

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: WEDNESDAY, 31 OCTOBER 2012

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

SUBJECT: ESTATE MANAGEMENT SERVICES

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 This Report updates members on proposals to develop an enhanced Assisted Gardening Service and seeks approval for new Qualifying Criteria.

This Report also provides an update on the following:

- Environmental Visual Audits.
- Garage Site Review.
- Maintenance of Housing Land (Street Scene).
- Allotments on Housing Land
- Estate Caretaker Review

Members are also asked to consider a range of recommendations relating to each area of work.

2.00 BACKGROUND

The Neighbourhood Housing Management Service is responsible for a range of functions relating to the day to day management of the Council's Estates.

As part of the drive towards continuous improvement, five areas of work are being considered that aim to not only improve local neighbourhoods but also enhance the customer experience in being a tenant or resident of Flintshire.

3.00 ASSISTED GARDEN SERVICE

3.01 Background

Flintshire County Council provides an Assisted Gardening Service to tenants, currently managed by Street Scene, consisting of grass and hedge cutting for both sheltered and general needs stock.

At present general needs housing tenants must be registered blind, over the age of 60 or in receipt of Disability Working Allowance, Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance to qualify for the Gardening Service; sheltered housing tenants qualify automatically.

Approximately 1,500 households (including sheltered tenants) are in receipt of the Service at an approximate cost of £250,000 per year. This cost does not include for collection of grass cuttings.

3.02 Considerations

The Assisted Gardening Service is in need of modernisation to align it with the changing needs of the population. There is no charge made for the service at present.

The new Service will be designed and operational by 1st April 2013 in time for the commencement of the spring grass cutting season.

The new Service will include typical gardening services and tenderers will also be asked to price for the collection of grass cuttings. Additionally a welfare element will be added to further support vulnerable tenants. (Research concludes that a model similar to the one proposed does not currently exist in Wales).

3.03 Welfare Support

This additional welfare element will compliment the new Community Based Accommodation Support Service (CBASS). This will ensure that the most vulnerable tenants are supported in ways which meet their needs.

At this stage two levels of intervention – low-level and high-level – are being considered:

3.04 Low Level Intervention

An example of this type of intervention would be a gardener who, upon arrival at a property, would check for evident signs of alarm, distress or unusual activity. These signs could include:

- A build up of post in the letter box.
- Swarms of flies in the window.
- An accumulation of full milk bottles outside the property.
- Signs of forced entry.

- Distressing sounds emanating from the property.

The gardener would report any signs of concern to Care Link or the Emergency Services so they could be acted upon immediately. In addition the gardener would be expected to introduce themselves to the tenant upon arrival at the property, affording the gardener a further opportunity to make a basic assessment of the tenant's wellbeing.

3.05 High Level Intervention

In addition to the above, this higher level of intervention could include well-checks, winter fuel advice, shopping services, financial advice, befriending help lines, referrals to other agencies and services tailored to the tenant's needs.

It is considered unlikely that a specialist landscape contractor alone will be able to deliver both the gardening service and high-level welfare element. However, it is considered that the majority of contractors could deliver a basic gardening service and low-level welfare provision as a single organisation.

The ability to deliver a service of this nature will depend upon a number of factors:

- The number of households that meet the proposed criteria.
- The cost of delivering the gardening and welfare services and consideration of service charges (which would be eligible for Housing benefit).
- Securing suitably skilled organisations to deliver services.

Following a market dialogue exercise it is clear that some organisations would be willing to work in partnership to enable both the gardening and high level welfare element to be delivered under a single contract.

3.06 Collection & Disposal of Grass

Many County Councillors and tenants have expressed a preference to have their grass clippings collected and disposed of following cutting.

Collection and disposal of grass clippings is currently unavailable to tenants due to the higher costs involved. These include costs of disposal and the need to change grass cutting equipment to enable collection.

The design of the new Service will need to consider the following options:

- Collecting grass clippings and funding (or charging) for additional costs for disposal.
- Do nothing – leave the grass in situ as at present.

Options for disposal of grass clippings include:

- Utilise the standard brown bin where permitted (lower cost).
- Utilise correct chargeable green waste recycling channels (would incur higher costs).

Discussions with specialist landscape contractors indicate an anticipated 20% increase in contract costs for disposal of grass clippings through the correct channels.

The ability of the Service to collect grass cuttings will therefore depend on:

- Number of households qualifying for the Service.
- Preferred method of disposal.
- Affordability of additional cost.

Members' Considerations

Members are asked to consider the financial consequences of collecting grass clippings and the implications this could have on the number of households who will be able to receive the Service or the way that the service is funded.

3.07 Community Benefits

The inclusion of 'community benefits' or 'social requirements' in public sector procurement is designed to ensure that wider social and economic issues are taken into account when tendering contracts. Community benefits' may focus on specific areas such as education, training and employment or community initiatives.

As well as supplying a basic gardening service, the successful contractor could offer to proactively engage with local communities to help develop gardening-related projects such as community gardens or allotments. The winning contractor might also be expected to attend the Housing Community Fun Day or support local schools undertake

environmental projects.

A 'community benefit' may also involve engaging people currently not in employment, education or training or people with learning difficulties or mental health problems. Emphasis could also be placed on developing a gardening apprentice scheme with a view to them securing employment with the organisation. The tender document will actively challenge organisations to consider how as part of their tender they will deliver 'community benefits' as part of contract delivery.

3.08 Social Enterprise

In seeking a suitable organisation to undertake this contract the benefits of employing a social enterprise are also considered. Research supports the assertion that when social enterprises tackle local social and environmental issues and reinvest their profits in the community the result is local economic growth and added social value. In other words when money from the public purse is channeled into community social enterprises that money appears to 'work harder' for those communities.

It is anticipated that organisations with an overt commitment to corporate social responsibility could provide enhanced 'community benefit' initiatives. As a result social enterprises and charitable organisations are actively encouraged to tender.

3.09 Amending Criteria

This Report seeks support from members to amend the Qualifying Criteria so that general needs tenants over the age of 65 (not 60) are eligible to receive services. This approach results from the contention that there are many able-bodied tenants who are capable not only of maintaining their own garden but also find the activity both interesting and rewarding.

New Qualifying Criteria also state that tenants of working age should be in receipt of a Personal Independence Payment (from 8 April 2013 the Government is introducing a new benefit called Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to replace Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for eligible working age people aged 16 to 64).

It is also proposed that a tenant would be eligible for services if they are without an active family member not only in the home but in the county of Flintshire.

3.10 The table below sets out the current and proposed Qualifying Criteria

for acceptance on to the scheme (general needs tenants):

Current criteria	Proposed criteria	Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Registered blind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Registered blind 	No change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age 60 and over Blanket qualification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age 65 and over In receipt of Attendance Allowance (AA) or Disability Living Allowance (DLA) 	Revised
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disability Working Allowance Disability Living Allowance Attendance Allowance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working Age In receipt of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) 	Revised
Current disqualification	Proposed disqualification	Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able bodied person in household 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able bodied person in household 	No change
-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able bodied relatives living in Flintshire 	New

3.11 Charging for Services

It is predicted that the number of people in Wales reaching statutory retirement age will increase by more than 5% over the next 20 years. It is also envisaged that an ageing population will significantly challenge the capability of councils to provide affordable, good quality services to tenants.

The Assisted Garden Service is one such service that could come under financial pressure and this report encourages debate among members as to whether tenants should be charged an appropriate sum to cover the cost of delivering services such as this.

3.12 Next Steps

An exercise to determine the number of qualifying tenants will be undertaken over the coming months, to understand whether the allocated budget will be sufficient to deliver gardening and high or low-level welfare provision.

It is envisaged that final proposals for the new Service will be completed by the end of October 2013. Tender documents will then be issued in November 2013 with an aspiration to commence the new

service in April 2013.

3.13 Members' Considerations

To consider which level of welfare provision is preferred. Views will be considered when the contract is costed and procured.

To consider charging for services and approving the new Qualifying Criteria.

3.14 Financial Implications

The Housing Revenue Account funds the existing Assisted Garden Service at a cost of £250,000 per year. Should the new service cost more than the existing then this would need to be considered as a budget pressure.

As qualifying tenants do not make a direct contribution towards the cost of providing the Service all Council tenants help fund a provision that many may not directly benefit from.

4.00 ENVIRONMENTAL VISUAL AUDITS (EVAs)

4.01 Background

An Environmental Visual Audit (EVA) produces detailed community intelligence to support crime reduction and neighbourhood improvements within a defined geographical area.

The Housing Service has provided a greater emphasis on delivering EVAs in the last 12 months and as a result 27 EVAs have been completed since the start of the year to date. An EVA's success depends on who is involved, the level of information collected and the action taken in response to the problem.

A standard EVA normally involves a Neighbourhood Housing Officer (NHO), Repair Liaison Officer (RLO), Estate Caretakers, Street Scene, Local Residents, Elected Member(s) and a range of agencies which may include North Wales Police and for example Neighbourhood Watch.

The Service uses EVAs to identify concerns such as abandoned cars, untidy gardens and graffiti, fly tipping, repair and maintenance issues, litter, dog fouling and anything else that may be regarded as detrimental to the neighbourhood.

4.02 Forthcoming EVAs

EVAs will take place in the following areas during November and December 2012.

- South – Areas in Broughton, Buckley & Leeswood.
- East – Areas in Shotton and Connah's Quay (Golftyn).
- North – Areas in Flint.

A schedule of EVA visits for the period March 2012 - March 2013 was circulated to members in August 2012.

4.03 Members' Considerations

Members will be notified of the date an EVA will take place in their ward and are encouraged to participate along with Officers, residents and other agencies.

5.00 GARAGE REVIEW

5.01 Background

The Council manages two types of garage sites:

- Council-owned garages built on Council land and charged at a cost of £4.86 per week for private residents and £4.05 per week for Council tenants.
- Private garages built on Council-owned plots and charged at a cost of £52.00 per year.

5.02 A review of private garages built on Council-owned plots has commenced. The management of these sites falls under the control of Administration; however, the need to bring the management of these sites into Housing Management has been identified.

To make the transition from Administration to Housing Management seamless a review of data integrity was undertaken. From this review it was evident that certain information required to create accurate records of the sites was missing or inaccurate.

The Council manages 25 sites with private garage plots spread evenly throughout the County. The sites are located in Abbermorddu, Broughton, Caergwrle, Connah's Quay, Ewloe, Garden City, Hope,

Mancot, Penyffordd, Saltney, Shotton, Mancot and Sychdyn.

A visual inspection of the plots reveals that while some are actively used many are not and a number of garages are in a state of disrepair. Responsibility for repair and maintenance of the garages sits with the leaseholders.

5.03 Considerations

A final report outlining recommendations for the future of these sites will be completed by the end of December 2012. However findings to date include that:

- Some sites are under utilised. For example, the site in Abermorddu consists of 16 plots yet only 1 plot supports a functioning garage.
- A number of sites house garages that are in a very poor state of repair and have subsequently been abandoned.
- Sites in Broughton contain garages that are reasonably well used but are in a poor state of repair.
- More garages are used for storage than they are for vehicles; this is likely to be due to the fact that modern cars no longer fit inside the garages.
- Asbestos is likely to be present in a number of garages due their age and it is recommended that these garages are demolished.
- Sites with a small number of plots could be disposed of and re-developed for new build housing, play areas or community orchards and gardens.
- There is evidence of land grabbing (residents have extended their gardens on to the site); this requires further investigation and legal advice.
- Some sites suffer from fly tipping, are poorly lit and attract anti-social behaviour.

Estate caretakers carry out litter picking, strimming and rubbish clearance at a number of these sites as part of normal estate management duties.

The cost of providing these services exceeds the annual income of £4,800 per year received from rent.

It would therefore seem appropriate to consider a change of use for many sites, as the majority do not add any value to the services the Council provide.

Work is due to commence on a similar review of Council-owned garages which is expected to be completed by February 2013.

5.04 Members' Considerations

Members are asked to consider private garage sites in their wards and consider their future use. Some sites are very difficult to locate, as a result Neighbourhood Housing Officers will assist members on site visits when requested.

6.00 ALLOTMENTS (HOUSING LAND)

6.01 Background

Leisure Services are responsible for the day-to-day management of the Council's allotment sites, of which there are 6.

The standard ground rent for a plot is:

- £42 per year for a full plot.
- £21 per year for a half plot.

Whilst Leisure Services generally leads in the management of allotment sites, the Housing Department manages one site (6 plots) located in Dobshill, near Buckley,

Allotments on this site are charged at a different rate to those under the management of Leisure Services (currently £1 per plot per year).

6.02 Considerations

The Council's Category Management Policy supports the grouping together of related products and services across the Council such as allotments. A recent review of allotments demonstrated the need for clear and consistent administrative and management procedures for those allotments developed on housing land.

This Report proposes that the management of the Dobshill Allotment Site is transferred to Leisure Services, as the department is skilled in the areas of horticulture and management of the County's allotments. It is recommended that the land remains a HRA Asset.

There is a difference between rental agreements for the site in Dobshill and those sites in the rest in Flintshire. It is therefore recommended that agreements for the Dobshill site are amended to

bring them into line with the others.

6.03 Members' Considerations

Members are asked to consider the development of a 'Council Tenant Preference Group' so that tenants are given priority for allotments over private residents.

If this recommendation is approved rent will rise from £1 per year to £42 for a full plot and £21 for half a plot, a modest increase from the £6 per annum income (6 plots at £1 each per year) the Service currently receives.

Members are asked to:

- **Support the transfer the management of the Dobshill site to Leisure Services.**
- **Support the increase of rent for allotments situated on Housing Land.**
- **Support the introduction of standardised rental agreements.**
- **Support a Council Tenant Preference Group for allotments situated on Housing Service-owned land.**

7.00 MAINTENANCE OF HOUSING LAND (STREET SCENE)

7.01 Background

The customer experience in being able to report an external maintenance or repair issue (i.e damaged path, broken street light or overgrown piece of land etc) to the Council is complicated for the following reasons:

Accurate and up to date information about land ownership and responsibility is not readily available.

The customer will not be aware which Directorate within the Council owns the land. As a consequence they may request a repair from Housing when the responsibility lies with Street Scene and vice versa. This can result in the customer being referred from one department to another and becoming frustrated.

7.02 Considerations

Discussions have taken place between Housing and Street Scene to understand how a problem such as this can be resolved.

It is proposed that issues relating to HRA land could in future be managed by Street Scene in order to create a single point of contact for the customer and provide a better quality service.

In order to be able to transfer responsibility for HRA land to Street Scene a piece of work is required to gather data and intelligence on location, condition etc. This will ensure a smooth transition from one service to another and avoid future complications for both officers and customers.

At this early stage the financial implications are unclear, however further work will be carried out to understand future requirements.

7.03 Members' Considerations

Members are asked to support in principle these early proposals to transfer the management of HRA land maintenance to Street Scene with a view to improving the customer experience.

8.00 ESTATE CARETAKER REVIEW

8.01 Background

The Housing Service employs 6 full time Estate Caretakers. Their role is centred around improving the visual appearance of council estates includes duties such as:

- Litter picking
- Minor repair and maintenance
- Strimming
- General cleaning
- Waste management, fly tipping, rubbish accumulation etc

The service costs the department approximately £205,000 per year to deliver.

A review of the Estate Caretaker Service has been completed in order to understand how a more efficient, co-ordinated service can be delivered. As a result the following changes are proposed:

8.02 Considerations

- Caretaker jobs are recorded using a simple lotus notes data base that provides low level management information. The review recommends that jobs should be managed using IBS Housing System in line with the management of day to day

repairs and capital works. The introduction of a PDA would also mean that Caretakers could receive their tickets electronically thus saving time travelling to and from the office.

- Estate Caretakers are skilled in a range of areas; some have skills in tree work, others in bricklaying. The review has identified that providing caretakers a geographical location in which to work (north, south or east) has meant that not all skills are being shared equally within the county. It is therefore proposed to provide job tickets to caretakers based on their skill and not their geographical responsibility.
- It has been identified that savings could be made to the service by up-skilling caretakers in specialist work such as chain saw use and tree felling. This would reduce the amount spent on employing specialist companies and give the service more control over prioritising work.
- Caretakers are often the eyes and ears of our communities due to spending much of their time on Council estates. It is apparent that whilst much time is spent outside, local people and particularly tenants are not aware of their presence; this is likely to be because they blend in with their surrounding and drive standard Council vehicles. The review recommends that vehicles are re-branded and new uniforms are provided so Caretakers are easily identified by tenants.

8.03 Members' Considerations

Members are asked to consider the above proposals with a view to enhancing and improving the Estate Caretaker Service.

9.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

- Assisted garden service
The service seeks to support the most vulnerable tenants (Charging for services could have a financial impact on some tenants)
- Environmental Visual Audits.
(None)
- Garage Site Review.
(None)
- Maintenance of Housing Land (Street Scene).
(None)

- Allotments on Housing Land
(A modest increase in rent will have implications for allotment holders)
- Estate Caretaker Review
(None)

11.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

None directly arising from this report.

12.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

None directly arising from this report.

14.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

Consultation on the gardening service took place with tenants during the first tenants' conference this year.

15.00 APPENDICES

None

**16.00 LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None

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