

Scrutiny Team Review of Grounds Maintenance

July 2015 – October 2015

Prepared by:

The Scrutiny Team

Introduction and Objectives

There has been no grounds maintenance review since the start of the current contract in 2007 with English Landscapes. This same contract was extended in 2012 by Selwood Housing for a further 4 years but ends in October 2016. It was deemed to be an appropriate time to review and reassess the grounds maintenance service in its entirety.

The intention of this review was to examine the management of the service and to make recommendations for improvement if and where applicable, for the benefit of both the tenant and landlord.

HISTORY.

2001. Properties and associated grass areas, car parks, paved areas, shrub beds and trees were transferred from WWDC to West Wilts Housing society. Many areas of grass (large and small), pathways and car parks were, for some unidentifiable reason, not included in the transfer and maintenance of these areas remained the responsibility of WWDC but were actually maintained by WWHS and charged accordingly. The actual sizes of all areas were provided by the council but were not verified by WWHS at this time.

2004. WWDC wanted to market test the grounds and cleansing services but due to inaccurate records detailing the scope of the works, this was not possible.

SCRUTINY TEAM

Measures were undertaken to improve these records. It is not known whether or not this included a 'geo mapping' survey. The contract was due to expire at the end of 2005 but was extended for 2 years to allow this information to be improved. (See additional information WWDC 2004)

2007. A new 5 year contract was negotiated with English Landscapes to include the maintenance of both WWHS (now Selwood Housing Society) and WWDC property. Costings and sizes of areas covered (Appendix A) were not verified by Selwood Housing. The terms and conditions in this contract continued for the 5 year period.

2012. Contract was re-tendered and WWDC (now Wiltshire Council) accepted a bid from Balfour Beatty. Selwood Housing extended their existing contract with English Landscapes by 4 years - until October 2016. There was a very skimpy one page statement encompassing the conditions under which the extension was to be conducted (Appendix B). From 2001 until this year, Selwood undertook to maintain the council owned areas within the estates and WC was subsequently invoiced for these works. This arrangement was terminated by WC during their most recent round of 'cuts' in June 2015 and maintenance was continued by WC, presumably by whosoever was contracted to them at this time.

REVIEW PROCESS

The scrutiny team undertook the following actions:-

1. The scrutiny team explored the written procedures and processes used to provide grounds maintenance services to the tenants and make the associated charges.
2. The scrutiny team reviewed and examined advice and information to tenants in all available formats.
3. A benchmarking exercise was undertaken to identify positives and negatives in comparison with other housing providers, local and national.
4. Surveys of tenants were undertaken to gain a range of views from tenants in receipt of ground maintenance services as follows:-

SCRUTINY TEAM

4a. General survey of estate tenants with regard to communal facilities.

4b. Site visits to sheltered schemes with communal facilities.

4c. Telephone survey of the members of the 'gardening club' in respect of services paid for individually but included in the costings of the main contract with English Landscapes.

5. Staff from Selwood Property Services were interviewed to obtain additional information regarding the provision of grounds maintenance services by English Landscapes and the monitoring thereof.

Findings

1. The scrutiny team explored the written procedures and processes used to provide grounds maintenance services to the tenants and collect the associated service charges.

1a. There is no evidence of any written procedures or processes being used in the provision of these services. The yearly schedule, sizes and specifications used to calculate annual costings to formulate the 2007 contract are still used (along with the area maps initially provided by WWDC at that time – example appendix C)

1b. The maps show grassed areas that are the responsibility of Selwood Housing (light green) and WWDC (dark green). It is not understood why these areas are split as they are contained within the same estates and in many cases are situated next to one another. There was an existing arrangement (agreed in 2001 on the bulk transfer of properties) whereby Selwood Housing would cut the areas belonging to WWDC and invoice them accordingly. There does not appear to be any clear documentation to verify this arrangement with detail specifying costings, sizes, locations etc. Selwood invoiced for this service on a regular basis. This arrangement continued until early 2015 when Wiltshire Council instructed Selwood to

cease maintaining these areas. There is some dispute as to whether Selwood was paid for the final service.

2. The scrutiny team reviewed and examined advice and information to tenants in all available formats.

2a. There is no information in any format - on the Selwood website, face book page, printed leaflets or in the tenant's handbook, regarding provision of grounds maintenance that can be expected in return for the service charge paid by the tenant.

There is a one page leaflet available on joining the gardening club and the services that will be provided for the payment of approximately £152 per annum – see additional information 'Gdn Club'.

3. A benchmarking exercise was undertaken to identify positives and negatives in comparison with other housing providers, local and national.

3a. There is very little documentation in the way of procedures and processes and it was therefore difficult to make any meaningful comparison with other housing providers. A comprehensive list of works and methods used has therefore been prepared – see additional information 'Best Practice'.

4. **Surveys of tenants.**

4a. General survey of estate tenants with communal grounds

63 survey forms were completed by tenants from various locations across the 5 towns. The results of this survey can be found at additional information 'General Survey Results'.

The general consensus was that the majority of respondents had little or no idea when & what services were provided but were very sure that other than grass cutting, other services were sporadic, if not completely non-existent (hedge cutting & hard surface spraying).

It is interesting to note that of those tenants who answered the question, 21 believed that 'repairs & maintenance' was the telephone option that

SCRUTINY TEAM

should be selected for ground maintenance enquiries. 28 correctly answered 'customer services'. This may support the assumption that satisfaction levels have dropped in the 2014/15 period due to the lack of information provided to tenants with regard to the responsibilities of each department.

4b. Telephone survey of gardening club members

16 gardening club members took part in the survey. The results can be found at additional information 'Gdn Club Survey Results'. The tenants were unclear as to how many times their grass was to be cut per annum. They did not appear to know much about hedge cutting but were adamant that hard surface areas were not being sprayed to eliminate weeds. There appears to be no provision for the trimming back of shrubs in these gardens.

The gardening club (tenant garden service) consisted of 275 sites in 2007 and for this number the cost quoted by English Landscapes was £15,315 - equating to a cost per site of £55.69.

There are currently 98 members in the gardening club. The cost for the year 2014/15 was £23,033 - equating to a cost per site of £235.00, an increase per site of over 300% in 7 years, (appendix E).

4c. Sheltered housing schemes survey/visits- communal grounds.

The scrutiny team visited 8 different sheltered schemes to survey tenants, measure beds and photograph some of the beds planted with bedding. (additional information 'Sheltered Scheme Survey'.

The grassed areas appear to be cut regularly but again, hard surfaces are not being sprayed to eliminate weeds. Some shrubs are being trimmed in some schemes but others are not. There is confusion as to what the contractors are /are not supposed to do. Many of the shrubs are planted in raised beds which are not maintained.

Of the 8 schemes, 3 had beds that were not being planted at any time with bedding plants. 5 did have bedding plants used but these were not watered or weeded throughout the summer and by August/September

SCRUTINY TEAM

were looking decidedly overgrown and neglected. Photographs are available to show this.

These beds are planted once a year, in early June to July and the plants last approximately 4 months. The beds are empty for the remaining 8 months of the year and are filled with weeds and rubbish.

There are some beds at these schemes that are planted and maintained by the tenants themselves. There were numerous other raised beds, some very large, that were overgrown with weeds and brambles that had become a receptacle for dumped rubbish.

A sign was placed on notice boards at sheltered schemes in August 2015 detailing some of the services provided under the contract but does not specify all timescales. Additional information 'Gdn Club Info'.

Planting – annual bedding.

2007 contract cost quoted – 223 metres at £60 per square metre, to include preparation of beds, planting, watering and weeding throughout the season. A list of current planting sites does not appear to be available nor the actual size of any that are being planted. The current charge per square metre is unknown as these charges appear to be amalgamated within the total charge levied for grounds maintenance as a whole.

5. Staff from Selwood Property Services were interviewed to obtain additional information regarding the provision of grounds maintenance services by English Landscapes and the monitoring thereof.

5a. Questions and answers can be found at additional information 'Staff Interviews'.

Overall, property services depends on neighbourhood managers estate inspections, reports by other Selwood staff (housekeepers and caretakers) and complaints from tenants to monitor the performance of the contractor English Landscapes. Apparently adjustments to areas included in the contract (new builds and areas no longer grassed or used as car parks etc) are reviewed at the beginning of each year. There is a 'trade off' approach between new areas and areas no longer serviced but this is not documented.

5b. There is a one page contract amendment sheet, produced when the contract was extended for 4 years in 2012 (see appendix B). This amendment proposed the use of GPS data to be obtained from WWDC in order to provide Selwood Housing with a full geo mapping function.

This would have provided exact measurements of the grassed areas, car parks, pathways and other areas which should be included in any tender/quotation for services to be provided. This proposal was not followed up and no action was taken.

The amendment sheet also contained an agreement to provide affordable gardening services to Selwood tenants who were not eligible to apply for the 'gardening club' and receive subsidised services. This agreement did not materialise and it is not known whether or not this was investigated and costed fully.

5c. A detailed list of complaints received by Selwood in the past 24 months was requested by the scrutiny team. It transpires that there is no specific QL code for complaints concerning any aspect of grounds maintenance. The details provided at additional information 'GM Complaints' is the sum total on the QL system of complaints discovered but we do not believe that this is comprehensive or complete.

5d. There are 3 job descriptions in existence that mention grounds maintenance monitoring and queries:-

Property Surveyor – 'Grounds maintenance and other asset related issues. To assist when required with the delivery of Selwood Housing's Ground Maintenance contract dealing with any queries or complaints that may arise'.

Housekeeper – 'Sweep and clean internal and external areas and clean litter away as required. Monitor grass cutting and window cleaning'.

Caretaker – Sweep external footpaths (including leaf collection) and clear litter away. Moss removal and gritting of pathways at sheltered homes. Monitor performance of grounds maintenance contractor and liaise with contractor when issues arise'.

There does not appear to be any system of reporting problems or monitoring performance in written form. The system appears to be

divisive as opposed to cooperative, with no cohesion between departments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Initiate a formal audit of the grounds maintenance contract and provisions to ascertain the actual costs of the service and responsibilities of Selwood Housing and the contractor. The scrutiny team review raised more questions than it provided answers and feel that a full and comprehensive audit would be appropriate at this time, especially since the overall cost of this service is approaching £800,000 per annum (APPENDIX F).
2. Investigate the actions required to ensure that Selwood properties and estates look tidy and well-kept. Encompass these within the contract tendering process to ensure that all aspects and responsibilities of grounds maintenance are clearly specified and understood by both Selwood and the contractor.
3. Approach Wiltshire Council to ascertain the possibility of using their geo mapping information to provide detailed information on sizes, whereabouts etc of areas requiring grounds maintenance. Should this information not be available, a survey should be commissioned as a matter of urgency to enable accurate information to be supplied to companies wishing to tender for the new contract beginning October 2016. An example of the information that can be obtained using this process can be found at appendix D.
4. Ensure that grounds maintenance information is made available to all tenants in as many formats as possible (face book, website, leaflets, handbook) to include details of responsibilities, methods, timings and if possible, charges.
5. Add specific codes to the QL system that covers all aspects of complaints with regards to ground maintenance, to ensure that they are both logged and acted upon accordingly.
6. Investigate the desirability of separation of the gardening club from the main grounds maintenance contract for ease of monitoring,

SCRUTINY TEAM

administration and the possibility of making such a contract more desirable to a smaller, local contractor. The extension of such a service could then be made to those tenants that are not vulnerable/disabled and charged accordingly. This could reduce the amount provided to those that are subsidised, by negotiation with the contractor.

7. Examine criteria and charges applied to current gardening club members with a view to grading services and charges. This may require current members to be reassessed for membership under any new conditions introduced.
8. Investigate and formalise all methods of monitoring performance for grounds maintenance services. Neighbourhood managers estate inspections, surveyors inspections, housekeeping and caretaking duties, cutting edge surveys, gardening club surveys and possibly the new 'street reps' could all be utilised for monitoring purposes but a system whereby problems, faults, lack of or inadequate service are all recorded and most importantly, acted upon.
9. Investigate the possibility of permanent planting at sheltered housing sites, with low level and low maintenance perennials and shrubs. Any savings could be used to subsidise the gardening club costs for disabled/vulnerable tenants.