

Update for Challenge For Change Grass Cutting Report for Scrutiny

Introduction and Background

Following approval from the Board of Sheffield Homes, a customer scrutiny panel was established in July 2011. Recruitment was open to tenants, leaseholders and customers of the then Sheffield Homes. The Community Engagement team, with independent support and advice from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS), successfully recruited a team of scrutineers. It was decided to call the group Challenge for Change. Throughout this report, the scrutiny group will be called C4C. This is the group's second project.

This project was completed by four main scrutineers - Richard Bailey, Michelle Cook, Mick Daniels and Linda Moxon. Three other scrutineers have been involved with the project in the early stages - Elspeth Lusby, Ken Rickwood and Kingsley Robinson

The group elected to focus on grass cutting following feedback from tenants that the service was not at the required level. Many of the group have also witnessed first hand the substandard level of service that is being provided.

The group has also previously looked at Complaints and noticed that a lot of emphasis was being made by tenants into the substandard service of grass cutting. Overall customer satisfaction into grass cutting is extremely low, which is why the Challenge for Change team elected to scrutinise the subject to see what improvements can be made.

The report detailed the findings following the challengers investigations. The challengers spoke to many different managers from within Sheffield Homes (now Council Housing Services) and Parks and Public Realm about how the service was delivered and monitored. They also spoke to Tenants and Residents on numerous estates to gather views from them.

The group analysed many different documents including the Service Level Agreement to establish if the service was working well and providing good value for money for the residents. The challengers made several recommendations based on their findings.

The overall purpose of the project was to examine the grass cutting service and ensure that Parks and Public Realm were giving a good enough service, delivering on its promises and providing the then Sheffield Homes 9(Council Housing Service) with value for money.

2. Objectives

From the initial research into the grass cutting service, the team identified the following objectives for the project.

- Establish what the grass cutting standards were and to understand what monitoring arrangements are in place by who and when.
- Understand why tenants feel the way that they do about the grass cutting service and evidence this. Link this to “estate pride” and health and safety issues and the fact that Sheffield is such a green city.
- Understand the “reasonableness” of customer expectations and if not being met, why is this is the case.
- Understand which land is being maintained and which is not. What is the difference between areas where customer satisfaction varies.
- Understand who manages what land and how easy it is for tenants and residents to access this information.
- To understand the systems of communication, find out if there are any issues and if so what is being done about them. Also why is Parks and Public Realm named so, does this mean anything to customers.
- Are tenants and residents getting what they are paying for? Find out if it would be more cost effective to replace some grassed areas with other surfaces.

- Understand what Tenant Inspectors do and are their findings being acted upon. Are there sufficient numbers and do walkabouts have any impact.

3: Findings and Investigations

The challengers met with numerous focus groups of staff from both Parks and Public Realm, the Council Housing Services as well as a selection of Tenants, Residents and Tenant Inspectors. All were asked questions about Grass cutting around

- Standards of cut,
- frequency,
- value for money,
- the Service level Agreement
- monitoring that took place.

All were encouraged to be honest with their responses. As a result of this extensive consultation and fact finding the group produced a series of recommendations for improvement to the grass cutting Service.

4: Recommendations

The group produced a series of recommendations for Managers from the Council Housing Service and Parks and Public Realm to look at and initiate where possible. The recommendations where;

R1:	Find out how other Social Landlords perform and compare best practice/achieve their standards
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R3	Grounds maintenance should be based on Housing boundaries as opposed to Community Assembly boundaries
R4.	Weed Spraying should be done more often that just once a year.
R5	Review and rewrite the SLA with customer input to ensure that it is clear and unambiguous and to make clear the distinction between a contract and an agreement.
R6	Better communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Between SH teams• Between PPR teams• Between SH & PPR• Between area staff & their Estate teams• Between Area Staff & TARAS• Ensures all delegates attend meetings.
R7.	Develop and implement a new and more efficient monitoring system, ensuring it is: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Independent• Avoids duplication.• Consistent application• A clear monitoring form for Tenant Inspectors• The use of Area Staff• The use of TARAS

R8	. Update the mapping system so all areas can be confident that sites actually exist and that charges are not being made for non-existent areas.
R9	. An urgent review of pricing mechanisms for different tasks/types of work
R10.	Payments are made on a per cut basis and not by the height of the grass.
R11.	Enforce the SLA or invoke a penalty clause for work either not done or not done to standard. Allow SH to concentrate on its own work and recharge PPR where it does work that they should have done.
R12.	That the service takes account of the various pilot schemes and make a decision to ensure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indefinite pilots should be avoided and a city wide standard needs to be developed. • Decision on which section leads grounds maintenance. • That C4C are involved in the evaluation of the pilots and any final decision • That Tenants are involved in the pilots
R13.	Review of SH staffing resources and how they are applied across SH areas
R14.	Provide up to date maps to TARAS
R15.	Provide up to date maps in Area Offices

R16	. Better use of Tenant Inspectors ensuring: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• That they receive regular feedback• That they work consistently• That their role and numbers are enhanced
R17	. Sheffield Homes and not Parks and Public Realm should conduct market testing and tendering.

Managers from both Council Housing Services and Parks and public realm looked at the recommendations and developed an action plan as to how the recommendations may be met and possibly implemented. In March 2013 Managers from Parks and Public Realm and Council Housing Services met the challenge for change group to provide responses to the recommendations. They then met again in April 2014 to update them off the progress. Explanations and evidence was provided where recommendations had been undertaken and updates given where the recommendations were not currently possible

The table below highlights the recommendations and the responses and actions to the recommendations.

Grass Cutting Review: Update for Challenge for Change July 2013 with additional update April 2014

		July 2013 Update	April 2014 Update
R2.	Parks and Public Realm workers to gain familiarity with the Sheffield Homes sites that they work on	Park staff have joined Area staff at the service development group for Estate Services. This format is set to continue every quarter. Also at a local level	The much improved relationship between Council Housing and Parks staff continues with regular liaison at all levels
R6.	Better communication:- Between SH teams Between PPR teams Between SH & PPR Between area staff & their Estate teams Between Area Staff & TARAS Ensures all delegates attend meetings.	Housing and Parks staff meet on a weekly basis to discuss any issues.	Continues and is working well
R3.	Grounds maintenance should be based on Housing boundaries as opposed to Community Assembly boundaries.	Links to FOCH recommendations and Housing Plus model, no further progress as yet.	Community Assemblies have now been disbanded and Housing Areas are also being reviewed as part of the Housing + project. There is a possibility that the new Housing Area and Council ward boundaries will be aligned
R4.	Weed Spraying should be done more often that just once a year.	Cost implications under current SLA. To look as part of FOCH service design work	Agreed that a second weed spray is a possibility but this would need to be funded by a reduction in other service. Consultation would be required
R5.	Review and rewrite the SLA with customer input to ensure that it is	Process to begin with parks in August 2013. To involve the C4C group with the	No thorough review has taken place pending the outcome of the Open

	clear and unambiguous and to make clear the distinction between a contract and an agreement.	review of the SLA.	Spaces Review
R7.	Develop and implement a new and more efficient monitoring system, ensuring it is:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent • Avoids duplication. • Consistent application • A clear monitoring form for Tenant Inspectors • The use of Area Staff • The use of TARAS 	All Housing staff (estates) have been trained using a consistent monitoring system. Areas are now using this system and reports are being produced and taken to Liaison meetings with Parks.	The monitoring system has been further refined and continues to work well. Agreed that it would be a good idea to issue results to TARAs
R8.	Update the Mapping system so all areas can be confident that sites actually exist and that charges are not being made for non existent areas.	As a result of the monitoring system any variations received are sent through to Parks to be amended. Will however be a slow process.	Continues to be updated but remains a slow process
R1.	Find out how other Social Landlords perform and compare best practice/achieve their standards	Parks are currently undertaking a review of pricing mechanism. Housing trying to bench mark with like for like Councils to compare best practice and standards. Still to progress further.	Peer reviews between the Council Housing Service and Parks and Countryside still take place. It remains difficult to compare with other organisations due to the commercial sensitivity of contract information. Comparing with the Core Cities group is problematic as they all have a different schedule of rates
R9.	An urgent review of pricings mechanisms for different tasks/types of work		Completed and prices held for two years
R10.	Payments are made on a per cut basis and not by the height of the		No change as old SLA still in place

	grass.		
R11.	Enforce the SLA or invoke a penalty clause for work either not done or not done to standard. Allow SH to concentrate on its own work and recharge PPR where it does work that they should have done.		The option to issue default notices remains but concerns are usually picked up through monitoring
R12.	That the service takes account of the various pilot schemes and make a decision to ensure:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indefinite pilots should be avoided and a city wide standard needs to be developed. - Decision on which section leads grounds maintenance. - That C4C are involved in the evaluation of the pilots and any final decision - That Tenants are involved in the pilots 	An evaluation process will be undertaken of all current pilots and the current SLA at the end of the NE pilot. The review will commence in late 2013 early 2014 and will feed back when completed to the staff and tenants in the local areas concerned, wider tenants groups through CSG partnership group and CWF. Local members will also be informed of the outcome.	The NE pilot concluded in November 2013. The Open Spaces Review is taking account of lessons learned.
R16.	. Better use of Tenant Inspectors ensuring:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That they receive regular feedback • That they work consistently • That their role and numbers are enhanced 	Still work in progress but aim to use up to date technology where possible and ensure they receive regular feedback of outcome of their reports.	Tenant Inspectors are now receiving better information

Following recommendations from the Future of Council Housing workstream's and an evaluation report around current delivery methods of Open Space maintenance for Council Housing Land, Managers from both Parks and Public Realm and Council Housing Services with members approval started to explore the possibility of there being one provider of Open Space Maintenance for both Council Housing and Parks Land

The current arrangement four Housing estates, which includes maintenance by both Parks and the Housing Estate teams, creates some confusion for members of the public and inefficiencies for internal service delivery as each service has their own maintenance specifications and standards, this is most noticeable where this is applied to adjacent pieces of land. Monitoring of service delivery and quality is carried out by Housing staff, tenant inspectors and Parks staff.

As part of this project officers undertook an options appraisal workshop to review the internal provision of grounds maintenance and to help inform the future options for service delivery.

Recommendations were presented to Cabinet on the 15th of October. Cabinet welcomed the report and agreed all the recommendations. The recommendations were that Cabinet;

- Note the contents of the report and the service efficiencies and savings that can be achieved for the HRA and General Fund
- Approve the delivery of Housing Grounds Maintenance by a single service and that this be achieved by the transfer of Estate Officers from the Council Housing Service to the Parks and Public Realm Service
- Approves the reconfiguration of the remaining Council Housing Service estate services function following the transfer of grounds maintenance work to Parks and Public Realm
- Authorises the Director of Culture and Environment and the Interim Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services to take the necessary steps to implement these recommendations

Work is now taking place to deliver these change. Discussions will shortly start to take place regarding service standards for the delivery of open space maintenance. The C4C group will be included within this process.

