

# East Area Panel August 2021 Resident's Questions

## 3 Star West

### 1. Reaffirming the EDB as a resident led budget

**Issue:** The Estate Development Budget was originally established as a resident led fund, with the process led by representatives from Residents Associations. West residents agreed unanimously that this founding principle is being eroded, with the process now being led by officers, rather than residents. They want the principle of a resident-led budget reaffirmed and acted on.

**Background:**

EDB process of application and funding has changed beyond recognition.

Although the EDB process has been discussed at some meetings, the nature and extent of the changes were not clearly put and debated. Some residents on the EDB panel, for example, were not consulted or involved and only realised the extent of the changes when asked to score bids at the West EDB meeting. West residents feel that the present system encourages top-down solutions. For example, residents were told that the old system was unfair and what changes had to be made.

A better procedure would have been to put forward clearly the arguments about why the system was unfair; discuss this with residents; agree whether or not it was unfair; look together at what to do about it and come to a joint solution.

The EDB used to be a simple process that really facilitated involvement. It is now more difficult and less helpful. For example, at Woods House the EDB was a quick way of accessing a small amount of money for their garden, which made a big difference to the volunteer gardeners. Last time Woods House applied for this their bid was rejected.

**Action:** Ask that the Council recognise and acknowledge the issues residents are raising

Reaffirm that the EDB is a resident led process

Engage with residents about what this means in practise.

#### **Response -Keely McDonald-Community Engagement Officer**

The Community Engagement team are sorry to hear that residents do not find the current process to be resident led. All project ideas come from residents and they make the decision on whether the bids receive funding.

An internal audit carried out in 2018, identified that there was only partial confidence in the EDB process and improvements needed to be made to make it fairer and more inclusive. In response, the EDB Review Group (resident members from across the city) was set up to look at the findings of the audit and identify what improvements could be made.

This work was then taken on by the Involvement and Empowerment, Service Improvement Group. All Review Group members were offered and encouraged to join the service improvement group, to continue the work and reduce the number of meetings they were attending.

An EDB Task and Finish Group has now been set up to complete the outstanding actions from this work.

The process of applying for EDB and the decision-making structure has not changed. The EDB Panel still decides on quick bids whilst the EDB Area Panel still decides on main bids. Residents are continuing the work of improving the process. The questions groups are asked on the bid form have not changed

The council has a responsibility to ensure the process is fair and inclusive, adheres to financial regulations and accountability, guidance around project feasibility is offered and confirm approval for bids as the landowner/landlord.

In regard to the Repairs and Maintenance team response to EDB bids. We need to carry out a number of checks on bids prior to delivery to ensure that works can be carried out effectively. Delivery time will vary depending on the bid.

We are committed to delivering EDB bids in a timely way however this has been extremely challenging over the last 16 months due to the impact of the Covid-19 and the high number of responsive repairs that the service is currently managing. The Repairs and Maintenance are currently in the process of undertaking significant recruitment, which we expect that this will improve the delivery time for EDB bids.

## 2. Resident Associations and Resident involvement

**Issue:** There is a lot of demoralisation and frustration amongst West Resident Association representatives. The following points were raised:

West residents feel that they are not listened to and their opinions are not considered important. Whether or not this is true, it is significant because it is the experience of residents who are engaging in the consultation process.

West residents often experience their involvement as a box-ticking exercise and that they are being informed about decisions that have already been made, rather than involved in a joint process.

It is very difficult to get even small things done, for example with CityClean and grounds maintenance. There is often no response or on-going communication about the progress of complaints or issues raised. The difficulty of getting things done, and feeling that your voice is not heard, takes a toll on individuals mental and physical health, and means people give up because they come to believe there is no point. It was recognised that COVID has made the situation more difficult, but there are underlying issues about how the council relates and communicates with its residents which are not about COVID and which need to change.

## Action:

West residents asked for this item to go to Area Panels to (a) register their concerns (b) see if other areas are experiencing similar problems and (c) look for a way forward.

Residents would like clarification as to how are these being actioned and communicated. The question is about communication, so that people know that they are getting things done for what they are being asked for

## Response Keely McDonald-Community Engagement Officer

At time of writing, a meeting is being arranged with West residents to listen to the points they've made and see what we need to do to improve communication. This is due to take place early in August. We hope that this meeting will have taken place before the August Area Panel meetings so that we can provide a verbal response.

## Response: Robert Walker, Head of Operations-City Parks

- Thank you for your question, I'll answer your points in turn:
  - The weather conditions have caused rapid growth, not just to grass but weeds & shrubs, this is the case throughout the city.
  - We are not mowing any less – longer grass takes longer to cut. To get a quality cut is harder to achieve when the grass is longer & has grown so quickly.
  - Weeds are worse not only from the weather but City Parks have not have had the resource during Covid/Isolating staff and this will have had an accumulative affect.
  - CityParks are currently within our target of within 3-4 weeks mowing in the majority of Portslade & Hove Park area
    - We have started round 5 in the majority of areas –
    - Oak dene Gardens & Foxway Flint/Forge area where operatives are working currently this round is slightly overdue but is now in process.
  - **Ingram Court:** Is not an exception in the amount of growth that the team maintain.
    - There are two full time operatives on this estate, and we have had reports that the maintenance has been very effective prior to the summer weather being creating the excessive growth. There are two rounds – a ride on mowing round and a follow up with a pedestrian mower. The ride on round is faster so may not be completed at the same time & grass areas may look incomplete but should be followed up.
    - Weeds in hard stand areas will be due to no longer using Glyphosate, it will impact these areas.
  - **Footpaths/ROW/Bridleways/Twittens** – There are some complicated land ownership issues but If they are within CityParks operational maintenance remit we are working to get to them. I have been working in partnership with Cllr Atkinson to work through these issues and determine who is responsible for the maintenance and flagging areas to the correct department. We are engaging contractors where possible if budget allows.
  - We do not geographically prioritise areas, all areas have the same targets – the exception is prioritising areas that may cause a health & safety hazard.
  - Complaints are responded to in the first instance by the team leader for the area.

## **Jonathon Pyle - Assistant Business Support Manager | City Environment, Hollingdean Depot**

What happens when complaints are made/issues raised for CityClean, what is the process for when complaints are made? Where are they sent to, how are they dealt with?

Complaints received from customers directly into the CityClean Inbox ([cityclean@brighton-hove.gov.uk](mailto:cityclean@brighton-hove.gov.uk)) or via a call-back request from Switchboard (for those currently using the Accessibility Line.)

When an expression of dissatisfaction with the service provided by City Clean is first received into the Cityclean inbox, a Customer Advisor (CA) will firstly review the email to assess both the nature of the issue and whether this is the first time the customer has contacted us about the issue. If there has been no previous contact from the customer and the complaint relates to a general issue (such as a missed collection or weeding issue\*,) the CA will provide details of the complaint to the relevant Team Leader and their manager and request that an investigation is carried out and a response provided in order to respond to the customer. The CA will then respond to the customer to advise of the action they have taken and update the customer on the action they have taken.

*\*Very often for any street cleaning issues the CA will also raise a 'Report A Problem' case which is then sent over to the Streets Team to action.*

If, however, the same customer then contacts us again regarding the same issue, the CA will raise the issue as an "Ops Referral Complaint" via our internal Customer Management system (CHAS), that gets automatically sent through to the relevant Team Leader to investigate. The Team Leader will then investigate the complaint and provide feedback, either directly to the resident (if the resident has requested a response via telephone) or email the CA with the outcome of their investigation, for the CA to update the customer (if the customer has stated they would prefer to be contacted via email.)

If a customer has contacted us and within the body of the email, the customer has requested to raise a complaint, or if the nature of the complaint is more serious (such as staff/crew conduct issues) then the CA will immediately raise a complaint on CHAS irrespective of whether the customer has contacted us before.

Following the recent introduction of a new Customer Management system, all Operations Team Leaders and Manager have 'live' access to all the complaints that have been raised by the CA's and a report can be run at any time. A 10 day turnaround has been agreed with Operations in which to provide feedback to the customer and resolve the complaint, however, it has recently been identified that a number of responses from the Team Leaders fall outside this timeframe and following a meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2021 between the Contact Centre Manager and The Operations Managers, it has been agreed that from next week every Team Leader will book in some designated time each week to respond to any complaints they are responsible for. The Operations Managers have also agreed to review the cases on a regular basis with the Team Leaders to ensure both timely and effective responses are provided.

If the customer remains dissatisfied with the service provide or the outcome of any action taken (or lack of) the CA would offer to raise a Formal Stage 1 Complaint for the customer, under the council's formal complaints procedure. (Previously customers would be advised of how to do this themselves at this stage, however, the CA's are now more pro-active and will offer to raise one on the customers behalf.) It is important to note that customers also have the option or raising a Formal Stage 1 Complaint themselves via the website or by contacting the Customer Feedback Team (CFT) directly without going through any of the above steps. When a Stage 1 Formal Complaint is raised the customer is sent an acknowledgment of their complaint by the CFT and the complaint is passed on to the relevant Manager at Cityclean to carry

out an investigation and respond directly to the customer. The timeframe for these responses is also 10 working days. If the customer remains dissatisfied following their Formal Stage 1 response, the Customer can then escalate the matter to a Stage 2 formal Complaint. At this stage the complaint is reviewed by a Customer Feedback Manager from the council's Customer feedback Team, this may lead to a further independent investigation by them, and can lead to recommendations for service improvement or a specific remedy to the complaint if it is upheld. Stage 2 responses are sent by the Customer Feedback Manager usually within 20 working days.

There is ongoing training to be provided to all CA's in respect of how to respond to queries and complaints, with some specific complaints training currently being scheduled for all staff prior to the Environmental Services telephone line re-opening in September. It has been identified, however, that there have been occasions where the above process has not been followed as it should. When this is identified the individuals have been provided with additional training or had their performance managed more formally.

- What are the current communication procedures to let residents know the progress of complaints/issues raised?

If a customer has contacted City Clean via [cityclean@brighton-hove.gov.uk](mailto:cityclean@brighton-hove.gov.uk) or via the Accessibility Line, then they will be advised that the issue has been passed on to the relevant team to investigate and resolve. If a customer has requested a further update then this request will be included in the communication between the CA and the relevant Team Leader.

When a complaint has been raised on CHAS it is then the responsibility of the Team Leader who has been assigned the complaint to either update the customer directly or update the CA in order to provide an update to the customer.

If there is a delay to responding to a Formal Complaint at Stage 1 then the customer should be notified of the reason for the delay and provided with an expected timescale of when they will receive a full response. Following a recent review of this process it was identified this was not always happening and additional measures have been put into place to ensure this does happen going forward.

If you require any further details or would like me to look into any specific queries or complaints from customers that were not resolved satisfactorily, please feel free to pass these details onto me and I will investigate these myself to identify where the process has fallen down and respond with an explanation.

### 3. Lack of Maintenance of estates

**Issue:** Inadequate grass cutting and grounds maintenance.

**Background:**

Ingram Court: an incomplete job was done when the grass was cut, with some areas left at least 2 feet high, obstructing pavements and causing a hazard. Residents were told these areas had been left as a strimmer was needed, which wasn't available. Weeds are climbing up walls in the carpark and covering paving, fences and buildings.

- North Portslade: alleyway completely overgrown.
- Hangleton and Knoll: overall lack of maintenance to public areas.
- Different areas of the city seem to get different treatment, with some having more regular and frequent grass cutting and maintenance than others.

- Residents attending the Estates Task and Finish group have been disappointed with this and hoped for more progress.

**Action:**

West residents want to see an improvement in the maintenance of estates generally. It was agreed that overgrown pathways and public areas can be a health and safety hazard and this must be taken seriously.

They asked for responses to the following issues:

- Why has the grass cutting and grounds maintenance service been so poor?
- What plans are there to improve this service and give value for money?
- How is it decided what area is getting what?
- Why are workers not provided with the correct equipment to complete a job?

**Response Robert Walker, Head of Operations-City Parks**

We have brought bank cutting specialists contractors with specialist machinery at Fitch Drive which has a similar problem with bank maintenance. I am unable to confirm further detail however, I can confirm that to date none of them have been able to help tackle the problem. In this case it is a steep bank down to the back of a high-rise block. At time of writing in spite of the cutting back of the overgrown bushes two weeks ago, this is still reported to be a continuing problem. A further update will be provided verbally at the next meeting.

## 4. AGM requirements

**Issue:** Residents have been told they must have a generic mobile phone and email address to meet the council's recognition criteria for Residents Associations.

It was agreed it is important residents have an easy way of contacting their Association, but it should be up to the Association to decide what works best for them. One solution should not be imposed by the council.

**Action:**

Request for more discussion on (a) how best to facilitate communication between residents and their Association and (b) a more flexible approach to how this is done.

**Response**

In all areas the use of glyphosate has been stopped, this means that hard surfaces are no longer treated with weed killer. To date no satisfactory substitute has been found, any control on hard surfaces has to be done manually. This is far less effective than chemical control in most situations. We can supply details for any Housing sites where tasks such as grass cutting have been done. This information will be different for different sites.

The situation with verges is quite different to maintenance on Housing land. The Environment Transport and Sustainability Committee will consider whether they change mowing frequencies on verges. The Lewes Rd central reservation is intentionally left long for the wildflowers and will not be cut until September or October. If an area is affecting the vision of drivers it will be cut back.

In relation to verges, as we are behind on cutting, we will not be strimming around lamp posts and spraying around these is no longer an option. There are inconsistencies across the City, these are not intentional and are caused by other operational factors, such as staffing. City Parks currently have contractors and agency staff assisting the gardeners in the north area, due to them having the highest

number of staff shortages. We expect staffing levels to improve, once less people need to quarantine due to. notifications on the NHS track and trace app. City Parks will then use the current hot spell to get on top of outstanding work

### Community Engagement Team

Thank you for your question. We sent out some AGM guidance to offer support for residents associations with AGMs going forward. In the letter, we stated that new requirements are for residents to have an association phone number and email address. Apologies for the lack of clarity in our initial letter, we acknowledge that these requirements should be flexible for each association and that the community engagement team can support associations in acquiring the phones, phone numbers and email addresses on how they can be used. There is not the expectation for residents to be “on call” or the phone number to be accessible at all times. One example of use could be, that the could be “office hours”, the groups could advertise around their area that the phone numbers are available on a certain few hours a week for people to contact them. The community engagement team can support associations and groups in advertising these times.

## 3 Star North

### 5. Overgrown brambles at the bottom of Davey Drive

*See Minutes of North Area Residents Only Meetings: Items 2 and 6 from 19<sup>th</sup> January 2021 and Item 2 from 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2021.*

#### **Issue:**

The overgrown brambles on the bank between the bottom of Davey Drive and Horton Road are a hazard for local residents.

Hollingdean Residents Association has tried many different avenues to get this resolved over the last few years but none have resulted in effective action.

#### **Background:**

When requests to get the bank cleared regularly were not successful the Residents Association submitted an EDB bid for the work to be done, which was approved in April 2019. The work still wasn't done, and despite ongoing reports and written responses to Area Panel, the matter still hasn't been resolved.

In a written response to Area Panel 7<sup>th</sup> January 2021 Justine Harris stated:

*“Housing Services will invite representatives from the Residents Association to attend the inspection in the new year. The piece of land belongs to Housing. CityParks are not asked to cut it as they have no safe way of doing this. This bank cannot be cut with a tractor mounted flail I'm (sic) because of the uneven sloped verge at the bottom, obstacles in the verge such as trees/lamp posts etc and the fact that it is single carriageway, however CityParks are going to be purchasing a new machine that may be able to reach further so it will be trying it out. In the meantime CityParks have confirmed that they will endeavour to keep the overgrowth cut back off the path and steps. The only obligation is to stop any overhang onto the highway which includes the footpath.”*

However, this didn't result in the bank being cleared and more local people have since been injured, including a young boy on a skateboard whose face was severely cut by the brambles. The issue was re-submitted to Area Panel on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021 but no written response was forthcoming. Direct discussions between Hollingdean Residents Association and CityParks have also not resolved this problem, and explanations about a lack of appropriate machinery and a lack of staff have been repeated. Residents' representatives have attended the Estates Task and Finish Group to raise this, as it is recognised that a similar problem exists in other areas of the city. This hasn't yet led to a satisfactory solution, but the discussion is ongoing. The meeting agreed to respond to this lack of effective action by:  
Asking Housing to investigate the use of contractors with suitable equipment to clear the bank.  
Asking the Health and Safety Officer to inspect the area to assess the risk to local residents and action required to mitigate that risk.  
Contacting the Argus to ask them to run a report to highlight the problem.

**Action:**

Residents have proposed that the use of external contractors with appropriate machinery be considered to clear overgrown banks. Information is requested on whether this option has been considered and details of the outcome of any attempts to use contractors.

**Response**

In all areas the use of glyphosate has been stopped, this means that hard surfaces are no longer treated with weed killer. To date no satisfactory substitute has been found, any control on hard surfaces has to be done manually. This is far less effective than chemical control in most situations. We can supply details for any Housing sites where tasks such as grass cutting have been done. This information will be different for different sites.

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## 6. Grass cutting

**Issue:**

There are ongoing problems with the frequency and quality of grass cutting throughout the area.

**Background:**

- The grass cutting teams cut some of the grass areas on estates but leave others uncut.
- They don't strim around trees and lampposts, leaving the long grass and weeds to grow.
- Grass and weeds are left to grow in the cracks in pavements causing a trip hazard for pedestrians.



- The central reservation along Lewes Road and other main roads are not mown, leaving the weeds to grow very tall and obstruct the vision of drivers.

**Action:**

A report is requested from City Parks on: the planned schedule for grass cutting throughout the north area; and how many tasks on the schedule are being missed or done late.

**Response – Justine Harris**

In all areas the use of glyphosate has been stopped, this means that hard surfaces are no longer treated with weed killer. To date no satisfactory substitute has been found, any control on hard surfaces has to be done manually. This is far less effective than chemical control in most situations. We can supply details for any Housing sites where tasks such as grass cutting have been done. This information will be different for different sites.

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## 7. Estate Development Budget – Communication

**Issue:**

There are ongoing problems with communication after bids have been submitted by Residents Associations. This needs to be improved so that:

- the specification of work can be clarified before it commences
- the work can be checked afterwards
- local residents affected by work can be kept informed

**Action:**

Residents are requesting that the procedures for EDB bids be reviewed to ensure Residents Associations are:

- informed of the outcome of all bids;
- contacted before work is carried out to check the location and specification; and
- informed when the work is completed so they can check it has been carried out correctly.

**Response**

We apologise for any instance where residents did not receive the level of communication they were expecting around EDB bids. The Community Engagement and the EDB Team are working together to improve this and ensure groups which have submitted bids have access to updates on their bid progress in good time. The Estate Development Budget Task and Finish Group will be looking at the process of communications around EDB and will be making recommendations around how residents can be better informed at all stages. I will ensure that the points raised here about contacting bid applicants in advance of, and on completion of works are included in that discussion. The recommendations made by the EDB Task and Finish Group will be presented at future Area Panel meetings at the end of this year.