



**RESEARCH INTO WHETHER THE COUNCIL SHOULD CREATE A GARDENING
SERVICE TO OFFER TENANTS**

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Date: 3 January 2017

Research into whether the Council should create a gardening service for tenants – 3 January 2017

Research into the possibility of creating a Gardening Service

The purpose of this report is to establish whether it would be beneficial and cost effective for the Council's to set up and run a Gardening service for tenants in BMSDC.

What business problem are you trying to solve or analyse?

- To establish whether there is a value to the Council to set up a Gardening service?
- To establish whether this is a cost effective use of the Councils resources?
- This particular project does not meet any specific Strategic Priorities, but could be seen to influence:
 - o Managing our housing assets effectively

Scope

- To identify and establish what the current provision of Gardening support is within the Council
- To identify who may require this type of service
- To identify what services are already in existence within Suffolk
- To identify what the costs are for providing any service

Is this the type of service the Councils should provide?

- To propose/agree what the Gardening Service could provide
- To identify and establish what the estimated costs would be for setting up and providing a Gardening service
- To investigate/suggest alternative ways of providing a gardening service
- To provide guidance/advice as to whether it would be advisable for the Council to set up a Gardening Service

Current Situation

MSDC

- There is no current support or provision of a Gardening service by the Council for tenants
- MSDC currently have a Direct Service Team (DST) that undertake all the work for and on behalf of the Council on Council owned land and undertake Grass Cutting, Hedge Trimming
- The MSDC DST use commercial, larger equipment, to undertake this work.
- The MSDC team do not provide private gardening services
- The MSDC DST do occasionally get involved in the clearance of overgrown gardens etc. when requested to by the Housing if the issue has been ongoing and detrimental to the state of the property/estate.
- Most of the time the cost of this work would be recharged, only in exceptional circumstances would this charge be waived

BDC

- There is an "Assisted Gardening" service provided to some BDC residents
- The service is provided by the Landscape group
- The Landscape group are contracted to provide the overall grass cutting, hedge trimming, gardening services for BDC
- It appears that the "assisted gardening service" was a bolt on to the overall council contract and is offered as a loss leader by the Landscaping group.
- The Landscape group have had to downsize and purchase non-commercial equipment in order to undertake this work

Research into whether the Council should create a gardening service for tenants – 3 January 2017

- The service will cost £5,270 in 2016
- The service is paid for by the Council, no recharge is made to the tenants who receive this service
- The service currently supports 30 people, approximately costing £175 per household
- The recipients ages range from under 50 to over 90 and initially in order to qualify needed to be of pensionable age (60 for woman and 65 for men) or registered disabled and also receiving DLA, and have not got any family or friends
- In 2013 the management team made the decision to no longer accept referrals/new users to this scheme
- Since 2014 no new residents have been signed up to this service
- In January 2016 a report was taken to the Joint Housing Board Members with a proposal to stop the service. Outcome from the meeting:
 - *During discussions it was decided that this report should be withdrawn, as the savings that would be gained were minor, and as the scheme was no longer offered to new tenants, it would naturally cease to operate.*
 - *It was agreed that the scheme would continue for one year, with a further report to consider potential future opportunities (such as time. cost, benefits, and potential income opportunities) to develop a form of 'handy man' service, or an equivalent, to be brought to the Board within a year.*
- Since this report there has only been a reduction in 1 on the number of individuals who receive it.
- Based on the ages of those who receive this service, there is 1 individual who is under 50 years of age; it would be quite a few years before the service stopped naturally.
- The Housing team do occasionally get involved in the clearance of overgrown gardens etc, they would normally involve Morrison's in this work (very occasionally the MSDC DST if the property is close to the border), if the issue has been ongoing and detrimental to the state of the property/estate.
- Most of the time the cost of this work would be recharged, only in exceptional circumstances would this charge be waived

Tenant Requirements

As part of the tenancy agreement, tenants are required to:

- Keep their garden tidy, lawns must be cut, and hedges trimmed.
- Trees must be maintained to prevent loss of light, damage to property or growing to a height which is unmanageable.
- The maintenance of gardens, trees and hedges are the responsibility of the tenant. Any works undertaken to trees should be carried out by a professional trade's person or tree surgeon. The Council will only undertake works to the garden, trees and hedges in exceptional circumstances for example where there is a health and safety risk or a risk of damage to the property. (In such circumstances the tenant will be recharged for the cost of the works including VAT and an administration charge.)
- Keep the garden and surrounding areas free from rubbish, furniture or domestic or commercial appliances. The council may remove these items and the tenant will be given a minimum of seven days' notice that the council will be removing the items and will charge the tenant for doing this.

Who might require this type of service? (Information from Community Housing Officers)

The target audience could cover a wide range of individuals or tenants:

- Elderly
- Frail
- Disabled / ill
- Socially Isolated / Vulnerable (no friends or family)

Why might the need arise?

- Elderly/frail residents may not be able to undertake the gardening work themselves
- Tenants may not have friends or family close by who can assist them
- Sometimes the problems (i.e. overgrown garden) has only occurred because the tenant has not known who to get to do the works
- Tenants are often concerned about the cost of services, they may feel more reassured if there was a 'pre-approved' list
- Tenants often feel vulnerable getting in 'outside' agencies, they may feel more reassured if there is an 'pre-approved' list

What services are already available already in Suffolk?

- Age UK Suffolk
 - Do not provide a gardening service themselves but have a database which they use to recommend gardeners.
 - They do not investigate or vet these individuals but ask for references for individuals
 - If they receive negative feedback they remove these individuals from their database
 - They do not offer any financial assistance towards this service
- Good Neighbour Schemes –
(<http://infolink.suffolk.gov.uk/kb5/suffolk/infolink/results.action?qt=good+neighbour+scheme&term=&adultchannel=0&sorttype=relevance&sr=0&nh=10>)
 - Some communities have these schemes which may offer help to individuals to maintain their gardens, but it is not specifically mentioned in any of their promotional information.
- Suffolk Trader Scheme
 - Suggests using "Checkatrade", or "Which? Trusted Traders" websites/schemes to source reputable garden services
- CAB – do not make any recommendations for the provision of this type of service
- There are quite a few independent gardening services (both small businesses and larger organisation) available throughout the districts – researching this provision, the Needham Market newsletter lists 3 that would provide this type of service and it is likely that similar adverts appear in other Parish and Town newsletters

Having spoken to SCC – Customer First team, they have stated that should an individual be in receipt of direct payment and it can be established that the maintenance of their garden could contribute to the well-being of that individual then they could use their Direct Payment to pay for this type of service

What sort of service could be provided / be required?

Based upon the information obtained from the community housing officers it would appear that the services that would be of most use would be:

- Grass Cutting
- Hedge Trimming
- Garden Clearance

Research into whether the Council should create a gardening service for tenants – 3 January 2017

- Bigger clearances where the garden has become overgrown because it has not been maintained
- One off garden clearances- rubbish has built up
- Property clear ups (where their property has become dirty/ cluttered/ hoarding tendencies)

What are the alternative ways that a Gardening Service could be provided?

1. Continue to provide the service, as add on to the existing contracted out gardening service
2. Set up a Council provided gardening service
3. Compile/Create an approved suppliers list
4. Provide a list of suppliers / Contractors for this type of service
5. Do nothing, refer to the local Town/Parish newsletter

1. Continue to provide the service, as an add on to the existing contracted out gardening service

- The current Landscape group contract is being reviewed and an Options appraisal undertaken on future provision of all Public Realm services for the future – this is due out in November 2017.
- Should the Landscape group not be awarded another contract then this service would cease, and there is no guarantee that even if the Landscape group were to be contracted that this service would continue to be provided by them
- Based on the information already supplied, cost of the service and what is provided, it is unlikely that any new contractor would be willing to undertake this service in order to win the contract – however that is an conjecture as no evidence is available at the moment and would not be until the options appraisal work is completed and tenders undertaken.

2. Set up a Council provided gardening service

What do the current Public Realm DST team provide?

The team maintain the grass, flower beds, shrubberies, hedges and trees on open spaces and recreation grounds and on parts of the highway found within our towns and larger villages.

- Cutting and otherwise maintaining grass
- Edging grass growth back from paved areas on highway verges and open spaces (approx. once every four years);
- Pruning and caring for trees to keep them healthy and in a safe condition;
- Maintaining shrubberies, rose beds and hedges;
- Designing and planting out spring and summer bedding schemes;
- Generally maintaining play areas, collecting litter, sweeping paths and emptying litter bins

As these sites are normally larger than an average garden, the majority of the machinery – lawn mowers etc. are commercial

Could this service be provided by existing staff?

Having met with the CM – Public Realm, he has stated that the team are working at full capacity, he did state that they work on an annualised basis, in that more and longer work is undertaken during the Spring/Summer and Autumn (the growing season) when longer daylight hours and warmer temperatures result in greater and faster growth. This would be the same for any form of gardening service offered and he did not feel that would be feasible for existing staff to provide this service.

This would mean there would be a requirement to create a new individual/team who would undertake work on a chargeable basis for tenants in Council Houses; this team could also diversify into the open market.

Having spoken to the Commissioning Team they have stated that there are legal implications of doing this work in-house.

“If the Councils were to develop a chargeable service that replicates existing local services/ businesses then it will have to be set up as a completely separate trading arm”, advice received from CM – Commissioning and Procurement

What would the cost of providing a new gardening service?

Currently the Councils Public Realm employ grounds maintenance operatives on Grade 3. Job descriptions and evaluation would be required to confirm this, but the grading is based on the requirements to be skilled operatives and to have specialist training.

Staff Costs:

- £17,891 (Spinal point 18 – bottom of the scale)
- 30% on cost - £5,367.30
- Annual Leave = 23 + 2 Statutory days. Annual leave – this could be accommodated without requiring cover
- Sickness cover based on National average of 9 days –this could be accommodated without requiring cover
- **£23,258.30**

Management / Supervision (costed as part of the Council, however this may need to be a separate trading arm):

- Undertaken by Public Realm Operations Officer
- Grade 5 Spinal Point 34 = £29,854
- Assume 10% cost
- **£2,985**

Administration (costed as part of the Council, however this may need to be a separate trading arm):

- Undertaken by existing Public Realm admin. staff
- Includes taking on customers
- Setting up on-line records
- Setting up billing/payment systems
- Grade 2 Spinal Point 16 = £ 16,169
- Assume 10%
- **£1,616**

Total Staffing costs - **£27,859.30**

Equipment Costs

Equipment	£
Pick-up (costed for a 2 nd hand vehicle)	5,000.00
Pedestrian Lawn Mower	550.00
Multi Tool – Strimmer / Hedge Cutter	600.00

Selection of Hand Tools	70.00
Protective Clothing	150.00
Total Costs	6,370.00

(A new vehicle would cost £17,000 which is why costs for a second hand vehicle have been used)

These costs could be depreciated over a 5 year period, in which case the Annual figure used for these calculations would be - £ 1,274

Overall cost of equipping 1 member of staff to undertake this service for a year would be:

Total Staff cost -	£27,859.30
Annual Equipment cost -	£1,274
Total Cost -	£29,133.30

Assuming this service would be charged at £15 per hour, which having spoken to some of the local companies who provide this type of service is the average of what they charge, then in order to break even the individual/team would be required to undertake 1942.22 hours of work a year, or 52.49 weeks per year. As per the statement from the CM- Public Realm below, this is not a service that would have standard hours/working day/week all year round, and more work would be likely in the Spring/Summer and Autumn.

No costs have been included for Marketing/Advertising, IT/Technology or phone costs etc.

3. Compile/Create and Approved Suppliers list

This proposal would see the creation of an approved suppliers list that could be published and promoted through a range of mediums; Tenants Newsletter; Website etc.

There would be a cost to setting up and maintaining such a list and it is extremely difficult to quantify what those costs would be.

Could the Council create and have available a list of individuals/organisations that they could recommend to tenant if they are in need of assistance? Having spoken to both Legal and Commissioning staff within the Council the implications and issues of this are:

- How would an approved list be created?
 - Advertise
 - Seek applications for being added, these could include:
 - References
 - Financial information
 - DBS check Info.
- There would be a requirement for a member of staff to:
 - undertake the initial information gathering and collation
 - maintain of the database
- What would be the implications if anything goes wrong?
- There would be a cost to the Council that would not be recovered

4. Provide a list of suppliers / Contractors for this type of service

The main difference between this option, and Option 3 above, is that the Councils would not create an approved suppliers list, but would simply identify and collate a list of those individuals / organisations that provide this type of service within the districts that they could make available should they be asked.

Research into whether the Council should create a gardening service for tenants – 3 January 2017

This list, once created, could be maintained by a member of the admin. team at no additional cost. The list that could be published and promoted through a range of mediums; Tenants Newsletter; Website etc

Having spoken to Jonathan Reed – Legal Services Team, there would be a need to caveat this list with a statement that the Council were not recommending the provider, simply highlighting the services that were available.

5. Do nothing, refer to the local Town/Parish newsletter

This option would simply be to tell someone where to look to find this type of service.

Summary

- There are currently different services provided to BDC and MSDC tenants
- The current Landscape Group contract has been extended whilst an Options Appraisal on the future provision for both Councils is undertaken
- The provision of Public Realm services for both Councils is currently being reviewed as part of an options appraisal which is due to report in November 2017
- There are quite a few independent small companies who provide gardening services
- There do not appear to be any free schemes available within the district, from charities or other organisation, to provide gardening support
- Charitable organisations, such as Age UK, refer individuals to independent companies
- SCC Trading standards recommend or refer individuals to an independent website rather than making recommendations themselves
- There is a Risk to the Council financially. The cost of setting up a new service is expensive, and although it may end up at least covering its operational costs, once developed, the initial investment by the Council is unlikely to be recovered
- Is this in keeping with the Councils Joint Strategic Plan:
 - **Business Growth and Increased Productivity**
 - Increased understanding of our local businesses and their needs
 - We will support business to become more sustainable
- Should the Council be operating in direct competition with local small businesses?

Recommendations

From the information obtained it would not be cost effective for the Council to set up a gardening service.

Treating this purely as a business case it is recommended that:

- The Council do not look to adding this service onto any new contracts for a joined up Public Realm service
- The Council do not create an independent gardening service
- The Council do not set up/create an approved suppliers list
- The Council do not create a list of local suppliers
- The Council refer individuals to their local parish/town magazine

If this recommendation is adopted then there would be a need to contact and brief the current customers of the Assisted Gardening service that it is likely to cease, when and what the alternative provision would be and that it would need to be an individual arrangement that they would have to pay for.