed in certain times of the year, ideally before the growing season commenced and once it has ceased, this could prevent the reactive nature of the service, making the service more efficient and reducing the number of customer contacts

Further analysis of the customer contacts received by the Open Spaces Service based on a 10 % random sample suggests the following:

Of 35 customer contacts for trees, 14 related to routine maintenance, and 17 were with regard to preventive maintenance, e.g. trees at risk of falling down or causing damage to property.

A random sample of 16 Weeds and Leaves contacts revealed that 11 (over 50%) related to routine maintenance, requests for leaves to be cleared.

Grass Cutting, from a sample of 28 customer contacts revealed that 17 were the result of a caller asking for clarification on when for example the grass would be cut or why a communal area had not been cut.

In all of the above cases the vast majority of the work was completed, which suggests that it is either already within the scope of the current agreement, or if not, it should be added.

This analysis suggests that if information was readily available for all involved in the process, from housing staff to more importantly the customer, our tenants, this would result in less enquires and less work for the staff involved in dealing with the enquiries. The information on when for example an area of grass is going to be cut and the standard to which it will be cut could be displayed on the Council's website and advertised in Deane Housing News etc.

From research carried out a number of other housing providers set out a very clear description of the level of service provided by their own grounds maintenance contract. These providers display their service standard on the organisations website.

A good example of a clear service standard is shown in the attached copy of Rochdale Borough Councils grounds maintenance service standard. A copy of this is shown in Appendix 2.

The council has also produced a short You Tube film setting out how they have improved the service in response to their tenants concerns. <http://www.rbh.org.uk/grounds-maintenance>

TDBC does not have either a publicised service standard or clear information about ground maintenance on our website, this is an area where improvement can be made. A clearly defined service standard that is understood by all parties, is readily available and accessible to our tenants is something the project group wishes to establish.

## **7.0 Finance Officers Comments.**

The current actual cost of the provision of grounds maintenance is £1.12 per tenant (assuming a void rate of 2%)

The service charge to tenants (0.79p) is less than the cost to the HRA. At present the HRA is subsidising the service charge to tenants. The service charge needs to increase to match the service provided.

The service charge is eligible under housing benefit and as at February 48% of our General needs tenants and 74% of our sheltered tenants were in receipt of housing benefit.

Any increase in cost will be to cover the service provided and not to create a profit.

## **8. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **The Way Forward and next steps.**

The following section describes our approach to moving the project forward to completion. We intend to take the following steps:

#### **8.1 Share current position and progress with tenant representative groups:**

- a. TSMB 27/3/17
- b. Tenants Forum tbc April 2017
- c. Sheltered Housing Development Group tbc April 2017

#### **8.2 Verify cost breakdown of current Specification against existing service delivery and costs of additional work areas that tenants may request in future**

The Parks and Open Spaces team are currently going through the existing agreement to identify and cost those areas of work that have been identified as being important to tenants, that do not appear to be currently included in the agreement.

The purpose of this is to obtain an accurate cost of providing a level of service that meets the requirements of our customers.

This information will then enable the Council to identify whether or not the level of charges collected towards the ground maintenance service are realistic and sufficient to provide the standard of service that our tenants expect.

#### **8.3 Further clarification of issues and concerns of tenants:**

Although we have a useful analysis of areas of concern from tenants through analysis of complaints and service requests, we will test this through TSMB, tenants forum, TSDG and smaller focus groups and undertake further analysis if required. We want to ensure we listen to the direct voice of tenants before we start to specify a new contract. We will organise a tour of our main sites with tenant representatives once the first cuts have been completed in the new growing season so that the standard of work can be inspected and to identify where work completed has or has not met with our tenants expectations. **This tour will take place April/May 2017.**

This work will place us in an excellent position to understand the areas of work that the new contract should cover.

#### **8.4 Define and cost up new Service required with tenants**

Using the costing data, and cost breakdown in the actions above, we plan to undertake work with tenants groups testing their appetite for proposals for the new service specification. This is likely to offer an enhanced service that will require an increase in service charges to cover this. As part of this work, we will consider new solutions to provide a more cost effective and innovative service e.g. use of mulching mowers and identify areas that can be reconfigured to reduce cost of maintenance. As an indication, if tenants choose to enhance the service, this will increase service charges by around 3p per week for every additional £10,000 of service.

#### **8.5 Define and agree a clear service standard for new service**

We will establish a clear and concise service standard agreed with tenants that will be publicised on TDBC website and made readily available to tenants and members of staff in Housing and Communities.

TDBC's service standard will be based on the examples of good practice identified during the course of the research for this project.

The standard will be based on a fully costed service that is in line with the approved budget. Any expenditure required over and above what is contained in the agreed service, will have to be justified, approved and come from an identified budget.

Parks and Open Spaces will provide a level of service to the specified service standard and to budget. This will be monitored by its own supervisors, the estate teams and tenant representatives.

The service specification and costs should be reviewed at regular predetermined intervals in agreement with all parties.

#### **8.6 Implementation, clear communication and monitoring**

We will undertake an extensive communication campaign to ensure that tenants are aware of the service delivery and service standard they should expect in their areas. We will set up a means to monitor this within the Estates Teams through periodic estate walkabouts with tenant representatives.

We will endeavour to upload information onto a GIS mapping system that will show areas covered by the contract and what delivery can be expected in each area. This will help ensure that the contract is easier to monitor and hold to account by tenants and other interested parties. It is our aim for this service to be interactive with tenants and allow them to report issues and concerns directly via the website without the need to call.

#### **9.0 Recommendations**

The TSMB are asked to note the content of the report and endorse the recommendations in section 8 as an effective solution to meet the concerns of tenants. We look forward to working closely with representatives of the TSMB,

the Tenants Forum and the Sheltered Housing Development Group over the course of the next few months to achieve a tailored Standard of Service. That standard will meet both the minimum requirements of TDBC for the management of its assets and an enhanced quality for those areas that are identified by Tenants as requiring a greater investment.

**Appendix 1  
Grounds Maintenance Charges 2017**

<b>BEDDING 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Clear bedding summer & autumn	£1,535.98	2
Planting summer & autumn	£4,635.27	2
Summer & autumn bed maintenance	£5,471.79	31
Bed prep summer & autumn	£3,787.92	2
Watering summer	£6,907.76	99
Supply plants for summer & autumn	£5,796.68	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£28,135.39</b>	
<b>CONTAINERS 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Clear bedding summer & autumn	£87.26	2
Planting summer & autumn	£133.57	2
Summer & autumn bed maintenance	£213.78	31
Bed prep summer & autumn	£124.09	2
Watering summer	£2,342.66	99
Supply plants for summer & autumn	£458.24	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£3,359.60</b>	
<b>HANGING BASKETS 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Installation	£89.89	1
Irrigation	£2,343.50	105
Liquid feed	£8.41	1
Dead heading maintenance	£34.46	3
Removal	£44.63	1
Baskets	£1,136.00	80
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£3,656.89</b>	
<b>ROSE BEDS 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Cultivate/forking	£438.26	1
Fertilise Rose beds	£249.05	1
Rose prune annual	£617.49	1
Rose prune summer	£3,695.04	7
Rose prune winter	£617.49	1
Hoe & Hand Weed	£6,274.31	18
Fungicide	£1,613.38	3
Insecticide	£1,434.11	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£14,939.13</b>	
<b>SHRUB BEDS 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Hoe, Handweed & Prune	£88,356.57	12
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£88,356.57</b>	

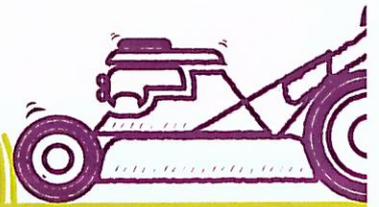
<b>Appendix 1 HEDGES 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Hedge prune 1	£8,555.60	1
Hedge prune 2	£671.63	1
Hedge prune 3	£1,068.10	1
Hedge prune 4	£1,550.17	1
Hedge prune 5	£28,364.48	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£40,209.98</b>	
<b>IMMATURE TREES UP TO 5M / POLLARDING 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Stake & Tie	£0.00	2
Remove Epcormic growth	£0.00	1
Pollarding Year 2	£270.61	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£270.61</b>	
<b>GRASS CUTTING 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Grass spec. 8	£191,053.60	13
Grass spec. 9	£539.15	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£191,592.75</b>	
<b>CLEANSING &amp; LITTER COLLECTION 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Cleansing spec. 8	£7,268.14	2
Cleansing spec. 10	£43.87	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£7,312.01</b>	
<b>GRAVEL AREA 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Raking	£0.00	0
Weedkilling	£0.00	0
Tree grids	£0.00	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£0.00</b>	
<b>ADDITIONAL WORKS 2017</b>		
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Cut & Collect Housing grass	£105,779.40	15
TREES TAUNTON	£31,690.71	As required
TREES RURAL	£4,325.00	As required
TREES WELLINGTON	£5,750.00	As required
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£147,545.11</b>	
<b>Total with Additional Works</b>	<b>£525,378.03</b>	
<b>Total without Additional Works</b>	<b>£377,832.92</b>	

# Appendix 2

REVISION HISTORY



## GROUNDS MAINTENANCE SERVICE STANDARDS FOR 2015



**We don't let the grass grow under our feet**

The tasks overleaf are to be undertaken at each scheduled visit:  
**as required, weather permitting,  
on RBH land.**

## SUMMER – MARCH TO OCTOBER

- All grass areas will be cleared of litter and debris before grass cutting commences.
- All grass areas, including edges and surrounding obstacles will have been cut in order to produce a pleasing appearance with an even finish and height, with no areas being left uncut.
- All grass clippings shall have been removed from hard surfaces or paths, by sweeping or blowing back onto the grass area.
- Horticultural features (e.g. Shrub Beds) shall present an attractive amenity, allowing development of the plants in keeping with the type, shape, size and aspect of the bed.
- Plants that abut other features (e.g. pathways, windows etc.) will have been pruned to ensure public safety and avoid obstruction.
- All soil surfaces shall be clear of litter and debris and any weed growth will have been removed or treated with chemical weed killers following each scheduled visit.
- All hard surfaces shall be free of litter and debris and any weed growth will have been removed or treated with chemical weed killers following each scheduled visit.

## WINTER – NOVEMBER TO FEBRUARY

- All soil surfaces shall be clear of litter and debris and any weed growth will have been removed or treated with chemical weed killers following each scheduled visit.
- All hard surfaces shall be free of litter and debris and any weed growth will have been removed or treated with chemical weed killers following each scheduled visit.
- All plants shall have received appropriate pruning that prevents an increase in height and encroachment, apart from allowing the development of a maturing planting scheme.
- Pruning shall be sufficient to allow growth between visits.
- All edges abutting hard surfaces shall be clean and true following the outline of the relevant hard surface.