

Report for Resolution

Report to Executive
25 June 2008

Report of Assistant Director – Neighbourhood Development

Subject Norwich Mow and Grow Gardening Scheme

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Purpose

To update members on the progress of the Norwich Mow and Grow gardening scheme, after 12 months operation, and seek approval to expand the scheme further.

Additional HRA funding for the scheme would enable Norwich Mow and Grow to access further external funding streams and consequently take on extra teams of volunteers and to expand the scheme to more tenants.

Recommendations

Members are requested to:

1. Note the progress and success of the mow and grow gardening scheme
2. Agree to the further expansion and funding of the existing scheme

Financial Consequences

The financial consequences of this report are as follows:

1. A budget of £20,500 was agreed for the scheme in 07/08. A further £3,000 contingency was used to fund a backlog of clearances which developed due to the success of the scheme. This was offset by income totalling £7791, leaving a net cost to the HRA of £ 15,709.
2. The 08/09 budget includes provision for the existing scheme of £23,000, plus further provision of £23,000 for the proposed expansion of the scheme. Based on 07/08 experience the total income, allowing for fee increase proposed in this report, would be approximately £27,000 thus resulting in a net cost to the HRA account of £19,000.

Strategic Objective/Service Priorities

The report helps to achieve the corporate objective to strive for sufficient, good-quality, affordable housing, providing choice and accessibility.

Executive Member: Housing and Adult Services

Ward: All

Contact Officers

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Background Documents

Report to Executive 24th January 2007 - Providing Assistance to Tenants to Maintain their Gardens

Report

Introduction

1. In January 2007 members agreed to the setting up of a scheme to assist vulnerable tenants with their gardens. Norwich Mow and Grow scheme was launched in May 2007. It offers two services – one-off garden clearance and optional follow-on regular maintenance visits. (See Appendix A) The service is delivered by a team of volunteers led by a paid co-ordinator from Norwich Mow and Grow. Mow and grow has the motto ‘Cutting Grass, Cutting Crime, Cultivating Futures’, reflecting the vision that by working with residents and volunteers to improve local gardens and neighbourhoods people gain pride in their community, and litter levels, crime rates and safety improve.
2. As Members are aware ‘Cleaning Up’ neighbourhoods and tenancy enforcement is high on the current agenda. Failure to maintain gardens is a growing estate management problem where tenants are unable or unwilling to carry out the necessary work themselves.

The first 12 months of the scheme

3. Since its introduction 114 tenants have benefited from a one-off £10 garden clearance and 78 tenants have signed up to the follow-up maintenance visits. A number of gardens required several full day visits to initially clear undergrowth, sometimes from both front and back of the property. The team take green waste back to their training centre to pellet and compost, keeping the disposal of non-recyclable rubbish to a minimum. The service reached full capacity at the end of 2007 and currently has a waiting list of 30 customers.
4. All recipients of the service are asked to complete a feedback survey. Over 80% of those who responded thought the work carried out, the volunteers carrying it out and the overall service was either very good or excellent. Similarly 86% said they would use their garden more, that it was a safer place and less likely to be a target of crime. 93% would recommend the service to others.
5. Norwich City Council won an Association for Retained Council Housing Best Practice Award 2008 for the scheme and Housemark, the good practice and bench marking organisation, are also citing the scheme as best practice.

Taking the scheme forward

6. As is evident from above the scheme has been a success and created more demand than there is currently capacity to cope with. Discussions have been held with Norwich Mow and Grow and the following proposals agreed to take the scheme forward.

7. It is proposed to increase the core funding from the HRA to £46,000. This would support the running of two teams, instead of one as at present. This would double the current capacity and enable 200 clearances per year plus 140 regular maintenances. (The cost of a team in 07/08 was £20,000. For 08/09 a 15% increase, bringing cost to £23,000 per team, has been applied, for fuel and equipment costs.) The net cost to the HRA after income (£27,000) is estimated to be £19,000. The second team would make greater use of probation service volunteers and use a vehicle supplied by the service.
8. The Head of Procurement has agreed in principle (verbal confirmation to be given at your meeting) to exempt this agreement from contract standing orders for a further year to enable a full contract specification, monitoring and tendering process to be developed in order to ensure full value for money is being obtained. A specification will be developed for a 3 or five year contract starting from 09/10 and specifically catering for the social enterprise sector.

Charging for current service

9. The current charge payable by all tenants to clear a garden is £10. This does not reflect the true cost of the clearance which is dependent on the time taken / equipment used. It is proposed that be increased to £15 to increase income, but remain affordable.
10. The weekly charge for Norwich Mow and Grow to maintain a garden throughout the year is £3.60 which is eligible for housing benefit. It is proposed that this charge is increased in line with inflation by 3% to £ 3.71 per week. Effective from 14th July 2008. (One month from this meeting.)

Conclusion

11. The garden assistance scheme is the best way of assisting vulnerable tenants to clear their gardens and meeting the wider aims of tenancy enforcement and the 'clean up' agenda as well as improving the appearance of specific gardens and estates.
12. Members are asked to agree to the continuation and expansion of the existing scheme as well as the revised charges.

Appendix A

How the current gardening scheme works:

To qualify for the scheme, applicants must: not have any household members or relatives or friends living nearby who are capable of maintaining the garden be in receipt of qualifying benefits. Applicants who are not in receipt of the qualifying benefits may still be assessed for eligibility if they have a health problem or disability which renders it difficult for them to maintain their garden themselves, even if they are not formally registered as disabled.

Those ineligible for the service are signposted to Norfolk Home Call, a county-wide accreditation service that helps people find reputable traders. Referrals are made through the customer contact team or as the result of an officer visit, and the scheme has been promoted both in the tenants' newsletter 'Tenant Talk', the Council's website and to staff within the Community and Neighbourhoods directorate.

A detailed procedure has been developed for staff handling requests for help maintaining their garden. Neighbourhood housing officers and sheltered housing scheme managers make assessment visits to verify information and confirm eligibility. Referrals are then logged on to the workflow management system and the appropriate charges added to rent accounts on the housing management system. Regular contact is made with the Norwich Mow and Grow co-ordinator to ensure new referrals are passed on and to monitor feedback of the service.

All tenants eligible for garden clearance pay a £10 charge, irrespective of whether they are on benefits, and the optional maintenance service allows for six additional visits throughout the year at a cost of £3.60 per week. For tenants in receipt of housing benefit the maintenance charge will be fully covered, as it is a condition of tenancy that the garden is maintained. Tenants in rent arrears are not necessarily eligible for the maintenance service – it is at the discretion of the Council's arrears team. One satisfied customer said "I cannot express the pleasure it has given me having my garden sorted, and with your assistance it means I can now get outside a lot which was difficult due to my disabilities."