

# **Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel**

**Date of meeting: 22 January 2014**

**Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D. Stallan**

**Subject: Review of the Garden Maintenance Scheme for Older and Disabled Tenants**

**Officer contact for further information:  
Roger Wilson extension 4419**

**Committee Secretary:  
Mark Jenkins extension 4607**



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## **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- 1. That the Housing Scrutiny Panel reviews the progress made by Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) with the Gardening Scheme for older and vulnerable tenants, and incorporates a recommendation into its report to the Cabinet (on the use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancement Fund) that Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding of £20,000 per annum continues to be utilised to fund the VAEF gardening scheme for older and disabled Council tenants for a further two years from 2014/2015; and**
- 2. In order to continue to provide the service to an increased number of tenants, the Housing Scrutiny Panel incorporates a further recommendation into its report to the Cabinet on the use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancement Fund (reported separately on the Agenda), that additional HRA funding of £20,000 per annum for two years from 2014/2015, (making a total of £40,000 per annum in each of these years), be provided to VAEF's Gardening Scheme for Older and Disabled Council Tenants.**

## **Report:**

- 1. The Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) Gardening Scheme for older and vulnerable tenants has been in operation since 2003. During 2012/2013 and 2013/2014, £20,000 per annum, funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), has been utilised to fund VAEF's part-time Garden Maintenance Co-ordinator Post, the purchase of some necessary equipment, and the general administration of the scheme. The same level of funding was granted in the two previous financial years. VAEF oversee voluntary garden maintenance work to older and disabled Council tenants' properties and undertakes some work for private sector residents, which is funded separately.**
- 2. Tenants are only included on the scheme if there is no one physically able to carry out the work under the age of 70 years living at the property, with the service being provided regardless of whether they have younger relatives living in the District. Tenants in arrears of rent are ineligible to receive the service. Disabled tenants (regardless of their age) are included on the scheme, provided they meet the agreed criteria. No reference is made to housing benefit in terms of eligibility. All those applying are assessed by VAEF and are only included on the scheme if they genuinely cannot cope with their gardens and have no other means of maintaining them.**

3. The service includes clearing and maintaining overgrown gardens, including lighter tasks such as lawn cutting, hedge trimming and light weeding, with priority being given to dealing with gardens that are unsafe and/or unusable and therefore hinder the tenant to enjoy the facility.

**Expansion of the VAEF Gardening Scheme for Older and Vulnerable Tenants**

4. At its meeting on 23 April 2012 (Minute 158 refers), the Cabinet agreed a range of Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements funded from resources made available as a result of Housing Revenue Account (HRA) self-financing. It was agreed that funding for the VAEF Garden Maintenance Scheme for older and vulnerable tenants be increased by £20,000 per annum for two years from 2012/2013 in order to increase the number of vulnerable tenants benefitting from the service.

5. As the additional funding was received by VAEF in around June 2012, it was not possible for them to recruit sufficient volunteers and additional administrative support in order to increase substantially the number of tenants benefitting from the service during that year. It was understandable that the additional funding would not have an impact until the following financial year.

**Review of the Scheme 2012/2013 & 2013/2014**

6. VAEF has provided a report on its activity for the period April to September 2013. In order to assess the improvement in the service due to the increased funding provided, the following table shows the work undertaken during this 6 month period compared to the corresponding period in the previous year:

<b>Activity</b>	<b>April to September 2012</b>	<b>April to September 2013 % increase in brackets</b>
Number of tenants' gardens maintained	79	138 (74%)
Total number of garden maintenance visits	168	296 (76%)
Average number of garden maintenance visits per tenant	2.13	2.15
Average cost of each garden maintenance visit	£69.45	£67.34
Hours worked by Project Gardeners	871	1326 (53%)
Hours worked by Project Administrator	338	494 (46%)
Number of tenants on the waiting list	0	0

7. As can be seen, the amount of work undertaken has substantially increased as a result of the additional funding provided.

8. VAEF undertook a survey of all tenants receiving the service in 2012/2013. The responses to questions asked are set out as an appendix to the report.

9. The additional funding has also enabled VAEF to better maintain their vehicles and equipment and purchase a second van. Both of their vans have been sign-written with the scheme's logo.

10. Furthermore, VAEF are planning a number of "Make a Difference Days" to promote the scheme in partnership with the Choices Learning Disabilities Project, and will be having promotional events to seek out more volunteers.

11. VAEF has confirmed that they can continue with the scheme for a further two years. A representative from VAEF will be in attendance at the meeting to answer any questions on the detail of the Scheme. The Housing Scrutiny Panel is asked to review the progress made by Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) with the Gardening Scheme for older and vulnerable tenants and incorporate a recommendation into its report to the Cabinet (on the use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancement Fund) that Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding of £20,000 per annum continues to be utilised to fund the VAEF gardening scheme for older and disabled Council tenants for a further two years from 2014/2015.

12. Furthermore, the Housing Scrutiny Panel are asked to consider that, as part of its report to the Cabinet on the use of the Housing Improvements and Service Enhancement Fund (reported separately on the Agenda), the Panel makes a further recommendation that in order to continue to provide the service to an increased number of tenants, additional HRA funding of £20,000 per annum for two years from 2014/2015, (making a total of £40,000 per annum in each of these years), be provided to VAEF's Gardening Scheme for Older and Disabled Council Tenants.

**Reason for decision:**

The Gardening Scheme provided by Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) has delivered an important service to older and disabled Council tenants over the last 10 years and is reviewed every two years. When bearing in mind the work can be undertaken by more than one volunteer, takes around 5 hours to complete and is well received by tenants, it clearly represents good value for money. It is therefore considered that the scheme should be continued for a further two years and additional HRA funding should be provided in order for the service to continue to be expanded.

**Options considered and rejected:**

1. Not to continue to fund the VAEF Gardening Scheme for older and disabled tenants.
2. To agree a different level of funding for the VAEF Gardening Scheme.

**Consultation undertaken:**

Set out as an Appendix to the report.

**Resource implications:**

Budget provision: Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding of £40,000 per annum from 2014/2015 for two years.

Personnel: None

Land: N/A

Community Plan/BVPP reference: N/A

Relevant statutory powers: Housing Act 1985

Background papers: Service Level Agreement

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: Improved appearance of housing estates with fewer poorly maintained gardens.

Key Decision reference: (if required) N/A

## APPENDIX

### VAEF Gardening Scheme Consultation Feedback 2012/2013

Question	Yes (%)	No (%)
Do you have a disability?	84.42	15.58
Are you less likely to have an accident such as a fall now your garden is maintained?	83.9	12.5
Do you feel safer and less vulnerable in your home now that your garden is maintained?	94.6	1.78
Will this service enable you to stay in your home longer?	94.6	1.78

Question	Under 65	65-74	75-84	85-94	94 +
What age are you?	3.7	40.7	38.27	13.58	3.7

Question	Excellent	Good	OK
How would you rate the professionalism of the gardeners?	82	12.5	1.78
How would you rate the quality of the work carried out?	75	21.4	1.78