

**SUMMARY OF FINAL REPORT
GREEN BUDGET IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HOUSING STOCK TRANSFER**

The aim of the Scrutiny investigation is to review the roles, responsibilities, resources, public interface and standards of service provision of the Green Budget in the context of the Housing Stock Transfer.

The Green Budget is a term that is open to wide interpretation and at its simplest it refers to the design, management and operational maintenance of landscaped areas.

The streamlining of various maintenance budgets to that of a single pot Green Budget was a result of a former scrutiny investigation carried out during the period October 2000 to February 2001.

On 15 November 2004, this Authority transferred the ownership and management of its entire Housing Stock (approximately 12,000 properties) to Erimus Housing Limited. As a result of this transfer, various pockets of housing land previously maintained by the Authority, funded via the Housing Revenue Account also transferred over to Erimus Housing Limited. A Service Level Agreement has been drawn-up between the Authority and Erimus Housing Limited as part of the initial transfer negotiations for the Authority to continue to provide the maintenance of such land for a period of one year.

Due to the high proportion of 'right to buy' Council house properties the Authority still has approximately 51% of the original identified land to maintain in addition to the SLA resulting in a service budgetary pressure for the future.

Conclusions

The Panel made a number of conclusions, some of which are included below:

1. That the service area is limited to a one-year accountancy system and that this system does not allow for well-managed operational planning.
2. That a major policy change to a three-year rolling programme should be considered once the Authority become an 'Excellent' rated Authority.
3. That a concentration of standards should be explored, for example, replacing fast-growing and thorny shrubs with slow growing shrubs or trees for ease of maintenance in the future, including litter picking, with capital investment used to facilitate the changes.
4. That in recent year's regeneration had been so great that Streetscene had stopped asking for commuted sums to assist with maintenance and therefore the present budget does not take into account any new developments. This gives a distorted view in which Streetscene has to manage the present ground maintenance provision, forcing the specification to be much lower than is desired.
5. That currently there is no cross-departmental working in relation to new developments or improvements and initiatives to ensure that long-term sustainability was achievable from Streetscene Service's perspective.
6. That there is a differing of opinions from both the Authority and Erimus Housing in relation to whom Erimus tenants currently contact with either complaints or service requests.
7. That the Authority's current contact mechanism does not allow for the contact centre staff/caller to gain real-time information whilst handling calls.

8. That the current specifications for environmental issues are substantially lower than in 1989.
9. The Panel notes that recommendations were made and agreed in the previous scrutiny review (2000/2001). However, little implementation has been made to address the issue in financial terms.
10. That the current budget provision for Environment is not sufficient when taking into account the Town's demographic/regeneration growth.
11. That there is a significant increase in the amount of customer complaints to both the Service and to Councillors, due to the current specification.
12. That this reduction in specification has resulted in a loss of image and possible loss of investment to Middlesbrough.

Recommendations

The Environment Scrutiny Panel has taken evidence from a wide range of sources to assist in the formulation of the following recommendations:

- a) For the Authority to explore the one of the following options in order for the Service to allow any maintenance works to be carefully and efficiently planned for:-
 - i) To implement a three-year rolling programme.
 - ii) To enable the carrying over of surplus funds to the next financial year.
- b) For the benefit and ease of the citizens of Middlesbrough, a single contact point (Contact Centre) is identified and delivered for dealing with complaints and service requests. This will ensure that the joint working with Erimus is seen to be seamless.
- c) To continue the good-working relationship and set up a Steering Group with Erimus to ensure the effective and efficient delivery of such a Contact Centre.
- d) For a real-time database (CRM) to be identified and delivered to ensure that on contacting the 'Centre' queries can be dealt with efficiently. To expand this database for the Authority's compliance with E-Government Standards and enable it for online public services.
- e) For the Environment Service to produce a deliverable Strategy that identifies the environmental maintenance problems in Middlesbrough. This Plan should provide the procedure for, and benefits of rectifying these problems, and the budget required for this. One example is that there does not appear to be any flexible working within the Service Area and that staff should embrace cross-boundary working.
- f) For the Authority to agree that this Strategy is beneficial to Middlesbrough and provides the budget for it in its next budget setting process.
- g) For Streetscene to be consulted in the planning stages of any new developments within Middlesbrough and to negotiate any applicable sums for the sustainable maintenance of such developments.
- h) That the Town's street furniture is currently showing the Authority's old logo and should be updated and standardised throughout Middlesbrough.
- i) For the Authority's Procurement Policy for ground maintenance, be dependent upon quality and not price and therefore reintroduce the 1989 ground maintenance specification and that the Service Area's Green Budget reflects this upgraded specification.
- j) That funding should be made available for the creation of an appropriate horticulture apprenticeship scheme in conjunction with the 14-19 Agenda.