

National Scrutiny Group Report

Customer Experience Committee



REPORT	
Meeting Date:	28 April 2020
Report Title:	Are the grounds maintenance contractors meeting their contractual obligations?
Author(s):	National Scrutiny Group (Abdul Bachani, Ayala Marshall, Eleanor Condron, Jan Ryles, Jenny Turner, Lyn Nelson, Lynda Mills, Mick Alston)
For Decision <input type="checkbox"/> Debate <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Information <input type="checkbox"/>	
Summary:	The NSG chose to investigate grounds maintenance, in particular whether the present measures that Accent has in place are robust enough to ensure that the chosen contractors are meeting their contractual obligations in providing an acceptable service to all Accent residents, irrespective of tenure.
Appendices Attached:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staff and contractor interview findings 2. Staff consultation results 3. Analysis of staff consultation results 4. 'Green Inspector' pilot advertisement

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1. Background

Accent's former contractors were operating in very different ways, and to ensure and provide and enforce a consistent standard of compliance, was challenging for them.

In 2016, Accent ceased working with local contractors and procured large contracts with regional and national 'grounds maintenance' service providers.

This decision was made principally to minimise health and safety risks.

The present contracts have been awarded for 10 years with a natural break in the contract after 5 years.

2. Methodology & Evidence Gathering

In order to provide a fair and detailed report members of the NSG undertook interviews with both Accent staff and contractors who administer and oversee the grounds maintenance contracts. Interviews covered all regions.

The group met with:

Contract Management

Antony Owen - Contract Manager - Estate Services

Operational Staff

Michael Long - Estate Services Officer (North East)

Louise Walsh - Estate Services Officer (North West)

Abu Bakar - Estate Services Officer (Yorkshire)

Sheridan Evans and Chris McQuade - Estate Services Officers (East)

Chrissie Broadhurst - Estate Services Officer (South)

Jamie Trotter and Megan Lloyd-Jones - Customer Partners (North West - Leyland)

Claire Wood - Customer Partner (Yorkshire - Wakefield and East Riding)

Julie Frankham - Customer Partner (South - St. Michaels)

Jordan Brown and Emma Hardisty – Quality Coaches, Contact Centre

Darren Whitfield - Homeownership Manager

Virginia Cheetham - Homeownership Specialist

Contractors

Zoe Miles and Darren Kilby - Lotus Landscapes

Scott O'Sullivan – Greenfingers, Contract Manager (North West)

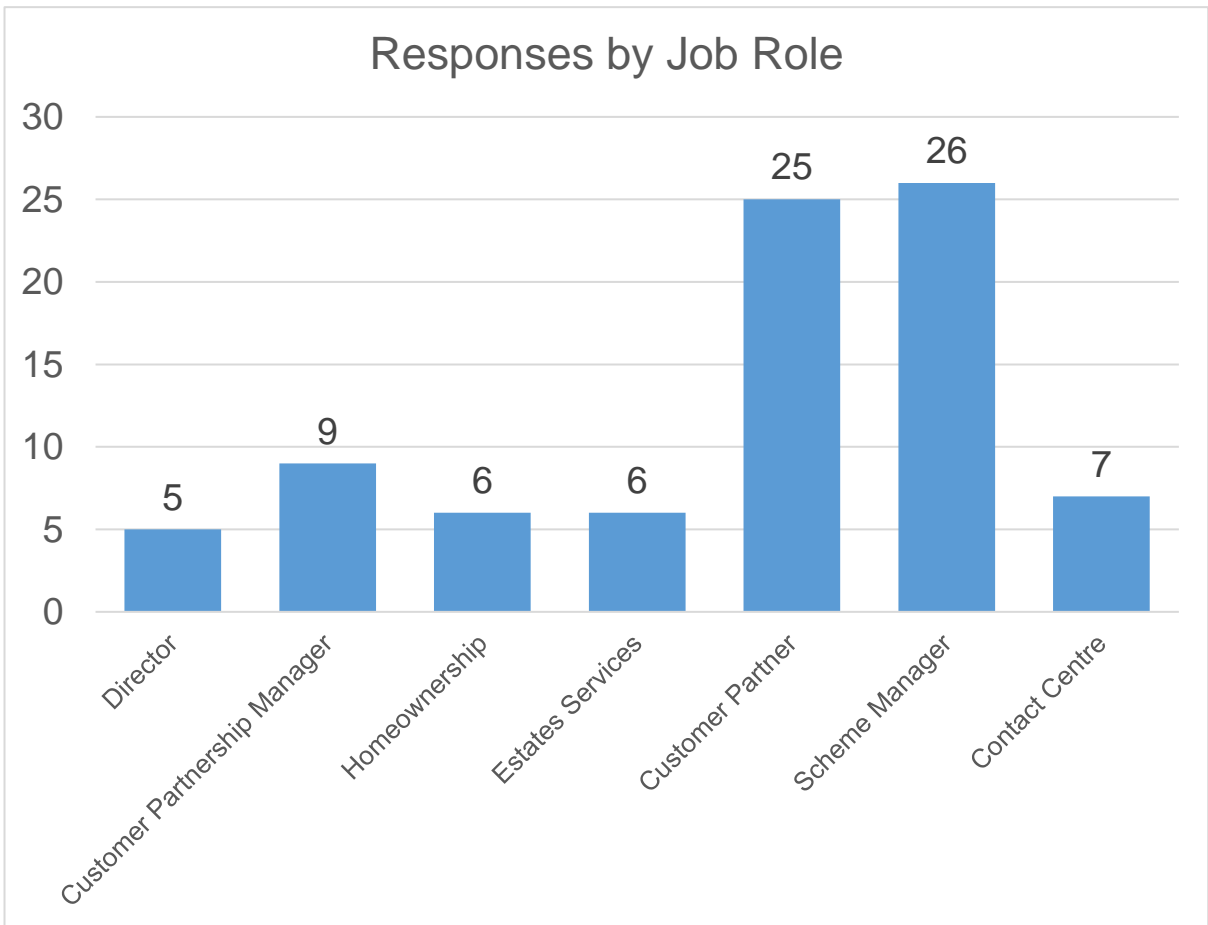
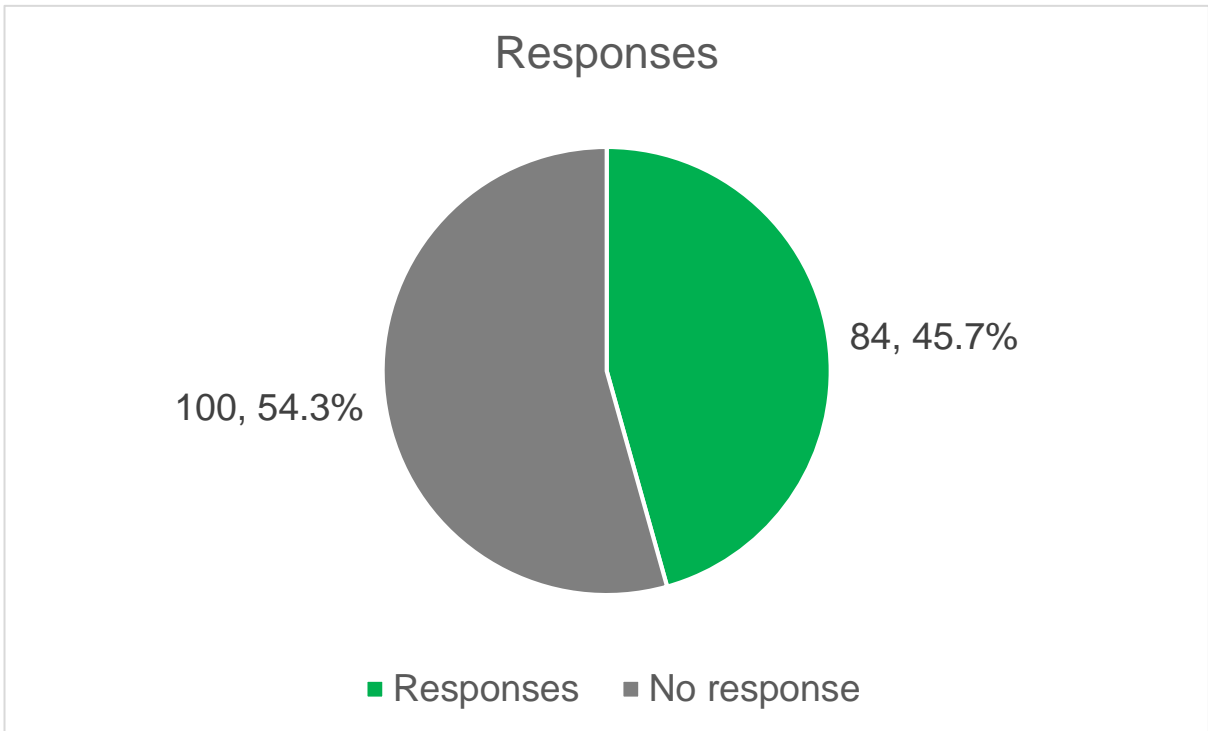
Dan Hiles – Greenfingers, Contract Manager (Yorkshire)

Chris Firth - Malc Firth, Company Director

Ady Almond - Malc Firth, Contract Manager

The NSG also conducted an in house survey of staff who routinely deal with Grounds Maintenance enquiries and complaints.

This survey yielded a response of 45.7% (84/184).



3. Findings

Procurement

Accent customers are not involved in evaluating or interviewing prospective contractors. If customers were involved in this process it could influence decision-making.

Customers and staff perceive that the grounds maintenance contract was awarded on basic cost, and less on quality of work.

Customer expectations

Customer expectations about the standard of work varies in regions.

Homeowners and leaseholders have indicated they would be prepared to pay for enhanced services.

Specification

Many customers are unaware of what is included in the grounds maintenance contract.

It was noted that a single specification does not fit with all schemes.

Replenishment works are not carried out consistently. In some cases, shrubs and plants must be replaced at extra cost.

Contractor performance

Contractors in all regions struggle to retain reliable and diligent operatives. There are various reasons for this, but it does appear to affect service continuity.

Contractors record and document the work they do on schemes. Some take photos serving as evidence that the specification is being adhered to.

Boundaries and responsibilities

The maps and plans that Accent provide to the contractors are out of date. This makes it difficult for both parties to agree who is responsible for maintaining the landscaped areas. There is further confusion where local authorities are also responsible for maintaining landscaped areas.

Contractors incur difficulties in areas where customers have chosen to look after small plots. Customers are not consistently advised about what areas they can adopt and contractors will not maintain areas that have been adopted by residents.

Tree management is not part of the contractors' day-to-day responsibility. Accent has a tree management programme in place to allocate work on risk.

Complaints and enquiries

Accent does not deliver dedicated training to Contact Centre staff about estate services.

Complaints about grounds maintenance are routinely tasked to Customer Partners. Some Customer Partners claim to spend as much as 30% of their time responding to complaints about grounds maintenance.

Customer Partners try to resolve enquiries about grounds maintenance, but working practices vary across the regions.

Customer Partners, Homeownership Specialists and Estate Services Officer inspect schemes at regular intervals.

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4. Conclusions

In order for residents to understand what the grounds maintenance contractors are responsible for, Accent must improve its communication.

Customers question how contracts are awarded; is it based on cost or quality of work? It became evident that customers would like to be involved in contractor procurement and work with staff to make sure that contractual obligations are met.

Customers are not always clear as to what the grounds maintenance contractors are responsible for, and should a complaint be necessary who to contact. Customer Partners, Scheme Managers and front-line staff need better means for providing feedback to residents.

Limited training on estate services makes it difficult for staff to respond adequately to customers' complaints. Some Customer Partners are spending valuable time on resolving complaints, which could be done by other staff following training and instruction.

5. Recommendations

	Recommendations	Strategic Priority	Service Area Manager	Response	Timescale	Measures for success
1	Provide customers, both new and existing, with an up to date copy of the grounds maintenance specification. This could be displayed on noticeboards in communal areas, or customers could be encouraged to access this information via MyAccount.	Service choice and innovation	Regional Customer Partnership Manager responsible for Estate Services	The specification is already available on the website, but could benefit from further promotion. Could be included on MyAccount. Regional teams could display the specification on communal noticeboards; this would be facilitated locally and emphasised as part of scheme inspection process.	30/06/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customers are better aware of the specification. Fewer complaints and service requests from customers for issues which are outside of the specification. Increased customer satisfaction with estates services (Rant & Rave).
2	Grounds maintenance contractors to take photographic evidence, both before and after, which serves as evidence of their visit. This will prove standards have been met and lessen complaints.	Service choice and innovation	Regional Customer Partnership Manager responsible for Estate Services	Possible in principle. Each Customer Partnership Manager would need to liaise with their respective grounds maintenance contractor. Storage of and access to photos would need to be considered and may require involvement from IT – we may decide to ask the contractors to store only and we request as required. Encourage contractors to have this on their own portals, where possible, and provide Accent with links to the information.	30/06/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer grounds maintenance enquiries tasked to Estate Services Officers / Customer Partners.
3	Provide training and/or clear guidelines to Contact Centre advisors, so that they can access grounds maintenance contractor portals enabling them to respond to any customer enquiries or complaints.	Empowered and talented people	Paula Wilson, Director of Customer Contact, working with a couple of Estate Services Officers (Chrissie Broadhurst + AN Other)	This could be achieved where portals exist – we will check portal content and its usefulness. Further consultation with Contact Centre advisors may be required to address specific training needs. The training needs to be around the specification. However, Estate Services Officer / Customer Partner is still best placed to answer queries with their local scheme based knowledge.	31/07/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer grounds maintenance enquiries tasked to Customer Partners. Increased customer satisfaction with service provided by Contact Centre (Rant & Rave).

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4	Increase budgets for Estate Service Officers so that they are able to approve improvements to schemes without relying on Customer Partner budgets. This will allow Customer Partners to spend their time and budgets delivering core housing services.	Empowered and talented people	Director of Customer Experience / Regional Customer Partnership Manager responsible for estate services	<p>Scheme improvements should be budgeted for as part of the budget setting process as we need to be proactive and reduce in-year reactive spend. In-year budget allocation is not designed to cover scheme improvements.</p> <p>'Patch budgets' can be used for small ad-hoc requests.</p> <p>Delivery of grounds maintenance will fully transfer to regional teams, headed up by each Customer Partnership Manager, from 4 May 2020. Therefore, scheme improvements required should be included in the budget setting process for 2021-22, which gets underway in September 2020. We will consider whether the Estate Services Officer has a delegated budget.</p>	30/11/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2020-21 budget consists of relevant scheme improvement initiatives
5	Customers are to be involved with monitoring the performance of Accent's grounds maintenance contractors. NB: 'Green Inspectors' will be appointed at selected schemes to monitor quality of work and to serve as the point of contact for feedback and complaints. If the trial proves to be successful; roll out to all regions.	Service choice and innovation	Regional Customer Partnership Manager responsible for Estate Services, with support of Estate Services Officers	We will consider and aim to roll-out 'Green Inspectors' in all regions.	31/07/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased customer satisfaction with estates services (Rant & Rave).

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6	<p>It is evident that a contract with standard specifications does not fit all schemes.</p> <p>Accent to consult with homeowners and leaseholders in particular prior to contract implementation, to confirm if they would be prepared to pay for an enhanced service.</p>	Service choice and innovation	Director of Customer Experience / Darren Whitfield, Home Ownership Manager	<p>To further strengthen the Accent Partnership, we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move away from the 'one size fits all' approach. • Empower regional teams. • Flex our ways of working to suit local circumstances. <p>This will benefit not just leaseholders, but all customers. For 100% leasehold schemes we are already delivering this. We may also look at this on a couple of general needs schemes but care to be taken where customers are on benefits.</p> <p>Any changes in specification to be reflected in the 2021-22 budget setting process.</p>	30/11/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased customer satisfaction with estates services (Rant & Rave). • Fewer complaints about service charges. • Fewer complaints and service requests from customers for issues which are outside of the specification.
7	<p>Commission of new maps to make it clear where Accent's land boundaries are and who is responsible for maintaining said areas. This in turn provides new and existing contractors with clearly defined boundaries, thus helping with more accurate quotes and efficiency of services.</p>	Ambitious and resilient business	Neil Cox, Director of Homes	<p>We are in the process of producing updated scheme boundary maps and these will be linked to ActiveH (via M-files) so all staff can access from our IT system. We aim to complete this by July 2020.</p> <p>We also have access to My Trees (TreeWorks) which shows the location of all our trees. We will review the licences available and ensure all Estate Service Officers have access and are trained on the portal.</p>	<p>31/07/20</p> <p>31/07/20</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less staff time and resources investigating boundary disputes. • More accurate quotes. • Continuity of service delivery. • Increased customer satisfaction with estates services (Rant & Rave). • Fewer grounds maintenance enquiries tasked to Customer Partners. • More customers choosing to self-serve.

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				We are putting together a project to achieve Geographic Information System functionality with all mapping information, including measurement of land. This may be used for procurement, day-to-day use by colleagues and potentially published to customers. Could also be used in conjunction with external 3 rd parties e.g. local authorities, to improve the knowledge, expectations and service to customers, particularly with adjacent land ownership	31/01/21	