



**SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL**

Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1 July 2021

Report of: Cllr Robert Reid

Cabinet Member for Housing and
Property



Housing Service Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme

This report seeks Committee comment and suggestion on proposed changes to the current Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme, in terms of eligibility for the scheme and whether it is appropriate to recover the costs for providing the service to tenants.

Report Author

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Corporate Priority:	Decision type:	Wards:
Housing that meets the needs of all residents	Key	All Wards

Reviewed by:	Helen Clarke, Head of Housing	28 April 2021
Approved by:	Andrew Cotton, Director of Housing and Property	20 June 2021
Signed off by:	Cllr Robert Reid, Cabinet Member for Housing and Property	21 June 2021

Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s)

1. That Committee considers the content of the report and the background to the current Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme.
2. That Committee provides comment and question on the options around eligibility and recharging for the Scheme, to inform consultation with current users of the scheme.
3. That the Committee, subject to suggested amendments and consultation, indicates its support to the adoption of the renamed Assisted Grass and Hedge Cutting Scheme.

1 The Background to the Report

- 1.1 The Council's tenants are required by the terms and conditions of their tenancy to maintain any garden that forms part of their dwelling. However, recognising that some tenants were unable to maintain their garden hedges and grass cutting due to ill health, the Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme was implemented some years ago to provide support. As well as supporting tenants to remain living independently in their homes, it has also been a way to ensure our estates look attractive and thereby encouraging sustainable communities.
- 1.2 In 2019, all current members of the scheme were contacted to ask if they still required assistance. This reduced members of the scheme from 585 customers on 01 October 2019 to 514 customers on 31 March 2020. 272 tenants (grass and hedge cutting);
- 132 tenants (hedge only); and
 - 110 tenants (grass only).
- 1.3 There are now a total of 501 customers who receive assistance through this scheme:
- 264 tenants (grass and hedge cutting);
 - 123 tenants (hedge only); and
 - 114 tenants (grass only).
- 1.4 The Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme is managed by Technical Services and the work is carried out by ESK contractor. The service is currently offered free of charge to tenants who are either:
- Elderly
 - Vulnerable
 - Registered blind
 - Unable or incapable of maintaining their gardens because of age or disability
- 1.5 Grass cutting takes place between March and October and each property receives an average of 14 cuts (a minimum of 11 cuts and a maximum of 17 cuts) through that period. Each property on the assisted scheme is visited approximately every 14 days but adverse weather conditions may impact upon this. Hedges are cut once per year.
- 1.6 The rationale for the current proposals submitted in this report is due to a revised service delivery contract agreed with Environment SK (ESK), which has seen an increase in the cost of the works completed through the scheme. In 2020/2021 the cost of the scheme was £77,762. The cost of the scheme in 2021/22 will be £194,712. This is an increase in cost of £116,950 which comes from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). Currently there is no charge to tenants for this service.

Costs

- 1.7 The total costs for the assisted gardens is: £194,712. The breakdown is as follows:

Activity	Proposal	Total cost (per year)
Assisted gardens (501 properties)		£194,712
• Grass only (114)	14 cuts	£ 46,664 (£409.33 per property per yr)
• Grass and hedge cutting (264)	14 grass cuts / 1 hedge cuts	£129,407 (£490.18 per property per yr)
• Hedge cutting only (123)	1 cut	£ 9,946 (£ 80.86 per property per yr)
Delivery of green bins (114 + 264)		£ 8,695 (£23 per bin per property)

1.8 This means that for tenants receiving the assisted garden scheme service, their charges, if they had to pay the cost in full would be as follows:

	Per annum	Per month	Per week (52wks)	Per week (48wks)
Grass and hedge:	£490.18	£40.85	£9.43	£10.21
Grass only:	£409.33	£34.11	£7.87	£8.53
Hedge only:	£80.86	£6.74	£1.56	£1.69

Eligibility

1.9 There is limited monitoring of the current Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme, and specific criteria for acceptance onto the scheme needs to be agreed. It is proposed that all those tenants currently on the scheme undergo a review, and any future acceptance onto the revised scheme is subject to:-

- a) An official application for the scheme to be fully completed.
- b) Inspection of the garden by the Grounds Maintenance Officer to ascertain if the service is required.
- c) Discussion with tenants regarding moving to alternative accommodation, which would have lower grass and hedge cutting maintenance or a sheltered housing scheme with communal gardens..
- d) There being no one else in the tenant/s household over 16 and able to maintain the garden.
- e) The applicant does not have anyone (eg. relative or friend) in the SKDC area or within a 25 miles radius of their home, who is able or willing to assist.
- f) Applicants must be either elderly, have a disability or a mobility issue, which would make it difficult or impossible to maintain their garden.

Tenants with a disability or mobility issue need to meet the following conditions:

- a) be in receipt of, or eligible for the following benefits:
 - i) Attendance Allowance
 - ii) Disability Living Allowance
 - iii) Severe Disablement Allowance
 - iv) Industry Injury Disablement Benefit
 - v) War Disablement Pension
 - vi) Long term Incapacity Benefit
- b) Have proof of disability/mobility issues:
 - i) If tenants do not receive one of the above benefits but have health problems or a disability which make it difficult for them to maintain their grass and hedge, they may still be considered for the scheme, with suitable proof at the discretion of the Council (for example, a letter from a medical professional).

1.10 It is noted there is no specific state benefit that can be accessed for support with garden costs. However the Council’s usual offer of support to residents in maximising their benefit entitlement is of course available to any tenant who wishes to take up that offer at any time.

2 Consultation and Feedback Received, Including Overview and Scrutiny

- 2.1 Consultation is proposed to take place once this report has been considered and discussed by the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and feedback on the options has been received.

3 Available Options Considered

- 3.1 To assist with the additional spend and pressure on the HRA, we believe there are three options for consideration:

Option 1: pass on all costs to tenants as outlined above;

Option 2: part subsidise; or

Option 3: Subsidise fully, but only to those who meet strict eligibility criteria.

- 3.2 If a first cut and tidy is required, it is proposed that this will incur an additional one off upfront charge to bring the garden to an acceptable level. This will be completed based upon an agreed quotation with the tenant, payable in advance of any work being undertaken.
- 3.3 It is proposed that SKDC may consider an overgrown garden as a breach of tenancy and as a last resort enforcement action will be considered, where other options, such as moving to a new home with a more manageable or communal garden, have been considered.
- 3.4 It is proposed for the current Assisted Garden Maintenance Scheme to become the *Assisted Grass and Hedge Cutting Scheme*. This is so that it is clearer to tenants that the scheme offers a basic service for grass and hedge cutting only and does not cover trees, shrubs, rose trees, bushes, weeding or pruning (this is not an exhaustive list).

4 Preferred Option

- 4.1 The options are to be considered and discussed by the Rural and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to gain their feedback before preferred options are consulted upon.

5 Reasons for the Recommendation (s)

- 5.1 N/A at this stage (see section 4).

6 Next Steps – Communication and Implementation of the Decision

- 6.1 N/A as a decision is not being made.

7 Financial Implications

The reports set out the background context for this discretionary service. There are financial considerations that are included in the report and Council has previously approved an increase in the grounds maintenance budget of £150,000 from 2021/22. Therefore the additional costs of the service are already built into base budgets. The report asks members to consider the principle of who should pay for the service going forward – the HRA as an overall service cost or direct user pays approach.

Financial Implications reviewed by: Richard Wyles, Interim Director of Finance

8 Legal and Governance Implications

8.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Legal Implications reviewed by: Shahin Ismail, Monitoring Officer

9 Equality and Safeguarding Implications

9.1 The proposed changes could have a negative impact upon elderly tenants and disabled tenants if they cannot afford any charges introduced. However, see section 10 on how this risk can be mitigated.

10 Risk and Mitigation

10.1 Tenants who cannot afford the charges, may have options available to them, such as downsizing to a smaller property or moving to a sheltered housing scheme. Alternatively, we can assist, or refer on for assistance, in applying for attendance allowance to cover these costs.

11 Community Safety Implications

11.1 There are no community safety implications.

12 How will the recommendations support South Kesteven District Council's declaration of a climate emergency?

12.1 Neutral (no carbon impact)

13 Other Implications (where significant)

13.1 None

14 Background Papers

14.1 None

15 Appendices

15.1 None

Report Timeline:	Date of Publication on Forward Plan (if required)	N/a
	Previously Considered by:	N/a
	Final Decision date	14 September 2021