

Select Committee on Environment – March 2011

Report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services

Tenancy and Estate Management

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update Members on Tenancy and Estate Management in Housing Services.

Background

2. This committee received a report on changes to Tenancy and Estate Management Services in November 2009. This report was delivered at a time when a number of changes to the service were just been imbedded and the committee asked for a further update this financial year.
3. It has now been nearly two years since the changes to the service were made and this report highlights the developments in service delivery since April 2009.

Home Checks

4. Home Checks are visits to tenant's homes where the Housing Manager undertakes an inspection of the property and checks with the tenant for any changes in circumstances since our last contact with them.
5. The purpose of Home Checks is the early identification and intervention on tenancy breaches or tenancy support. Examples of breaches of tenancy conditions that may be identified include but are not limited to damage or neglect of the property, tenancy fraud, unauthorised alterations or tenant responsibility repairs. Examples of tenancy support may include but are not limited to assistance in maintaining the garden or home, referrals for aids and adaptations, complaint resolution, access to other services or referrals for education, training or employment opportunities.
6. As at 1st January 2011 we have completed 26,536 Home Check since we started them in April 2006. Only 1260 tenants have so far not received at least one Home Check during the life of their tenancy and these are been prioritised for a visit.
7. We are confident that Home Checks as a central part of our tenancy and estate management strategy are helping us to effectively manage our tenancies. However it has been difficult to measure their effectiveness accurately because the management data required to do this has been held in paper files making an exercise to extract this data not cost effective.
8. Since November 2010 a small number of Housing Managers have been using

bespoke software designed in house by our own ICT team to record the outcomes of their Home Checks. This is done in real time in front of the customer by using their blackberry smart phones. This testing has proved successful and from February 2011 all Housing Managers will be using their blackberry for this purpose.

9. This change in working practice will deliver the benefits of reducing the preparation and post visit work of the Housing Manager by automating some of the processes. This is time that Housing Managers can invest in meeting customers to deal with other tenancy and estate management issues. We will also have access to much better management data that will allow us to evaluate more accurately the cost and benefits of Home Checks and review our strategy on their use.

Gardening Scheme

10. In April 2010 we introduced our gardening assistance scheme in partnership with Future Skills Dudley. The scheme was introduced to assist elderly and vulnerable tenants who were struggling to maintain their gardens through no fault of their own. A budget of £100,000 has been allocated and divided evenly amongst the North and South of the Borough to carry out this work.
11. To date we have completed 24 garden clearances at a cost of £15,226 and 37 tenants have benefited from the garden maintenance service at a cost of £4,361.
12. The maintenance scheme requires tenants to make a contribution of £11 per visit by the gardener and the service is provided between April and October with an average number of 15 visits made by the gardener per cutting season. One off clearance are undertaken either in preparation for a tenant to join the maintenance scheme or sometimes as a one off to put the garden into a condition where the tenant is then able to maintain themselves going forward.
13. In addition a number of tenants in North Dudley who received garden maintenance from Age Concern during our pilot of the scheme have chosen to retain the services of the gardeners working for Age Concern.
14. Work is ongoing to increase the take up of the maintenance scheme and to identify tenants who would qualify and benefit from one off clearances. This is predominately been done by Housing Managers during their home checks but also through liaison with other service areas such as the tenancy sustainment team and raising awareness with elected members and tenant representatives at Area Housing Panels and other meetings to encourage referrals. However the sustainability of the scheme will have to be reviewed if take up of the scheme does not increase.

Anti-Social Behaviour, Nuisance and Disputes

15. Housing Managers continue to respond to service requests for anti-social behaviour, nuisance and disputes between neighbours and communities. At the end of December Housing Managers had received and dealt with 1080 such service requests during the current financial year. These are service requests received via Dudley Council Plus and are in addition to any that have been referred to Housing Managers from Elected Members, Tenant Representatives or direct from customers. Housing Managers are currently on average carrying a

case load of approximately 7 cases of anti-social behaviour, nuisance and disputes.

16. The focus for improvement in performance in this service area has been ensuring that anyone who reports a problem is seen promptly by a Housing Manager who will agree an action plan which will outline what will be done, what will not be done, who is responsible and timescales for completion. This approach has seen an improvement in the satisfaction of customers with the way we manage cases with their overall satisfaction rising to 75% during quarter 3 of this financial year from a position of 65% in previous quarters and years.
17. We are mindful that further improvement can be made in this service area and are jointly leading a Corporate review of our response to the case management of anti-social behaviour. This is timely with the Government starting a consultation exercise on powers for tackling anti-social behaviour and crime. This consultation document can be viewed on the Home Office website at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/consultations/cons-2010-antisocial-behaviour/>.

Gas Servicing

18. The last report brought to this committee highlighted problems we encounter with some tenants who refuse to allow us access in order for us to meet our statutory requirement as a landlord to undertake an annual gas safety check on properties with gas appliances or gas supply.
19. At the time of the last report our Housing Managers had a case load of 188 cases where tenants had not allowed us to carry out our annual service. This included 38 cases where the tenant had failed to allow access for two or more consecutive years.
20. We have established a gas access champions group in the last year to review procedures and processes. As a result performance has improved with the case load of Housing Managers having been reduced to 110 and with only 12 cases that having been outstanding for longer than two years all of which are the subject of live enforcement action.

Rent Arrears

21. One of the most significant changes made to our structure in April 2009 was the introduction of specialist Income Management teams. These teams immediately faced the challenge of controlling and reducing the level of rent arrears during the challenging wider economic conditions.
22. The teams have risen to this challenge and had at the end of December 2010 reduced the level of current rent arrears to £1,245,856 which represents a reduction of £307,199 since April 2009. They have also collected £339,488 from former tenant debt.
23. The teams have brought about these improvements though a number of new ways of working including the introduction of evening telephone sessions to make contact with tenants in arrears, taking payments directly over the telephone when making repayment agreements, stream lining legal enforcement action by using online court applications and by running a number of marketing campaigns at key

times of the year to remind tenants that their rent payments must be a priority.

Electronic Document Management

24. We continuously strive to make efficiency savings across all of our service areas so resources can be put to best use in the delivery of our front line services. A significant development in the last year aimed at reducing the waste of resource both in terms of office space and staff time has been the introduction of an electronic document management system for all of our tenancy and property files.
25. This investment has enabled us to make better use of our office accommodation and has also reduced the likelihood of important documents been lost.

Fire Safety

26. We have implemented new procedures for fire safety checks undertaken by our Estate Assistants across our stock of high and low rise flats during the last twelve months. Fire safety checks are carried out daily to our high rise blocks and on a frequency of every, two, six or twelve weeks for our low rise blocks as determined by a risk assessment.
27. We have also obtained approval to increase our establishment by three Housing Management Assistants to assist with our work on fire safety. We are currently recruiting to these posts.
28. We continue to experience problems of tenants using the communal landings of their buildings to store furniture or as an extension to their own flat. We are currently consulting tenant representatives and health and safety officers to agree our policy in respect of these items with the intention of implementing this with effect from April 2011.

Tenancy Fraud

29. Work has started this year with assistance from colleagues in Audit Services to ensure we mitigate as far as we reasonably can any risks that might expose our services to fraud. We are mindful that in the current economic climate that our risk of exposure to tenancy fraud such as unauthorised sub-letting or key selling may be higher than it has been previously.
30. Successful action has been taken in the last year to recover possession of one of our properties where we had established the tenant intended to sublet the property. Team Managers have also investigated a number of cases identified through the Audit Commissions National Fraud Initiative where data from different sources has suggested possible tenancy fraud.
31. Further work is planned to raise the profile of the risks of tenancy fraud and to ensure our policies and procedures have proportionate mitigating actions contained within them to minimise such.

Finance

32. There are no financial implications from this report

Law

33. The Council may do anything incidental to, conducive to or which facilitates the discharge of its functions under Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972. This would include anything incidental to the Council's housing powers and duties under the various Housing Acts.

Equality Impact

34. This report has no direct Equality Implications. The provision of the housing management service complies with the Council's policy on Equality and Diversity.

Recommendation

35. It is recommended that:-

- Members note the contents of this report.



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Andrea Pope-Smith
Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services

Contact Officer: Nigel Collumbell
Telephone: 01384 815050
Email: Nigel.collumbell@dudley.co.uk

List of Background Papers