
Report of the Director of Environments and Neighbourhoods

To the Inner South Area Committee

Date: Tuesday 19th February 2008

Subject: Gardening service

Electoral Wards Affected:

Beeston & Holbeck
City & Hunslet
Middleton Park

Ward Members consulted
(referred to in report)

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Council
Function

Delegated Executive
Function available
for Call In

Delegated Executive
Function not available for
Call In Details set out in the
report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a summary of the issues and options for the Area Committee to consider in setting up a gardening service in Inner South Leeds.

1.0 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

- 1.1 At the December 2007 Area Committee meeting, Members asked if a gardening project could be established. The purposes of this report is to:
- (i) Set out the issues that need to be explored before setting the gardening project
 - (ii) In principle decisions needed from Members before further detailed work is carried out into setting up a service.

2.0 ISSUES

2.1 Need for the service

- 2.1.1 Anecdotally there is considerable demand for a gardening service which would help maintain peoples' gardens. There are complaints about gardens not being maintained in various parts of the Inner South and these complaints can lead to action by the

landlord in some cases (Aire Valley Homes Leeds, BITMO, Leeds Federated Housing Association etc) or action by Environmental Enforcement. However, we do not have any statistics about the number of untidy gardens that need to be maintained in the area. It should be noted that most of the action by landlords and enforcement is about waste in gardens rather than about the state of the gardens themselves. Certainly there are some neighbourhoods where lack of garden maintenance is definitely a problem, conversely there are significant parts of the area e.g. Beeston Hill, large parts of Holbeck, where residents do not have gardens.

2.1.2 There is already some support for people who have untidy gardens. In the INM areas, Environmental Services can take away any rubbish and cut back overhanging/overgrown hedges and vegetation. This is a one-off service and residents are expected in return to sign a pledge that they will maintain the garden themselves in future. This is a time-limited service as it is dependent on grant funding through Intensive Neighbourhood Management. Aire Valley Homes and Leeds Federated Housing Association will both tidy up gardens for residents sometimes they will be re-charged for this work, sometimes this will be done as a one-off; however, certainly in the case of AVHL, this 'one-off' has in some cases had to be repeated a year or two later. Aire Valley Homes Leeds can also refer gardens to Groundwork's community gardeners scheme who will similarly carry out a one off of cutting back vegetation and tidying up the garden.

2.2 Type of service that could be provided

2.2.1 There are two main types of work needed: a 'one-off' cutting back/clearing overgrown vegetation/hedges etc and a continuing maintenance e.g. grass cutting, hedge cutting, grass cutting tidying and other basic maintenance. Both types of work could be provided by a gardening service.

2.3 Who the service could be for

2.3.1 The service could be for everyone but given that the proposals involve Area Committee funding to subsidise the service it is suggested that elderly people (particularly those who do not have any relatives or other people who could help them) and people with disabilities (particularly those who do not have any relatives or other people who could help them) should be the main groups of people who would be eligible for the service.

2.3.2 Numbers: the numbers using the service would need to be built up particularly during the first year (e.g. via publicity, referrals etc). In Outer South, for example, the service had 56 customers in year 1 and 95 customers in year 2. (The Outer South service covers the Rothwell, Robin Hood, Woodlesford and Lofthouse areas). There is more demand than can be met through the current arrangements, so there is a waiting list of people wanting the service. Meeting this demand would involve additional staff which would increase costs. The proposed service for Inner South Leeds would need to develop its customers by publicity and ensuring referrals from other organizations e.g. Social Services, Neighbourhood Wardens, Voluntary and Community Organisations, Aire Valley Homes, Leeds Federated Housing Association etc.

2.4 Finance

2.4.1 Costs: based on the experience and initial proposals for the Outer South for a new service, the costs of the service would need to include year start up costs (including purchase of van, equipment, recruitment costs). The costs are set out in detail in appendix 1 but in outline (and with costs rounded up):

- 2.4.2 Income: we have assumed a lower number of customers to begin with than in the Outer South scheme (i.e. 40 customers in year 1, 65 in year 2 and 85 customers in year 3.) We have assumed the same level of charges as in the Outer South scheme (i.e. that customers would pay £20 for each of 7 maintenance visits during the year). An alternative type of basic service could be that only two visits a year each at £20 are provided. This would obviously mean that more customers would be needed; using the assumptions on charges and costs, 140 customers receiving 2 visits a year would be needed in the first year, 220 in year 2 and 300 in year 3. The details are set out in appendix 2.
- 2.4.3 Funding: using the assumptions about costs and income set out in appendix 1 and 2, funding would be needed as follows (figures rounded up):
Year 1 £31,000 (includes set up costs)
Year 2 £16,000
Year 3 £14,000
We have assumed that all the funding will come from the Area Committee (although Greenfingers Leeds did make a significant contribution to year 1 of the Outer South scheme) and other sources of funding are not guaranteed. These figures are currently a very rough, preliminary estimate and would need to be tested against actual figures providing during a tendering process.
- 2.4.4 Sustainability: based on the experience of the Garden Maintenance Service that has been part funded by the Outer South Area Committee in parts of the Outer South a continuing subsidy is likely to be necessary. Providing a gardening service is labour intensive and even if the service continued to grow it is not clear if a sufficient margin of income compared with costs could be built up to enable the service to become self sufficient. The pressure would be to provide gardening services to clients (private individuals and public and private sector organisations) who could pay more than the standard rate and this would subsidise the service for those paying the standard rate. The disadvantage of this is of course that fewer people who need the service but who cannot afford the higher rate would be able to receive the service.
- 2.4.5 In addition to a new, standalone service outlined above, alternative models do need to be explored including, for example, developing existing gardening services run by voluntary organizations and a different approach to providing the service which may significantly affect funding.

2.5 Practical issues

- 2.5.1 The Service is likely to employ one worker and is bound to be dependent on this one person. The person would obviously need gardening skills but also the ability to relate to local residents and be responsible for organizing their own work. Ideally the service would need someone who can work longer hours in the summer with shorter hours in the winter (possibly via annualized hours contract?). There may be a limited number of people available to do this.

2.6 Risks

- 2.6.1 There are a number of risks that Members need to be aware of in deciding whether or not to fund a gardening scheme.
- 2.6.2 Provision of the service would be jeopardized if the worker became ill for a long time.
- 2.6.3 Viability of the service would be adversely affected if there was a significant period of very bad weather making it difficult to carry out work for customers.

- 2.6.4 The viability of the service depends upon reaching the number of paying customers and the level of charges as outlined in appendix 1. Obviously if these assumptions were to prove optimistic and not realized in practice, there would be an adverse impact on viability. This might result in the organization providing the service to request additional funding, alternatively the host organization might find the costs of providing the service too high and might in practice stop providing the service.
- 2.6.5 Conversely if the scheme proved very successful with greater demand than the service could cope with, there would be a demand for additional subsidy as the service cannot trade into surplus by gaining additional customers once it reached maximum capacity on the assumed staffing of 1 person.

2.7 Link with other garden services

- 2.7.1 This report is written on basis of a separate gardening service for Inner South but given that there is already a Gardening Service in Outer South, it might be useful to see if a South Leeds-wide gardening service could be set up. The main advantage of this is the spreading risk and overhead costs across the wedge and this might make easier for the service to be viable. The main disadvantage would be the need to run a service across a large area. An alternative approach is to support the expansion of existing garden services run in Inner South Leeds by e.g. elderly and voluntary organizations or from LCC's Environmental Services. We would also have to consider whether the new proposed service would have an adverse impact on the existing garden services.

2.8 Other issues

- 2.8.1 Prior to any final proposal, we would advise other gardening schemes are currently operating in Inner South to evaluate what impact they would have on the proposed new service and vice versa.
- 2.8.2 We would have to agree the organizations that would be invited to tender to run a gardening service. We may need to recognize that there are not many organizations with the organizational and financial capacity to provide a service of this kind.
- 2.8.3 Split between Wards: the service would need to aim to be spread reasonably evenly across the three wards but this might be quite difficult to achieve given that significant parts of City and Hunslet Ward (Beeston Hill) and of Beeston and Holbeck Ward (Holbeck) have few gardens.
- 2.8.4 Would the service operate across all tenures? We do have some significant areas of AVHL housing (and also of e.g. Leeds Fed); AVHL do some clearing of gardens – we would have to make sure that there is reasonable equity between residents e.g. with some getting gardens cleared free of direct charge by the ALMO with others having to pay (albeit a subsidized) charge. Alternatively the service could operate only where there is no provision for gardens by landlords.
- 2.8.5 Timing: if we agree the final project details at the April Committee meeting, there would then have to be a tendering process which is likely to take a minimum of 8 weeks (tendering documents would have to be drawn up; tendering process and documents agreed with Procurement Unit; tenders would have to be invited and a reasonable period given for return of tenders; tenders would have to be appraised and possibly shortlisted organizations interviewed; the successful organization would then have to be appointed.) It is unlikely that all these stages would be completed before the end of June at the earliest. The organization would then have to appoint someone and get the service started. Realistically it is unlikely that the service would actually

start much before the end of August – while this is late in the year for gardening work, the service would come into operation in the autumn.

2.8.6 We would need to ensure that the organization providing the service received financial reward for organizing and providing the service and for taking some risks. A management fee of 5% has been assumed for the table at appendix 1.

2.8.7 In tendering the proposed service, we would need to make clear whether this was a one year project, or perhaps a one year project with an in principle commitment to (say) three years depending on annual reviews. As well being funding is allocated to the Area Committee annually, the Committee could not make a definite commitment to a three year programme but could indicate that it would intend to fund a project provided it received funding in successive years in line with the current year.

3.0 OPTIONS/DECISIONS

3.1 On the basis of this report **would Members agree in principle to support a new gardening service with well being revenue funding ?**

3.2 **For the initial period Members would like the service to run,** the options are:

- (i) in principle for 1 year or
- (ii) in principle for 2 years
- (iii) in principle for 3 years

In all cases in addition to an annual review, there would be a review at the end of the agreed period to decide whether the service should continue to be supported.

3.3 **Members are asked to decide in principle the level of well being funding provided.** The options are:

- (i) to provide the level of funding as indicated above in paragraph 2.4.3
- (ii) To provide a lower level of funding with the funding gap either being filled by other sources or by increasing charges or by including a mix of private/institutional customers who would pay a higher charge.

Members should note that the actual funding required for option 1 would not be clear until we receive the results of a tendering exercise.

3.4 **Members are asked to decide in principle who the service should be provided for.** The options are:

- (i) older people/senior citizen (60 + years) only
- (ii) elderly and disabled people
- (iii) elderly and disabled people + all those on benefits
- (iv) everyone

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The Area Committee is asked to note the contents of this report and to decide in principle on the options outlined in section 3 above.

4.2 The Area Committee is asked to receive a further report once the issues outlined above have been examined in more detail including different models of provision.