

Challenge for Change

Scrutiny Report Grass Cutting



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1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 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 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.
- 1.2 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
- 1.3 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.
- 1.4 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.
- 1.5 In this report, we have detailed the findings following our investigations. We have spoken to many different managers from Sheffield Homes and Parks and Public Realm. We have also spoken to Tenants and Residents on numerous estates to gather views from them. We analysed many different documents including the Service Level Agreement to ensure that the service is working well and providing good value for money for the residents. We have made several recommendations based on our findings, which are at the end of this document.
- 1.6 The overall purpose of the project was to examine the grass cutting service and ensure that Parks and Public Realm are giving a good enough service, delivering on its promises and providing Sheffield Homes with value for money.



2. Objectives

2.1 From our initial research into the grass cutting service, we identified the following objectives for the project.

- Establish what the grass cutting standards are 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 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

3.1 Tenant Surveys

3.1.1 As part of our investigations, we devised a questionnaire which we used to gather responses from Tenants and Residents. Most of the people we have spoken to are not happy with the service, some have been unclear as to which pieces of land are covered by the contract. This can often lead to confusion, as if tenants are unclear as to which sites are maintained by who, then complaints can be made to the wrong department where the service falls short of expectations.

3.1.2 We also contacted the Tenant and Resident Associations (TARA's) and most of the replies that we have received report that the service falls far short of the expected standards. Tenants in all areas of Sheffield have reported that often the grass is not litter picked prior to grass cutting taking place, which leads to the grass being cut anyway and sending small shards of litter all over the place, This makes tenants unhappy as the grass then looks unsightly and makes areas look very unkempt.

3.2 Service Level Agreement

3.2.1 We scrutinised the Service Level Agreement (SLA) to see what the required standards are. How we interpret certain areas of this agreement has often differed to how managers we have spoken to have interpreted it, leading us to form the view that the wording of the SLA is wholly confusing.

3.2.2 The most notable part is the section around length of grass and frequency of cuts. Some departments have told us that the service focuses on height of grass not exceeding 100mm and others have told us that the service is measured on frequency of cuts, which according to the SLA is 9 cuts per annum. None of the residents/tenants we have spoken to can recall 9 cuts ever taking place and in certain areas the height of the grass has been left for the winter far exceeding 100mm.

3.3 Monitoring

3.3.1 We have also discovered that monitoring does not take place as a matter of course and the only real monitoring that takes place is by the contractor, who then reports back to Sheffield Homes that the service is of an acceptable standard and is being maintained as per the SLA. We have seen evidence of this and have discovered that the target as per the SLA is 85%, and most of the monitoring reports are at this level.

3.3.2 We have seen reports from TARAs that paint a very different picture and shows that the service is very much below standard and in the eyes of most tenants needs vast improvements. One TARA survey that we have seen shows that 67% of people that we spoke to see the service as been substandard, with only 7% of people been happy with the service.

3.3.3 We have seen some monitoring evidence, however the information is not clear and is extremely sketchy. The reports are not easy to understand and do not show which area was cut or when, just an area and a pass or a fail.

3.4 Tenant Inspectors

3.4.1 We also met with Tenant Inspectors who told us that the maps that they are issued with are usually out of date, so do not accurately reflect the full area that they have to inspect. The inspectors have criteria on which they inspect against and do report back with any issues that they have identified as part of their inspection.

3.4.2 We have discovered however that the inspector does not get any feedback to tell them once improvements have been made following an inspection. So on a repeat inspection, they would not know whether a fault they might spot again is a repeat offender or merely the same problem as when they last inspected.

3.4.3 The general feeling amongst the Tenant Inspectors was that the grass cutting service is appalling and vast improvements need to be made. When we interviewed the Tenant Inspectors, sadly not all areas were represented, so we were unable to get a holistic view of the service, but from the inspectors that were present we were able to glean that there are problems with the service and that it needs to drastically improve.

3.5 Sheffield Homes Estate Services Development Group

3.5.1 We also attended a Sheffield Homes Estate Services Development Group where we asked several questions with regard to monitoring and checks. We established that no real checks are completed other than if a supervisor or manager were to telephone the contractor to gather the information.



- 3.5.2 We also asked them about performance monitoring figures. They told us that these are not routinely provided and have not been for quite some time and was not a regular thing. Most people at this meeting felt that the relationship between Sheffield Homes and the contractor was good and were satisfied that the service is self monitored. However Sheffield Homes have to be reliant on the information being forthcoming from the contractor and that it is accurate when it arrives.
- 3.5.3 We went on to ask them about quality checks, and again we discovered that apart from self monitoring by the contractor, there is no formalised checking carried out. Feedback from TARA's is heavily relied upon to highlight areas of poor service and as previously mentioned, the role of the tenant inspector.
- 3.5.4 We then asked them about the working relationship between the contractor and Sheffield Homes, we have discovered that there is no real relationship between the two and as the contractor does not have any real estate knowledge then this has caused problems at estate level and has caused conflicts as to what is a priority and what is not.
- 3.5.5 Some at this meeting felt that the contractor was still proving its worth and needed time to really show their capabilities. We asked if taking the service back in house would be beneficial and this was met with a resounding no as it was generally felt that this could lead to a worsening of standards.

3.6 Parks and Public Realm Officers Focus Group

- 3.6.1 We also met with the officers from Parks and Public Realm who told us that their work is allocated via the "Confirm" system. All grassed areas are measured up and workers work their way through a list from April to September. The final cut of the year is in March. Alongside this, some of the work they do is to satisfy the requirements of the specification laid out in the Service Level Agreement. Work is very often reactive with teams going back to sweep up grass or anything else that has not been done for whatever reason.
- 3.6.2 They told us that when they first set out, there was some problems with unfamiliarity, as many of the teams did not know the areas they were working in. This has now being resolved and they went on to say that no matter which area they are working on, they do not feel that they have enough time to carry out their duties effectively.
- 3.6.3 They also echoed the point that litter picking is not the responsibility of Parks and Public Realm, as far as the officers knew. Sheffield Homes are informed when cuts are going to happen, it is then up to Sheffield Homes to arrange litter picking to take place. They went on to say that where large machines had been deployed and the litter pick had not happened, it would be uneconomical not to go ahead with the cut, so therefore it was often the case that litter was then spread over the area in little pieces. Areas around Takeaways are usually hotspots for excess litter and in the view of the officers, more action needs to be taken to address the problem of litter and fly tipping.

3.6.4 We then asked them about the problem of grass being left all over footpaths. They told us that a thin scattering of grass will not warrant a blowing and that the grass is only blown or swept off the footpaths where it is deemed to be a health and safety matter. Special care is taken around Disabled or Senior Citizens areas.

3.6.5 They informed us that every area is cut on average 9 times per year.

3.6.6 They went on to say that technicians do random checks, building up a record which is fed into the “Confirm” system. As far as they are aware, Sheffield Homes also do their own monitoring, and staff will go on estate walkabouts where requested.

3.6.7 They told us that it is not always possible to carry all the specialist equipment that they need to carry out their duties, so on some occasions they might have to return to an area to finish the job if they need more than one piece of equipment. They also said that in extremely wet conditions areas such as slopes can be potentially dangerous or hazardous, which makes cutting difficult.

3.6.8 They went on to say that all staff are fully trained and are not allowed out until this has taken place.

3.7 Sheffield Homes Estate Officers

3.7.1 We also met with the officers that provide the estate services, they told us that they don't always get informed about when the grass cutting is about to happen, so they can't go and litter pick. There have also been occasions when they have been informed of an intention to cut the grass, but when they have attended to litter pick, the grass was cut the previous day, which would rather negate the point of the exercise if the information is not accurate. We have also discovered that litter picking is also not done on certain days, so if grass cutters wanted to work on these days, then no litter picking would have been carried out.

3.7.2 They also tell us that they generally don't have enough staff, They do have volunteers, but due to health and safety constraints they can only be utilised for litter picking and sweeping, so they don't have a massive impact on staffing numbers. Some areas have a regular workforce, whereas in other areas the staff are moved around. East area however, has no fixed staffing levels.



- 3.7.3 They tell us that if they had somewhere to store the large machinery, then they could undertake grass cutting services themselves. The general consensus was that services have definitely dropped this year and the service had the potential to become even worse if the budget is cut any further in future years.
- 3.7.4 From this meeting we have also gleaned that the South East pilot seems to operate in a totally different way to the rest of the city with budgets being broken down into specific costs and well above the number of cuts the rest of the city has seen during the last year. They also have a detailed log of where the grass cutting has taken place, and the staff at this meeting that represented the South East were clearly delighted with the service, a view not echoed by the rest of the city where standards are vastly different.

3.8 North East Pilot Manager and Area Manager for Parks and Public Realm

- 3.8.1 We then interviewed the project manager for the North East Pilot and the area manager for Parks and Public Realm. We asked them about the North East Pilot - they told us that the pilot is not going to cost anymore money and that the emphasis is on getting the job done better and everyone working together to provide a better service. The existing tools are going to be used and no extra ones brought in.
- 3.8.2 They told us that in their view the SLA reads that the height of the grass and general appearance is the most important factor, and not the actual number of cuts.
- 3.8.3 We then asked them about the mapping system. They agreed with us that the mapping system is out of date and needs to be updated. They also told us that an audit is being put together to look at ways of saving money, for example litter trap shrub beds could be removed

3.9 Parks and Public Realm Manager

- 3.9.1 The Parks and Public Realm Manager came to meet with us. We asked him about the grass cutting service, he told us that they do random monitoring against the specification and that the monitoring is done by staff themselves, their line managers and area officers. We then asked him whether he felt that staff were being put under undue pressure and whether this was causing them to lose pride in their work, he effectively denied this and said that some pressure can be good and it was more about trying to achieve than staff losing pride in their work.
- 3.9.2 We put it to him that the maps are also out of date, he replied that this was inevitable as the city is changing. He went on to say that prior to the contract being signed that work was undertaken to validate the sites.
- 3.9.3 We then challenged him on the issue of litter picking, he replied that this is a matter for Sheffield Homes as it is not in the specification. He told us that a written schedule

is sent out so that Sheffield Homes know when the grass is going to be cut. However adverse weather can affect the schedule.

- 3.9.4 We then moved on to ask him whether Sheffield Homes got a refund if the work was not carried out, he did not actually answer this question clearly. He said that they always tried to get the job done, he also went on to say that monitoring is not cost effective, it is better to get the job done than to spend money on monitoring.
- 3.9.5 We then raised the question of some areas being invoiced the same rate for a push mower as for a ride on mower. This comes from the Streetforce days and to work out new rates would come at a cost.
- 3.9.6 We also raised the question of collecting up the grass and composting it, he told us that this would cost a lot of money and the money that would be collected in return would not even cover a proportion of the initial outlay. We raised the point that some other local authorities do this, he replied that to his knowledge, this was not done on a large scale and for a city as big as Sheffield to do this, the costs would be astronomical as new machines would have to be purchased.

3.10 Assistant Finance Manager

- 3.10.1 We have also interviewed the Assistant Finance Manager, who tells us that they do not check if the work has been undertaken, they simply process the costs as per the journal entry, there is no actual invoicing, it's all done as part of a journal.
- 3.10.2 He also noted that there is no mechanism in place for checking that the costs are reasonable and that there are no penalties in place for the contract not being fulfilled. He also explained why the costs of period 9 were higher, this is due to the shrub and hedge maintenance costs for the whole year are billed for during this month. He did feel that there is room for improvement within the SLA to provide a better service.

3.11 Estate Services Manager

- 3.11.1 We then invited the Estate Services Manager to come along, she also brought her Assistant with her. We started by asking them what monitoring was taking place, they replied that they rely on the performance information from the contractor and that they meet with them bi-monthly. A 20% sample is monitored, 85% of areas need to be within the specification of the SLA.
- 3.11.2 They went on to say that they don't want to move to a system where everything is monitored as this pulls staff away from their usual tasks, but they did say that a more reactive system needs to be devised to improve monitoring of the service. However they did admit that the monitoring has dropped off compared to what it used to be like and that maybe a review needs to take place.

3.11.3 We then went on to ask them regarding invoicing and pricing, They replied that they don't actually see a monthly costing breakdown, only an annual forecast at the start of the financial year as to what the costs are going to be. They also told us that they have no idea which invoice or journal represents which specific area of work as this is not monitored.

3.11.4 They also told us that under the terms of the Service Level Agreement, an annual review into whether the contractor is providing value for money is supposed to take place, but so far this year, this has not happened.

3.11.5 We went on to ask them about the North East Pilot. They echoed the comments made by the North East Pilot Manager, saying there is no additional funding for this, and the emphasis is more about doing a better job and working together with the contractor to use resources more cost effectively. They also told us the same as the Parks and Public Realm Manager that the costings that are being used are from the Streetforce days and were probably out of date, however nothing has been done to rectify this.

3.11.6 We then went on to ask them if they felt that tenant participation at the start of the year would be useful when drawing up new Service Level Agreements, they replied that they couldn't see a reason why this could not be done as this may prove useful.

3.11.7 We put it to them that perhaps the 85% satisfaction rate was not challenging enough to which they replied that it may be due a review and maybe tenant input on this matter may be useful as the current target might not be seen as acceptable to tenants.



4. Budget Review for the Project

C4C were allocated a budget for the duration of the scrutiny project. The money was used to cover the costs of:

- Training
- C4C member travel expenses
- Refreshments

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 During our investigations, we have consistently found that tenants and residents are far from happy with the service that is being provided, most of the challengers have seen this first hand. This view is also based on the surveys that we carried out and surveys that were sent to tenant and resident associations.
- 5.2 We have discovered that the Service Level Agreement is not clearly worded and is therefore open to multiple interpretations, this can lead to uncertainty. For example in the SLA it states that surrounding paths will be kept substantially free from grass cuttings. Parks and Public Realm interpret this as where there is a health and safety risk, customers interpret this as meaning that this will be done every time the grass is cut.
- 5.3 Monitoring is not done as a matter of course, even though the Service Level Agreement states that it will be done, we have found that it is not happening correctly, Monitoring by the contractor alone is not sufficient to ensure service standards
- 5.4 Communication between Sheffield Homes and the contractor is not sufficient and also we have discovered that the contractor is not attending meetings.
- 5.5 Maps are completely out of date, this has led to some invoicing for areas that simply do not exist anymore. Tenant and Residents Associations do not have up to date maps either.
- 5.6 Tenant Inspectors are not receiving adequate feedback when they report problems, this can lead to confusion as on further visits, they do not know whether they are looking at a repeat of the same problem, or whether no corrective action has ever been taken.
- 5.7 Pricing mechanisms are totally out of date, this has led to some areas being charged at the same rate for a push along machine as a ride on one.
- 5.8 No enforcement action is being taken where the contractor has failed to deliver or where the service is not up to standard.

6. Recommendations

R1. Find out how other Social Landlords perform and compare best practice/achieve their standards

R2. Parks and Public Realm workers to gain familiarity with the Sheffield Homes sites that they work on

R3. Grounds maintenance should be based on Housing boundaries as opposed to Community Assembly boundaries.

R4. Weed Spraying should be done more often than 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:

- 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:

- 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:



- 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:

- 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.

7. Acknowledgements

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 North East Pilot Manager
 Assistant Finance Manager
 Assistant Director
 Area Manager Parks
 Parks and Public Realm Manager
 Sheffield Homes Estate Officers
 Parks and Public Realm Managers
 Tenant Inspectors
 Tenant and Residents Associations.



