



Ark Rainbow Service Improvement Group

*Landscape Maintenance Scrutiny Report
September 2022*

The Rainbow Service Improvement Group would like to thank all Ark staff and Tenants Information Service, who assisted and supported us to carry out this scrutiny project.

FINAL

Contents

Foreword	Page 3
Introduction	Page 4
Our Activities	Page 5
Our Key Recommendations	Page 6 - 20
Our Findings	Page 21 -23
Next Steps	Page 24
Appendix 1: examples of areas of concern	Page 25 – 26
Action Plan	Page 27

1. Foreword

Established in 2021, Ark Housing Association's Rainbow Service Improvement Group (Ark Rainbow SIG) is committed to independently reviewing and monitoring the Association's housing and asset management services policies, and standards.

Our members work hard to achieve the Ark Rainbow SIG's overall aim of ensuring that as a landlord Ark Housing Association provides services that meet the needs of tenants and other customers and that are of the highest standard.

We aim to ensure that our thorough and effective scrutiny projects will enable us to make recommendations to senior managers and Board members on how services can be improved for all tenants and other customers.

The Scrutiny Project detailed in this report was carried out during 2021 /22 to allow us to provide recommendations for consideration in the development of the Association's new landscape maintenance tender documents and specification.

In recognition that Ark tenants live in various locations throughout Scotland, all work and meetings have been carried out online.

Ark Rainbow SIG

2. Introduction

The Ark Rainbow Service Improvement Group (Ark Rainbow SIG) is a group of Ark tenants who work together to look at the services provided to tenants by Ark Housing Association. This is known as “*tenant scrutiny*”. Our overall aims are to:

- Learn more about Ark’s policies, procedures, and service delivery
- Understand how services are provided to tenants
- Find out tenants’ views on the services provided
- Consider what works well and what could be improved and
- Make recommendations for changes or improvements to Ark’s Senior Management Team and Board.

We endeavor to carry out our work through tenant led inspections, interviewing, and shadowing staff, reviewing information about Ark services, talking to other tenants, and reviewing housing and service standards set by the Scottish Government in the Scottish Social Housing Charter (the Charter) and expectations of the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR).

[The Tenants Information Service](#) (TIS) provides the Ark Rainbow SIG with independent advice, training, and support to assist us in our work and Ark staff members support us through providing the information we require to review services and standards.

3. Our activities

Members of our group participated in scrutiny training and awareness sessions with TIS to find out more about the legal requirements, principles, and potential outcomes as well as the kind of activities members could undertake to carry out effective scrutiny projects. This included gaining an understanding of the Scottish Social Housing Charter (SSHC), the role of the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) and Ark performance reporting duties and responsibilities.

TIS then assisted us to develop a group Terms of Reference and Code of Conduct which outlines our aims, objectives, and areas of work along with roles and responsibilities of group members, Ark Executive Team, officers, and Ark Board Members in making tenant scrutiny at Ark a reality.

Early in our development members identified concerns with the landscape maintenance services in different locations across Ark housing developments, this therefore determined our initial scrutiny project.

4. Our Key Recommendations

We recommend that Ark Housing Association:

- a. Considers the content of this report and **our recommendations for future service improvement**.
- b. Ark ensures effective and thorough **monitoring of the new Landscape Maintenance Contract**, including visits by officers pre and post work and providing **opportunities for tenants to participate in site visits** with Ark and contractor staff.

Ark's Response:

Ark staff will continue to undertake quarterly inspections, as a minimum, of all sites throughout the year and this will be when officers and tenants can inspect landscaped areas jointly.

We would not expect contractors to be involved in tenant / staff inspections as the monitoring of the contractors performance is between Ark staff and the contractor.

Timeline: Once a quarter

SIG would like to see site visits being carried out jointly to allow all stakeholders to review things at the same time. Ark would then agree improvements required with the contractor and monitor this.

Having discussed this again with Assets, this is not an option. We will take photos of any issues and feedback to the contractor for their response

- c. Ark ensures **officer presence in communities to carry out regular estate inspections**, discuss and report on issues and concerns raised by tenants in relation to the landscape maintenance and wider estate management and maintenance issues.

Ark's Response:

As noted at b. above, we carry out quarterly estate inspections and these will continue.

Timeline: Once a quarter

Agreed

Also, can Ark inform tenants when the visits will be carried out, so that they can participate or advise of complaints and compliments face to face.

Yes, we will notify all tenants of the visit cycle, but this may be subject to change according to weather.

- d. Ark **improves the level of services provided by the maintenance team in terms of the ensuring delivery of the landscape maintenance service**. NOTE It was our understanding that the new contract would provide grass cutting / maintenance every two weeks, however it has come to our attention that this was not the case during the summer of 2022 in at least one development.

Ark's Response:

The wording of this recommendation is vague. Please can clarification be given about what the Group sees as an improvement of the service by the maintenance team eg. Is this in relation to a reduction in complaints or levels of dissatisfaction. We intend to issue quarterly satisfaction surveys and will monitor feedback.

Timeline: Not applicable

This recommendation refers to improved monitoring by Ark of the service delivery to ensure work is carried out to the specification standard which will in turn reduce complaints and dissatisfaction.

Quarterly tenant satisfaction surveys is a good idea and Ark SIG recommends results are reported to tenants.

All results will be reported to all tenants via the newsletter.

- e. Ark **senior management team reviews the draft spec and compares to the final version** within the new contract and advises the Rainbow SIG if there were any changes to the final specification. NOTE we understood this to be a two-weekly service during the growing season, not twelve cuts per year.

Ark's Response:

This has already been undertaken. Terminology between the draft version and final version may have changed to reflect site specifics of Ark contracts but otherwise there was no change in the specification.

Timeline: Not applicable

Agreed

- f. Ark **senior officers and members of the Ark Board visit local developments, communities,** and properties to ensure increased awareness of service levels and improvement needs.

Ark's Response:

Senior Officers have visited some developments and will continue to do so. The Executive Team have been provided with this recommendation and will discuss it with the Board of Management as part of their development plan.

Timeline: 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024

SIG would like to see a programme of visits to all developments with an itinerary / dates / times etc advised to tenants.

We have created a visit plan for senior staff and will share this with tenants. Board members are attending the Ark Services sites at the end of June but we still need to get confirmation of whether they will visit all other sites.

- g. Ark consults tenants on the specific landscape maintenance requirements for each development.

Ark's Response:

Ark will consult tenants in due course on landscape **improvements** for each development.

Timeline: Some of this has started but it will be programmed over the remaining 4 years of the contract.

SIG would like to see a programme for this developed and issued to tenants, with updates of when work has been carried out.

Tenants have been asked for their views on improvements and as and when this is agreed it /programmed this will be shared with tenants.

- h. Ark provides information to tenants on the new contract specification.

Ark's Response:

Ark updated all tenants by letter of the new contractor but we have not advised what the contract specification is. We will provide this information to all tenants by letter/via the website.

Timeline: By the 31st March 2023 in time for the new season.

Agreed

- i. Ark advises Rainbow SIG of number of cuts per development from set up of new contract.

Ark's Response:

Pre contract specification:

The Maintenance Schedules equate calendar months to Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, periods of work. In general Maintenance Visits should be on a monthly basis, 12 visits per year with the exception of the summer months when grass cutting will require to be carried out between the end of April to the end of October at intervals of approximately 2 weeks or less and should amount to a maximum of 24 grass cuts per year for the amenity areas and front and rear gardens.

The Landscape Contractor shall report any potential failures to meet the specified Programme and any changes to the Workmanship must be agreed in writing with the Maintenance Officer.

Signed contract specification:

The Maintenance Schedules equate calendar months to Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, periods of work. In general Maintenance Visits should be on a monthly basis, 12 visits per year with the exception of the summer months when grass cutting will require to be carried out between the end of April to the end of October at intervals of approximately 2 weeks or less and should amount to a maximum of 24 grass cuts per year for the amenity areas and front and rear gardens.

The Landscape Contractor shall report any potential failures to meet the specified Programme and any changes to the Workmanship must be agreed in writing with the Maintenance Officer.

Timeline: Not applicable

Is Ark confident that the contractor will report any failures?

SIG considers the maintenance officers need to be carrying out spot checks on the level of service.

Assets staff will carry out checks any time they are on site.

- j. Ark ensures that local officers have a presence in communities to advise of when grass cutting, and maintenance is being done.

Ark's Response:

This is not practical due to the other work commitments of staff, however a contractor schedule will be provided to all tenants so that they know when work will be undertaken (subject to bad weather/unforeseen circumstances) and tenants will be notified of the quarterly inspections which they can attend.

Timeline: By the 31st March 2023

SIG considers that officers should be in local communities at some time and recommends that whilst in sites, officers could have a checklist to report any issues noted.

SIG understands that officers cover large geographic areas, but consider it would be good if tenants were made aware of when officers will be in developments.

We have created a visit schedule for all sites to be visited as a minimum once a month and all tenants will be notified in writing beforehand so they can attend.

- k. Ark provides an update to tenants and Rainbow SIG on when the new service started, where work has been carried out and how often.

Ark's Response:

This information was provided to Ark RSIG prior to the meeting of 12/10/22.

Agreed

- I. Ark **ensures that new contractor operatives are aware that smoking in vicinity of tenants' homes, is not permitted** as per rules for previous contract or by Ark officers.

Ark's Response:

A Code of Conduct has been issued to the Contractor and they will expect all operatives to abide by it.

Timeline: Not applicable

SIG note that when tenants get permission to use private contractors, they are not held to account in terms of this code of conduct. Should Ark advise tenants that it is their responsibility to advise of no smoking policy in shared spaces?

We can advise tenants of this but we do not have the resources to "police" this.

m. Ark ensures that work in the new contract includes **replacement of old, dead, or unsuitable plants**.

Ark's Response:

Query about how the use of the terms **old** or **unsuitable**. This could be a matter of personal opinion and may vary from person to person. The new contract will consider the replacement of **dead plants** only.

Timeline: Over the 5-year term of the contract.

SIG recommended this in relation to:

- Shrubs, trees etc that are overgrown and could cause obstruction or damage.
- Excessive weeds
- Knowledge of types of plants in developments to ensure correct ones are retained or replaced.
- Grassed areas that are mainly moss and weeds – consider replacement with astroturf / stones etc.

Comments above have been noted.

- n. Ark **supports tenants to participate in local planting and maintenance of local open spaces** where tenants are involved in or would like to be involved in this.

Ark's Response:

Ark will support any tenants or local groups that come forward as wanting to be involved. However, it does not have the staff resource to establish or facilitate such involvement. If substantial changes are proposed, the tenant or group of tenants will have to get the majority agreement of tenants living in the area.

Timeline: As and when tenants come forward.

Noted permission for bench and planter given at general needs housing in Livingstone, but not at care home. This seems like an inconsistent approach.

We do not have an general needs housing in Livingstone? Can specific examples be provided so that we can investigate this and provide a specific response about any decision making process involved.

- o. Ark supports communities to **include school children and young people** in planting and community garden developments

Ark's Response:

As at n. above.

Timeline: As and when school groups/young people's groups come forward.

Agreed

- p. Ark seeks donations of plants and flowers from the landscape maintenance contractor for areas where tenants are or want to be involved in community planting or gardening projects.

Arks Response:

As part of the Contract there is a Community Benefit Clause and donations may come through this in 2023-24.

Timeline: 2023-24 and in subsequent years

SIG would like Ark to request this from the contractor rather than just waiting.
SIG considers Ark should be seen as more than a landlord and ensure benefits of living in a well-maintained area are felt by all tenants – “kerb appeal”.

The payback clause from the landscaping contractor took the form of donation of plants, however we still need to get a budget approved to pay them for such work. We agree however that we want all our developments to look as attractive as possible and are tacking issues through the quarterly estate inspections.

- q. Ark involves members of the Ark Rainbow SIG in contract monitoring meetings.

Arks Response:

Ark believes that the SIG has been set up to scrutinise the services that Ark provides, not that of the Contractor, as a result we do not think it would be appropriate for SIG members to attend contract monitoring meetings.

Ark will however provide an annual report which will summarise the contractor’s performance; a review of contract and will share satisfaction levels.

Timeline: 12 months after the contract started so July/August 2023

Agreed

- r. Ark ensures **allocation of an increased budget** to ensure all improvements and regular work required are carried out efficiently and effectively and ensure Value of Money.

Arks Response:

The cost of the new contract is considerably more than the previous contract sum and with it comes the expectation that the service delivery for regular maintenance work is improved.

An additional budget has been provided for improvement works over the remaining period of the contract.

Timeline: Over the next 4 years

Agreed

- s. Ark **provides the Rainbow SIG with a participation budget** to allow members visit locations out with their own communities to review services, meet with other tenants, officers, and contractors to assist us to carry out our agreed duties and tasks.

Arks Response:

We do not think this should be included in this report but instead is for the Terms of Reference.

Timeline: Not Applicable

Agreed

- t. Ark **advises tenants when operatives will be on site** to allow them to ensure windows and doors are closed to prevent noise nuisance and debris accessing homes.

Arks Response:

As mentioned at h. a schedule will be provided to all tenants. This will allow tenants to plan in advance.

Timeline: By 31st March 2023

Agreed

- u. Ark **provides progress updates on the landscape maintenance work** carried out in local areas to tenants.

Arks Response:

We will provide updates in newsletters; on the website and as per q. we will provide an annual report to all tenants.

Timeline: Spring 2023 and July/August 2023

Agreed

- v. Ark increases tenant awareness of the contract details and **encourages involvement in local monitoring** and how to advise Ark of complaints or satisfaction.

Arks Response:

Awareness raising - Updates will be provided in newsletters/on the website. The newsletter always contains information about how to make a complaint. These can also be found on the website.

Involvement in Monitoring – tenants will be advised of the quarterly estate inspections and can be involved in these to inspect areas and provide feedback.

Timeline: Quarterly

SIG recommends this is reported in website, newsletters etc re how many inspections, how many tenants involved, locations etc.

As and when this information is collated throughout the year this will be reported quarterly via newsletter/website/social media.

- w. Ark **provides regular and easy to read information to tenants** on landscape maintenance service charges, including cost breakdown, details of work carried out and future plans as well as details of any service delivery issues and associated reasons for delays or non-compliance.

Arks Response:

Service Charges are generally calculated annually and tenants are notified of the charge at the end of February each year, with the charge taking effect from 1st April each year. The charge is calculated based on the cost of the contract + 10% admin fee for staff time to calculate and notify tenants/manage the contract.

The **details of the work** will be notified as part of the contract specification.

Updates in the Newsletter will address any areas of non-compliance and how they will be addressed, as will any future plans.

Timeline: by 31st March 2023

Agreed

- x. Ark **works with associated local authorities, housing associations and landowners** to address landscape maintenance issues and concerns that are not Ark's responsibility including maintenance and cutting of trees that may cause damage to tenants' homes and Ark housing developments.

Arks Response:

Ark only has the resource to get involved in such land queries/disputes when it affects Ark properties/developments directly but is committed to doing so when required.

Timeline: As identified and when classed as a risk to Ark property

SIG considers where tenants have advised of such concerns that Ark should carry out a health and safety inspection and advise tenants or outcome.

Yes, we will carry out a H&S inspection and pass the matter over to the local authority/landlord responsible,

- y. Ark and the contractor **work together to find out ownership of land** and areas not yet known and thereafter address any issues of concern.

Arks Response:

As at x. above, Ark will do this when it directly affects Ark's developments.

Timeline: As identified and when classed as a risk to Ark property

Agreed

- z. Ark ensures that partner organisations such as Inspire are aware of and carry out their landscape maintenance duties and responsibilities.

Arks Response:

It would be very unusual for another Care Provider to have direct responsibility for managing a landscaped area. It may be that they are supporting a tenant who has responsibility for maintaining a garden. If this is not being maintained, we would deal with this under the terms of the Tenancy Agreement.

Timeline: Not applicable

This was mainly in relation to standard of slabbed area and shrubbery at property leased by Inspire at Forfar. Therefore, we now understand this is Ark's responsibility.

- aa. Ark carries out regular tenant satisfaction surveys on the service and reports results to Ark RSIG, Board, and tenants.

Arks Response:

Ark will carry out tenant surveys on a regular basis. Updates will be provided to all tenants in the Newsletter/Website and the Annual Report to Ark RSIG.

Reports to the Board will be undertaken as per the regular reporting cycle.

Timeline: Quarterly/Annual Report

Agreed

5. Our Findings

a. The 2021 / 22 Contract

We understand that the pre-April 2022 contract specification did not include adequate detail of the level of work required to ensure all landscaped areas throughout Ark developments and Ark head office were maintained to a satisfactory standard.

Tenant satisfaction with the standard and quality of landscape maintenance was low. We understand that Ark was aware of this and had taken steps to develop a new contract specification.

Ark officers were aware that an increase in budget would be required to deliver a new and improved service.

b. The New Contract

Our group members carried out a review of the **draft contract specification** and provided feedback to Ark officers.

We are pleased to see that the **draft specification** is more detailed and includes a review of the landscaped areas and a report on what is required to improve areas in the short to medium term as well as ongoing and regular maintenance and longer-term developments. However, we are concerned that the final version of the specification was not provided to the Rainbow SIG and we are concerned that the number of “cuts” do not seem to reflect what was in the draft discussed at every two weeks rather than twelve per year.

Arks Response:

Please see Section 4.i – In general Maintenance Visits should be on a monthly basis, 12 visits per year with the exception of the summer months when grass cutting will require to be carried out between the end of April to the end of October at intervals of approximately 2 weeks or less and should amount to a maximum of 24 grass cuts per year for the amenity areas and front and rear gardens.

Agreed

We were pleased to learn that Ark will provide an increased budget to ensure an improved service to tenants and communities.

c. Communication to tenants

Communication to tenants on what the landscape maintenance service provides, including details of when and what work will be carried out in their area is not clear or provided on a regular basis.

We understand that different tenants pay different levels of service charges, however not all tenants are aware of this or the associated reasons.

Tenants are not always aware of when landscape maintenance operatives will be working in the vicinity of their homes, we have been made aware that this can cause issues such as noise disturbance and debris blowing into tenants' homes and closes.

Arks Response:

We will include an article in the next newsletter about how the service charges are collected.

Timeline: April 2023

Agreed

The contractors schedule will be shared with all tenants. It is important to note that this will always be weather dependent.

Timeline: by 31st March 2023

Agreed

d. Contract Monitoring

We consider that the pre-April 2022 contract monitoring could have been more robust.

We understand that Covid – 19 restrictions may have reduced the time officers spent in local communities or assessing service levels. We consider this led to Ark being less aware of work required as well as issues and concerns in communities, resulting in reduced tenant satisfaction.

We are also aware that some officers are no longer with Ark and the organisation has been recruiting new officers for various posts.

e. Working with Others

The landscaped areas at the properties managed by Inspire are in poor condition which has a detrimental effect on the wider community.

Some tenant car parking areas are not well maintained, and we note concerns that some tenant allocated spaces are being used by others, including carers and visitors to other properties.

We note that not all landscape maintenance issues raised in local communities will be Ark's responsibility. This could be trees, plants, car parking areas, adjacent open spaces that should be maintained by local Councils, other Housing Associations, or other owners.

We are also aware that ownership of some areas may not be known.

6. Next Steps

The Ark Rainbow SIG recommends:

- i. Ark Housing Association Executive Committee and Board consider and take account of our views and suggestions for improvement identified in this report.

Arks Response: The Executive Team (ET) have considered this report. It has not been shared with the Board of Management yet as a discussion still has to take place with the Board about their involvement with the Scrutiny Group

- ii. The Executive Team meets with the Rainbow SIG to discuss our report and provides feedback on how Ark can implement our suggestions for improvement and works with us to develop associated information to tenants.

Arks Response: This has been delegated to the Operational Management Team, specifically Fiona Ross and David Gray who have formulated their response taking into consideration the comments made by the ET.

- iii. Members of our group attend the next available Board meeting to present and discuss our findings.

Arks Response: There has been interaction with the Housing & Property Working Group (HPWG), which consists of some of the members of the Board of Management. This first report, once finalised, will be shared in the first instance with the HPWG. The ET yet have to enter into formal discussions with the Board about their level of involvement. This will be built into the Board Programme for 2023-24.

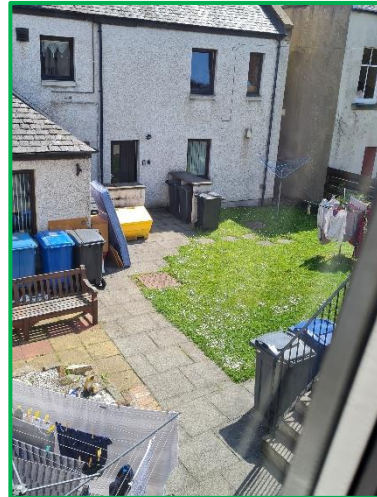
- iv. We commence work with Ark to agree review performance information and tenant satisfaction levels to agree our next scrutiny project.



Appendix 1

Examples of Areas of Concern





ARK RSIG REPORT 1 - Summary of Actions/Timeline

ARK RSIG Recommendation		Ark Action	Timeline	Date completed
h.	Advise tenants of specification	Confirm specification	31 st March 2023	
j. t.	Increase officer presence when contractors on site Advise tenants when operatives will be on site	Not possible but will issue contractors schedule at start of growing season	31 st March 2023	
b. c. v.	Monitoring of contract and tenant involvement	Estate Inspection held jointly with staff and tenants	Quarterly	
aa.	Gather tenant feedback	Regular satisfaction surveys	Quarterly	
u. w.	Progress updates Calculation of service charge	Will be provided to all tenants	Newsletter - Spring 2023 Annual Report – August 2023	
q.	Involve Ark RSIG members in contract management meetings	Not possible but will provide an annual report 12 months after the start of the contract	August 2023	
f.	Senior Staff/ Board are more aware of developments/issues	Site visits by Senior Staff – include in annual report	1 st April 2023 – 31 st March 2024	
		Board members	To be confirmed	
g.	Improvements to existing landscaped areas	Consult tenants on what they want	From 31/3/23 for the next 4 years	
p.	Seek donations of plants from Contactor	Discuss with Contractor	From 31/3/23 for the next 4 years	
m.	Replace old/dead/unsuitable plants	Will only replace dead plants	From 31/3/23 for the next 4 years	
r.	Increase budget	Annual Budget will be available to improve areas over the remaining term of the contract	Over the next 4 years	