
Select Committee on Environment – 26th June 2007

Report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services

Patch-Working and Estate Management – Home Checks

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to advise Members on the implementation of 'Home Checks' across the Borough in 2006 / 2007.

Background

2. A report was presented to this committee in January 2007 on improvements made to patch-working and estate management in the previous 2 years. This report highlighted that the introduction of 'Home Checks' during 2006 was a significant service development intended to contribute to the continuous improvement of patch-working and estate management.
3. The report also highlighted that a review of the implementation of Home Checks was underway and Members requested that further information be made available on this once it was completed.

Implementation of Home Checks

4. Home Checks are visits carried out by Housing Managers to individual tenants in their homes. The purpose of the visit is to carry out an inspection of the property to identify any breaches of tenancy conditions or other issues which may affect the sustainability of the person's tenancy.
5. Home Checks were introduced across the Borough in April 2006 with the target of completing Home Checks for all our properties on a 3 year cycle.
6. At the end of the 2006/07 financial year 5782 Home Checks had been completed. This represents 24.5% of our stock that have benefited from these visits. This is however slightly behind our intended target of 33% for the first year.

Review of Home Checks

7. A review of the first year of Home Checks was completed in March 2007 to assess the impact that they have had. The views of tenants who had received a Home Check as well as the views of staff undertaking the Home Checks were sought as part of the review to assess the impact. The following are the key findings.
8. Housing Managers identified that the most common issues identified and discussed with tenants at Home Checks were:

- Tenants wishing to report new repairs or enquire about previously reported repairs.
 - Changes to tenancy details not previously notified to us.
 - Breaches of tenancy conditions / estate management issues.
 - Referrals to other agencies for care or support e.g. Social Services.
9. Tenants who were surveyed as part of the review indicated that the following issues were discussed with them during their Home Check:
- Repairs.
 - Nuisance / Neighbour Complaints.
 - Condition of garden.
 - Improvements to property.
10. Housing Managers generally feel that Home Checks have helped to develop positive relationships with tenants living on the estates they manage and this view was reciprocated by the tenants themselves with 81% of tenants surveyed stating that, as a result of the Home Checks, they would now feel more confident to contact Housing Services having met their Housing Manager.
11. The review has identified that there is a gap in management information on the outcome of Home Checks. Manual records have been kept for the outcome of each individual Home Check but not in a way that can easily be collated and reported on. Therefore it is not possible at this time to state the number or type of actions or advice that have been carried out as a result of Home Checks, although individual property records can be scrutinised if necessary.
12. In the absence of detailed statistics to substantiate the impact of Home Checks evidence has been collected on examples of positive outcomes. A selection of these good practices are highlighted below:
- A property in the Central Dudley Area was identified by the Housing Manager during a Home Check as poorly looked after by the tenant including the standard of decoration and condition of garden. The tenant was requested to make improvements and the Housing Manager carried out a follow up visit to check on progress. Significant improvements were made to the property and garden, turning it from a property that was in a poor condition to one that was well looked after. This property was not known to the Housing Manager before the Home Check as having any problems and no complaints had been received. However, had this not been picked up on in a Home Check, the condition of the property would have been likely to deteriorate further, which may have led to complaints from other residents. The Home Check enabled the breach of tenancy conditions to be identified early enough for action to be taken that ensured the breaches were remedied and the tenancy sustained.
 - Whilst undertaking a Home Check at a property in Halesowen, the Housing Manager took the opportunity to discuss with the tenant their rent account which was £300 in arrears. The tenant explained to the Housing Manager that they were withholding their rent because of a repair that had not been completed at the property. The Housing Manager was able to resolve the repair complaint, with the assistance of officers from Building Services, and the tenant duly paid all the outstanding rent.

This is an example where the Home Check enabled a Housing Manager to get easily to the root cause of the tenants breach of their tenancy conditions and resolve the matter to both the satisfaction of the tenant and the Authority before positions became entrenched.

- Whilst carrying out another Home Check in Halesowen to an elderly tenant's home it was identified that the property was in a poor state of repair, with ceilings bowing and plaster crumbling from the walls. The tenant had not reported any repairs which was why the property had got in this condition. The Housing Manager was able to arrange for an inspection of the property and for the tenant to be moved to temporary accommodation whilst the property was repaired. Had this Home Check not been carried out, it is likely that these repairs would have gone unaddressed and the tenant would have been left to live in less than satisfactory conditions.
 - A Housing Manager in North Dudley identified an elderly couple who were struggling to maintain the general up keep of their property during a Home Check. The Housing Manager, with the tenant's consent, made a referral to Social Services and a crash clean of the property was arranged. Again without a Home Check this situation may not have been addressed.
 - A Housing Manager in Stourbridge identified a water leak coming from a tenant's gas boiler during a Home Check which had gone unnoticed by the tenant. The Housing Manager was able to make arrangements whilst at the property so that the boiler could be repaired the same day.
 - A group of Housing Managers working together in Brierley Hill chose to target a number of roads and streets as a whole for Home Checks. During one round of these Home Checks tenants commented that they had seen a significant improvement in the condition of the area with neighbours throwing out rubbish and tending to their gardens shortly after receiving notification that the Home Checks were to be carried out in preparation for the visits.
13. The above examples of positive outcomes of Home Checks show the impact they are having in terms of effectively managing our tenancies, making a difference to individual tenants living conditions and the wider impact they can have on roads or estates.
14. The majority of tenants surveyed (88%) were happy for the Home Check to be carried out and also satisfied with all aspects of how it was conducted by the Housing Manager.

Improvements Planned for Home Checks

15. The review of the implementation of Home Checks has highlighted both anecdotal and factual evidence that Home Checks are making a difference to the management of our tenancies and estates. They are generally seen as a positive tool by both officers and residents. However there are a number of improvements that we wish to make to Home Checks which are outlined below.

16. As stated earlier we are slightly behind target at the end of the first year of Home Checks against where we wanted to be on the number of Home Checks completed. All Housing Managers have been set targets to ensure they complete Home Checks to all remaining properties within the next two years to complete the first 3 year cycle. The completion of Home Checks has been set as a key Housing Management target and performance against this will be scrutinised regularly by senior managers.
17. We are exploring mobile technology solutions for Housing Managers that will enable them to record the outcomes of the Home Check whilst at the property they are visiting as well as having access, electronically, to the individual tenants' records whilst out on site so that more queries can be answered during the visit. This will have the benefit of creating records of Home Checks that can be manipulated into management reports so that the quantity and quality of Home Checks can be kept under ongoing scrutiny, but also improve the customer experience by providing more immediate responses to queries that cannot currently be answered on site. It is also anticipated that the time officers currently need to spend back at the office recording the outcome of their visits will be reduced or eliminated so that this time can be spent more pro-actively on management of their estates.
18. We intend to increase the level of publicity on Home Checks in terms of promoting their purpose and good news stories arising from them. The purpose of doing so is to generally raise the awareness of Home Checks as it is still fairly low, even after 12 months of carrying out this work.
19. A further review is planned to be carried out before the end of the third year cycle to fully assess the impact Home Checks have had on patch-working and estate management.

Finance

20. There are no financial implications from this report as Home Checks are being carried out with existing resources.

Law

21. 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

22. 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

23. It is recommended that:-

- Members note the contents of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Linda Sanders'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning of the first name.

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Linda Sanders
Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services

Contact Officer: Diane Channings
Assistant Director (Housing Management)
Telephone: 01384 815063
Email: Diane.Channings@dudley.co.uk

List of Background Papers