

## **Report to the Cabinet**

**Report reference: C/119/2007.**

**Date of meeting: 12 March 2007.**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Portfolio: Housing.**

**Subject: Review of Garden Maintenance Scheme - Older and Disabled Tenants.**

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### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**(1) That Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding of £20,000 per annum, continues to be utilised to fund the Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) Garden Maintenance Scheme for older and disabled Council tenants for a further two years from 2007/2008; and**

**(2) That a progress report on the scheme be considered by the Housing Portfolio Holder towards the end of the further two-year period.**

### **Background:**

1. At its meeting on 20 December 2004, the Cabinet agreed the continuation of the Garden Maintenance Scheme for older and disabled tenants for a further two years until the end of 2007. Under the scheme, £20,000 per annum, funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), has been utilised to fund Voluntary Action Epping Forest's (VAEF) part-time Garden Maintenance Co-ordinator Post, and the purchase of some necessary equipment. VAEF oversee voluntary garden maintenance work to older and disabled Council tenants' properties and also undertakes work for private sector residents.

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, subject to a right of appeal. Disabled tenants 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 the 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. There is currently a waiting list of 61 clients (including Council tenants and private sector residents) with priority being given to dealing with gardens that are unsafe and/or unusable and therefore hinder the tenant to enjoy the facility.

### **Review of the Scheme 2005/2007:**

4. The Cabinet agreed that it consider a further report at the end of 2006/2007 reviewing the scheme, hence the need for this report.

5. VAEF had provided a report on its activity, in which it advises that VAEF maintained 105 gardens (52 tenants) in 2005/2006 and expect to complete works to around 125 gardens (70 tenants) in 2006/2007. Therefore, over the two-year period they would have received funding of £40,000 and completed around 230 gardens at a cost of £174 per garden. Although the cost per garden appears high, prior to VAEF taking over the scheme in 2003/2004, the work was undertaken through the Council's Leisure Services at a much higher cost of £215 per garden which, when taking into account inflation, would be around £236 per garden at today's values, being 26% higher than the current cost of the VAEF scheme. The reasons for the high cost of the Leisure Services scheme were due to paid contractors undertaking the work and additional costs for specifications and other documentation.

6. Furthermore, VAEF have reported difficulties in recruiting and retaining a part-time paid gardener, which has resulted in less garden work being carried out. However, following a re-organisation, the amount of time spent on administration has been reduced, with one part-time Co-ordinator now working only 12 hours each week, VAEF has also employed two part-time paid gardeners. These changes are expected to result in a substantial increase in the numbers of gardens maintained in the future if the Cabinet agrees to extend the scheme further. The total cost of these three posts is £18,000 per annum.

7. VAEF have confirmed that they can continue with the scheme for a further two years at the same level of funding received in the last two years (representing a real-term reduction in cost), which would cover the cost of the three posts and the purchasing and servicing of equipment.

#### **Statement in Support of Recommended Action:**

8. The Garden Maintenance Scheme has delivered an important service to older and disabled Council tenants over the last two years, with 230 visits being made to undertake garden clearances. With two part-time gardeners now being employed, VAEF confirm that more garden clearances will be made in the next two years for the same level of funding.

#### **Other Options for Action:**

9. Not to continue with the VAEF garden maintenance scheme for older and disabled Council tenants.

#### **Consultation Undertaken:**

10. During November 2006, VAEF undertook a survey of 62 tenants receiving the service. Of those surveyed, 51 responded (82%) with 62% saying that the work carried out was "very good" 14% "good" and the remaining 24% felt that the work carried out was "satisfactory or poor." Around 81% felt that a tidy garden made them feel safer in their home.

#### **Resource implications:**

**Budget provision:** Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding of £20,000 per annum from 2007/2008 for two years.

**Personnel:** N/A.

**Land:** Improved appearance of housing estates with fewer poorly maintained gardens.

**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:** N/A.

**Key Decision reference (if required):** N/A.