

Agenda No:

Report Title: Resident Scrutiny Panel – review of the tenancy sustainment service

Board: Town & Country Housing (TCH) Board

Action: For discussion & consideration

Date of Meeting: Thursday 20 October 2022

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Presenters: Teresa Godden O’Callaghan & Alex Tuckwell, resident scrutiny panel members

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Documents in the Board Pad Reading Room: Action plan (appendix one)

Executive Summary

Following a review of the tenancy sustainment service, the resident scrutiny panel have developed ten service improvement recommendations. These are detailed in section five of this report and in the action plan (appendix one).

Recommendations

The Board are kindly requested to consider the findings & recommendations detailed in section four and five of this report and in the action plan (appendix one). The action plan also contains the management response.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The resident scrutiny panel was established in October 2013 and is designed to fulfil Town & Country Housing's (TCH's) commitment to enable residents to directly influence service provision, as well as exceed the Regulator of Social Housing's regulatory requirements. Since April 2014, the panel has undertaken ten service reviews of customer services, responsive repairs & maintenance, the void standard, the grounds maintenance service, the money support service, responsive gas services, planned repairs & maintenance, leaseholder & shared owner services, service charges and the 'resident voice' phase one (digital services and service standards) & phase two (staff recruitment, induction & training and resident involvement in procurement).
- 1.2 In January 2022, the panel commenced a review of the tenancy sustainment service. This was undertaken by resident scrutiny panel members: Francesca O'Neill, Emma Lovell, Natalieann Leadbetter, Paul Evans, Teresa Godden O'Callaghan, Valerie George, Kevin Dodds, Adam Field, Alex Tuckwell and Andrew Palmer.
- 1.3 The panel recognise that the tenancy sustainment service is relatively new and was suddenly and heavily utilised when the first Covid-19 lockdown occurred in March 2020. They also appreciate the considerable efforts made during the welfare calls programme and the subsequent workload this has resulted in, while noting that financial struggles and poor mental health are not new concerns for residents. Given the resources the team has, the panel accepts the service can only meet the needs of a limited number of residents, and that several additional members of staff have already been recruited to the team in its short history.

2. Rationale & aims

- 2.1 Tenancy sustainment featured quite prominently in wider housing sector news when the first Covid-19 lockdown happened, particularly highlighting the many hundreds of welfare calls that were made to the most vulnerable residents up and down the country. The result was a stark picture of the daily struggles of many. Since then, this has been compounded by energy price rises and the 'cost of living' crisis, meaning the panel felt it would be timely to review the service now.

3. Methodology

- 3.1 The service review was undertaken using a structured process developed during previous reviews. This included a desk top review of evidence and information, followed by a reality check phase culminating in several recommendations for service improvement.
- 3.2 The desk top review phase involved the gathering of relevant evidence and information. This was analysed and considered by the panel over several weeks and included the following:
 - A presentation and discussion with Niki Melville, Tenancy Sustainment Manager
 - An extensive research exercise to compare TCH documentation with those of 23 other registered providers to identify good practice.

3.3 The activities outlined below were undertaken as part of the reality check phase. This provided an opportunity to clarify and affirm provisional findings resulting from the desk top review phase.

- Discussions with and/or surveys of 45 residents who had used the tenancy sustainment service in the last three months
- Presentation from Twenty11 housing provider about their tenancy sustainment offer
- Discussions with other tenancy sustainment leads to identify best practice and the differences in service delivery.

The panel recognised that tenancy sustainment involves sensitive and complex issues and that service users may not wish to recount a period when they were facing difficulties. Service users were approached to give their feedback on the understanding that there was no requirement to divulge specific circumstances. Despite this, there was a limited response (less than 25% of those who were approached) and of those, almost half were unsure what the tenancy sustainment service was or seemed unaware that they had indeed used it.

4. Findings

4.1 Firstly, the panel acknowledges that the demands on the tenancy sustainment service have grown exponentially due to factors that could not have been anticipated, and that external sources of community support (e.g. local authorities) are equally stretched.

4.2 Although the interventions that are being delivered are significant, the panel would wish to see earlier, more pre-emptive involvement to prevent residents reaching crisis point, and for this be a more cross-organisational function. In other words, everyone loses (TCH and residents) where tenancies fail.

4.3 The survey responses indicated that many residents were largely unaware about what the service does, even though they were recent recipients. This confirms the panel's view that the name of the service could be clearer – the word 'sustainment' is jargon and is associated with the green/eco agenda.

4.4 The recommendations below reflect these findings. Given the review has focused on what it means for a resident to sustain their tenancy and the complex factors potentially present when residents experience difficulties, some of the recommendations will require a cross departmental approach for implementation. The recommendations may also contain some information for contextual purposes.

5. Recommendations

5.1 The panel have not made any specific recommendations about how tenancy sustainment resources are used but wish to state that this is a very crucial service, especially with the cost-of-living crisis. They recognise that more and more residents are likely to need support, whether it be with rent, budgeting for utilities, mental health and so on, and that where a tenancy fails, this is detrimental to both tenants and TCH. The panel are aware that waiting times to access the service can be lengthy, which is far from ideal, and that there is a fine line between the tenancy sustainment service and for example, the services provided by the neighbourhood housing managers and income managers.

Therefore, the panel recommends that tenancy sustainment should be every staff member's responsibility. Although the tenancy sustainment team has a specialist role, all customer facing staff should be equipped with the skills, information and ability to make quick referrals to external agencies where needed.

1. Consider renaming service to 'tenancy support' as 'tenancy sustainment' is not widely understood. Even residents who were contacted to give feedback about their recent experience of using the service did not recall the name, it had to be explained that it was help and/or support.
2. Improve website information with more information about the types of tenancy support available. As there is a process of prioritisation and triaging, explain this in simple terms so expectations are managed. Use more pictorial images, diagrams and graphics. It remains hard to find anything on the website unless you have a clear idea about what you are searching for and already know the name of a service.
3. Consider what else can be done to promote self-help like a directory of local services, mental health support, second hand furniture and budget management tools? If done well, this could reduce demand. What about budget management e-courses for those residents who could benefit?
4. Customer facing teams including the tenancy sustainment, neighbourhood housing managers and income managers should be featured on the website with names, photos, geographical area of responsibility and contact details. We appreciate there is high staff turnover, but this information is very important to residents.
5. The assessment form at the beginning and at the end of an intervention should contain some similar questions to enable a direct comparison and to provide a better measure of effectiveness. In addition, the 'closure' element is ambiguous and should state 'closure survey'. It is not currently clear who is responsible for completing the forms (they refer to the 'first' and 'third' person). Also, consideration about a simple pre and post intervention perception survey. This could be as simple as a digital wheel with colours that asks the resident to select how they are feeling at the outset and then post intervention.
6. Publish how many residents are supported each year with case studies (alongside better website information). This appears to be the most widely used performance indicator in the sector, as well as household debt reduction.
7. Consider how the service can be included at the pre-tenancy stage for all tenures. Can it be promoted at sign-up or in the HUG so residents know where to go if they experience difficulties?
8. With the cost-of-living crisis, what else can be done to reduce fuel poverty? Again, this is all about better resident information on the website. This remains disappointing, with information presented in a random, incoherent way.
9. Can key messages/sound bites be relayed to residents by senior staff such as the CEO, using social media or a short video included in the newsletter to promote tips about smart energy use and the help available for those who need it?

6. Next steps

- 6.1 Before this report was submitted to Board, it was submitted to the appropriate managers and executive management team for comment. The management response to each of the recommendations is included in the 'management response' column in the accompanying action plan (appendix one).
- 6.2 The panel requests that the Board considers the recommendations & proposed timescales and provides a formal response, detailing the process by which the approved recommendations will be implemented. The resident scrutiny panel constitution states that *'where recommendations are agreed by the Board, an action plan will be developed and implemented by the head of service. He/she will provide the panel with a progress update every six months. Where the Board does not agree with any of the panel's recommendations, the reasons will be explained in their formal response to the panel'*.
- 6.3 The approved recommendations will also be summarised and published on the TCH website to enable residents to understand the impact of the resident scrutiny panel on service improvement.
- 6.4 The panel wish to extend their sincere gratitude to Niki Melville, for his flexibility, openness and positive approach to the resident scrutiny process.