

Croydon Resident Inspectors Team

‘Spotlight on Services’

**Report on the Inspection of
Grounds maintenance contract
October 2010**

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1. Introduction

This report details the findings of an inspection of the London borough of Croydon grounds maintenance contract by the newly formed resident inspection team - "Croydon Resident Inspectors Team" (C.R.I.T), during September and October 2010.

The involvement of residents in scrutinising and monitoring the services that they receive is becoming increasingly accepted as both best practice and good business sense for landlords and other organisations. It is now a requirement of the Tenant Services Authority's regulatory framework.

Resident inspections can provide valuable management information for landlords, identifying where services are being delivered well or where issues exist, and can identify solutions to service failures. In addition, involvement of residents in inspection activity can increase their skills and knowledge, for example through working as a team, interviewing, note taking and observation exercises. Increasingly the extent to which residents are involved in these types of roles is playing a part in assessments of the strength of resident involvement within the organisations of which they are tenants, leaseholders and freeholders.

In response to these considerations and a desire to further strengthen the resident involvement arrangements already in place in Croydon, we sought to recruit both new and existing resident representatives to undertake a programme of training and support over the past 10 months, aimed at giving them the skills and confidence to act as resident inspectors.

The inspection team are 9 residents who have agreed to help Croydon council by acting as resident inspectors of their services. This involves inspecting services using a series of proven techniques and identifying strengths and weaknesses in existing service provision. The inspectors were from different geographical areas within the borough and all inspected only outside the area in which they live.

All the inspectors have been through a TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service) training and development programme for resident inspectors, which was facilitated by Croydon's resident participation team. This programme has equipped participants with the skills and knowledge to undertake resident inspection activity to a high standard.

During the 2 day training course the inspectors took part in various group exercises which included interviewing and observation skills (including role play), inspection techniques, working as a team and self assessment around the skills they already have and how to build on these. The course was very successful, with a 100% satisfaction from the participants via the evaluation forms.

Following the training course all the inspectors then took an active role in the working group which agreed the role description, code of conduct, service to be inspected and a name for the inspection team.

The C.R.I.T members who took part in this inspection are:
Syed Ahmad, Guy Pile-Gray, Daron Senior, Kim Wakely, Sandie Sullivan, Eric Webb, Marilyn Smithies, Eric Tshibamba & David Palmer.

2. Scope & Methodology

A decision was taken by CRIT to inspect the grounds maintenance service to council housing estates. This service area was chosen because it was a service area they felt strongly about and would benefit from the inspection process.

This service is managed by the Neighbourhood Services teams in each of the three district housing management offices. The contract is delivered by Continental Landscapes as part of their larger grounds maintenance contract with the Council. Their work is monitored by the Community Services department.

This inspection took place between 6th September and 8th October 2010 and used a variety of inspection techniques to assess the performance and monitoring of the grounds maintenance contract currently in place with Continental Landscapes.

The inspection took place on housing sites only. The types of work included under the contract are grass cutting, maintenance of trees, hedge trimming, maintaining and weeding shrub/ flower beds, However, it was decided early on that the inspection would focus mainly on grass cutting, although the inspectors did look at other work to a degree.

The inspection techniques used to test compliance with service standards were:

- A desk top review
- Focus group of contractor staff
- Interviews with key staff from both the council and contractor sides
- Telephone satisfaction surveys with residents
- Site visits and work shadowing with key staff

These techniques were used to gain a fuller picture of how the contract is being applied across the borough.

Wherever possible more than one technique was used to test each service standard to ensure as full a picture as possible was gained from the inspection. By using different inspection techniques, greater insight is gained into how the service is being provided. This “triangulation” using different techniques reflects the approach of Audit Commission and other inspectorates.

Results are not intended to be quantitative but rather a qualitative snap-shot of how service standards are being delivered or perceived as being delivered within a given service area.

3. The Process

An evaluation session took place with the inspectors on Monday 15th November 2010, at which the group reflected on the inspection process and agreed on the key findings and recommendations to be presented from the Inspection (see Chapters 5 & 6).

The inspectors have all given a strong indication that they wish to continue as resident inspectors during future inspections. This in itself should be considered a success as there has been a steep learning curve for all of them over the past 10 months, with a lot of voluntary input and effort on their part.

What went well?

- The inspectors felt fully involved because they had input in the process from start to finish
- The mutual support and team work among all inspectors worked well, and inspectors found working in pairs helpful
- It was fun – though a serious process, it was at the same time enjoyable
- This is a new process for staff and residents and as such people were nervous. Although there were misgivings initially from some service managers, staff were supportive, co-operative and interested in the process
- Using different techniques helped to confirm the findings, which helped build confidence in those findings
- Inspectors felt confident enough to adapt the TPAS materials to suit the individual situation. In particular they adapted some existing questionnaires to ensure they were more valid.
- The staff interviews were felt to have worked particularly well with different inspectors taking on different roles within the groups such as note taking and asking questions.

Learning Points

- In future a pool of reserve inspectors would be ideal as sickness amongst the inspectors did hinder the process on this occasion

- Although the inspectors tried out different techniques during the inspection there is a need to widen experience in future. This could be achieved by pairing experienced people with new and those with less experience.

- Further training is required in the following areas:
 - Note taking
 - telephone interview skills

From a TPAS perspective the process has gone well and the progress that each inspector has made has been excellent. They are confident that C.R.I.T will develop into a very effective inspection team working closely with LBC.

4. Summary

Overall the inspection found the grounds maintenance contract to be working effectively across the borough.

The inspectors found evidence of lots of good practice, particularly in the monitoring of the service which has the potential to be built on.

Existing staff also have lots of experience. Two of the three green spaces inspectors have worked as grounds maintenance operatives and bring a wealth of knowledge to the role. The operatives interviewed are also very experienced, take a pride in the job they do and want to carry out their role to the highest standard possible.

However the inspection has brought to light a number of areas where things could be improved. These improvements and changes could not only make things better for residents, but for both council and contractor staff and managers also.

The resident inspectors have therefore come up with a series recommendations intended to either clarify any service “shortfalls” or to overcome any perceived weaknesses in the service. These are detailed in section 6

5. Findings

Findings from the key service areas tested by the inspectors are listed below. The techniques used to inspect the service are also detailed.

The findings are coded as **green** (pass), **amber** (partial) and **red** (fail).

Additional comments and suggestions from the inspectors are included against each service standard where applicable (in *italics*).

1. Grassed areas are pleasing to look at, are safe for people to enjoy and are maintained in a way that will ensure that their quality is preserved from year to year

(work shadowing, site visits, contractor focus group, resident interviews)

Following the site visits & work shadowing the inspectors felt that this standard was generally complied with.

Staff knowledge was good in this area and the inspectors learned from this exercise that it is not simply a matter of 'cutting the grass'. The weather, terrain and soil types can, amongst other things, affect the grass quality and grass cutting in different areas of the borough.

For the reasons above the service did appear to vary across the 3 housing management areas, which are split in to North, South/Central and East. There are systems in place for replacing damaged grass/areas and both council & contractor staff are aware of this.

64% of residents who were interviewed said that the overall quality of the grass cutting in their area was very good or good. A further 18% said they thought it was a fair standard, and 18% poor.

The inspectors suggest that LBC provide information to residents regarding grounds maintenance and the standards set out in the contract in order to make them more aware (see recommendations)

2. Areas shall be cut on the same day of the week, for example every other Monday or Tuesday for amenity cutting, to provide certainty for residents.

(staff interviews, contractor interview, contractor focus group)

Each contractor team has a 'route and round' which they complete every 4 week period. Although in theory the above system should work, operatives can and do face a number of problems which can mean their system/route is interrupted, for example being unable to gain access to some housing sites (see recommendations)

3. All works are expected to be of the highest professional standards across the whole variety of grass cutting regimes, and be capable of being used for the purpose intended

(staff interviews, contractor interview, contractor focus group, site visits)

It was felt by the inspectors that this standard was not fully met for a number of reasons.

Although the contractor operatives want to do their best in terms of the standard of work they achieve, due to problems faced in trying to carry out their jobs, this was difficult at times. For example, the effectiveness of joint working with Streetscene affects residents overall perceptions of the service and this could be better coordinated. (see recommendations)

4. Areas to be cut in line with the frequency as set out in the specification (core 13 cuts per annum for housing areas)

(desktop review)

Following the change in the contract from frequency to performance based the grass cutting season has been extended and can now occur between March and as late as November.

This standard was found to be complied with overall.

5. All areas shall be cut in order to produce a pleasing appearance with an even finish and height, with no areas being left uncut

(staff interviews, contractor focus group, staff interviews, site visits)

The service complied partly with this standard.

For a number of reasons it is not always possible for operatives to cut all areas. These include fly tipping, excessive dog fouling and vehicles parked on grass verges/ grass areas (see recommendations)

6. Prior to all grass being cut it shall be cleared of all litter and other debris.

(contractor focus group, staff interviews, contractor interview, resident surveys)

The specification does not state how much litter the operatives are expected to clear. Staff discretion is therefore used with regard to the point at which Streetscene are called in to do this.

Of the residents who were interviewed 22% said the litter was cleared prior to the last cut, 30% said it was not. However 48% said they did not know.

The inspectors felt that there was a lack of communication between Streetscene and the contractors, and that the litter clearing and grass cutting routes could be

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Sylvie Saunders, Senior survey officer, October 2010

better co-ordinated. The specification should also clarify the amount and type of litter the contractor is expected to clear before Streetscene are expected to do it (see recommendations).

7. Where rotary mowers are employed any grass thrown from the machinery should be directed away from adjoining areas, and on to areas specified to be mown.

All arisings and mud will be removed from paths, roads, gutters and surrounds associated with grass areas after mowing and before leaving site.

(contractor focus group, contractor interview, staff interviews, site visits, work shadowing)

The operatives and contract manager are aware of this service standard however it was not being consistently applied. There are issues with cuttings and other debris being left on paths, roads etc, which is being walked in to blocks of flats, making unnecessary work for caretakers.

55% of residents confirmed that when the grass was last cut the paths and roads were cleared, 27% said they were not and the remaining 13% did not know.

Blowers to be used in all instances where cuttings are thrown on to pathways, and all other debris removed from paths and roadways

8. Grass to be a specific height over the specified area. There shall be no tufts or bents (flower stalks) left standing above or protruding from the side of the general sward

(staff interviews, contractor interviews, work shadowing, site visits)

When the site visits took place the standard was generally felt by the inspectors to be quite good. Where it appeared to be below a reasonable standard the contractors were able to explain why this may be the case (for example uneven ground)

Contractor staff are aware of the standards expected and do the best they can to achieve these.

9. The Supervising officer may instruct the contractor to cease the cutting of grass areas on any site or in total should weather conditions result in cessation of growth. In such an event no payment shall be made to the contractor for work from the time of notification.

When ground conditions are such that grass cutting may cause damage, the contractor shall cease cutting, notifying the Supervising officer immediately

The Supervising officer may accept a limited amount of skidding and surface damage subject to approval to avoid future problems relating to grass height if weather and ground conditions are consistently poor

Subject to written authority being given the contractor may make additional cuts following periods of wet conditions in order to restore areas to the agreed standard. Payment shall be in accordance with the schedule of rates contained within the bill of quantities

(staff interviews, contractor interview, contractor focus group, site visits, work shadowing)

There are measures in place to deal with circumstances set out above, which all parties are aware of. However, in real terms the measures relating to work stopping due to wet weather rarely come in to play.

The consensus was that because wet weather is inevitable, and a limited amount of damage is allowed within the terms of the contract, rain does not tend to result in work ceasing. If it does the operatives will do other work such as hedge, shrub bed and tree work.

Snow can interfere with the schedule, in which case the above conditions apply.

10. Remove all moveable obstructions to facilitate cutting, and replace them before leaving site.

(staff and contractor interviews, contractor focus group)

There was no evidence of this during the site visits because there were no moveable objects on the sites visited. Moveable objects would include benches and flower//plant pots.

Staff were aware of this condition and confirmed that it was adhered to as necessary.

11. The contractor will be mindful of the need of suitable behaviour and protocol when mowing or undertaking any other activities in the areas

(Contractor focus group, contractor interview)

The contractor staff are aware of the attitudes and behaviours expected of them when they are on site. However they were not aware of a code of conduct.

The contract manager confirmed that there is a code of conduct.

Contractor to provide a code of conduct for staff, and to remind staff of its contents on a regular basis (see recommendations).

12. Appropriate uniforms shall be worn to identify staff at all times when operating in all areas.

(staff interviews, contractor interview, contractor focus group, resident interviews)

The contractor staff and contract manager are aware of the dress/uniform code.

The operatives confirmed that they do have sufficient uniform supplied to them, and that they wear this when on site.

Contractor staff also have identification badges. However they do not wear these because they can get caught up in the machinery they use when carrying out their work. They keep them in the company vehicle so they can provide them if necessary.

Most of the residents interviewed could not confirm if the operatives were wearing a uniform or I.D or not when the grass was last cut.

Contractor to ensure I.D can be worn safely by staff (see recommendations)

13. Every 3 months (or at such frequency as may be agreed) the Supervising officer and the contractor will meet to review the overall performance and future direction of the contract. These meetings will be convened by the council and will be attended by the contractors together with relevant personnel from each area. The purpose of these meetings will be to:

- **Review local performance in all key areas, including feedback from local community and customer representatives**
- **Identify any areas of under achievement and/or specific problems and agree actions to address them**
- **Consider ideas for changes/developments to the service and where agreed, identify actions to progress them**
- **Any other relevant issues**

(contractor interview, staff interviews, desk top review)

This standard is generally being met which is evidenced by the provision of minutes from meetings held. However there does not appear to be a clear action plans coming out of these meetings (see recommendations).

Provide action plans as a result of these meetings taking place (see recommendations).

14. In addition to the monthly progress meetings it is expected that there will be regular (probably weekly) meetings between the parties to address day to day operational issues and performance
(contractor interview, staff interviews)

The supervising officer and contractor manager talk on a daily basis. Each of the three green spaces inspectors also liaise with the contractor at least twice a week.

It is felt by all parties that this regular contact, which can be face to face, by email or over the telephone, is the most productive way of dealing with day to day issues.

Joint monitoring also takes place between the green spaces inspectors and housing management services. This seems to work well and results in a better understanding of one another's roles and responsibilities. However it is inconsistent across the 3 areas and does not involve tenancy officers.

Make monitoring consistent across the borough in order to further highlight best practice and efficiencies as well as showing service shortfalls. Involve Tenancy officers in this process (see recommendations).

6. Recommendations for improvement

Recommendation	Response from service manager	Officer(s) responsible	Completion date
<p>1. Provide information to residents about the grounds maintenance contract and how it works. Produce an article (with accompanying photographs) for the Open House newsletter, which is produced 3 times a year for tenants and leaseholders.</p>	<p>An information article to go in to Open House during the 2011/12 financial year.</p>	<p>Supervising officer Alan Brett/Contract manager Niko Mardushaj</p>	
<p>2. Put in place a process by which green spaces and the contractor can promptly obtain keys/fobs in order to gain access to housing sites where security enhancements or environmental improvements have taken place</p>	<p>Process now in place within all 3 housing districts. Ongoing monitoring & supervision being undertaken by NSM Paul Hayward on a bi-monthly basis</p>	<p>Director of housing management services/delegated officer</p>	<p>December 2010 with ongoing monitoring</p>
<p>3. Co-ordinate the work of the contractor operatives teams and Streetscene in order for them to work more cohesively</p>	<p>Supervising officer (Alan Brett), to arrange an initial meeting with Streetscene managers to discuss improving coordination of the two teams.</p>	<p>Supervising officer/Contractor manager/Streetscene manager</p>	

<p>5. Deal effectively with residents who allow their dogs to foul on grassed areas by following the dog fouling procedures outlined by Streetscene and raising awareness with residents of their responsibilities</p>	<p>New dog control orders came in to force in Croydon on 17 January 2011. On housing land signs will be placed warning people to keep dogs on leads, and to clear up the mess. Play areas on housing land will be dog exclusion areas. Mark Pinnock, Streetscene manager, is the lead officer.</p> <p>Once the signs are erected, a fixed penalty notice (FPN) can be issued for offenders. At present the Neighbourhood enforcement officers will issue the FPN, however, this may change as the street based services review is finalised later this year, with the possibility of Neighbourhood wardens taking an active role.</p>	<p>Director of housing management services/delegated officer</p> <p>Streetscene manager</p>	<p>January 2011 with ongoing monitoring</p>
<p>5.1 Deal effectively with residents who park their vehicles on grass areas/verges.</p>	<p>Contractor operatives will pass car registration details to specified council officers in these circumstances (green spaces inspectors).</p>	<p>Director of housing management services/delegated officer</p>	<p>January 2011</p>

	Tenancy teams will then deal as parking on grass verges/areas is a breach of tenancy conditions (clause 34)		
6. Clarify within the specification the amount and type of litter the contractor is responsible for clearing	As for recommendation 3 - Supervising officer (Alan Brett), to arrange an initial meeting with Streetscene managers to discuss improving coordination of the two teams.	Supervising officer/Streetscene manager	
6.1 Ensure other contractors (e.g utilities/building) clear housing sites fully when works have taken place through closer monitoring of the process.	Head of Responsive repairs (Lorraine Smout) & Head of Programmed works (Bob Richardson), to lead on monitoring to ensure all sites fully cleared in future.	Director of housing management services/delegated officer	December 2010 with ongoing monitoring
6.2 Check grass cutting methods with contractor before inserting wooden/concrete bollards around grassed areas	This was raised as an issue in relation to environmental improvements. This type of E.I are not being undertaken during 2011/12 and is therefore not relevant. However where this type of improvement occurs via housing management estate inspections tenancy teams	Director of housing management services/delegated officer	January 2011

	and green spaces inspectors work together to resolve issues.		
7. Ensure that cuttings and debris are always removed from paths and roads following works through clearer monitoring processes	Contractor to ensure all staff are reminded of the contract specification by sending a memorandum and giving reminders at future meetings	Contract manager/supervising officer	From November 2010
11. Ensure all contractor staff are aware of the Code of Conduct and its contents. Remind staff of this on a regular basis	Contract manager to issue regular reminders, both written and verbal, regarding the Code of Conduct.	Contract manager	From November 2010
12. Provide I.D which can be worn safely by operatives whilst they are on site	Contractor operatives have been provided with jackets that have plastic see-through pockets specifically for staff ID's. Situation to be reviewed again prior to the summer period.	Contract manager	December 2010
13. Produce an action plan from all monthly & 3 monthly joint meetings	Action plans are rolling and ongoing, consisting of works required to bring works up to date or in line with specification	Supervising officer/Contract manager	December 2010 and ongoing
14. Enhance the current joint monitoring procedure to include tenancy officers and	It is felt that for tenancy officers to be involved in this process at present	Supervising officer/delegated staff/Neighbourhood	

other key staff as necessary, and make this consistent across all 3 housing management/green spaces areas	would jeopardise their capacity to deliver essential elements of the service that have already been prioritised and costed for their necessary time commitment as part of the Tenancy Services Review.	services managers/delegated staff	
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General recommendations

15. Produce a written procedure enabling contractor staff to be able to formally report incidents of verbal and physical abuse	Completed by Niko Mardushaj Contract Manager, Continental Landscapes. All incidents of verbal and physical abuse now formally recorded.	Contractor manager/ Supervising officer	From December 2010
16. Key staff to attend local resident meetings (including attendance at 'surgeries' beforehand) as a way of engaging with those residents and improving customer service	Green spaces officers to attend meetings if requested by resident panel, with immediate effect.	Supervising officer/Contract manager/Green spaces inspectors	From January 2011
17. Carry out regular customer satisfaction surveys with residents on housing sites as a way of involving them in the processes whilst improving the grounds maintenance service and monitoring thereof	Questions relating specifically to satisfaction with grounds maintenance to be included in the annual neighbourhood services survey from 2011.	Neighbourhood services managers/Sylvie Saunders, Senior survey officer	January 2011

