



Estate Services

Housing Regulation Panel Report

February 2015

Introduction

The role of the Housing Regulation Panel is to monitor the standards of Housing Services to ensure they are quality services which give value for money. It monitored the Estate Services Standards during the period November 2013 to December 2014, evaluated the results and made recommendations for improvement.

Background

Estate Services are carried out by the Council's Streets and Open Spaces Team. The minimum standard for these services is set out in Housemark's Caretaking and Cleaning Standards. The Estate Maintenance Calendar gives information about the times in the year when various estate services will take place. It may vary depending on conditions at the time. Both documents are available at www.cambridge.gov.uk/estate-services.

The Residents Standards Group (which preceded the Housing Regulation Panel up to 2010), worked jointly with Cambridge City Council to develop the standards for grounds maintenance in communal areas. The standard was summarised in the leaflet "Estate Management Service Standards" which was available at City Homes Area Offices.

At the time of compiling this report (January 2015), Streets and Open Spaces are going to review the leaflet and feedback on any out of date information and contact numbers etc. This will then be discussed at the Estate Liaison meeting on 27 January 2015. The finally agreed leaflet will be added to the Estate Services page on the website and copies made available in the City Homes Area Offices.

Leaseholders are charged the actual cost of Estate Services to individual flat blocks. As a result of a review of leaseholder charges by internal audit published in July 2011, the Director of Customer and Community Services presented a Leasehold Service Update to the Housing Management Board on 3 January 2012. The July 2011 Audit Report highlighted 5 areas of concern, one of which was grounds maintenance service charges. The Director's report to the Housing Management Board outlined actions taken and progress made in costing grounds maintenance (now to incorporate estate cleaning) for each flat block, using up-to-date costs. The Executive Councillor approved the recommendations. The full report is available at www.cambridge.gov.uk/meetings.

Leasehold Services and the Business Team have confirmed the 2015/2016 estimated charges will be the same as the 2013/2014 actual charges. The annual charges range from £0.28 (for 1 specific property) to £75.57. The annual rate per 10 square metres for grass cutting is £0.32 and for hard standing areas is £0.75. The annual rate per square metre for shrub beds and hedge maintenance is £1.10. The Grounds Maintenance charges currently charged to leaseholders is £9,866 per annum and does not now incorporate the previous Estate Cleaning charge.

Monitoring

The Chair of the Housing Regulation Panel met with the Senior Operations Manager, Streets and Open Spaces, on 3 December 2013 for an introductory briefing on Estate Services. On 8 April 2014, the Grounds Maintenance Team Leader, Streets and Open Spaces, attended the Housing Regulation Panel meeting to give a presentation on the Services provided by Streets and Open Spaces.

Information was collected from the following sources:

- Estate Liaison meetings
- Estate Performance Reports tabled at the Estate Liaison meetings
- 2014 STAR Survey
- City Homes
- Streets and Open Spaces
- Leasehold Services
- Business Team, Housing Strategy, Customer & Community Services
- Minutes of meetings:
 - City Homes Residents Partnership
 - Leaseholder Consultation
 - Housing Management Board

Housing Regulation Panel site inspections of Estate Services

The programme of work for the delivery of Estate Services is governed by the seasons so it was necessary to take a year to inspect all the elements. The elements making up estate services and inspected by the Housing Regulation Panel are:

- Play areas and seating areas
- Litter removal from grassed areas and shrubs
- Hard surface areas – paths, roadways (not highways), courtyards, drying areas, car parks
- Grounds maintenance – grassed areas
- Grounds maintenance – weed clearance
- Grounds maintenance – shrub bed and hedge maintenance

The inspections were carried out by Housing Regulation Panel members working in pairs. Locations for the inspections were randomly selected across the City. To be fair to Streets and Open Spaces, the inspections for a particular element were carried out during the period indicated on the Estate Maintenance Calendar. HRP used a city map and devised a colour code to record the inspection locations and elements inspected. In all, the Housing Regulation Panel carried out 190 inspections.

Gritting

The Housing Regulation did not inspect this service as it was not required on housing land in the winters of 2013/2014 or 2014/2015. To address concerns expressed by residents, the City Homes South Area Housing Manager arranged an annual meeting in the autumn of 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 with Streets and Open Spaces and a resident representative, to agree policy and procedures for this service. This resulted in information on this service being made available to residents in the winter issue of “Open Door” magazine

annually which is sent to all tenants and leaseholders. The information is also available at www.cambridge.gov.uk/estate-services.

Evaluation

- The standard of the Estate Services is good and they are value for money.
- The services are delivered consistently across the City (with very few exceptions). They meet the standards set out and published.
- From the responses to the 2014 STAR Survey, 71% of respondents expressed satisfaction with grass cutting. 53% expressed satisfaction with maintenance of planted areas. 49.1% expressed satisfaction with litter picking. Only 5.4% had made a complaint in the year relating to estate services.
- The Housemark Caretaking and Cleaning Standards information and the Estate Maintenance Calendar are only available on the Council's website.
- The Estate Liaison meetings scheduled 10 times a year are attended by officers from City Homes, Independent Living Service, Streets and Open Spaces, and the Housing Regulation Panel Chair. These meetings gave the Chair the opportunity to raise issues from the inspections as they occurred so they could begin to be addressed. The issues raised include arisings from grass cutting on footpaths making the footpaths slippery when wet, grass overgrowing footpaths reducing the walking space and moss accumulating on the safe surfaces of play areas making them slippery when children are using the play equipment.
- Streets and Open Spaces are unable to deliver the services in some locations because of dog fouling/excrement on the grass, toys and other obstructions in communal gardens. In July 2014 Streets and Open Spaces provided the Housing Regulation Panel with a list of sample locations where the services could not be delivered. These locations were:
 - Hawkins Road – toys everywhere all the time
 - Larkin Close – excrement
 - East Road flats – toys
 - Bliss Way – excrement
 - Tiverton Way – excrement
 - Ainsdale – toys and other obstructions on the grass
- At some locations residents have taken over all or part of the communal gardens so they are not/cannot be, maintained by Streets and Open Spaces despite residents being charged for the service. From the site inspections it became apparent that problems arise when the areas taken over are no longer maintained. This may be due to change of occupancy or the resident(s) who have taken them over no longer maintain them for a variety of reasons.
- Communication between City Homes and Streets and Open Spaces does not address these issues.

- The locations in need of particular attention are Lichfield Road play area, Lichfield Road communal areas and the communal areas at Colville Road flats, Monkswell and Hazelwood Close.
- Monitoring of Estate Services is carried out by Independent Living Facilitators, Housing Officers, Estate Champion and Resident Volunteer Green Inspectors. The results contribute to the Estate Performance Reports.

Recommendations for improvement

- From the responses to the 2014 STAR Survey, 39.2% did not have access to the internet so are unable to access information on the website. There should be a reference copy of the Housemark document and the Estate Maintenance Calendar in each of the City Homes Area Offices.
- Copies (when available) of the revised leaflet – Estate Management Service Standards, made available at the City Homes Area Offices and added to the Estate Services website page.
- Streets and Open Spaces need to continue to address the issues of arisings on footpaths, grass overgrowing footpaths and moss on play area safe surfaces.
- City Homes and Streets and Open Spaces need to agree and put in place, a robust system for Grounds Maintenance staff to report obstructions which prevent service delivery so that City Homes can take action.
- Tenants and leaseholders must be made fully aware that communal gardens are for the use and enjoyment of all residents in each flat block. The issue of “communal garden take over” must be addressed. Initially this could be an article in “Open Door” magazine and information included in the new tenant sign-up packs and in leasehold sales information documents.
- The issues at Lichfield Road play area, Lichfield Road communal areas, and the communal areas of Colville Road flats, Monkswell and Hazelwood Close need to be addressed by City Homes and Streets and Open Spaces communicating and working together.
- The Housing Regulation Panel recognises that Independent Living Facilitators, Housing Officers and Estate Champion have limited time for monitoring service delivery and that there is only a small number of resident volunteer Green Inspectors. In the responses to the 2014 STAR Survey, 18.9% of the overall sample indicated they would be interested in receiving information about opportunities to influence and improve the Housing Service. Recruitment of more tenants and leaseholders to be involved in monitoring service delivery in their local area would help to maintain and improve satisfaction with Estate Services.

The Housing Regulation Panel would like to thank the following officers for their support with this inspection:

Sandra Farmer and Andrew Latchem (City Homes Area Housing Managers)

Will Beavitt (Estate Champion)

Chas Page (Maintenance Manager, Independent Living Service)

Bob Carter (Senior Operations Manager, Streets and Open Spaces)

Paul Jones (Grounds Maintenance Team Leader, Streets and Open Spaces)

Don Blair (Team Leader, Streets and Open Spaces)

Julia Hovells (Business Manager/Principal Accountant)

Carol Amos (Leasehold Manager)

Housing Regulation Panel members who inspected Estate Services

Stan Best (Chair)

Anna Vine-Lott (Vice-Chair)

Archie Ferguson

Lewis Wilbur

Julia Casey (up to November 2014)