



Grass Roots

Report by SRT on behalf of TPG

June 2014



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The Team appreciates Gill Anderton (Resident Involvement Team Leader) and Helen Pagram (Resident Involvement Officer) for their diligence, kindness and hard work in arranging venues for meetings, ordering taxis and generally helping to make everything run smoothly.

Most importantly, SRT's thanks go to Luisa Sartini Baldwin and Andy Sage from The Linchpin Project for without their unstinting help and training this report would not have come to fruition.

Executive Summary

Purpose

This report is about the Scrutiny Review of the Grounds Maintenance Service recently completed by the Scrutiny Review Team (SRT), on behalf of the Tenant Participation Group (TPG).

The Review focussed on the extent to which the Grounds Maintenance Contract is fit for purpose, contract management, the performance of the Contractor, resident involvement in monitoring the contract and customer satisfaction with the Service.

Approach

The SRT adopted a robust Tenant Audit Approach which included:

1. **Written questions** for housing staff to seek clarification of issues.
2. **Desktop review** of the relevant policies, procedures, reports to gain a good understanding of the service and identify pertinent issues to explore through other activities.
3. **Work shadowing** to observe the working practices of the Contractor.
4. **Tenant Inspections** of sites maintained by the Grounds Maintenance Contract.
5. **Resident surveys** to reality check the quality of the service and rate it from the point of view of residents.
6. **Telephone survey** using the new TalkBack Panel to reality check the 'customer experience' and options for improving the service.*
7. **Focus group** with housing and contractor staff to identify any inconsistencies between policy and practice and generate ideas for improving performance and service delivery.
8. **Staff Interviews** to clarify any grey areas, apparent inconsistencies, gaps in the available information, etc.
9. **Presentation on social enterprises** by a local social enterprise called Crack On to learn about what social enterprises are able to offer.
10. **Study visit** – visit at least one other local housing provider recognised as being a good practice performer in grounds maintenance or one that has depooled rents.*
11. **SRT meetings** – discuss key findings, question and challenge key Housing and Contractor staff to seek clarification.
12. **Reporting and presenting an evidence-based report** to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and others, at a public meeting.

*Deferred until after the report has been presented to allow SRT to gain a clear steer on future charging for the service.

Main Findings

- Grounds Maintenance is jointly funded (50/50 split) between the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the General Fund (GF). This was introduced in 2009 in response to the extremely difficult financial situation Housing faced after a 'No' vote for transfer, i.e. the opposite to the current situation whereby self-financing of the HRA and the cuts faced by the GF have reversed the situation that existed in 2009
- Depooling is considered good practice. It would be transparent, maximise the Council's income, stop the Grounds Maintenance Service being under resourced in the future and only those people who directly benefit from the service pay for it.
- Contract management and enforcement is very informal. Rectification and default notices aren't being issued as the Supervising Officer prefers to adopt a less formal, collaborative relationship with Contractor to achieve resolution
- The budget cuts imposed in 2009 were huge (half of the budget) and the Contractor could have walked. The Council was very relieved the Contractor agreed to continue on a much reduced budget and may have contributed to the overly cosy relationship between the two
- The budget cuts have gone too far and mean the Council faces a bigger bill in the long run because the longer you leave things the more difficult the job becomes and if an area looks a mess people don't value it, they start to dump rubbish, this attracts more rubbish and can cause health and safety risks
- Complaints are not dealt with under the Corporate Complaints Policy. Most complaints or 'requests for service' relate to aspects of the service cut in 2009. There is no database to record issues raised, action taken or outcomes
- The Contractor's staff were professional and approachable but were clearly hampered by the underfunding of the service
- The Contractor's work is well scheduled, recorded and supported by senior staff at SPL, and staff receive full training
- The maps provided to SRT by the Council and used by the Contractor appear to be considerably out of date or were never correctly marked in the first place
- Tenants have surprisingly low expectations and this may be down to not knowing they pay for the service. Most liked where they lived but wanted things to improve
- To move service from OK to Good would need to restore services to pre-2009 cuts, i.e. include things like edging, weeding, strimming around trees, etc.
- The Council is keen to capture increased social value/added value from the Grounds Maintenance Contract
- SME's and social enterprises potentially have a lot to offer and the Council should create a level playing field to allow them to tender for the next Grounds Maintenance Contract.

Main Conclusions and Recommendations

	Conclusions	Recommendations
1.	The cuts imposed in 2009 reduced the Grounds Maintenance Contract to a basic grass cutting service and as a consequence open spaces aren't maintained to an acceptable standard.	Specify a new Grounds Maintenance Contract that reinstates the works sacrificed by the cuts in 2009. Including a relaunch of the Welfare Gardens Scheme.
2.	The 50/50 split totally precludes improving the Grounds Maintenance Service other than by letting the contract in smaller lots or opening up competition from other types of provider such as social enterprises, in an attempt to achieve better VfM.	Renegotiate or remove the 50/50 split to allow for the procurement of a better service and to get the contract on a fairer and surer footing.
3.	By not depooling rents and introducing a service charge for grounds maintenance, the Council has not adopted good practice, maximised its income, or been transparent with tenants, the combination of which is leading to the service being under resourced.	Introduce a good practice charging mechanism based on depooled rents, a separate Grounds Maintenance Service Charge, charging RTBs where the conveyance allows and the recovery cost isn't prohibitive and a proportionate contribution from the general fund for any land not directly owned by the HRA.
5.	To date tenant involvement in monitoring the Grounds Maintenance Contractor has been limited and ineffective.	Recruit Tenant Inspectors to monitor the performance of the Grounds Maintenance Contractor and engage local champions to sign off the works before the contractor is paid.
6.	The conditions of contract, including rectification notices, default notices and management reporting, are not being enforced by the Client and the relationship between the Client and the Contractor is far too informal.	Develop new contract conditions in collaboration with tenants, general needs and sheltered housing officers and enforce them in a robust and effective way.
7.	Residents are not aware of the Grounds Maintenance service standards or that they indirectly pay for the service which may contribute to their low expectations over the service.	Develop an explicit set of service standards and provide residents with a copy of them and a rent/service charge statement which shows the charges clearly broken down.
8.	The Council's maps are out-of-date or inaccurate and this has meant some areas of land have never been maintained by the Contractor.	Review the sites maintained by the Grounds Maintenance Contract, update its records and issue new maps ahead of procuring the next Grounds Maintenance Contract.

Introduction

Formation and membership of SRT

After a presentation given by The Linchpin Project, TPG agreed to enhance its role to act as an umbrella body for coordinating all the scrutiny and involvement activities and filling in where there are gaps.

Alongside this, it was recognised that it would be necessary to develop new scrutinising and involvement structures such as the Scrutiny Review Teams, Mystery Shoppers, Tenant Inspectors, TalkBack consultative pool of tenants, etc.

TPG would continue to do much of what it did already but in a more challenging way and split the additional scrutiny work between those TPG members who want to get involved in scrutiny reviews (no more than two a year) and recruits to the new scrutinising structures.

To ensure this would work it was important to

- Recruit 'new blood' to support TPG members to undertake the scrutiny reviews. This could be done by co-opting new members onto TPG with the interest, skills and confidence to do this type of work
- Guard against TPG members who undertake the additional scrutiny work from coming to resent those members who decide not to do so.

The Linchpin Project recruited new members through an intensive engagement process called SpringBoard.

TPG members and the new recruits have worked well together and many have struck up firm friendships.

See Appendix 1 for SRT membership details.

Selection process for choosing first scrutiny review

SRT considered three services, namely:

1. Grounds Maintenance
2. Response Repairs Quality Control
3. Voids.

They invited Anita Goddard (Head of Housing and Property) to the meeting as she has overall responsibility for all three services.

Members of SRT asked Anita the following three opening questions for each of the services:

1. How would you scope a tenant scrutiny review of the service?
2. What would you expect to come out of a scrutiny review of the service?
3. Are you aware of any issues that would make it problematic to carry out a scrutiny review of the service at this time?

They then invited questions from the floor before deciding on Grounds Maintenance. Repairs and Voids were deferred as the contract had only recently been let to MEARS and it was decided they needed time to bed in before undertaking a scrutiny review of these services.

Scope of review

It was decided that the review would look at the following areas:

1. The extent to which the existing contract is fit for purpose and the performance of the existing contractor.
2. The different types of contract and how taking a partnership approach could foster contractors to be more proactive.
3. The scope of the Grounds Maintenance contract and the possibility of extending it to cover a more imaginative approach to the management of open space and an enhanced gardening service for sheltered housing.
4. The option of setting up or procuring a Grounds Maintenance contract through a social enterprise providing training and employment opportunities for local people.
5. Contract management and enforcement arrangements and the capacity of staff responsible for overseeing the contract, including training requirements
6. The performance of the existing contractor and the level of customer satisfaction.
7. The current service standards, the development of more explicit service standards and how to effectively communicate them to customers.
8. Resident involvement in policing the contract, providing feedback and delivering services.
9. The transparency of the Grounds Maintenance service charge mechanism, the breakdown of charges and the relationship between the service charge and the cost of providing the service.

See Appendix 2 for full explanation of the scope and scrutiny review process.

50/50 split, depooling rents and RTBs

It became quickly apparent to SRT that so long as the 50/50 split between the HRA and the GF remained in place the potential for improving the Grounds Maintenance Service was severely limited, i.e. the funds are only available by the other according to what the poorest can afford to pay. SRT would have been restricted to looking for alternative ways to procure the next contract to achieve better VfM. This coupled with the question of fairness led SRT to consider alternative ways to pay for the service.

SRT strongly endorses the thinking behind depooling rents on the basis that this would be more transparent, fairer, maximises the Council's income and would help to ensure that the Grounds Maintenance Service is properly resourced in future years.

SRT thinks the Grounds Maintenance Service should be funded through a separate service charge which reflects the cost of providing the service and is paid by the residents who directly benefit from it. The fairest way to charge for the service would be to get tenants, leaseholders and RTBs to pay a service charge. SRT acknowledges that there are complications around charging RTBs a service charge, e.g. restrictive conveyancing, cost of recovery but this charging mechanism would be fairer than the 50/50 split which means the Council Tax payer is subsidising a service for a number who don't derive any direct benefit.

SRT's understanding is that the sites covered by the Grounds Maintenance Contract are those that are parcels of land owned by the HRA that directly benefit the residents who live in the immediate housing (legally defined as Part II land under section 74 Local Government and Housing Act 1989), i.e. they are not amenity sites and therefore should be charged exclusively to the HRA.

Scrutiny mentoring

SRT were mentored through a tenant-led scrutiny review by The Linchpin Project, a tenant run Community Interest Company based in Cambridge. Their support was pivotal to SRT being able to effectively challenge and hold SCDC to account.

SRT decided the level of support they received from Luisa and Andy. This included help to interpret and analyse information and performance data, identifying and framing the right questions to ask, pointing out information gaps and how they can be filled, signposting good practice, building the capacity of tenants through training, coaching, mentoring.

Members of SRT attended briefings/training on the following topics

- Undertaking Desktop Reviews
- Interviewing
- Mystery shopping
- Tenant Inspections
- Running Focus Groups
- Telephone interviews
- Report writing
- Presentation and Public Speaking skills.

More training is scheduled over the coming months.

Tenant Audit Approach

In planning and carrying out its work, the panel adopted a robust Tenant Audit approach, with discrete tasks and timings.

SRT has tried to write an evidence-based report that fully captures the perspective of residents coming out of the Scrutiny Review. It is expected that it will inform the procurement of the next Grounds Maintenance Contract.

The Team hope you find the report interesting and informative.

Evidence gathering and findings

This section sets out the various activities undertaken during the review and the main findings.

Desktop review

The Desktop Review was undertaken by:

- Bill Bullivant
- Patti Hall
- Dave Hammond
- Wendy Head
- Les Rolfe
- Thora Saunders.

They considered the following documents:

- Conditions of Contract for Grounds Maintenance Services for December 2006
- Specification for Grounds Maintenance Services for December 2006
- Invitation to Tender and Instructions to Tendering Grounds Maintenance Services for December 2006
- Grounds Maintenance Procedure Guide (trees)
- Portfolio Holders Grounds Maintenance Budget Report covering the savings proposals for 21 October 2009
- Decision Sheet for Grounds Maintenance Contract
- Cabinet agenda for 12 November 2009
- Medium Term Financial Strategy: Proposals to meet Current and Future Years' Savings Targets (Cabinet, 12 November 2009) and appendices
- Croydon Resident Inspectors Team Spotlight on Services' Report on Grounds Maintenance
- Grounds Maintenance Tenant Involvement Presentation by Wakefield and District Housing
- Greener Neighbourhoods: A good practice guide to managing green space by NHF.

The questions raised at by the Desktop Review Team were reported back to the SRT in a Summary Report (see copy at Appendix 3) along with some suggestions about how to pick up the issues within the agreed scrutiny review process.

Also led to the following additional information requirements:

1. List of specific service standards (pre and post 2009 savings).
2. Impact assessment of the 2009 savings.
3. Copy of the Schedule of Rates.
4. Contractor's procedures as issued to their staff.
5. Guidelines for assistance to tenants where health & safety is an issue in their properties' gardens.
6. Contract monitoring and enforcement documents, including a summary of the Rectification and Default Notices served between September 2012 and 2013.
7. Examples of Maintenance Reports and Daily Site Logs.
8. Summary of complaints trends and outcomes over past three years.
9. Evaluation procedure for contract bids.
10. Details of "Welfare Gardens" scheme.

SRT was disappointed that some of these documents didn't exist and/or weren't made available as part of the Scrutiny Review.

Staff Interviews

Geoff Clark (Supervising Officer)

The interview was conducted by Wendy Head and the focus was on the Conditions of Contract and impact of 2009 savings.

- No rectification or default notices issued as prefer to have a less formal, collaborative relationship with Contractor to achieve resolution. Contractor seems happy to revisit if there is an issue. If dissatisfied with Contractor's work/response can challenge or withhold payment
- Issues raised by tenants/officers are treated as "requests for service or to bring something to our attention". This is not formally recorded as it may consist of just a phone call or email
- Housing officers deal with these issues as part of their daily routine and respond to them accordingly. Can be a time-consuming process checking with other officers
- On first name terms with Contractor so have felt informal processes are sufficient
- No database exists to record issues raised, action taken or outcome
- Outcomes don't appear to be reported back to tenant who raised issue to ensure satisfaction or explain course of action taken
- The responses of the Supervising Officer were at times vague and incomplete and therefore unsatisfactory.

See copy of the Interview Report at Appendix 4.

Anita Goddard (Head of Housing and Property Services)

The interview was conducted by Carol Akribi and Marie Brookes. The focus of the interview was on the Invitation to Tender for the next contract and seeking clarification about 2009 savings.

Findings

- The Council would be willing to support smaller local contracts, but consideration would have to be given to management costs
- It may be possible to get something different by working with contractors who have a charitable arm or have a relationship with a charity, e.g. employing mental health charities to clear gardens
- The Council is keen to capture increased social value/added value from the Grounds Maintenance contract, e.g. any ideas that helped people get back into work and receive training, increase social connectivity and reduce rural isolation by enhancing role of Grounds Maintenance operatives to be part of the local community
- The Council recently joined the Eastern Procurement Consortium. The Consortium's Framework allows the Council to appoint contractors without having to go through a tender process. This could offer big savings
- Accepted SME's and social enterprises potentially have a lot to offer and the Council should create a level playing field to allow them to compete for the next Grounds Maintenance contract.
- More use could be made of residents being the 'eyes and ears' of the Council to increase the role of residents in monitoring the contract. Willing to consider introducing local Grounds Maintenance champions whose role is to sign off works before payment
- Tenants may want to consider managing the contract through a Tenant Management Organisation under Right to Manage or jointly manage the Grounds Maintenance Contract through a Board
- The 50/50 split is historical and it's questionable as to whether it was ever fair as the land belongs to the HRA. Maybe it would be fairer if the HRA made a bigger contribution and split out the costs for sheltered housing
- Bit of creativity needed e.g. private sponsorship. Contractors such as Fosters and MEARS may be willing to sponsor parcels of land or the welfare gardens in the same way private companies sponsor roundabouts in towns and cities
- All of the savings listed in the Portfolio Holders Report were implemented. The budgets were reduced and the new ceilings can't be exceeded. The savings were confined to what could best be described as the 'soft underbelly' of the contract. The intention was to limit the impact of the cuts

- The cuts were very significant (half of the budget) and the Contractor could have walked. The Council was very relieved the Contractor agreed to continue on a much reduced budget
- There hasn't been any impact assessment of the 2009 cuts, but not aware of any reductions in service other than those agreed as part of the 2009 cuts
- Thought the TPG was consulted although back then it may have simply been a case that it was notified of the cuts. Things have changed, they would now fully expect robust consultation over any future cuts on this scale.

See copy of the Interview Report at Appendix 5.

Interview with Tracy Cassidy (Supported Housing Manager)

The interview was conducted by Les Rolfe and focused on the proposal to consult sheltered residents over the possibility of introducing an enhanced Grounds Maintenance Service for Sheltered Schemes.

Findings

- Things were at an early stage and no decisions had been made about whether to proceed with the proposal to introduce an enhanced service
- The proposal was being investigated because sheltered housing was exempt from RTB and was paid for out of the HRA. The enhanced service could therefore be funded out of the HRA without impinging on the 50/50 split which hamstrung the main Grounds Maintenance Contract.

Focus Group with Contractor and Housing Officers

The focus group was moderated by Marie Brookes, Bill Bullivant, and Peter Lever and explored the themes of service standards, impact on of the 2009 savings, scope for making further savings, contractors working practices and captured the 'view from the other side' or put a different way, the viewpoint of the Contractor.

The focus group identified the following basic service standards:

Cyclical work

- 12 grass cuts per year in main housing areas. Cut to a height of 25mm if possible, but due to type of mowers used this is difficult to achieve when grass is wet
- 4 cuts per year on "rough cut" areas, open spaces tucked away from housing
- 5 "Welfare cuts" per year. This is an historical list of properties where the occupants are elderly/disabled and cannot manage their own gardens, so they

are hand cut and strimmed for them. This list is now about 100 properties, but used to be much bigger; no new names are added to it due to lack of budget, and it will naturally reduce as tenants move/die and so are removed from list

- 1 hedge trim per year, in autumn/winter (dormant phase)
- 1 weed spray per year around street furniture i.e. benches, lights etc.
- Blower used to clear paths/hardsurfaces, but little strimming done due to hazards.

Reactive work:

Tree work/surgery on request

At year end if money in budget will undertake ad hoc work that would previously have been in budget i.e. ditches, weed spraying, cleaning hardstanding areas etc.

Findings

- This standard of service currently provided by SPL is much lower than the one specified in the original contract and is different to the one agreed at the time of the 2009 cuts
- SPL weren't properly informed about the new service standards after the imposition of the cuts in 2009 and were left to interpret what was required of them
- Housing and SPL work well together to resolve any issues raised and to deal with any "requests for service" i.e. where a tenant complains to Housing that a piece of work has not been completed. Six-weekly meetings are held with Housing to discuss progress and issues, although it was felt that these could be more regular and more formally recorded - particularly "requests for service" or complaints - so that the quality of the service could be proven
- Sometimes the operatives need to work at speed as they are under pressure to get round the sites. SPL need to make money, but aim to do that through providing a good service
- General feeling was that work is well scheduled, recorded and supported by senior staff at SPL, and that staff receive full training
- It was generally felt that most complaints about standards actually relate to the budget cuts, which were not well publicised and as a result tenant expectations are not managed. Staff feel a bit like they have been "put through the wringer on this", but still try to communicate the problem patiently to tenants on site
- General feeling was that SCDC have cut the budget as much as they can without causing serious issues in the long-term. To do less than 12 cuts per year is not viable as standards could not be maintained and it would mean completely changing the type of equipment used, which would also take longer to do the job adding further to the issue; in this case it would be better to simply have more rough cut areas, which may not be acceptable to residents

- All felt that SCDC got value for money for this contract. The operatives all live locally and are keen to maintain their reputation and level of job satisfaction
- Would like to see a budget increase as recognise the importance of grounds maintenance to residents and to the professional reputation of both companies – an untidy location can quickly become an uncared for one increasing the issues in an area i.e. rubbish, fly-tipping etc.
- The contract still works, but it is not as SPL would like it – frustrated by having to accept a lower service to meet lower budget which impacts on standards
- Equipment/vehicles are not replaced as often as they used to, instead they are maintained on a stringent schedule to extend their lives (it has since transpired that SPL is down to two mowers rather than the four they had at the beginning of the contract)
- Hedges have been the hardest hit – complaints increase by August as they have become overgrown by this time. The consequence of less maintenance is an increase in brambles/scrub leading to a bigger job than it would have been
- The next most frequent cause of dissatisfaction has been trees, e.g. trees that have grown too big and interfere with telephone lines, or shed fruit i.e. crab apples, or unbelievably shed their leaves!
- Staff retention is very good, with a staff age range of 18 to 55 years and many staff having over 15 years' service
- The cuts have put pressure on pay, with no increases since 2009 unless the individual has up-skilled in that period
- The longer you leave things the harder they are to work with and if an area looks a mess people don't value it, they start to dump rubbish, this attracts more rubbish and can cause health and safety risks
- Change in service to grass/hedges has had a cumulative impact year on year, plus there are always complaints about trees
- SPL will be looking at the new contract when the tender process begins and believe that SCDC is happy with their services.

See copy of the Focus Group Report at Appendix 6.

Presentation by Social Enterprise

Mark Byford – Director of Crack On Foundation, based in Thetford, gave a presentation about his Social Enterprise (definition of a Social Enterprise = a business that trades to make a profit to fund their social aims).

They take young people who have dropped out of the mainstream school system and put them on a 26 week course to “get them back on track”. Respect is paramount and the aim is to give them the skills to get into work and stay in work. Crack On have their own premises in Thetford, where volunteers help the young people to learn about

finance, legal and social issues, try drama, music or Outward Bound type challenges and improve their understanding of English/Maths through more fun activities than just sitting in a school room.

As part of the programme the young people are expected to get involved in volunteering in the local community to create an understanding about social responsibility – giving something back.

In the last 10 weeks of the course the young people help the adult experts to deliver contracts that Crack On have negotiated, such as grounds maintenance with Suffolk Housing Society, or recycling unwanted goods in the Crack On warehouse and in the process learning to repair items for reuse. All of this gives them valuable work experience and skills to take them into employment, delivers services that local people want/need, and creates income for the Foundation to continue its work. Crack On was completely self-funding, but has recently attracted Government funding which will allow it to reach more young people.

This is just one example of how a Social Enterprise can deliver commercial contracts, but with an added value in their social impact.

Findings

- SRT wasn't convinced that Crack On could run a Grounds Maintenance Service to the professional standards required by SCDC, but thought it was important to keep an open mind about what social enterprises might be able to offer in future procurement exercises
- When the contract is tendered there needs to be an open evaluation process for the bids, so that all types of organisations can enter and the vital things to consider will be:
 - a) Whether the organisation bidding for the work can deliver a grounds maintenance service to the same or higher standards than we currently receive.
 - b) That the organisation has the correct management structure, skills, staff and equipment in place to deliver the contract.
 - c) Whether they could provide extra services that have dropped out of the contract due to budget cuts through working differently i.e. volunteers, apprenticeships etc.
 - d) Is there a realistic balance between cost and quality of service, i.e. not too cheap just to get the contract; value for money.

Tenant Inspections and Resident Survey

This work was undertaken by a Tenant Inspector Team made up of Marie Brookes, Jim Watson, Les Rolfe, Joan Ball, Patti Hall, Carol Akribi, Tony Bateman, Dave Hammond, Wendy Head, Bill Bullivant, Ron Ryan, Lucy Stevenson, and Mark Holmes.

SRT designed an Inspection Sheet (see copy at Appendix 7) and Resident Survey (see copy at Appendix 8) to capture the 'customer experience' of the Grounds Maintenance Service across the District by carrying out inspections of a good cross-section of villages.




To ensure consistency across inspections SRT developed a set of photo standards (see full copy of photo standards at Appendix 9) using a traffic light system:

- **Red** – level of service has badly failed and something needs dealing with as a priority
- **Amber** – level of service doesn't adequately meet the required standards or residents expectations
- **Green** – level of service required and expected is being achieved.

Standards were set for the following aspects of the grounds maintenance contract:

- Grass cutting
- Hedges
- Shrubs/beds
- Hardstandings/car parks
- Ditches
- Trees.

Standard for hedges

<p>1 Green</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hedges are well maintained, cut back and attractive to look at.
<p>2 Amber</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hedges are well maintained, but in need of minor attention.
<p>3 Red</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hedges are overgrown in height, overhanging footpaths and not well maintained.

They physically inspected the open space, recorded their observations on the inspection and took photographs on arrival at the site.

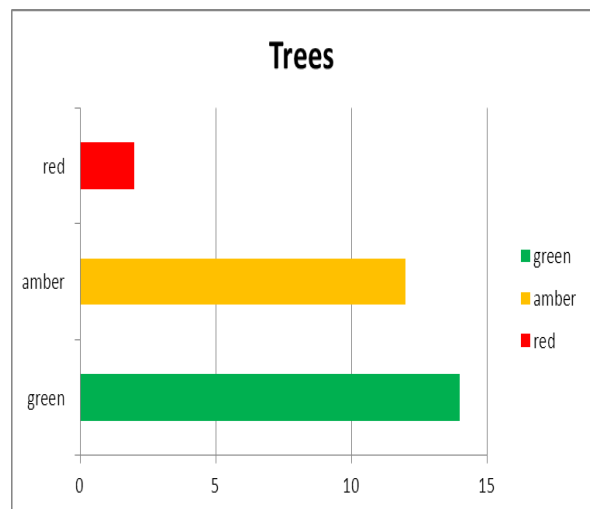
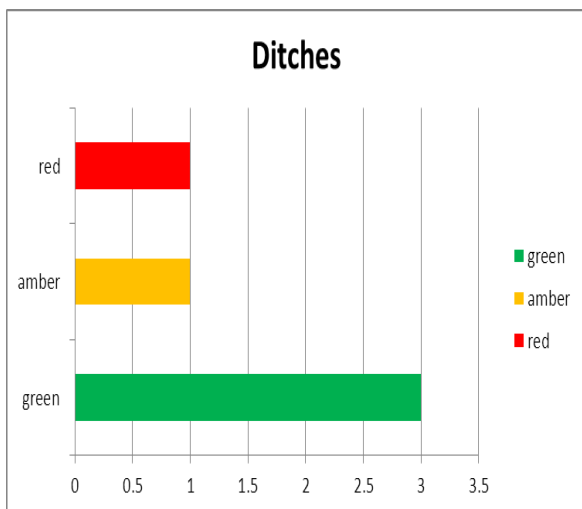
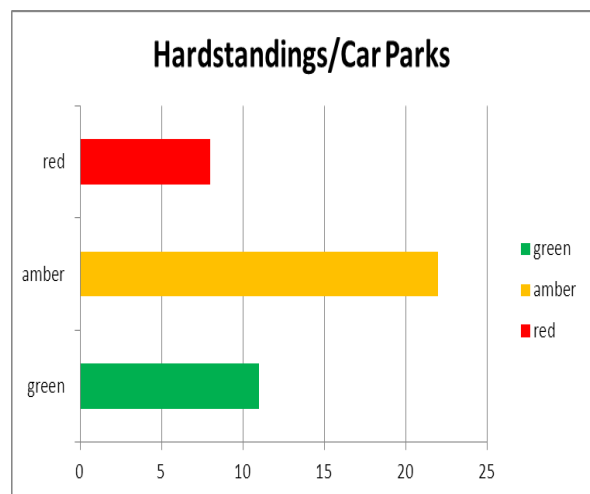
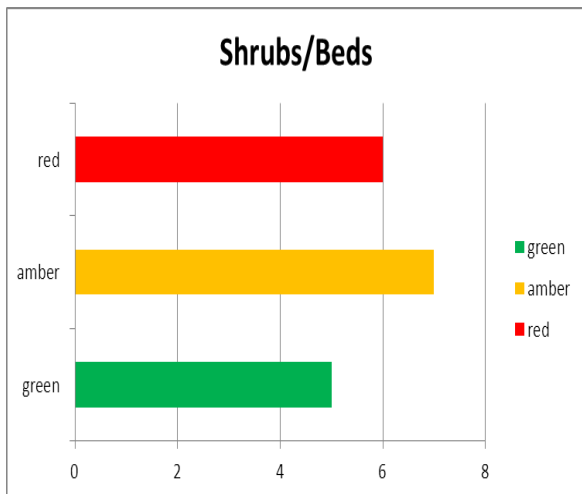
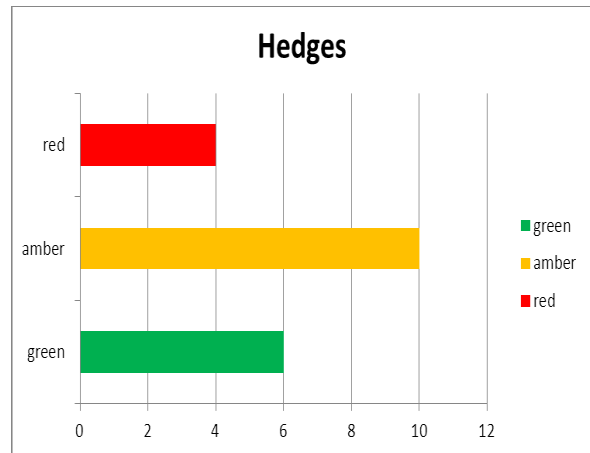
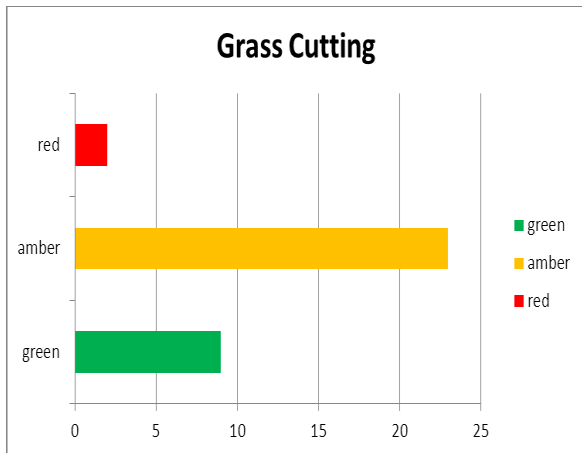
They then completed doorstep interviews with up to three residents at each site by completing a simple questionnaire.

The Tenant Inspectors then met to analyse the results of the questionnaire and discuss their inspection sheet judgements with the other inspectors (See full details of their discussions at Appendix 10).

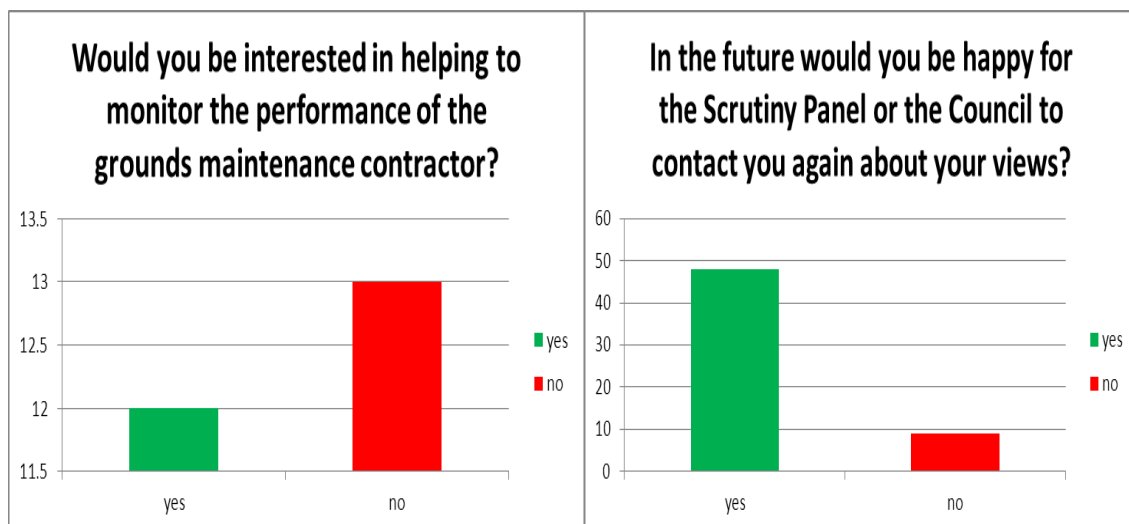
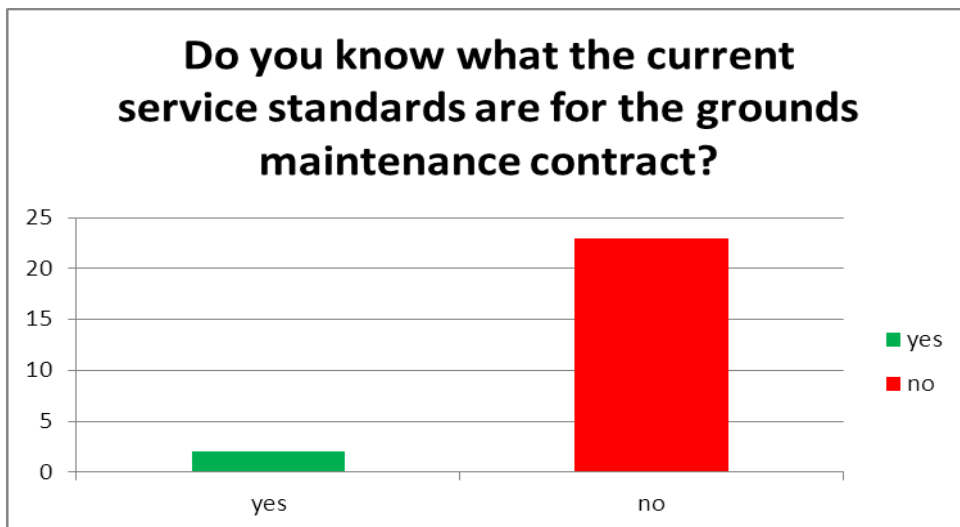
Their discussions covered:

- What did residents tell you?
- What would residents like to see done?
- What was being done well?
- What was poor or in need of improvement?
- What are the priorities for improvement? Try to put things in order of importance.
- Are there changes you want to recommend?
- What things can be done quickly and at little cost?
- What are the implications for the procurement of the next contract?

Tenant Inspector site ratings



Responses to Residents Survey



See Appendix 11 for narrative responses to Resident Survey.

Findings

- The cuts imposed in 2009 are having more than a visual impact and the outstanding works will result in the Council facing more costly works in the future
- Council's maps were questionable – not marked correctly for sites managed. Need to be reviewed and improved as even the Contractor is not aware of all pieces of land. How can Council or Contractor understand what they are responsible for?
- Surprised by tenants acceptance of poor standards – low expectations? Most liked their area but wanted things to improve. Sometimes the Inspectors' opinions on an area varied from those of the tenants living there.
- Tenants were not always aware that Grounds Maintenance was a service that they were paying for which might explain their low expectations
- Some tenants have given up reporting issues as “nothing gets done”
- To move service from OK to Good would need to restore services to pre-2009 cuts and include things like edges, weeds, strimming around trees etc.
- Hedges: with one cut per year it is not possible for these to look their best. Some are blocking footpaths and this represents a health and safety risk as pedestrians, people in mobility scooters, parents with buggies, etc. are forced onto the road. Need a regular and consistent program of care and maintenance
- Shrubs: the good planting was that which was cared for by tenants, the rest was poor. These areas need more attention to keep looking attractive and to remove weeds, litter etc.
- Removal of litter and general weeding need to go back into the contract
- Hardstanding/Car Parks: Weeds were a big issue, as were cracks and potholes on hardstandings and most areas needed sweeping. Car parks/ garage blocks were often hidden away so they were in worse condition than hardstandings, with lots of weeds and litter. Some garages were so over grown with weeds that the doors could not possibly be opened. Some of these areas were in such bad condition that Inspectors felt they should be demolished and used for housing
- Not many ditches in the areas visited, but some that were inspected were overgrown and contained litter such as bottles/cans. Ditches should go back into the contract to ensure they are safe
- Trees were generally OK, with some being described as “glorious”, but where dead or diseased were not dealt with. Low hanging or overgrown trees were an issue, especially where they impacted on paths or car parks – sometimes the trees causing these problems were in the gardens of residents. Maps did not show trees.

Here it should be mentioned that the vast majority of residents approached by SRT were welcoming and polite. Any adverse comments were directly at SCDC and the Contractor, however, these were relatively few and far between and generally of a nature to be expected on a walkabout.

Telephone Survey

The telephone survey has been put on hold until after the presentation to the Portfolio Holder and others, on 17th June 2014, to allow SRT to get a steer on charging mechanisms before consulting residents.

Work shadowing

Working shadowing was limited to casually observing and chatting to the Contractor's staff on site while completing the Tenant Inspections. This was not ideal, in future work shadowing should be more structured and involve going out with the Contractor's staff to assess first-hand how well they perform their role.

Findings

- It would appear that very little has been done to identify the Contractors understanding of what was required of them or even where they should be maintaining
- The maps provided by the Council appear to be considerably out of date or were never correctly marked in the first place.
- The Contractor's staff were professional and approachable but were clearly hampered by the severe cuts imposed in 2009.

Presentation on Housing Finance

SRT requested a presentation on housing finance as the 50/50 split placed a stranglehold on improving the service and it had misgivings about the charging mechanisms. Stephen Hills, the Director of Housing, delivered the presentation.

Findings

- The 50/50 split had been introduced in 2009 to deal with a difficult financial situation that Housing faced after a 'No' vote for transfer, i.e. the opposite to the current situation whereby self-financing of the HRA and the cuts faced by the General Fund has reversed the situation that existed in 2009
- Questioned the legitimacy of charging the General Fund to pay for open space designed to be enjoyed by residents living in the immediate council housing (part 2 sites)

- The Council has previously decided against depooling its rents and setting up separate service charges because this would have been costly and time consuming
- Also considered charging a service charge to RTB but decided against this because some of the conveyancing does not allow for a service charge to be made and it would therefore be unfair to charge some RTB and not others. Also, it has previously been considered impractical to make a charge because of the administrative costs of recovery. The Council has never charged a lump sum amount at the point of sale
- Accepted that depooling is considered good practice. It's transparent, maximises the Council's income, would stop the Grounds Maintenance Service being under resourced in the future and only those people who directly benefit from the service pay for it
- All villages benefit from the Grounds Maintenance Service to a greater or lesser extent as they all have open space that is maintained by the contract (the validity of this has subsequently been challenged, i.e. there are villages that don't have any open space maintained by the Grounds Maintenance Contract).

SRT meetings

Meetings were held on at least a monthly basis sometimes more regularly when the work required it throughout the past year (see full set of minutes at Appendix 12).

Mainly they provided an opportunity for members to:

- Report back to SRT on the outcomes of the activities they had undertaken on its behalf of TPG
- Discuss the outcomes and explore the implications for the Scrutiny Review of Grounds Maintenance
- Receive a series of Briefing by The Linchpin Project to develop the skills to undertake activities ahead of actually doing them and also reflect on how they had gone afterwards to identify any learning points.

SRT decided against doing a study visit at this stage, but may choose to undertake a study visit as part of the procurement of the next contract.

Conclusions

1. The cuts imposed in 2009 reduced the Grounds Maintenance Contract to a basic grass cutting service and the impact has been more serious than anticipated at the time. The Grounds Maintenance Service is inconsistent across different sites and tasks, in some areas there are health and safety issues, especially with regard to trees left in a dangerous condition and hedges blocking footpaths. The current Grounds Maintenance Contract is not fit for purpose and has therefore made the management of the contract inefficient.
1. The 50/50 split totally precludes improving the Grounds Maintenance Service other than by letting the contract in smaller lots or opening up competition from other types of provider such as social enterprises, in an attempt to achieve better VfM. The split itself may be open to legal challenge.
2. It would be unfair and controversial to treat the sheltered service in a preferential way simply because it is wholly funded out of the HRA. A solution should be found to allow both general needs and sheltered tenants to elect for an enhanced Grounds Maintenance Service.
3. By not depooling rents and introducing a service charge for grounds maintenance, the Council has not adopted good practice, maximised its income, or been transparent with tenants, the combination of which is leading to the service being under resourced.
4. The Grounds Maintenance Service clearly fails to maintain the open spaces to an acceptable standard. Overall the expectations of tenants are low, the reasons for this aren't clear, but may be related to the absence of explicit service standards and transparent charging mechanisms.
5. The conditions of contract, including rectification notices, default notices and management reporting, are not being enforced by the Client and the relationship between the Client and the Contractor is far too informal. Whilst a certain amount of informality is expected and in some cases useful, a more formal approach would be better adopted.
6. The Council's maps are out-of-date or inaccurate and this has meant some areas of land have never been maintained by the Contractor.
7. The Client and the Contractor are not using the corporate complaints policy and this is thought to be contributing to under recording and subsequently under reporting of complaints from residents who feel nothing happens if you complain. A more robust approach to dealing with complaints would provide the Council, the Contractor and residents with a better overall picture of the quality of the service. Residents are quite disillusioned regarding complaints, believing it's "no good complaining, nothing gets done".
8. The Council's membership of the Eastern Procurement Consortium offers potential savings to the Council through making it unnecessary to go through the normal 'hoops and hurdles' for the next contract but it also places constraints on the autonomy of the Council to decide the tendering criteria, conditions of contract and specification.

9. There's no real appetite for setting up a Tenant Management Organisation to run the Grounds Maintenance Service, but there is interest in having tenants on a board overseeing the next contract.
10. To date tenant involvement in monitoring the Grounds Maintenance Contractor has been limited and ineffective. This is acknowledged by the Client and the Contractor who would welcome the introduction of tenant inspectors to monitor the performance of the Contractor.
11. Residents are not aware of the Grounds Maintenance service standards or that they indirectly pay for the service which may contribute to their low expectations over the service. Shared Equity residents are paying for the service in three different ways, a) service charge, b) within the rent element and c) Council Tax if they are liable to pay it.
12. Some garage sites are in a state of serious neglect and have outlived their usefulness.
13. Social enterprises, including charities, may be a way of enhancing a Grounds Maintenance Service through providing cost effective solutions to weeding and litter picking, but the jury is still out as to whether they could manage to run a Grounds Maintenance Service.
14. The Grounds Maintenance Service should offer more social value, including employment and training opportunities. Social enterprises and other types of providers could have something to offer even if this is restricted to tasks such as litter picking, fly tipping removal, weeding, etc.

Recommendations

The Council should

1. Specify a new Grounds Maintenance Contract that reinstates the works sacrificed by the cuts in 2009. Including a relaunch of the Welfare Gardens Scheme.
2. Renegotiate or remove the 50/50 split to allow for the procurement of a better service and to get the contract on a fairer and surer footing.
3. Create a level playing field for general needs and sheltered tenants to be able to choose to specify an enhanced Grounds Maintenance Service.
4. Introduce a good practice charging mechanism based on depooled rents, a separate Grounds Maintenance Service Charge, charging RTBs where the conveyance allows and the recovery cost isn't prohibitive and a proportionate contribution from the general fund for any land not directly owned by the HRA.
5. Consult residents through a telephone survey and focus groups about an enhanced Grounds Maintenance Service (or more accurately one reinstated) and develop a set of explicit service standards that should then be communicated to housing and contractor staff and everyone paying for the service.
6. Develop new contract conditions in collaboration with tenants, general needs and sheltered housing officers and enforce them in a robust and effective way.
7. Review the sites maintained by the Grounds Maintenance Contract, update its records and issue new maps ahead of procuring the next Grounds Maintenance Contract.
8. Request that the existing Grounds Maintenance Contractor adopts the corporate complaints policy, makes this a condition of the next contract and uses complaints as a mechanism to drive service improvement.
9. Investigate the requirements of Eastern Procurement Consortium regarding Grounds Maintenance Contracts as a matter of urgency and liaise with SRT over the implications for this review.
10. Set up a board made up of a majority of resident representatives to oversee the next Grounds Maintenance Contract.
11. Recruit Tenant Inspectors to monitor the performance of the Grounds Maintenance Contractor and engage local champions to sign off the works before the contractor is paid.
12. Develop an explicit set of service standards and provide residents with a copy of them and a rent/service charge statement which shows the charges clearly broken down.
13. Redevelop garage sites for housing where they are in a state of disrepair and there is no longer a demand for garages.
14. Ensure the new invitation to tender requirements allows for contractors to bid for smaller lots as well as the whole contract and that they create a level playing

field to increase competition by attracting tenders from social enterprises and others.

15. Extract more social value from the next Grounds Maintenance Contract by specifying a more enhanced service which reduces rural isolation and offers employment and training opportunities for local people.

Appendices

1. Members of SRT.
2. Scoping document.
3. Summary Desktop Review Report.
4. Interview report with Geoff Clark.
5. Interview report with Anita Goddard.
6. Focus Group Report with the Contractor and Housing.
7. Inspection sheet.
8. Resident Survey.
9. Photo Standards.
10. Tenant Inspector discussions.
11. Narrative responses to Resident Survey.
12. Minutes of SRT Meetings.

References

Greener Neighbourhoods: A good practice guide to managing green space – NHF (2011)

Derby Homes Estates Inspection Photo Quality Book – Derby Homes (undated)

Estate Services Peer Review Photo Book – HouseMark (2009)

Briefings – The Linchpin Project (2013/14)

