



**Tenant Inspectors**

**Tenant Inspectors' Report No 11  
Grounds Maintenance**

**January 2013**

## **Preface**

Soha's Tenant Inspectors project started because of an idea from the Audit Commission in 2005 that they may go lighter on inspections if an RSL had tenant inspectors in place. The Chair of the Tenants' Forum was concerned that they must be able to show their ability to do the work efficiently as she was sure that the Commission would want proof that the inspectors were capable of doing a good job.

This led to a bid to Soha's Excellence Fund (the re-investment of efficiency savings) which was successful. The first Tenant Inspectors training took place in October 2006.

Tenant Inspectors help Soha to understand and put the views of Tenants first.

We carry out detailed and robust assessments of the services and functions provided by Soha and its partner agencies to check they do "What it says on the tin"; to help them improve.

We promote the role of Tenants in all aspects of Soha's business; working towards a joint approach to regulation.

There are currently 15 inspectors who decide which area they will inspect and how they will go about their task.

## **Acknowledgements**

The Inspection Team would like to express their thanks to everyone involved with this Inspection

**Soha's staff;**            Director of Customer Services  
                                 Assistant Director of Customer Services  
                                 Estates & Neighbourhoods Manager  
                                 Resident Involvement Officer

## **The Inspection Team was;**

Edwina Lamond (Lead Inspector)  
Ian Allison  
Trevor Brewerton  
Angela Harding  
Don Harrison

## **Executive Summary**

Since 2010 the new contracts for grounds maintenance have seen major changes within which brought much extra work to staff. There were many more complaints and as we analysed all the surveys and reports which staff use, we realised that estates management and surveys were being done in a certain way purely because “that’s the way it had always been done”. This did not highlight the short comings of the contractors. Important changes need to take place in the monitoring of the quality of service.

Soha needs to ensure that tenants are fully informed as to what the contractors responsibilities are and that when they fail, the follow up procedures are water tight.

The Inspectors were surprised to learn that many staff members were not aware of the current standards. We suggest that in future, surveys and inspections are re written to ensure that Soha do ‘what they say on the tin.’

Contractors failed to post notices of when works were carried out and Soha staff failed to notice this as it was not in their survey. This question is not currently being asked.

Poor weather conditions cannot constantly be used as an excuse for inefficiency.

Ultimately it is Soha’s responsibility to ensure that tenants have a reliable quality and efficient service in Grounds Maintenance.

## **Scope of inspection (what we wanted to know)**

As a result of inspection 10 Sheltered Housing Schemes, a co-regulation day which was held in April 2012 and a liaison meeting with the Director of Housing, it was recommended that the Tenant Inspectors should undertake an inspection of the Grounds Maintenance contracts that were presently in place with Soha. This suggestion was ratified at the full meeting of the Inspectors in June 2012.

## **Corporate Plan**

- Aim 1 – to have highly satisfied customers
- Aim 2 – to empower and maximise the involvement of residents to make a difference
- Aim 3 – to provide and maintain quality sustainable homes and communities

## **Methodology (how we did it)**

To begin with, we initially agreed that our inspection must as always, be SMART. By this we mean:

- S - Specific
- M – Measurable
- A – Achievable
- R – Relevant
- T – Time-limited

Together the team devised a project plan that enabled everyone to look at specific areas. This included:

- Tenant Interviews
- Staff interviews
- Reviewing written evidence
- Site visits
- Benchmarking exercises

## **Methodology or How did we do it?**

We decided to base our inspection on some relevant questions, namely,

- Are our contractors working to an agreed specification?
- How many formal/informal complaints were received during the course of the last year?
- Has customer satisfaction increased since the implementation of the contracts?
- How are grounds maintenance contracts monitored for both service level and customer satisfaction?
- Are they logged in a similar way to repairs?

In order to achieve this we decided to undertake a series of tenant interviews, interview both the Director of Customer Services, the Assistant Director of Customer Services and the Estates and Neighbourhoods Manager. We also decided to benchmark Soha's activities against some similar sized housing associations. As well as these interviews we all decided to review the internal policies that were in place that covered this aspect of Soha's activities.

For the inspection of the Grounds Maintenance contracts we decided to find out what are Soha's standards in this area and how we know these standards are being kept. In other words does it do "what it says on the tin?"

This proved to be very confusing. The communal areas leaflet which is sent to every concerned tenant gives, according to the Director of Customer Services as a series of "expectations". We are not sure how wide the consultation process of these services are with interested tenants, but we do know that this information was passed on to all tenants. Involved tenants are individually advised of the service charges that will be made for the provision of these services but we could find no

information about when and where maintenance work will be carried out or what form it would take. This also appears not to be checked by the estate inspections.

There would appear to be five standards for “Green” grounds maintenance”

In the first standard, “undertake a programme of grounds maintenance and confirm when work has been carried out by posting a notice in flatted blocks and sheltered schemes”

It has been found that contractors do, in general, undertake a programme of grounds maintenance, but there is no evidence that this standard is informed to the tenants by the posting of Notices in the situations concerned.

The second standard is “Visit your estates and neighbourhoods regularly to check the quality of the grounds maintenance and cleaning contracts”.

There is substantial evidence that this is being carried out. However, the estates survey form is lengthy and covers all communal works.

The third standard is “Tidy Hedges, and shrubs and maintaining the trees monthly during the growing season (March – September)”.

Judging from all the results received by the Inspectors this standard is less than satisfactory although it must be said that “Tidy” is a very subjective word. It, for instance, takes no account of hedges becoming perhaps two or three feet higher than planned.

During our reality check visits to several sites, it was noted that although the grass was being cut, the verges were not. Our reality checks did identify some areas for improvement, however at the time of the visits the grounds maintenance did appear to be satisfactory.

The fourth standard, “Cut the grass areas of sheltered blocks and communal flats every two weeks in the Summer”,

The evidence shows that overall, in spite of atrocious weather conditions the standard was, in the eyes of most tenants, reasonably satisfactory.

The fifth standard is “Establish community gardens in areas where residents wish to support these”

There was no evidence where this standard was advertised, surveyed or inspected.

**We list below “What it says on the tin.”**

- **The specification of works to be carried out (Appendix 1)**
- **The Policy PO29 (Appendix 2)**

- **A Communal Areas leaflet (Appendix 3)**

In general, at the present moment, both contractors are working in a satisfactory manner.

However, this has not always been the case.

In the case of I S S the contract commenced in November 2010 and it is fair to say that it got off to a poor start. Gritting etc., of Sheltered Schemes was satisfactory, but no winter cut backs or pruning of hedges was done so that ISS were poorly prepared for cutting which was due to start in March 2011. By May of that year we had already received 24 complaints from sheltered scheme residents.

A meeting with the management team of ISS resulted in a rectification plan being agreed. This plan was due to be completed by June 2011 but was not fully implemented by that date and was not, in fact, fully up to standard until August 2011.

The Winter of 2011/2012 went well, and, until March 2012 the cutting was up to standard. However, in April, May and June 2012 there was a major disruption of the service that they were supplying. This was caused to some extent by the bad weather, but there was also a marked lack of manpower to the service of the contract added to which there was evidence of sub-standard equipment and poor management.

A further meeting took place with the senior management of ISS at which a list of actions to be put in place was agreed. These included notifying Soha of any service disruption in future, better communication both with Soha and the Tenants, a detailed apology and a re-imburement of some £11,000 in lieu of missed work. This sum was repaid to the affected tenants who had been charged.

At a further meeting with ISS at the end of July it appeared that they were meeting their targets approximately 95% of the time. However, since that meeting, a further 8 tenants have reported problems.

It appears that the general problems are:

- Mechanical failure of equipment
- Work not being carried out in accordance with agreed standards
- Poor management
- Lack of communication between ISS and Soha
- Lack of communication between ISS operatives and ISS management
- The six week programmes that were agreed for both blocks and sheltered schemes were not being published on the notice boards. The "Completion Sheets" are not being signed
- Neither Soha nor its tenants are being kept informed if the work is interrupted for any reason.

Further meetings at a senior level have now taken place regarding the problems and a series of actions have been agreed. They include:

- Refresher training provided to staff who undertake inspections to ensure a consistent approach to estate inspections

- Winter plans have now been produced by both grounds maintenance contractors signed off by the Estates & Neighbourhoods Manager
- Soha and concerned tenants will be notified immediately of any disruptions in service following a meeting with the relevant portfolio holder
- Sheltered Schemes to be given priority when grass cutting resumes following an unavoidable disruption to the service
- All issues to be escalated to the core management group if unresolved at a lower level
- A new contract, which will be commencing in November 2013, will include much stricter financial penalties upon the contract for under performance and failure to complete the work on time.

The manner in which calls are monitored for service level compliance and customer satisfaction has also been reviewed. At present;

- All calls are logged on the HCRM programme. In theory, this should alert all actively interested parties to the problem
- Informal complaints are on an "In House" spread sheet
- Formal complaints follow the same procedure as all other formal complaints
- At present, an informal estate complaint spread sheet is being used
- However, it is felt that this is not adequate and further work is being done in this field.

**Strengths:**

<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>Evidence 1</b>	<b>Evidence 2</b>	<b>Evidence 3</b>
Customer satisfaction	Survey results	Staff interviews.	Tenant interviews
Increased Resident Involvement regarding grounds maintenance.	Minutes of grounds maintenance meetings.	Staff Interviews	Records of visits made by portfolio holders.
Open lines of communication between Soha and its contractors.	Staff Interviews	Minutes of meetings.	Desktop review

**Weaknesses:**

<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>Evidence 1</b>	<b>Evidence 2</b>	<b>Evidence 3</b>
Delivering equal service standards for all homes.	Visits.	Staff interviews	Tenant calls.
Recording of informal complaints.	Staff interviews	Desktop review	No records were produced showing informal complaints were documented.
Awareness of standards.	Lack of information on display boards.	Lack of feedback from contractors to Estates Manager	Staff interviews.



## **Recommendations:**

1. The compilation of an effective informal complaints spread sheet to be made easily available both to customer services and other relevant members of staff, which cannot be signed off until the complainant is satisfied. Lines of communication to be kept open throughout the process. Any informal complaints should be notified on the communal notice boards where appropriate. This is now being implemented.
2. If an informal complaint is not satisfied within mutually agreeable time, it must be escalated to a formal complaint.
3. To standardise, specification, surveys and estate inspections so that they have a common language and all Officers would then know the standards they are required to uphold. The estate inspection forms need to be amended immediately to include the missing standards.
4. To review the questions posed in the present "Survey Monkey" to make them more relevant to the conduct of the grounds maintenance contractors and separate them from other estate management operations. Tenants should be involved in this, perhaps by means of a focus group.
5. In all future contracts there should be penalty clauses that are enforceable from commencement.

**"The Tenant Inspectors have worked side by side with Soha staff in the struggle to achieve the standards with the new contractors. We look forward to 2013 to see whether there has been a significant improvement in maintenance when all the hard work of Soha officers with contactors will come to fruition.**

**The Tenant Inspectors would like to thank all the staff involved in the production of this report and congratulate them on their efforts and co-operation in respect of this area of inspection."**

## **Analysis of Portfolio Holder's Observations of 22 Sheltered Scheme sites 3rd and 4th September 2012**

The opinion was that there was 'extreme dissatisfaction on the standards of workmanship and lack of supervision from Soha.

The Portfolio Holders have asked for Scheme Managers report sheets to be provided at their quarterly meetings.

Of the 22 Sites only one had grass too long. This means that in 20 sites the standard was being upheld on 3rd and 4th September 2012.

The Portfolio Holders noted that 15 sites had weedy mossy lawns. Much as Inspectors might want to comment that 15 were weedy and mossy this is not a standard and the even the specification and schedule of works only says 'Keep the ward substantially free of broad leafed weeds by applying a suitable selective herbicide' it does not mention moss control.

The Portfolio Holders noted that 16 sites had poorly maintained borders, over grown hedges and poorly pruned shrubs. Unfortunately the standard says 'Tidy hedges and shrubs' which does not cover a 'tidy' hedge getting higher and higher or a shrub being poorly pruned. However it is clear that Soha supervision and contractors poor work is not meeting the 'right' standard. The fact that these criticisms were made in 16 out of 22 sites is indicative of the size of the problem.

Unfortunately the Portfolio Holders were reporting with a view to what gardening Improvements (planned maintenance) was required. The standards were not checked and the Schedule of Works was not referred to. Never the less the results from these surveys were very helpful to the Inspectors and we are grateful to the Portfolio Holders for such a detailed study.

## **Meeting with the Director of Customer Services 8<sup>th</sup> October 2012**

### **Are the contractors working to specification?**

There have been more than just initial problems with a new contract. The Customer Services Director has been involved in meetings to maintain standards. All teams are involved in the monthly neighbourhood surveys and the Chief Executive is keen that staff get out to survey. The Assistant Director of Customer Services has also been involved in training those who carry out surveys to ensure that they have the expertise to carry out the monthly inspection report.

### **What records does the Customer Service Centre keep of calls about Grounds Maintenance?**

Records are not kept at this level. Enquiries and calls are passed to the Estates and Neighbourhood Manager or in her absence the Technical Administrator.

### **How are Informal Complaints Registered?**

The Customer Services Director was able to access the complaints and said that in this year so far there had been 26 complaints about SCS and 81 about ISS.

### **Do you check the validity of the Grounds Maintenance Survey? (Estates Survey)**

The Customer Services Director is personally involved in this method of survey. The Chief Executive is keen that all staff get out and door knock. However because the results are added to the survey as they are done each month this can cause results that do not reflect the whole picture. Also the Customer Services Director acknowledges that as all the surveys are done during office hours they are not a sample representative of all tenants.

### **Has customer satisfaction increased or decreased since the change of contracts?**

There has been a high level of activity this year in maintaining the contracts. The Customer Services Director has been involved in discussions with the contractors. It can be accepted that Soha are dissatisfied with performance at a high level and are taking necessary steps to ensure increased satisfaction and there has been a meeting with the Tenant Portfolio Holder.

The standards for grounds maintenance do not give the tenants a standard in line with the specification and schedule. The only two standards are of consultation and timing.

### **Are there any plans to change these standards to include one about quality of grounds maintenance?**

The Customer Services Director pointed out that the two standards in the communal areas leaflet dated 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009 only provided an expectation and that the

standards were on the website. I showed the Customer Services Director a sheet entitled Neighbourhood and Community Standard and this was not the standards either. We would have to postpone this question until Tenant Inspectors had examined the standards.

### **How are informal complaints registered?**

They are held by the Estates and Neighbourhood Manager/ assistant Directors office there is no record elsewhere.

The Customer Services Director discussed various ways in which Soha could be satisfied that complaints had been dealt with as there was no clear method.

The Customer Services Director also suggested that a way of measuring satisfaction would be to add questions to the routine calls made to see if tenants were satisfied with repairs.

### **Has the Safer Cleaner Greener assessments detracted from the monitoring of Communal Standards in general and Grounds Maintenance specifically?**

The Customer Services Director did not think that this was the case.

Recommendations from the interview with the Customer Services Director:

1. Improve communication between involved tenants. (if Tenant Inspectors have a meeting with the Tenant Portfolio Holder before commencing an inspection then valuable officer time might be saved)
2. Faster escalation to be imposed when new contracts are started so saving Officers time in prolonged action.
3. Standardise expectations, standards, specification, surveys and inspections so they have a common language and all Officers would then be accustomed to the standards they are called to uphold.
4. Example Standard of 26/10/10... Green... confirm when work has been carried out. This is not checked on the Estate Inspection report and this does not appear on the survey.
5. Establish follow up to complaints to ensure contractor has responded to the complaint or if the complaint needs to move on to an official complaint.
6. As recommended by the Customer Services Director, add survey questions to follow up calls used to check on repairs satisfaction.
7. Consider a method of checking that any communal request has been satisfied.

The writer was extremely grateful for the time and patience of the Director during this interview.

## **Report of meeting with the Estates and Neighbourhood Manager 31<sup>st</sup> August 2012**

The meeting was specifically to discuss the working of grounds maintenance the subject of the Inspection. The Inspectors were not able to obtain a copy of Soha's standards for grounds maintenance. However they were provided with evidence which demonstrated the systems by which the whole of estates were checked and managed.

There are three organisations involved in grounds maintenance, the systems of checks is the same. The works are not checked against the standards or the specification but against a monthly sheltered/estate inspection sheets (a copy has been provided). These sheets are then collated to give an overall measure of contractors' compliance and standards between 3 and 4 are satisfactory to good. There is no check box on this inspection report for the posting of information for tenants. (Standard 1 under Green in standards).

The works are also surveyed on the Survey Monkey surveys once a year when tenants are surveyed on a door knock. A copy of this survey was provided as well as results to date for this year which showed that 75% of tenants surveyed were either very or fairly satisfied. There is not a question on this survey about the standard of posting up information or questions that would indicate that the standard of tidy hedges ..etc, grass cut every two weeks or whether tenants would like community gardens. The survey monkey also shows that to date 75% of tenants regard grounds maintenance as good value for money though a couple of the comments indicate that tenants are not able to assess this. 'Don't know how much you pay' and 'don't know what they are supposed to do'.

The Estates and Neighbourhood Manager also showed the inspectors how; when an unofficial complaint is made, an email is raised to the contractor. It was clear from the volume of emails that even the current year (year 2 of the new contract) had given rise to an unacceptable volume of work for the Estates and Neighbourhood Management department.

The information on official complaints did not agree with those provided by the Chief Executives PA and only showed one Official complaint for 2011 (joint complaint with Communal cleaning) The Manager was not able to give the tenants the number of unofficial complaints but demonstrated that these were forwarded to the contractors.

A closer look at the survey monkey yearly survey showed that of the 425 respondents there were 54 comments about grounds maintenance replying to Question 10 "Do you think the grounds maintenance service gives good value for money?" It would require a lot of analysis to ensure that all these comments came from tenants who receive grounds maintenance or if they were definitely commenting on Soha areas of land but never the less 33 comments were complaints two said they were not sure what should be done, 2 said they could not measure Vfm and 3 comments were positive. The largest number of complaints were not about grass cutting but about borders, pruning and cutting hedges.

The monitoring methods were time consuming and the results not easy to analyse.

If the contractors are not getting it right and this would appear to be the case with the new contracts, the Estates and Neighbourhood management are faced with an unacceptable work load using a monitoring system which is lengthy, detailed and difficult to analyse.

The tenants were very grateful for the time given by the Estates and Neighbourhood Manager and for the transparent way in which the meeting was conducted.

Recommendations from this meeting

1. Standards (those on the tin) should be known by all staff
2. Monthly Inspections should be more closely related to standards
3. Tenants need the information on the survey to be able to judge/assess Vfm
4. The yearly survey should also reflect the standards so that tenants can respond against those standards. That is 'Are Soha doing what they said they will'



Fleet Meadow , Didcot.

## **Visit to Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust (VAHT) 20th November 2012**

I visited the VAHT offices and met with their Estate Services Manager Cameron Finnie. He was most welcoming and very enthusiastic regarding the nature of our investigation, he was also most forthcoming on all the points that I raised.

The copy of the questions that I asked him is attached and he was very informative as to how VAHT deal with grounds maintenance on their patch. The Trust has some 7,500 homes in all, and this includes 14 sheltered schemes. The remainder is split between general needs (75% and supported (25%).

The makeup of their area is, like ours, mainly rural, although in Aylesbury and Milton Keynes they do have some four storey blocks of flats for general use.

They only employ one contractor who is responsible for all their grounds maintenance needs. The company that they use is "The Landscape Group" who have been in place now for the last twelve months. The contract has a five year term with the possibility of extending it for a further two years. At present, they are extremely pleased with the way the contractor is performing, they have already suggested, and implemented a number of procedures that have enhanced their performance and have resulted in an improvement in the rates of satisfaction of the residents.

They have been proactive in consulting with the residents and have even set up training for procurement for interested tenants. They also have an excellent software package which enables tenants to access details of their particular property to discover when next the contractor will be visiting their area either to cut the grass or to visit a Supported Scheme or when the next general gardening session will be taking place.

They employ six handymen who each have their own patch to deal with the problems that may arise with older or vulnerable tenants. They also have a new scheme that they are testing which will be available to all residents. They have decided to make a charge for this service which will be £6.13 for general needs residents, reduced to £4.95 for the elderly and /or disabled. This service will be a visit every 3 to 4 weeks during the growing season (April to October) and three gardeners will spend approximately 20 minutes at each visit and they will do any basic gardening that the tenant needs. The cost of this service will be added to their rent account on a weekly basis. This service is still to be implemented and VAHT are waiting to see what the take up will be like. The Landscape Group, will be undertaking all the work on behalf of VAHT

They have conducted a number of surveys to measure customer satisfaction. This has mainly been done by an external group, "Voluntas" who survey an area on a monthly basis. Every property has been furnished with an "Estates Pictorial Guide" which clearly states the levels of management which the Trust expect their contractor to adhere to. Approximately 20 samples are obtained from each area on a monthly basis, which enables any failings to be speedily resolved.

**Conclusions:**

From this visit, it is clear to see that although Soha are performing adequately, there is room for improvement and fine tuning. It would be interesting to pursue this matter further and to investigate what extra services could be provided, and at what cost.

Finnie was most interested to hear of our Tenant Inspectors role. They are at a very early stage in coming to terms with in depth Tenant Involvement. I agreed to pass on the thanks of all of us at Soha for the visit and left it that he would like to discuss the visit with his group. I made it clear to him that we would be only too happy to be of any assistance should he wish it. I think that we will soon be hearing from him.



## Appendices