

Part I

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Executive Member: Cllr Gemma Moore

All Wards

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 18 MARCH 2025
REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (RESIDENT SERVICES AND CLIMATE
CHANGE)

REPORT OF THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP ON SOCIAL HOUSING – COMMUNAL
AREA MAINTENANCE

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 On 30 July 2024, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee determined that a task and finish group should be established to review the arrangements for communal maintenance in our social housing stock, specifically:
- to improve maintenance of communal areas, where deemed required
 - to improve cleaning of communal areas, where deemed required and
 - to consider service charges to tenants for such services
- 1.2 As part of the action plan following the Tenant Satisfaction Measures results for 2023/24, officers had identified and were working on improvements to cleaning and grounds maintenance in housing communal areas. Progress on the overall Tenant Satisfaction Measures action plan is reported to Cabinet Housing Panel.
- 1.3 The current cleaning and grounds maintenance service does not include all homes in blocks. The council does care about where our residents live. Hence the review, but the lack of cleaning and grounds maintenance gives the wrong impression, as shown in the Tenant Satisfaction Measurement survey's perception that circa 50% of the communal areas are clean and well maintained.
- 1.4 To change this perception, the Council needs to develop a holistic service for all residents regardless of age, tenure, or location.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report.
- 2.2 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend that Cabinet consider the recommendations set out at 3.25 to 3.42 in this report.

3 Explanation

Introduction:

- 3.1 Appendix A lists the objectives and scoring matrix for the Social Housing – Communal Area Maintenance Task & Finish
- 3.2 The scope of the task and finish group covered:
 - Information on existing maintenance regimes
 - Information on the cyclical decoration programme
 - Information on cleaning arrangements
 - Information on existing service charges and ability to charge services to tenants and leaseholders
 - Feedback from tenants (including tenants panel)
- 3.3 The objectives expected through this scrutiny were to determine if recommendations could be made:
 - to improve maintenance of communal areas, where deemed required.
 - to improve cleaning of communal areas, where deemed required; and,
 - to consider service charges to tenants for such services
- 3.4 The Task and Finish group remit explored grounds maintenance, cleaning and repairs.
 - **Grounds Maintenance:** covering Horticulture Services, Grounds Maintenance, Arboriculture (Trees) and Pathways
 - **Cleaning** – covering internal and external communal cleaning
 - **Repairs** – covering Communal Area Repairs
- 3.5 The Council has various corporate contracts for these services which include most of the social housing communal areas.
- 3.6 Horticulture and grounds maintenance is with Krinkels UK (previously known as Continental Landscapes Limited).
- 3.7 Communal cleaning is with STM Group Ltd., and window cleaning is with F&G Ltd.
- 3.8 Communal maintenance repairs are with Morgan Sindall Property Services.
- 3.9 The Krinkels UK contract also provides an assisted gardening scheme for some council housing tenants, especially the elderly and vulnerable tenants. There is no financial assessment, and it is funded through the department's operating budget.
- 3.10 The Tenant Satisfaction Measures for 2023/24 reported satisfaction levels of 47% for cleanliness and maintenance of communal areas in council housing. So, as part of the action plan following these Tenant Satisfaction Measures results, officers were already working on improvements to cleaning and grounds

maintenance in housing communal areas. Progress on the overall Tenant Satisfaction Measures action plan is regularly reported to Cabinet Housing Panel.

- 3.11 The Residents Panel had previously undertaken a piece of scrutiny work on (Council Housing) Estate Management and also reported on areas for improvement in grounds maintenance, cleaning and other matters.
- 3.12 The Task and Finish Group noted that the current grounds maintenance contract with Krinkels UK does not meet tenants' and leaseholders' expectations. Based on the TSM results the cleanliness of the communal areas and grounds maintenance arrangements need to be improved.

Methodology and Findings

- 3.13 The task and finish group met three times between October and December 2024 and received presentations and information from council officers.
- 3.14 The following topics were explored during the meetings:
 - What an Estate Management Service should consist of
 - Purpose of Estate Management Services Standards
 - Arrangement for service charges
 - Current contracts
 - Cyclical redecoration programme
 - Communal repairs and health and safety inspection
 - Footpaths
 - Scaffolding
 - Winter plan
- 3.15 There are 563 council housing blocks in the borough; of which about 2/3^{rds} are occupied by tenants and about 1/3^{rds} are leasehold. A small proportion of the blocks receive a routine clean and others receive ad-hoc cleaning.
- 3.16 In addition, there are 34 sheltered schemes. The communal charge covers the cleaning of the windows and communal areas in all the sheltered housing blocks. The communal charge was set some time ago and may not be fully recovering all the costs.
- 3.17 Gardening and grounds maintenance are carried out across housing land, but the service does not include some items that residents would expect, for example, moss clearance on pathways.
- 3.18 The Neighborhood Officers inspect their patch every six months.
- 3.19 Most of these services are funded from rent rather than through a service charge because the rents and service charges have not been de-pooled, or the required consultation was not undertaken. So, the costs are met from the service's operating budgets.
- 3.20 A new cyclical gutter clearing programme commenced in 2024/25. It runs on a two-year cycle and is evolving. The first circa 120 properties were identified from the repairs data.

Task and Finish Objectives and Recommendations:

3.21 Objective 1: To improve the maintenance of communal areas, where deemed required

3.21.1 A Housing Estates Service Manager was successfully recruited in December 2024 and is leading on improvements to council housing estates and communal areas. The manager will develop the neighbourhood service standards that set out the services residents can expect from their landlords and lead the actions identified in the TSM action plan for communal areas.

3.21.2 To manage estates effectively, adjacent blocks with shared communal facilities are usually grouped for inspections and correctly allocated and apportioned costs.

3.21.3 After the neighbourhood inspection patches are agreed upon, a schedule of Estate Management Inspections can be arranged and published.

3.22 Objective 2: To improve the cleaning of communal areas where it is deemed it is required

3.22.1 The current window and block cleaning contracts cover routine cleaning for a small proportion of the 563 blocks.

3.22.2 The current contracts expire in 2025, allowing the Housing Department to procure new contracts for a schedule of cleaning for all blocks. It is our intention to consult with tenants and leaseholders on this.

3.22.3 The costs of more comprehensive cleaning schedules can be covered by applying service charges to tenants and leaseholders, including all sheltered housing scheme costs. The implications of this will be considered and consulted on.

3.23 Objective 3: To consider service charges to tenants and leaseholders for such services

3.23.1 This was one of the objectives tasked by OSC. All estate management services are chargeable. At the present time we do not separate rent and service charges in our rent accounting. Therefore, the cost of the majority of estate services are funded from the service operational budgets.

3.23.2 For all of the current services, including grounds maintenance, grass cutting, and arboriculture Services, leaseholders are only being charged for some of the services.

3.23.3 Current ad hoc services, such as additional grounds maintenance to remove moss and overgrown ivy from pathways and entrances, are not currently recharged to leaseholders. Improvements by contractors of records (eg photos) would be needed to easily demonstrate the services received.

3.23.4 Work can be undertaken to consider service charges for estate management services and how they can be fairly and justly applied.

Recommendations

- 3.24 **Recommendation 1:** Consult with tenants and leaseholders and agree on the estate service standards.
- 3.24.1 An estate service standard sets out the services residents, i.e. tenants and leaseholders, can expect from the landlord.
- 3.25 **Recommendation 2:** Officers should establish/re-procure a contract for a comprehensive schedule of window cleaning and block cleaning across all housing blocks.
- 3.26 **Recommendation 3:** Contractors, specifically Grounds Maintenance and Arboriculture (Trees) Contractors, to improve record keeping (eg evidence of regular inspections that show before and after photos).
- 3.27 This will also assist with any future consideration of the application of service charges to demonstrate the costs have been reasonably incurred and the works are of a reasonable standard.
- 3.28 **Recommendation 4:** Undertake a more detailed review of the estate services provided, the costs involved.
- 3.30 **Recommendation 5:** Officers should examine the de-pooling of rents and the split between rent and service charges and report back through the budget setting process for 2026/27.
- 3.31 Under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, landlords are expected to identify service charges separately from rent in the case of social rent properties.
- 3.32 If the outcome of recommendations 4 and 5 was that it was considered tenants and leaseholders should be consulted on service charges, it is recommended that it is reported to the cross party housing maintenance group to review how officers plan to communicate such important changes.
- 3.33 Tenants receiving a service chargeable service would not see an immediate increase in their gross rental payment, but service charges are not governed by the same regulation as rent increases. However, social landlords should endeavour to keep increases for service charges within the limit on rent changes.
- 3.34 **Recommendation 6:** Officers should establish regular inspections of all blocks.
- 3.35 This can be established once the new contracts are in place.
- 3.36 **Recommendation 7:** Officers should publish regular estate inspections of shared common spaces, both external and internal.
- 3.37 **Recommendation 8:** Officers must publish the neighbourhood and estate maintenance inspections.
- 3.38 **Recommendation 9:** Officers should explore how the resources of the current grounds maintenance service for a housing estate can be better utilised to

address the gaps in the service that residents would like to see (eg ivy and moss clearance)

- 3.39 Officers will explore how current budgets could be repurposed, and that will improve the service for all tenants.
- 3.40 **Recommendation 10:** Officers should review all current service chargeable costs to reschedule costs for leaseholders and tenants who receive the service.
- 3.41 Review sheltered housing costs to ensure all costs are fully recovered as far as is possible through the service charge.
- 3.42 Review the approach and funding of the assisted gardening service.

4. Legal Implications

- 4.1 The Regulatory Standards set the by Regulator of Social Housing under the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 includes the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard. This requires, for example, that landlords must provide tenants with accessible information about matters such as the available landlord services, the standards of service tenants can expect, standards of safety and quality tenants can expect homes and communal areas to meet, rents and service charges that are payable by tenants, and responsibilities of the landlord and the tenant for maintaining homes and communal areas.
- 4.2 The setting of social housing rents is governed by the Rent Standard and guidance issued by the Regulator of Social Housing. Statutory controls on service charges are regulated under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are no new or direct financial implications arising from this report. However, if the recommendations are approved and the work progressed is likely to give rise to financial implications which will need to be considered.

6. Risk Management Implications

- 6.1 If improvements are not made to the cleaning and grounds maintenance of communal areas, there is a risk that we could be considered non-compliant with the Regulatory Standards. In addition, this could lead to complaints from residents about the condition of communal areas, and reduced satisfaction levels in the Tenant Satisfaction Measures.

7. Security and Terrorism Implications

- 7.1 There are no security and terrorism implications arising from this report.

8. Procurement Implications

- 8.1 There are no new or direct procurement implications arising from this report. However, if the recommendations are approved and the work progressed it is likely to give rise to procurement implications, for example establishing new cleaning contracts.

9. Climate Change Implications

9.1 There are no climate changes implications arising from this report.

10. Human Resources Implication(s)

10.1 There are no human resource implications arising from this report.

11. Health and Wellbeing Implications

11.1 Safe and well maintained communal areas in council housing land supports the health and wellbeing of tenants and leaseholders.

12. Communication and Engagement Implications

12.1 If the recommendations are approved, any future changes to services provided to tenants and leaseholders would need to be communicated effectively and may require formal consultation also.

13. Link to Corporate Priorities

13.1 The subject of this report is linked to the Council's Corporate Priorities: Homes to be proud of and Run an effective council.

14. Equality and Diversity

14.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has not been carried out in connection with the proposals set out in this report, as there is no change to policy or services proposed at this stage.

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Date 25 February 2025

Appendices:

Appendix A: The scoring matrix, the scope and aims and objectives of the Task and Finish group for Social Housing Cleaning Maintenance

Appendix A:

The scoring matrix, the scope and aims and objectives of the Task and Finish group for Social Housing – Communal Maintenance

3.43 Appendix A: Scrutiny Scoring Matrix

Topic/area of interest: Social Housing – Communal area maintenance

Public Interest + Strategic Value + Risk + Corporate Priorities + Financial Value = Scrutiny Value Score

	Numerical score			
Public Interest	Low 1	medium 2	high 3	2
Risk to Council or service delivery	low 1	medium 2	high 3	2
Alignment to Corporate Priorities	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Financial Value	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Issue of concern for partners?	low 1	medium 2	high 3	2
Will the outcome of scrutiny review result in any meaningful impact on the Council service?	low 1	medium 2	high 3	3
Will the outcome of scrutiny result in any benefit for a significant part of the community / partners / stakeholders or the Council?	low 1	medium 2	high 3	2
Total Score				17

Decision:

Members discussed complaints they had been receiving from tenants regarding the maintenance of communal areas (including cleaning, decorating and estates). Any recommendations here may have an impact on leaseholders so it is important they are considered through the recommendations.

A **task and finish panel** will be set up to cover:

- providing details around the councils cleaning and maintenance schedules and levels of service
- providing an overview of service charges (where are they charged, what do they include) □
providing details of chargeable services to leaseholders

The objectives expected through this scrutiny are to determine if recommendations could be made:

- to improve maintenance of communal areas, where deemed required;
- to improve cleaning of communal areas, where deemed required; and,
- to consider service charges to tenants for such services

Task & Finish Terms of Reference: Social Housing – Communal area maintenance

Scrutiny Review Title	Social Housing - Communal Area Maintenance
Scoring Matrix Result	17
T&F Panel Members	Councillors: L.Chesterman, J.Cragg, S.Khan, L.Musk and A.Nix
Co-opted Members	
Portfolio Holder	Councillor Gemma Moore
Officers	Sue McDaid, Janice White, Simon Kiff
Key Stakeholders	
Background Issue to review - the rational for scrutinising this issue	
<p>Members discussed complaints they had been receiving from tenants regarding the maintenance of communal areas (including cleaning, decorating and estates). This would include both internal and external communal areas.</p> <p>The committee were keen to understand what level of provision was already in place for maintenance, and how this could be improved.</p> <p>Any recommendations here may have an impact on leaseholders so it is important they are considered through the recommendations.</p>	
Scrutiny Aims and Objectives	
<p>The objectives expected through this scrutiny are to determine if recommendations could be made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to improve maintenance of communal areas, where deemed required; • to improve cleaning of communal areas, where deemed required; and, • to consider service charges to tenants for such services. 	
Review of Implications/Impacts/Risks	
<p><i>Failure to adequately undertake adequate maintenance of communal areas can have reputational damage to the council, lead to maladministration findings by the ombudsman and social housing regulators, and impact on the quality of homes and communal areas for tenants and leaseholders.</i></p>	
Methodology for Gathering Evidence	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on existing maintenance regimes (officers) • Information on cyclical decoration programmes (officers and contractor information) • Information on cleaning arrangements (officers) • Information on existing service charges, and ability to service charge and leaseholder charges • Feedback from tenants (including tenants panel) 	
Proposed time scales and meeting frequency (aim for 2 to 3 months)	
Start date	October 2024
Frequency of Meetings	Meetings 6 Weekly
End Date	December 2024
Reporting back to OSC/Recommendations to Cabinet	
Date of OSC	January 2025

Date of Cabinet	February 2025
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