

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CABINET**

DATE: **TUESDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2013**

REPORT BY: **DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES**

SUBJECT: **ASSISTED GARDENING SERVICE**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 To request that Cabinet consider and approve the new Assisted Gardening Service.

2.00 BACKGROUND

Current Service

- 2.01 An Assisted Gardening Service has existed in Flintshire for over 25 years.
- 2.02 Today, services consist of grass cutting and hedge trimming and continue to be delivered in house via Street Scene to tenants living in both general needs and sheltered housing stock.
- 2.03 To qualify for the Service, 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. Sheltered housing tenants qualify automatically.
- 2.04 Approximately 1,500 households (including sheltered tenants) are in receipt of the Service at a cost of £250,000 per year to the Housing Revenue Account. This year 1,191 tenants' gardens and 791 tenants' hedges were maintained by Street Scene between April and October.

Review of Services

- 2.05 The Assisted Gardening Service requires modernising to align it with the changing needs of the population and implications of the Government's Welfare Reform proposals.
- 2.06 A review of the Service has been necessary for the following reasons:
- Residential gardening services do not form part of Street Scene's core business and as a result they no longer wish to deliver the Service.
 - There is no provision for ensuring the welfare of the tenant or carrying out

visual checks of the building for security purposes.

- The Service does not allow for additional services such as garden clearance for antisocial tenants or void properties.
- There are limitations on who is able to receive the Service, with no option for other residents to pay for services if they required them.
- Grass clippings are left in situ; a matter which has caused some dissatisfaction amongst tenants and elected members.
- The Service does not provide value for money.
- The cost of delivering the Service is met by all tenants whether they receive it or not.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

Tender Process

- 3.01 Invitations to tender were issued during the summer. These placed a strong emphasis on community benefits and social enterprises were encouraged to bid for the contract. Two social enterprises completed the prequalification questionnaire; however, only one proceeded to full tender submission with the second withdrawing from the process.
- 3.02 The contract was awarded to Ground Control, an established local landscape contractor who won the tender on both quality and price. The Company are highly experienced in delivering large scale contracts to Local Authorities, Housing Associations and other public sector organisations, and have a proven track record of high customer satisfaction.
- 3.03 The cost of Ground Control delivering a comparable Service for grass and hedge cutting under the terms of the new contract has been calculated at £125K., enabling an annual saving of £125,000 based on this year's expenditure. This includes the cost of delivering the welfare element of the Service.

Charging for Services

- 3.04 A service charge is a payment made by a resident, leaseholder, shared owner or freeholder towards the cost of providing and maintaining services and benefits, beyond that of enjoying occupation of their home. Welsh Government has developed a prescriptive list of service charging activities. An example of the services charges applicable in our Council housing currently are heating where they have a communal heating system and a care-link service. All other services are charged for in the inclusive rent paid by all tenants.
- 3.05 However, the Gardening Service falls outside the strict definition of service charging and the service is discretionary. This distinction is important, as it

gives the Council greater freedoms as to how it charges for the service and additional flexibility to create some surpluses from non vulnerable homeowners and tenants, should it choose to do so.

- 3.06 Charging for this service can be fixed or variable. A fixed charge is based on how much the Council estimates it will reasonably cost to run the services in the scheme/block. The advantage of fixed charges for tenants is that they are simple to understand and easier to budget for and manage.
- 3.07 Variable service charges are based on the actual costs of a particular service so the tenant only pays for the service, plus any associated management fee. When operating a variable charge the administrative burden increases and this is therefore the less favoured option.
- 3.08 Whether a fixed or variable service charge is implemented, tenants' expectations naturally increase and invariably result in a greater demand for better quality services and value for money and inevitably the provision of a high quality service.

Proposed Service

- 3.09 It is proposed that a new universal Service is developed and implemented in time for the grass cutting season on 1st April 2014.
- 3.10 Council tenants with a disability would be eligible for a reduced rate and to qualify would need to demonstrate that they are in receipt of one or more of the following benefits:
- Attendance allowance
 - Disability Living Allowance
 - Disability Working Allowance
 - Personal Independence Payment
- 3.11 There are two ways that a pricing policy could be implemented:-
- A fixed charge based on a number of size bandings. For example, 0-50m² falling under level 1 and 50m² to 100m² falling under level 2.
 - A variable charge calculated by the actual m² of each garden.
 - Both methods would involve an administrative fee to cover the management of the contract and associated financial administration costs of running this provision.

Grass Cutting

- 3.12 Grass would be cut to 15-25mm and all clippings would be removed from site. It is proposed that Service users would fall into one of three categories: council tenant, disabled council tenants and private residents.

- 3.13 A fixed frequency for both grass and hedge cutting is suggested for ease of management. Experience also shows that the number of scheduled visits proposed is sufficient for the maintenance of residential green spaces.

Services & Frequency

	Grass Cutting	Hedge Trimming	Welfare Check
Disabled Council Tenants	14 cuts per year	2 cuts per year	Included for all
Council Tenants	14 cuts per year	2 cuts per year	Included for over 65 All sheltered schemes At special request
Private Residents	14 cuts per year	2 cuts per year	Included for over 65 At special request

Grass Cutting Costs per m2

Item	Cost Disabled Council Tenant	Cost Council Tenant	Cost Private Resident
Grass cutting per m2	£0.99	£1.16	£1.16
Management Fee	£0.15 (15%)	£0.17 (15%)	£0.35 (30%)
Total	£1.14	£1.33	£1.51 plus vat

Grass Cutting Charges

Level	Average m2	Disabled Tenant	14 cuts	Per Wk	Council Tenant	14 cuts	Per Week	Private Resident	14 cuts	Per Week
Level 1	50	£ 1.16	£ 58.00	£ 1.16	£ 1.33	£ 66.50	£ 1.33	£ 1.51	£ 75.50	£ 1.51
Level 2	100	£ 1.16	£ 116.00	£ 2.32	£ 1.33	£ 133.00	£ 2.66	£ 1.51	£ 151.00	£ 3.02
Level 3	150	£ 1.16	£ 174.00	£ 3.48	£ 1.33	£ 199.50	£ 3.99	£ 1.51	£ 226.50	£ 4.53
Level 4	200	£ 1.16	£ 232.00	£ 4.64	£ 1.33	£ 266.00	£ 5.32	£ 1.51	£ 302.00	£ 6.04
Level 5	250	£ 1.16	£ 290.00	£ 5.80	£ 1.33	£ 332.50	£ 6.65	£ 1.51	£ 377.50	£ 7.55
Level 6	300	£ 1.16	£ 348.00	£ 6.96	£ 1.33	£ 399.00	£ 7.98	£ 1.51	£ 453.00	£ 9.06
level 7	350	£ 1.16	£ 406.00	£ 8.12	£ 1.33	£ 465.50	£ 9.31	£ 1.51	£ 528.50	£ 10.57
Level 8	400	£ 1.16	£ 464.00	£ 9.28	£ 1.33	£ 532.00	£ 10.64	£ 1.51	£ 604.00	£ 12.08
Level 9	400+	Calculated per m2								

- 3.14 The table above gives examples as to how much a disabled council tenant; non disabled council tenant and private resident would pay to have their grass cut. The costs are based on the average m2 of the garden. For example, a council tenant with a garden of up to 100m2 would pay £2.66 per week to have the grass cut 14 times a year. A private resident of Flintshire would pay £3.02 per week for the same service. Disabled council tenants are offered the lower rate

and would pay £2.32 per week.

Hedge Cutting Charges

Level	Average m2	Disabled Tenant	2 cuts	Per Wk	Council Tenant	2 cuts	Per Week	Private Resident	2 cuts	Per Week
Level 1	50	£ 0.60	£ 30.00	£ 0.60	£ 0.69	£ 34.50	£ 0.69	£ 0.78	£ 39.00	£ 0.78
Level 2	100	£ 0.60	£ 60.00	£ 1.20	£ 0.69	£ 69.00	£ 1.38	£ 0.78	£ 78.00	£ 1.56
Level 3	150	£ 0.60	£ 90.00	£ 1.80	£ 0.69	£ 103.50	£ 2.07	£ 0.78	£ 117.00	£ 2.34
Level 4	200	£ 0.60	£ 120.00	£ 2.40	£ 0.69	£ 138.00	£ 2.76	£ 0.78	£ 156.00	£ 3.12
Level 5	250	£ 0.60	£ 150.00	£ 3.00	£ 0.69	£ 172.50	£ 3.45	£ 0.78	£ 195.00	£ 3.90
Level 6	300	£ 0.60	£ 180.00	£ 3.60	£ 0.69	£ 207.00	£ 4.14	£ 0.78	£ 234.00	£ 4.68
Level 7	350	£ 0.60	£ 210.00	£ 4.20	£ 0.69	£ 241.50	£ 4.83	£ 0.78	£ 273.00	£ 5.46
Level 8	400	£ 0.60	£ 240.00	£ 4.80	£ 0.69	£ 276.00	£ 5.52	£ 0.78	£ 312.00	£ 6.24
Level 9	400+	Calculated per m2								

- 3.15 The table above gives examples as to how much a disabled council tenant; non disabled council tenant and private resident would pay to have their hedges cut. The costs are based on the average m2 of the hedge. For example, a council tenant with a hedge measuring up to 100m2 would pay £1.38 per week to have the hedge cut twice per year. A private resident of Flintshire would pay £1.56 per week for the same service. Disabled council tenants are offered the lower rate and would pay £1.20 per week.

Welfare Support

- 3.16 An 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.
- 3.17 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.
- 3.18 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 / resident upon arrival at the property, affording the gardener a further opportunity to make a basic assessment of the tenant's wellbeing.

- 3.19 It is acknowledged that not all tenants / residents will require a welfare check as they are independent and active. It is therefore suggested that only those tenants / residents who live in sheltered accommodation, are disabled or over 65 would benefit from such a service.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.01 Cabinet is asked to support the introduction of a chargeable gardening service to tenants and private Flintshire residents as set out in sections 3.04 - and support the charging model set out in this report (see point 3.04 – 3.08).

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.01 A substantial saving has already been made by tendering the work. Further savings will be made by charging for services.
- 5.02 The cost of maintaining a tenant / resident private garden is not eligible for housing benefit.
- 5.03 It is anticipated that if all council applicants are disabled the service would need to subsidise £21k towards the cost of delivering the service. The forthcoming consultation exercise will help determine the level of demand for the service and assist with more detailed financial planning.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

- 6.01 The new service is designed to be delivered at a cost. The cost of maintaining a small garden based on a maximum of 50m² is considered affordable at £1.33 per week.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 7.01 The service will deliver environmental improvements.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.01 None.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.01 A part time Contract Services Technician will be required to manage all aspects of the contract anticipated grade S01 pro rata salary plus on costs £17.2k.
- 9.02 The service will have a better understanding of the resources required to deliver the service once tenants have been consulted and the demand for the service has been measured.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

- 10.01 To move forward with proposals a detailed consultation will be carried out with

existing service users. This exercise will help identify the demand for the new service.

10.02 Following tenant consultation, it will be necessary to advertise the Service to Flintshire residents to gauge levels of interest from the private sector.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 The concept of a chargeable Assisted Gardening service has been discussed with tenants at the Tenants Conference. Feedback has been positive.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 None.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985 BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None.

Contact Officer: Hannah Fargher
Telephone: 01352 701484
Email: hannah.fargher@flintshire.gov.uk