

Grounds Maintenance Service

Tenant Scrutiny Report

2018



Contents

1	Introduction
2	Tenant Scrutiny – background
3	Tenant Scrutiny at West of Scotland Housing Association
4	Grounds Maintenance – Planning for Scrutiny
5	Scrutinising the Service
6	The Findings
7	The Recommendations
8	Next Steps

Acknowledgements

This report has been prepared by the Tenant Scrutiny Group of West of Scotland Housing Association. We would like to thank those tenants and staff who have helped us by completing surveys, answering questions, and providing advice and support throughout the process.

1/ Introduction

The Tenant Scrutiny Group aims to review the performance of West of Scotland Housing Association in particular service areas and make recommendations as to how services can be improved based on our findings.

The Group has been working hard over the last 10 months to undertake a review of the Grounds Maintenance Service, and in the report below you will find out what activities we have undertaken to review the service, what we found out, and our recommendations for the Association to consider which we believe will lead to an improved service for tenants.

The Scrutiny group is made up of the following members:

- Anne Young
- Lynne Clark
- Janette Oliver
- Agnes Docherty
- Gerry Murphy
- Peter Murphy
- Rosemary Murphy
- Rose Friel
- Josephine Coghlan
- Margaret Ritchie
- Margaret Storrie
- Lynne Di Folco
- Raymond Baxter

2/ Tenant Scrutiny – background

Tenant Scrutiny aims to give tenants more power in holding their landlord to account for their decisions, performance and conduct. Changes to regulation in Scotland following the introduction of the Scottish Social Housing Charter and the independent Scottish Housing Regulator, require landlords to be more proactive in self regulation and to involve tenants in the scrutiny process.

There is now increased focus on housing organisations carrying out self-assessment, and reviewing their housing services to evaluate how well they are doing, and to plan improvements.

3/ Tenant Scrutiny at West of Scotland Housing Association

A group of tenants, some from the Tenant Advisory Group, and others who responded to an article in Westworld attended a number of training sessions which looked at:

- What is tenant scrutiny and why do it?
- What scrutiny activity has been undertaken with tenants from West of Scotland to date
- The different approaches to tenant scrutiny that can be used
- Learning lessons from other landlords

Following these sessions the Tenant Scrutiny Group was formed, with all those who undertook the training agreeing to become part of the Group.

4/ Grounds Maintenance – Planning for Scrutiny

The first task for the Scrutiny Group was identifying an area of service to scrutinise for our first activity. Based on the training that we had undertaken we knew there were a number of considerations before deciding on a service area to look at including:

- Performance information
- Complaints received
- Customer satisfaction performance
- Any view from the Housing Regulator
- Any view expressed by the Management of West of Scotland
- Views from members of our Group.

Based on the above information, and taking into account in particular the views expressed by the Board of the Association it was agreed to undertake a review of the Grounds Maintenance service provided by the Association.

5/ Scrutinising the Service

Based on our training we agreed that we would undertake the following activities to scrutinise the Grounds Maintenance Service:

- Initial discussion with the relevant manager of the service
- Review of the policies relating to the Grounds Maintenance service
- Review the complaints received about the service
- Review the publicity that is shared with tenants regarding the service
- A survey of staff members to gather their feedback on how the service worked for them, and how they felt it could be improved
- A survey of customers to gather their feedback on how the service was delivered, and to identify any improvements that could be made

The Group were confident that by undertaking the above they would be in a position to provide a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve the service we offer to tenants.

6/ The Findings

Discussion with manager

To assist the Groups understanding of the Grounds Maintenance Service it was felt it would be beneficial to get an overview of the approach the Association takes with regard to the service. The Housing manager for Glasgow/ Ayrshire spoke to the Group about this. The Group noted the following information:

- The service is currently procured every 3 years, and on each occasion this must be done following procedural rules set out in legislation and following the Associations Procurement policy
- The contract is worth around £250k each year – and is funded almost entirely by service charges
- The way the contract is structured has in the past made it harder for smaller organisations to tender
- The bulk of the service is provided between March and October with the contractor expected to deliver a set number of cuts. There is also a winter programme which includes items of work such as clearing leaves and cutting back shrubs
- The Housing officers regularly monitor the work undertaken and there are regular contractual meetings between Housing Managers and the contractor

The Group felt this overview was a helpful introduction to the service.

Policy Review

The Group reviewed the Landscape Maintenance Policy which set out the approach the Association would take deliver the service. The Group noted that the policy document contained a detailed specification in Appendix 1 of what should be delivered, but felt that the introductory part of the policy would benefit from a refresh.

Complaints Information

The Group reviewed the complaints received about the Grounds Maintenance Service between April 2017 and March 2018. This review provided the following information:

- There 59 complaints reviewed in total, with the vast majority (44) of these being received in the Lanarkshire area

- The common reasons for complaints included untidy work (19), and work not completed (28)
- The common issues behind the complaints mainly related to the quality of the work being undertaken, and the schedule for work being adhered too.

The Group reflected that though it was a high number of complaints (the total was over 25% of all complaints received in 2017 / 18 by WSHA), and there were some common issues, it was evident that the Contractor was good at responding to issues when raised.

Review of publicity

The Group noted that in the past there had been articles in Westworld explaining to tenants what level of service to expect in terms of Grounds Maintenance. This included information on the number of cuts that tenants should expect. Tenants noted that other than this, it was more difficult to find out what level of service should be delivered. There was no information in the Tenants Handbook, and the website did not include any information.

Staff Survey

The Group were keen to find out what the staff view of the service, and developed a survey to be sent to all Housing Officers and Assistants as it was felt they would be the staff most closely involved in supporting delivery of the service. The survey asked the following questions:

- What do you think about the Grounds Maintenance Service that WSHA provides to customers?
- What steps should, if required, WSHA take to improve the service for our customers?
- What steps could WSHA take to make your role easier in terms of the Grounds Maintenance Service?
- Do you have any other comments that would assist us with our exercise?

In total, 8 Housing staff completed the survey. A summary of the responses is shown below:

Question	Response
What do you think about the Grounds Maintenance Service that WSHA provides to customers?	In general officers felt the service being provided could be better, and that at times the work of the contractor was not great. The contractor does respond well when asked to do work.
What steps should, if required, WSHA take to improve the service for our customers?	In general officers felt that the Association should employ some kind of clerk of works service to oversee the work of the contractor. They also felt

	it would be better if tenants, WSHA, and the contractor were absolutely clear about what work should be undertaken.
What steps could WSHA take to make your role easier in terms of the Grounds Maintenance Service?	As noted above Housing Officers were clear that employing a clerk of works would improve the service in a number of ways. It would also free up officer time to deal with other important tasks, rather than following up on Grounds Maintenance enquiries.
Do you have any other comments that would assist us with our exercise?	In general officers felt that a key focus for the new contract should be about ensuring that the contractor is aware of what standards they should be achieving.

Tenants Survey

The Group agreed to develop a survey to find out what tenants thought about the Grounds Maintenance Service. This survey asked the following questions:

- What are your views on the Grounds Maintenance Service provided by WSHA?
- Are you happy with the information the Association provides you about what to expect from the service?
- What could be done to improve the service?
- Do you believe the service charge you pay for the service provides value for money?
- Do you have any other comments that you feel will help us review the service?

This survey was sent to all tenants who had made a complaint about the Grounds Maintenance Service in the preceding 18 months, to all tenant members of the Board, and was publicised on the Association website and social media channels. In all, 27 tenants responded to the survey. A summary of the responses are shown below:

Question	Responses
What are your views on the Grounds Maintenance Service provided by WSHA?	A majority of those who responded felt the service was 'very poor' or 'basic'. There was a number (7) who said the service provided was 'excellent'. Some common themes were expressed about

	the need to stick to the schedule, but this was contradicted by others who felt work should not be undertaken in poorer weather.
Are you happy with the information the Association provides you about what to expect from the service?	<p>The strong consensus from tenants was that the Association was not providing enough information about either the frequency of the work to be undertaken, or the specification that should be completed.</p> <p>Some tenants felt there was a need to provide information that was specific to each estate, and also to provide information about work not included in the contract.</p>
What could be done to improve the service?	<p>A number of responses indicated that there should be a more rigorous inspection process.</p> <p>A number of tenants felt that the Association needed to improve how they managed the relationship with the contractor.</p>
Do you believe the service charge you pay for the service provides value for money?	The majority of tenants felt that the service as currently provided was not value for money.
Do you have any other comments that you feel will help us review the service?	Some of the tenants felt that it was important the Association focused on other aspects of Grounds Maintenance, including trees, fences and bin shelters, as these were all important in making sure an area looks nice, which was important when encouraging new tenants to move into an area.

7/ Recommendations

Based on the findings above, after consideration the Scrutiny Group would make the following recommendations to WSHA as to how the service delivered to tenants could be improved.

Recommendation	Why are the Group making this recommendation?
Employ a Clerk of Works to oversee the work of the Contractor	The Group was clear that one of the issues that tenants and others have with the service is a lack of inspection of works

	<p>undertaken. Initially it was felt this should be done by Housing Officers but based on their feedback, and on the suggestion by the Corporate Services Manager, the Group agreed with the idea of employing a Clerk of Works</p>
<p>Improve the management of the contract and provide clear methods for tenants to raise concerns</p>	<p>Several Housing Officers indicated that responding to issues relating to Grounds Maintenance was reducing the time they could spend on other issues such as allocating homes, collecting rent, and supporting tenants. By providing tenants with clear information on who to raise issues with, this will reduce time spent by Housing officers on this service.</p>
<p>Produce a clear map or diagram so that tenants are informed of the work due to be carried out in their area</p>	<p>Feedback from tenants indicated that at times they were unclear about the work that was expected to be carried out by the contractor. This could include what areas of grass were to be cut, what areas in communities fell under the terms of the contract, and what areas should be weeded.</p>
<p>Ensure this map is publicised so that all tenants are aware. Also, include in new tenant sign up packs</p>	<p>As above, the Group felt that not enough was done to ensure that customers were aware of what work should be undertaken.</p>
<p>Publicise on a regular basis what tenants should expect from the contractor out with the summer programme.</p>	<p>As the activity progressed the Group became aware of the work that should be undertaken as part of the specification during the winter months. They feel that other tenants may not be aware that this work should be undertaken and would benefit from regular information about the service they should expect.</p>
<p>WSHA should identify all areas of grounds similar to that at Hillcrest Avenue, and Queenzieburn (basically wide open space adjacent to our homes) and identify a longer term strategy for each area</p>	<p>The Group felt that the Association was potentially spending money maintaining ground that was providing no benefit to tenants or communities. The Group felt that there may be better uses for some of this ground.</p> <p>This may reduce expenditure on the Ground Maintenance service for areas that don't fit nicely into our communities.</p>

Ensure that regular inspection and maintenance of trees are undertaken	Some tenants thought that these were being missed from regular maintenance programmes
--	---

8/ Next Steps

The Scrutiny Group would be grateful if the Association could consider the report and the recommendations contained and provide a response to the Group for each one, setting out whether it is accepted or not. Where the Association does not accept a recommendation we would be keen to understand why not, so that we can give consideration to how else we can make required improvements.

Once the recommendations are agreed we would expect the Association to develop an action plan which will show how each recommendation will be implemented, with appropriate timescales against each, so that we can monitor progress. We would hope that this action plan is monitored not only by ourselves, but by the Senior Management of the Association.