

Appendix 1



Resident Scrutiny Panel Report September 2016

The Grounds Maintenance Service at Town & Country Housing Group

Review by the Town & Country Housing Group Resident Scrutiny Panel

Panel Members involved: Cicilia Bannister, Jennifer Blackburn, Emma Lovell, Len Lewis, Francesca O'Neill and Barbara Twiss.

Executive Summary

The Resident Scrutiny Panel (RSP) is pleased to present the outcomes of our review of the Grounds Maintenance Service to the Group Board. We have taken a detailed look at Town & Country Housing Group's (TCHG's) Grounds Maintenance Service, which is provided by a number of different contractors. The review included both grounds maintenance contractors and cleaning contractors because the cleaning contracts include responsibility for litter picking, weeding and the general upkeep of some external areas. We have worked with TCHG staff, residents, contractors and other housing providers to reach our conclusions. The review took place between January and August 2016.

The review identified a number of key findings and makes recommendations for changes broken down into six categories. Generally we found that the standards delivered by the contracts that started from April 2015 (including the current North Kent contract which was re-awarded this year due to the poor performance of the original contractor) are better than the grounds maintenance contract that has been in place in the Tunbridge Wells area since 2008. We acknowledge however that this contract has also been moved onto the photo book standard and efforts are being made to bring it in line with the other contracts.

The KPI monitoring, published quarterly to the contractors and used as a monitoring tool at contract meetings creates healthy competition and we were impressed by the proactive and resolution focussed approach shown by the newer contractors at contract meetings and site visits.

There is an efficient contractor meeting structure, especially in East Kent, where all meetings were well structured and positive. This was generally the case in West Kent too, however it is important that the right people attend these meetings, the Bridglands meeting was attended by an office based contract administrator, it was felt that operational managers with a real insight into the issues faced on site would be more appropriate attendees.

The photo book used to monitor performance is clear and presents challenging standards (we recognise that the A grade is sometimes aspirational rather than achievable as a consistent standard). It is an effective tool for monitoring standards and contractor performance and helps to achieve consistency; however we feel that additional information is needed to give residents a clearer understanding of what they are paying for through the service charge and the standards they can expect.

The division of work in the contracts between grounds maintenance and cleaning contractors means that cleaning contractors are responsible for litter picking and weeding of most external areas. This can create confusion for staff, contractors and residents and means that some areas, particularly where there is no cleaning contract in place, can be neglected.

The Garden Help Scheme, which is available at a cost to older or disabled tenants who are unable to tend their own gardens, is valued by customers but there are some areas which need improving, particularly around frequency of grass cutting and information to residents. We are pleased to note that since our discussions with the Neighbourhood Services Manager, improvements to information have already started to be put in place.

Information to residents around many aspects of the grounds maintenance service could be improved, we appreciate that regular articles have been included in Spotlight and information is available on the website but feel that further information is needed to make residents familiar with the current standards and contract delivery methods.

Throughout the review we were mindful that the service is funded via service charges and that any recommendations leading to increased costs would have a direct impact on many tenants, we have therefore tried to balance recommendations for service improvements with the need for cost effective, value for money services. With this in mind some recommendations are made subject to an investigation into costs by TCHG and, if costs were to increase, further consultation with residents before a decision to change the service is made.

We are also mindful of the impacts of the government's four year rent reduction programme, ongoing welfare benefit reforms and the recent referendum vote to leave the European Union, all of which could potentially impact on the TCHG resources needed to administer, monitor, publicise or enhance the grounds maintenance service. We have also been advised that where properties are subject to affordable rents, service charges will be restricted as the HCA requires affordable rent tenancies to include service charges in the set rent (up to 80 per cent of market rent).

Equality and Diversity issues were considered throughout the review. Our recommendations are intended to deliver grounds maintenance to a consistent, high standard which will be of equal benefit to everyone in receipt of the service. The recommendations relating to the Garden Help Scheme aim to ensure that the best possible service and clear information is provided for older and disabled tenants who are unable to tend their own gardens.

1. Introduction

The RSP was set up by TCHG in October 2013. This is the fourth review we have completed. The review took a little longer than initially anticipated as it evolved to include a wide range of review activities to evidence our findings and we felt that it was vital to monitor grounds maintenance services on TCHG sites across the Spring/Summer growing season.

2. Background information:

The review took place between January and August 2016. Estate Services was selected as an area for review because new estate services contracts were awarded for much of TCHG's operating area in April 2015, and we felt that services would now have had time to 'bed in' and should be checked. There was also very limited performance or customer satisfaction information about the service, so we wanted to monitor current performance and create a framework for ongoing monitoring. Lastly there were some concerns about the Bridglands' contract which had been in place since 2008 and had not been due for re-tender alongside the other contracts; anecdotal evidence and the expressions of dissatisfaction information identified some issues with the quality of the service.

2.1 Scope of review

After scoping the review and considering the advice of the Board we decided to narrow the review to consider just the external communal areas of properties, concentrating on grounds maintenance and the upkeep of external hard areas such as car parks. In addition to this we decided to look at the Garden Help scheme, the scheme which, for a weekly charge, provides grass and hedge cutting for older and vulnerable people who are unable to tend their own gardens. We had identified the need to improve some of the information provided about this service and TCHG indicated that they would also be keen for this service to be reviewed.

2.2 Specific areas for investigation

To facilitate the review the RSP wanted to fully understand:

- The grounds maintenance contracts
- Responsibilities under the contracts for litter picking and rubbish and waste removal
- The private garden service (the 'Garden Help Scheme')
- Information provided to residents about the estate services they receive and pay for
- Clarity about who is charged for estate services and how they are apportioned
- Guidelines/processes for residents who take on responsibility for sections of communal areas
- Management and renewal of older shrubs and plants
- Resident involvement in estate inspections

2.3 Aims of the review

The aims of our review were to achieve:

- Assurances that there is effective monitoring of the new contracts and the more established Bridglunds contract
- Clear information to residents about how the new 'photo book' contracts work and standards they can expect
- Effective resident involvement in monitoring estate services
- An accurate measure of resident satisfaction with estate services
- A review of the garden help scheme available to older or disabled residents
- Clarity about how service charges for estate services are apportioned

3. Methodology

We used the structured process we have developed over the previous reviews to carry out this review, starting with selection and scoping of the review topic as described above.

3.1 Desk Top Review

The desk top review looked at the following documents/information:

- Cleaning & Grounds Maintenance Contracts
- Areas of responsibility for each contractor and the geographical areas that they cover
- Caretaking & Cleaning Standards –as outlined in the 'Estate Services Peer Review HouseMark Photo Book'
- Gardening Help Scheme for Elderly or Disabled Tenants – leaflet, letters and website information
- Information about the grounds maintenance and gardening services published in Spotlight and on the website
- On-line information provided by other landlords about their grounds maintenance services
- Copy of Estate Contract Officers (ECOs) 4 weekly rota
- Estate Services KPI spreadsheet and contractors 'league tables'
- Current methods by which residents are involved in estate inspections
- Information about when the scheme inspection recording will include wider estate areas as well as blocks of flats
- Community Neighbour location details
- Expressions of dissatisfaction/ complaint information
- Estate services survey feedback
- Information in tenancies re tenant responsibilities for upkeep of communal areas
- ECO job description

An initial meeting was held with David Comerford, Neighbourhood Service Charges Manager, who gave an overview of cleaning and grounds maintenance contracts and the procurement process followed to re-award the contracts in 2015.

The panel was also approached by the Rent & Service Charge panel (R&SCP) and asked to consider a written submission about Estate Service Charges. The chair of the R&SCP also attended the May RSP meeting. A full response was sent to R&SC panel in which we agreed that the review would include some of issues they raised, such as the need for a structure for resident involvement in estate monitoring. It was made clear that the scrutiny review would not consider any issues currently being addressed via the internal Service Charge Improvement Project as it is not our practice to duplicate current reviews being carried out by TCHG. We also clarified that procurement of estate services was not within the scope of the review; our initial investigations had not raised any concerns about the procurement of estate services. However it is suggested that any appropriate service changes or good practice arising as an outcome of this review should be incorporated into future procurement processes.

3.2 Reality Checks

This phase of the review involved: meeting with TCHG staff and contractors; meeting other involved residents; surveying residents and meeting other housing providers to observe their estate inspection processes and share good practice.

Our activities included:

- Site visits and inspections (TCHG sites and other landlords)
- Attending contractor meetings (East Kent and West Kent) including meeting with cleaning contractors to discuss external cleaning/litter picking/leaf removal
- Talking to the Estates Contract Officer(ECO), Neighbourhood Housing Managers and Neighbourhood Services Managers in East and West Kent
- A postal survey of all garden help scheme users
- Other surveys re grounds maintenance standards
- Visits with the ECO – shadowing part of his working day
- Liaison with the sheltered panel, asking them to participate in surveys for April/May/June/July
- A Customer Net email survey
- Review of satisfaction/performance data and surveys
- Meeting with the West Kent Neighbourhood Services Manager to discuss the gardening help scheme

4. Findings

The key findings of our review are:

Grounds Maintenance

- **Contracts.** There are some fundamental problems with the work division in the contracts; the contract states that cleaning contractors are expected to do external litter picking and weeding of hard areas such as carparks and paths leading to blocks, this is leading to issues with the split of work between contractors and it is suggested this needs to be reviewed and a clear inside/outside areas split introduced into the contract. The improvement plan compiled by contractor DMS to address issues on the North Kent estates they have taken over from a failing contractor clearly illustrates the issue saying “We discussed whilst inspecting the need to remove litter/old litter from shrub beds... On reading the specification of works these clearly fall under the cleaning and caretaking contractor not the grounds work contractor.....We are of course here to help but it is important that our duties do not evolve into being responsible for another contractors duties..” An inside/outside split would also ensure that, where there is no cleaning contract in place, sites still receive litter picking and weeding services for areas such as hard standings, under hedges etc., this is not always being done at present.
- **Site mapping.** There are still areas of uncertainty around ownership and responsibility for some areas of land. Tenants are not informed what areas within their estate or street will be maintained, confusion can occur when sections of the site are not owned by TCHG. We are confident that the current mapping exercise and the GIS system which is being procured by TCHG will address many of these issues.
- **Photo Book** – It would be useful for residents to have a better awareness of the photo book and an understanding of how it is applied. Other landlords we visited have adapted the photo book to their own sites or no longer use as the standards are hard to achieve. We liked the Golding Homes leaflet which gave photo book standards along with simple descriptions and aims.
- **Hedges.** Hedges are often not cut back adequately and more information is needed for tenants about programmes and reasons for timing of cuts, such as bird nesting season.
- **Weeds.** We feel that there is not sufficient hand weeding or digging out expected in the contract, spraying or strimming is not always the most appropriate means of effective weed removal. Some residents have expressed concerns about weed spraying and harm to pets.
- **Involving residents in monitoring grounds maintenance services.** NHM estate inspection dates are no longer advertised. We feel it is vital to have resident involvement in monitoring the service. The review found it was easiest to get resident feedback from directly targeted surveys; responses to more general surveys were disappointing, even where incentives were offered. Information from other landlords and interest from one of the contractors in being directly involved

in measuring customer satisfaction has provided some involvement ideas that we would like TCHG to trial.

- **The KPI's** produced from the NHM/ECO block inspections were very useful for the contractor monitoring meetings and create healthy competition amongst contractors which helps improve services. Most of the contractors were seen to be positive in their approach to customer service. One contractor (Town & Country cleaners) has volunteered to be involved in measuring customer satisfaction, one (DMS) has developed an improvement plan for the North Kent area (which had previously been poorly kept by another contractor) and Just Ask, DMS and Town & Country all demonstrated that they were keen to attend site visits and very willing to meet with Neighbourhood Managers (NHMs) and Estate Contract Officers (ECOs) on site to address issues. Regular KPI/satisfaction reporting re grounds maintenance would be an effective means of ongoing monitoring of the standard of services.
- **Trees/shrub replacement.** There is no budget or programme for refurbishment of communal planted areas on older estates and there is no information published about the maintenance of trees in communal areas.
- **Communal areas adopted by residents.** Some NHM's were very proactive about addressing neglected areas but there was no evidence of a consistent process.
- **Noticeboards.** There was evidence of out of date information and boards could be much better utilised to provide useful information. A 'Take care of your estate' flyer was given as an example
- **New sites.** Evidence from Newtown in Ashford and MacDonald Court in Paddock Wood showed communal areas which had been handed over in poor condition or which had not initially been identified as TCHG's responsibility and were therefore not included in the grounds maintenance contracts. Sites need to be handed over to contractors in a good condition and areas of responsibility need to be clearly outlined during the Development team handover to housing staff so that staff and contractors know which areas fall into the contract from the start. More consideration could perhaps also be given to the design and planning of communal areas on new schemes so that easily maintained planting and low cost grounds maintenance contracts result. Clear information should be given to residents of new schemes about who is responsible for grounds maintenance and if there is a defects period during which the building contractor is responsible.
- **Weather conditions** –it was clear from contractor meetings, site inspections and gardening scheme feedback that the current damp, warm weather conditions are causing issues for contractors – if contractors/TCHG aware of issues/delays to usual schedule these should be communicated to the tenants too via the website, twitter, facebook etc.
- The work with other landlords showed that common issues faced by all the responding landlords were

- Fly tipping and bulk rubbish
- Residents failing to maintain own gardens
- Ownership of areas – accurate maps
- The current wet, warm, weather conditions
- Containing the spread of weeds and ensuring that self-sown saplings were removed

Gardening Scheme

The survey and further discussion with some respondents showed that:

- There is no clear consensus about the number of visits members of the scheme were expecting to receive
- Not everyone is aware of having received notice of when the gardeners will attend. A letter has been sent out this season, this is a positive move but the letter is too generic and could include more detailed information. Week commencing dates are not always kept to (and the meeting with Bridglands indicated that the contractor was unclear about these dates too). Letters to tenants newly accepted onto the scheme contained very limited information.
- Most respondents said that the operatives get on and do the work even if the respondent is out. Some comments say that it would be useful to have advance notice so they can ensure access. In some cases operatives do not announce their arrival, it would be good customer service if they could knock to tell the resident they were on their property or leave a card/slip
- There is little understanding by service users of why hedge cutting is left until July (This is due to birds' nesting habits). Hedges are becoming oversized and often need cutting back more severely.
- Grass is sometimes left to become very long, it would be useful if cutting was at regular intervals (e.g. once every 4 weeks, as once in July and once in August could be up to 8 weeks apart) it would also seem sensible to coordinate communal grass cutting areas with communal areas
- There are cases of long grass being strimmed and then the cuttings left for the resident to clear. This can be very problematic for those receiving a service because they're unable to bend down to clear up cuttings
- There were lots of positive comments about the operatives and their work and approach to customer service and lots of comment to say that the scheme is an essential service and people could not manage without it.

5. Recommendations

Our recommendations fall into six categories:

- **Contracts**
- **Monitoring**
- **Information to residents**
- **Processes/technology**
- **Garden Help Scheme**
- **Additional findings** - Although the review concentrated on grounds

maintenance there was inevitably some overlap with cleaning services because of the way the contracts are written and because we conducted a number of site visits. A small number of additional findings have therefore been included, which it may be possible to address as 'quick fixes'.

Our recommendations are attached at Appendix 1 of this report.

6. Way Forward/Next Steps

As required by the Scrutiny Panel Constitution this report has been included on the agenda of the next available meeting of the Board following its completion (September 2016). Before the report was submitted to the Board it has been submitted to the appropriate managers for comment. The managers' responses have been included in the Management Response column of the recommendations table at appendix 1.

We request that the Board considers our recommendations and the timescales suggested and provides a formal response, detailing the process by which accepted recommendations will be implemented. The Resident Scrutiny Panel Constitution states that "Where recommendations are agreed by the Board an action plan will be implemented by the Head of Service, who will provide the RSP with an update on progress every 6 months. Where the Board does not agree with any of the RSP's recommendations, the reasons will be explained in the response to the RSP."

Agreed recommendations will be formulated into an action plan. Progress against these will be reported to the RSP and publicised to residents, staff and other stakeholders via Spotlight, TCHG's website and intranet, information to resident panels and team meetings and briefings.

We would like to thank everyone who worked with us to help us complete the review and reach our recommendations, this includes the Neighbourhood Service Charge Manager, David Comerford, who provided the initial overview of the service and met all our subsequent information requests; Amanda Apps and Stefan Polom, the Neighbourhood Services Managers, who took time to provide lots of background information and invited us to join contractor meetings; Andrew Paterson, ECO, and Anthony Alder, Anna Alexander-Williams, Laura Kanareck, Jane Mitchinson and John Sinclair, the NHMs, who we joined on estate inspections and visits; the contractors who welcomed our attendance at the contract monitoring meetings and on-site meetings; Golding Homes and Ashford Borough Council who invited us to join their estate inspections and all the other housing providers who answered our grounds maintenance queries sent via Kent Engagement Group.

We would also like to thank all the residents who contributed to the review either by completing on-line or postal surveys, by attending meetings to discuss grounds maintenance services and by carrying out estate inspections and reporting their findings to us.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Recommendations