

**Select Committee on the Environment – 30th March 2006**

**Joint Report of the Director of the Urban Environment and the Director of Adult, Community and Housing**

**Grounds Maintenance on Housing Estates**

**Purpose of Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee of the Council's responsibilities in respect of grounds maintenance on Housing Land.

**Background**

2. Contracts for Grounds Maintenance in Dudley were formerly let under the Compulsory Competitive Tendering regime and were configured across 5 geographic areas, loosely based on Area Committee boundaries, however, crossing over where operational arrangements required them to do so.
3. The contracts were operated through a series of unit rates applicable to the different types of grounds maintenance work detailed in the contract document. The contracts were overseen and monitored by the Council's former Planning and Leisure Services Department who undertook a Client role, representing the interests of the various Council landowners.
4. As a direct result of the various rounds of tendering, each contract area operated with different unit rates, providing a fragmented and complex arrangement across the borough.
5. In order to ensure that the Council developed and introduced a consistent level of service across the whole of the borough and in order to deliver value for money services under the requirements of Best Value, a rationalisation of unit rates was approved and introduced across all contract areas in 2000 as part of a comprehensive Grounds Maintenance Review.
6. To continue to deliver value for money and remove areas of duplication, the Council also removed the former Client and Contractor arrangements and approved the introduction of an all inclusive 'Green Care' budget, managed directly by the Council's Green Care section. Under the new arrangements and further Council modernisation, the section was integrated into the

Environmental Management Division in the Directorate of the Urban Environment.

### **Green Care Budget**

7. The Green Care budget is made up of a series of recharges to different sections (landowners) of the authority. Recharges for 2005/6 are set out below.

Legal Services	£ 8,700
Chief Executive	£ 35,700
Housing General Fund	£ 300,000
Housing Revenue Account	£ 176,000
Community Development	£ 15,200
Education	£ 10,100
Leisure Services	£3,083,300
Social Services	£ 32,400
Environmental Services	£ 108,800
Engineering Services (Highways)	£ 477,000
Total	£4,247,200

8. The recharges were based on the original contract unit rates required to maintain areas of land in accordance with detailed programmes of work. Following rationalisation of the rates and the introduction of the Green Care budget, work programmes continue to be used as a basis for routine maintenance. However, the section is now also required to consider the maintenance priorities of the borough and where appropriate may deploy resources as necessary. Furthermore, whilst the budget has been increased each year in accordance with inflation, new developments, landscape schemes and environmental enhancements have not attracted corresponding yearly increases in revenue budget, with new maintenance often accommodated from the existing budget, adding further strain to levels of service resource.
9. The situation was exacerbated during the late 1990's when Decision Conferencing resulted in Council Departments making budgetary savings by reducing their green care budget without considering implications on future maintenance. In particular money previously available for non programmed work.
10. The introduction of the Green Care budget has now however 'ring fenced' the budgetary allocation, enabling the Council to manage the budget as a whole and in doing so, consider the overall priorities of the Council. An example of this can be provided in respect of works undertaken on Housing land in 2004/5, where the identified Housing recharge was £466,700 compared to the actual cost of work undertaken by the section totalling £513,399. The difference being met from the Green Care budget.

11. Although Dudley can demonstrate that it is a low spending authority in relation to Grounds Maintenance, it also continues to provide good value for money when compared to local authorities where benchmarking has taken place. New works and changes in Health & Safety Legislation however continue to put added strain on the service and standards of maintenance, particularly in areas where additional revenue funding is not provided.

### **Configuration of Resources**

12. Green Care employs a total of 116 core 'front line' staff, which is increased by a further 22 seasonal workers over the spring and summer months in order to meet seasonal peak workloads.  
Each area is managed by a dedicated Area Manager, responsible for teams of employees who undertake a range of grounds maintenance duties.
13. In order to reduce travelling time, achieve maximum productivity and enhance economies of scale, teams are responsible for grounds maintenance activities across areas of the borough, irrespective of client ownership (e.g. a team cutting the same category of grass with the same equipment may have a route that consists of Housing, Highways and Leisure land). This ensures conformity of standards across the whole of the Borough. Likewise, specialist teams are required to undertake work covering a number of sites, e.g. tractor mowing and ride on pedestrian mowing. Other teams have borough wide responsibilities. These include playground maintenance and inspections, arboriculture (maintenance of trees) and hard / soft landscaping etc.
14. Housing has a recharge of £476,000 (2005/6) for grounds maintenance works on housing land of which £176,000 is paid for by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The allocation financed from the HRA equates to approximately 4.1% of the total Green Care budget and is recovered through Council rents for maintenance of communal areas. A small percentage of this cost is recovered from Leaseholders through service charges amounting to around £12,000 per annum. When considered against the total number of front line employees, the percentage equates to approximately 4 FTE core employees and 1 FTE seasonal worker for all (HRA funded) housing work in the borough.

### **Maintenance of Housing Land**

15. A range of grounds maintenance work is undertaken on Housing land. This includes work on Sheltered Housing Schemes, Flatted Estates, Council Housing Estates and Open Spaces. Key operations include.

Grass Maintenance  
Chemical Control  
Litter Collection  
Shrub and Rose Bed Maintenance  
Inspection and Maintenance of Play Areas

16. Furthermore, the Green Care section have historically provided Arboricultural services on mature trees situated within council housing properties as this type of work would be considered as 'high risk' for tenants.
17. In addition, a range of further maintenance activities are undertaken at different times of the year, with improvement schemes considered against ongoing maintenance liabilities. An example of this would be the removal or reduction of shrub beds that are perceived to be the source of personal security concerns to local residents.
18. Maintenance is broadly undertaken in accordance with programmes of work which detail the location of maintenance, the area, the type of activity and the target frequency.
19. Site Details are held on the Green Care 'Confirm' Grounds Maintenance Management system, which identifies land included for maintenance as part of the contract.
20. Areas of land or work requirements which are not detailed on the database are not included for programmed maintenance. However non programmed work on these sites may be funded directly by Housing in consideration of available budgetary provision.
21. It should therefore be recognised that when CCT contracts were being drawn up only the land maintained at that time (for all customers) was measured and billed. Therefore customers only provided budget for this work and nothing more.
22. Areas of land which are not identified for programmed maintenance are further compounded by land acquired by Private Housing Associations. In light of these two issues, joint work is currently taking place between representatives of the Housing Department and Green Care to review the accuracy of all data now held on the Green Care 'Confirm' management system and records of site details held directly by Housing.
23. To oversee the process, regular meetings have been introduced between Senior Managers of Housing and Environmental Management, with further operational meetings also taking place between Housing Caretakers and Green Care Area Managers to discuss maintenance issues on sheltered housing sites.

#### **Benchmarking Data**

24. In order to explore Best Practice and Value for Money with other local authorities, Environmental Management is an active member of the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) Performance Networks.
25. As part of the benchmarking process, each authority forms part of a family group, determined and grouped together by common characteristics, e.g. type of authority, size, urban/rural location etc.

26. The last time Green Care participated in a benchmarking survey undertaken 2 years ago, it confirmed Dudley as the lowest spending authority per hectare of Council Housing Land in their family group, consisting of 10 local authorities.

Indicator – ‘Charge per hectare for Council Housing Land’

Lowest spending authority	-	£3,189 per hectare (Dudley)
Highest spending authority	-	£6,777 per hectare
Average authority spend	-	£4,800 per hectare

### **Audit Review**

27. Audit Services have undertaken a review of Grounds Maintenance on Council managed flatted estates and Sheltered Housing Schemes. Although the report and its findings/recommendations have yet to be published a known issue to be addressed is how the service is monitored to ensure the appropriate service is delivered and there is value for money.
28. A flatted Estates Review is being progressed in the Directorate of Adult, Community & Housing Services. It is looking at 3 specific areas – caretaking/concierges, cleaning and grounds maintenance. The review, in respect of ground maintenance will incorporate the agreed Audit recommendations.

### **Finance**

29. The 2005/6 budget for Green Care is £4,247,200, which provides for both Grounds Maintenance and Arboricultural works. Item 7 of this report details the respective recharge to the various Council Departments with landownership responsibility, for which Housing pay an allocation of £476,000. The majority of the Housing allocation (£300,000) is recharged to the Housing General Fund while the remainder (£176,000) is recharged to the Housing Revenue Account.
30. Maintenance responsibilities in respect of new developments or environmental schemes are met from the Green Care budget in the event of new revenue funding not being identified.

### **Law**

31. The Council carries out its function of providing parks and public open spaces under various statutes, notably the Open Spaces Act 1906 and Part IV of the Public Health Act 1875.

32. Section III of the Local Government Act 1972 enables the Council to do anything that is calculated to facilitate or is conducive or incidental to the discharge of its functions, the care and maintenance of the green environment and tree stock being such an activity.
33. The provisions relating to works on the highway are contained in the Highways Act 1980.
34. Any future revision to standards of grounds maintenance would be made in consideration of the views of local tenants, children and young people.
35. The Council is a local housing authority for the purposes of the Housing Act 1985; under Part II of the Act, in conjunction with actual housing accommodation it may also provide recreation grounds and open spaces.

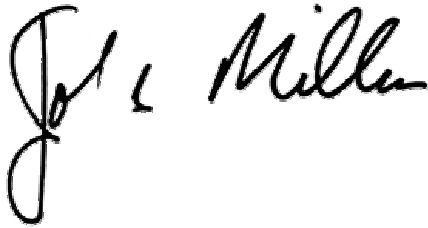
### **Equality Impact**

36. This report takes into account and acknowledges the Council's Policy in respect of Equality and Diversity in the delivery of the service and recruitment of Green Care personnel. The Borough's green space is an amenity enjoyed by all including children and young people.

### **Recommendation**

37. It is recommended that:-
  - That the committee note the contents of this report and the work undertaken by the Green Care Section in respect of Grounds maintenance on Council land in Housing ownership.
  - That the Committee note previous measures taken by the Council to introduce a Green Care budget, to provide consistent standards of maintenance across the borough and to more effectively manage the Council's Green Care priorities.
  - That the Committee note the impact of new landscape developments on the Green Care budget and on overall standards of maintenance, particularly where schemes are introduced without adequate revenue funding.
  - That the committee note the joint working that is taking place between Housing and Green Care to further improve information jointly held on areas of Housing land.

- That the committee receive a further report when the recommendations of the Audit Review are in place.



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**Background documents used in the preparation of this report:-**

- Grounds Maintenance Review, January 2000.
- Tree Management Policy – Service Update, Select Committee on the Environment – 27 January 2005
- Dudley Council – Tree Strategy
- Housing Audit Review of Flatted Estates