

Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) scrutiny review - Grounds Maintenance

Introduction

The Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) began a review of the grounds maintenance service in April 2023. This area was selected because Neighbourhood Officers had been receiving a lot of queries regarding grounds maintenance and there was a significant difference in the service provided in different areas. It was also an area that is regularly highlighted in customer surveys as a source of dissatisfaction.

Review Approach

Surveys

With the help of Matthew Stratta, we developed a new Grounds Maintenance survey, based on a historic Neighbourhood Management survey that was previously carried out up until 2018. A summary of the results of the survey are given below, with customer feedback.

Interviews

As part of the review, we interviewed three members of Rooftop Staff, those being Simon Jarvis (SJ, Estates and Facilities Manager), Will Simmons (WS, Head of Property Services) and Andrew McKinley (AM, Service Charge Officer). Simon and Will were asked the same questions so we could evaluate two different viewpoints. Andrew was asked questions relating to finance and the service charges that residents pay. In all 3 cases we discussed funding, resident expectations, and the service specification.

Later in the process (December 2023) Simon attended a CSP Meeting and explained the GIS Mapping system confirming that he was still working on this as there were areas such as access footpaths that were Rooftop responsibility that needed to be added to the current contract.

We also interviewed Nicola Chamberlain (NC), Estates Manager at Platform Property Care. Nicola was asked the same basic questions as Simon Jarvis and Will Simmons.

Three Rooftop Independent Living Officers (ILOs) were approached and asked why they thought residents were so dissatisfied with the current Grounds Maintenance service that is provided.

Findings

Interview Findings

NC at PPC was very open about certain failings we had found whilst doing this review. The Team challenged Nicola regarding operative failure issues especially relating to safe handling and use of hazardous substances. Nicola stated that all operatives carry out E-Learning and hold PP1 and PP6 certificates. Concerns were also raised around poor standards of workmanship within the HOP schemes including St. Oswald's as well as schemes in Broadway, Pershore and Evesham. Nicola clearly stated that she was more than happy to receive photos of operator failure at the time of incidents. Platform operatives have 12 tasks to carry out at each site. It was accepted that standards do fall and also that mowing does need to be done in wet weather conditions which can leave sites looking very messy.

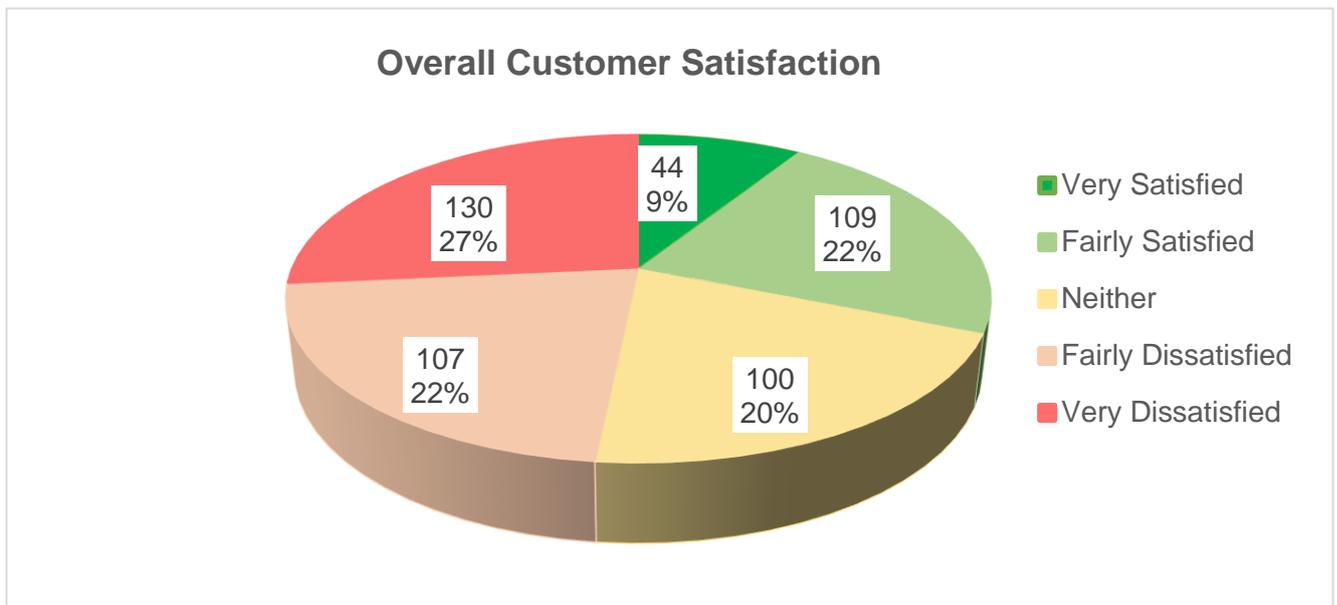
Decision

All three ILOs agreed that the current specification of works to be carried out does not meet resident expectations. The suggestion was made that ILOs should feedback any concerns at the time of residents bi-monthly meetings to either NC directly or alternatively to SJ. The current Grounds Maintenance specification certainly needs to be more specific. A two-tier Service Charge system was suggested to offer a better standard of workmanship, but this would be difficult to implement.

Customer Feedback

The survey was sent to the 2009 customers that pay a service charge for grounds maintenance and have a valid email or mobile number. Nearly 1 in 4 (490) customers responded.

When asked the question on Overall Customer Satisfaction “Taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the grounds maintenance service in your neighbourhood?” customers answered:



Customer quotes

Customers were also invited to answer two longer form questions:

- How do you think we can provide better Value for Money?
- Thinking about the answers you have given today, is there anything else you would like to say about the ground's maintenance service?

Below is a sample of the responses received, which give a sense of the range of feelings on this service area. Many customers used the survey as an opportunity to comment about other issues about their property and other service charge items:

- It is non-existent and shocking, we shouldn't have to pay for a service we do not receive!!!
- I had an experience where the ground maintenance service shoved cut branches into my garden. I had to ring, and it was eventually removed.

Decision

- Maybe try doing the grounds maintenance service properly? Needs adjusting to seasonal weather.
- A schedule of dates it's going to happen would be nice so that those of us that work shifts know when we're not going to get any sleep. The noise from the machinery is awful.
- We don't know terms of contract. We have no idea what service the contractor offers.
- I think you provide a good service, but in my opinion, everything you do for a council property tenants, but property owners have to do everything themselves, I don't mind but, in my opinion, people living in council properties should participate in cleaning their area.
- I would employ people who care about the environment and know what they are doing to me they seem as they are not qualified to do a good job.
- Carry out grass cutting shrubs and hedgerow more thoroughly.
- Clear the grass cuttings, don't just leave them rotting on top of the grass. Mow the grass areas & the verges. Weed the pathways. Sweep up the grass cuttings and dispose of them so they aren't walked into houses and cars.
- Actually, mow the grass instead of leaving it so long the other homeowners do it. I had to cut it last month because I couldn't get to my car.
- Weeding is not done, they just trim the grass and then blow it. In the last 12 months I've seen pruning take place twice, but this has not covered all areas.

Recommendations

The CSP felt there was a need for a number of recommendations for change, and these are set out below. Agreed management actions and progress will be reported back to Audit and Risk.

#	Recommendation
1	A separate Grounds Maintenance Policy needs to be created.
2	Residents should receive a clear/detailed breakdown of what their service charge covers with their annual rent statement.
3	The maintenance specification should be made available to residents on request.
4	The specification needs to be more resident friendly with more clarity on product description, for example grass cutting and / or mulching, spot weed treatment to nuisance weeds vs hand weeding of beds, shrub maintenance vs pruning, summer vs winter maintenance programmes.
5	Currently the Contract is described as 'Grounds Maintenance'. We need to manage expectations as many residents do not understand the implications of the name and the quality of service currently offered therefore does not meet resident expectations. Consider a name change, e.g. 'Grass & Hedge Cutting'.
6	Improving communication options to enable residents to report issues.
7	HOP schemes have been identified as an issue of concern. Better liaison at the time of residents bi-monthly meetings. Independent Living Officers being encouraged to report issues direct to Rooftop/Platform Property Care (PPC) in a more timely manner.

Decision

8	Better reporting and escalation of issues as they arise both within Rooftop and to our contractors (suggested by PPC) would help resolve issues.
9	Ensure comprehensive training and refreshers are in place with contractors, e.g. use of restricted substances, without appropriate equipment (lance hoods).
10	Re-Instatement of regular Grounds Maintenance surveys via the Customer survey programme.
11	Investigate whether residents in specific areas are prepared to pay for a two tier system for a more comprehensive service.
12	As identified by the survey, operatives should take more pride in their work and not just arrive, rush the job and leave. Customers in Bishop's Cleeve were very concerned about this, possibly because the previous contractor regularly went above and beyond specification.
13	Rooftop should consider a 'no' or 'low' mow policy in specific areas to be more climate friendly and encourage wild flowers and fauna, rather than neglecting certain patches all together.
14	Rooftop could consider offering a small reward to tenants in communal schemes to maintain their own sites take pride in where they live.
15	Young people from local colleges (Persnore & Harbury) could be given on the job training to complement their course work.