

**Decision Session: Executive Member for
Housing & Safer Neighbourhoods**

20 November 2017

Report of the Assistant Director, Housing and Community Safety

Garden Assistance Scheme Procurement / Budget Saving

Summary

1. The report requests approval to take part of the budget for this scheme as a saving on the Housing Revenue Account which is facilitated by the service being procured as part of the Handyperson Scheme via Adult Social Care commissioning.

Recommendations

2. The Executive Member is asked to consider:
 - 1) Procuring a grass and hedge cutting service as part of a tenure blind Handyperson Scheme to realise a saving of £46,000 on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to contribute to overall savings of £1.5 million.

Reason: Consultation suggests that over half of customers receiving this service are not prepared to pay for it and this proposal delivers a similar service for most existing customers at no cost to them.

Background

3. The HRA requires savings of £1.5m to be realised over the financial years up to 2019 / 2020. Potential savings have been identified across staffing and service budgets. The original saving of £96k proposed by ending the Garden Assistance Scheme (GAS) in its current form was earmarked for 2017 / 2018 but it was felt that removing the scheme completely would have a big impact on customers. Other ways of delivering the service whilst delivering the savings have been sought but no other substantive solution has been discovered.

The GAS helps older and disabled customers with the upkeep of their gardens through periodic grass cuts (7) and hedge cuts (2). The service is not a full gardening service although one off work to bring gardens to a manageable state when customers join the scheme are made as part of the overall scheme.

Customers are expected to do complementary work on their gardens where they have planted areas and to keep on top of their garden between cuts.

409 tenants received the service in 2016. 365 received the service in 2017 following a tightening of the criteria for qualification. No means testing was applied.

The current criteria to qualify for the scheme is that the customer is over 70 and / or disabled (registered disabled or receiving a disability related benefit) and has nobody living with them that could do garden work for them.

Prior to the need to make savings the intention was to further review the scheme criteria, in particular the age threshold.

The service has been provided by procuring external contractors for grass and hedge cuts as well as a rate for one off garden works. The current contractor indicated that an arrangement where they offered a paid for service and charged customers directly on a one off or ongoing basis would not be acceptable to them given the additional costs and resources this would incur.

There is no desire to charge internally for a garden assistance service given the additional costs this would incur and resources this would require.

We have looked at the potential for volunteer opportunities, local initiatives or a paid for by customers scheme to replace the GAS but we have not been able to put anything concrete in place at this stage. We will look to develop these with colleagues across the council including ward teams in the future

Consultation

4. A customer consultation exercise was undertaken in 2016. See annex A for a summary of results.

Customers were asked if they were prepared to pay £2.25 per week / £117 per year which would cover the costs of grass and hedge cuts at the rates included in the most recent contract. If they were not prepared to pay this they were asked what they would be prepared to pay.

Nearly 50% of customers responded by various means.

44% indicated that they would pay the amount to cover costs.

56% indicated that they would not pay this amount. 57% of these were not prepared to pay anything and the rest indicated they were prepared to pay varying amounts as detailed in Annex A.

Anecdotally, many customers indicated that they could find somebody to help with their garden.

Age Concern were asked for their opinion on the removal of the scheme and the response was one of understanding in the face of a difficult financial environment for housing and wider council services.

Options

5. A: Ending the Garden Assistance scheme to realise a required saving of £96,000 on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to contribute to overall savings of £1.5 million. Develop other options for customers unable to find other means to manage their gardens in the longer term.

B: Procuring a grass and hedge cutting service as part of the wider Handyperson Service to deliver savings of £46,000 whilst providing a similar service for customers on benefits and those allowed on to the scheme on a discretionary basis. Develop other options for customers unable to find other means to manage their gardens in the longer term who don't qualify.

C: Procure the GAS service as is.

Analysis

6. Option A:

The decision to accept this saving would contribute to the overall savings target on the Housing Revenue Account without further

affecting core housing services. Options to help customers manage their gardens by other means could be explored and could potentially contribute to other objectives including reducing social isolation, encouraging volunteering opportunities and providing opportunities for social enterprise.

Option B:

In seeking solutions to providing a GAS service whilst delivering savings conversations with colleagues lead to us to developing this proposal.

Adult Services have historically procured a handy person scheme. See details in Annex B. Yorkshire Housing currently have the contract for this but this runs out March 2018 and procurement will be needed to provide the service in future.

There are obvious benefits in linking the delivery of GAS to the Handyperson scheme given the intended outcomes of that scheme.

The scheme currently involves grass and hedge cuts in the full specification. The service is means tested and available to those on benefits. The service is tenure blind. One off garden works to get the garden 'cut ready' are carried out by volunteers

We can write the specification to extend this element of the service and transfer qualifying customers from the Housing Services scheme across. They would get 7 grass cuts and 1 hedge cut. It would also include edge trimming, weed killing on hard services and clearing of cuttings from paths. On the current list it is estimated that 306 will qualify following means testing

The organisation delivering the contract would assess customers for eligibility reducing administration for Housing Services. There would be a requirement to ensure up to 306 Housing Customers received the service and any above this number would join a waiting list. Monitoring information would be required and provided quarterly

The cost to the Housing Revenue Account would be £50k representing a saving of £46k to contribute to overall saving. The £50k would include a contingency for one off works when no volunteer service was available to do this (for council tenants only). This contingency would be held by Housing Services who will organise and pay for grass cuts

using internal services only when needed. These figures are based on indicative costs and tenders may come in with lower rates for grass and hedge cuts.

The overall cost also includes provision for a small number of tenants to join the scheme on a discretionary basis via referral to the Housing Estate Manager. The process for doing this will be fully developed but it would allow exceptional cases to join the scheme for example due to financial hardship including severe debt (engagement with debt advice services would be required), medium term incapacity or absence for ill health or disability reasons, cases in the spirit of the Forces covenant e.g. access to war pension or similar. In all cases this will be where the customer does not have anyone who can do this work for them

The contract would be procured for 3 years which would give time to develop alternatives for non qualifying tenants and residents where possible.

This option provides a substantial saving to the HRA and provides a similar service to that delivered previously to tenants who qualify on the age or disability basis on low incomes.

Option C:

Although it would mean the service could continue in it's current form this would not deliver any savings on the HRA which would have to be found elsewhere within the services provided by Housing. It would also not link directly in to the Handypersons scheme and the potential benefits to be gained from this.

Council Plan

7. This proposal contributes to key council priorities:

A) A focus on frontline services – to ensure all residents, particularly the least advantaged can access reliable services and community facilities

This will be achieved by ensuring bigger budget savings to core housing services are avoided which would affect all customers including the most vulnerable.

B) A council that listens to residents – to ensure it delivers the services they want and works in partnership with local communities.

This will be achieved by working with communities and other organisations to provide the proposed scheme and developing other options and alternatives to the current scheme in the longer term.

Implications

8.

- **Financial** - Savings would have to be taken from other (core) housing services if not agreed. This proposal will deliver a saving of £46k on the overall budget of £96k.
- **Human Resources (HR) - none**
- **Equalities** – Customers will be provided with information on how they can get help with keeping their garden in good shape where they don't qualify, there is also a discretionary element to the scheme for exceptional / hardship cases and customers not qualifying have option of purchasing the service at the contractors stated rate.
- **Legal** - none
- **Crime and Disorder** - none
- **Information Technology (IT)** - none
- **Property** - none
- **Other** - none

Risk Management

9. Untidy / overgrown gardens – non qualifying customers may not be able to keep on top of gardens themselves and will need to seek alternative means. Housing staff will be able to provide advice on options available. The council's tenancy requires that customers keep their gardens tidy.

Contact Details

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**Report
Approved**



Date 1/11/2017

Wards Affected:

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

None

Annexes

Annex A – Garden Maintenance Focus Groups
Annex B – Handyperson Service
Annex C – Community Impact Assessment

Abbreviations:

GAS Garden Assistance Scheme
HRA Housing Revenue Account