

# Residents play a leading role in selecting new grounds maintenance contractors



When Dorset based Signpost Housing Association needed to tender its grounds maintenance service saving money was not its only consideration; getting a standard of service that met residents' needs was also of great importance. Working with specialist social housing consultant Peter Bird from Primary Business Support the Association formed a project working group from staff and residents who were already members of the Association's Planned and Responsive Repairs Review group (PARRR).

The working group comprised three members of staff and 18 residents and its first task was to agree the tender specification. Working with a draft the group had real and meaningful input and introduced a number of new elements as well as adjusting the specification to meet their own needs. There was a desire to improve the standard of specification and the group identified two key areas where it wanted to see improvements. Grass cutting had long been an area where improvement was wanted, in particular those who lived in communal schemes wanted to see the grass cuttings collected up and taken away. The group also wanted to see the maintenance of hedges improved. It wasn't clear whether improved services were affordable and so the group decided on a three standard specification where the standards on grass cutting and hedge maintenance varied between a reduced, middle and enhanced standard.

Having established the standards the group delegated responsibility for tendering to a sub-

group that comprised three staff and six residents. Because of the size of the contract – the Association has stock in Dorset, Devon and Somerset – the tendering had to be undertaken through the EU tendering route as a 'Part B' service and the work was split into three lots each covering different geographic areas. The restricted tendering procedure was followed which meant that a pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ) was sent out to potential suppliers. The sub-group agreed the content of the PQQ including the project specific questions to be included and it also agreed the PQQ evaluation model. The group went on to undertake the PQQ evaluation and decide which potential providers to invite to bid at the Invitation to Tender (ITT) stage.

Again, the working group agreed elements of the ITT requirement, including the subject areas for method statements that would be used to evaluate the tenders under the 'most economically advantageous tender' (MEAT) model employed and also, again, the evaluation model to be used. The method statements decided by the group covered working methods, staff training, customer service and adding value to the contract.

The procurement process was complicated because the grounds maintenance service is recharged to many residents under variable service charge arrangements. Alongside the tendering arrangements around 4000 residents were also

consulted under a mixture of S20 Consultation for variable charge payers and general consultation with other residents who benefited from the service. The working group also considered the representations made by residents under these consultation arrangements.

Having completed the tender stage the working group evaluated the tenders for the three contract areas and, based on the evaluation model, selected the preferred suppliers for each contract based on price but also the content of the method statements, and references.

The contracts were let at the higher standard, which, following the tendering exercise, could be afforded within existing budgets. Residents will see grass maintained at a shorter standard than previously and those in communal schemes will have grass cut using box mowers and clippings will be taken off site for disposal. Hedge cutting will also be provided at an enhanced standard.

The residents involved have found the process stimulating and enjoyable. John Pearson, a resident from Winterbourne Whitechurch, said 'I have found the whole process interesting and I feel that the residents have had a very real role to play in determining the standards to be agreed and the selection of the best contractors for the work'.

Residents continue to be involved and attend joint client/contractor meetings monitoring the delivery of the service in the three contract areas.