

**Annual Tenancy Visits
Tenant Scrutiny Board
19th March 2015**

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Desired Outcomes and Recommendations

Desired Outcome – To reassure tenants that the primary purpose of home visits is to build good tenant/landlord relations

Recommendation 1 – That the confused purpose of the ATV be clarified to clearly show that the primary purpose of the ATV is to get to know tenants and understand their needs *not* to detect tenancy fraud.

Desired Outcome – To reassure tenants that the primary purpose of home visits is to build good tenant/landlord relations

Recommendation 2 – That the ‘tarnished’ image of the ATV be improved with a change of name. The phrase ‘*Home Environment Review*’ is suggested as an umbrella term to capture information about the built environment and social environment.

Desired Outcome – Better use of officer time and improving tenant/landlord relations

Recommendation 3 – That visits be by appointment in the first instance

Desired Outcome – Focussing resources on tenants most in need of support

Recommendation 4 – That housing managers have local discretion to extend the period between visits to two years for those tenants they feel are not at risk.

Desired Outcome – More effective use of officer time

Recommendation 5 – That housing officers work smarter with other agencies in terms of planning visits and gaining access.

Desired Outcome – To reach tenants not already contacted through ATVs

Recommendation 6 – That ‘Action Days’ be used to target areas in the city where landlord/tenant contact is low

Desired Outcome – Reduction in duplication of effort

Recommendation 7 – That those living in sheltered accommodation be removed from the formal visiting arrangements

Desired Outcome – Increased and better targeted and managed contact with tenants

Recommendation 8 – That Housing Leeds reviews alternative contact methods for identified groups



Desired Outcomes and Recommendations

Desired Outcome – Increased service efficiencies and opportunities for savings

Recommendation 9 – That the Director of Environment and Housing supports the business case for funding to introduce mobile technology in housing management (subject to a successful pilot) We also request that this Board be provided with an update on the pilot outlining the financial and operation viability of the technology.

Desired Outcome – To ensure data collected is correct to improve service outcomes

Recommendation 10 – That the data collected be reviewed as part of the development programme for the introduction of mobile technology and an evaluation be undertaken about how the information collected is shared and translates into service improvement

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Introduction and Scope

Introduction

1. The Tenant Scrutiny Board is an amalgamation of the scrutiny panels previously established under the three ALMOs. Our current membership consists of those who sat on the previous ALMO scrutiny panels. Many of us have also sat, or continue to sit on other tenant forums and or actively take part in other tenant activities. As such we bring a depth of knowledge and experience to the scrutiny process and collectively we wish to provide robust challenge to ensure that Leeds City Council provides a high quality housing service that retains tenants at the heart of the organisation
2. Our first formal meeting under the new arrangements was held in April 2014 and centred on our terms of reference, procedure rules and training needs. At our June meeting we discussed our work programme and at our meeting on 23rd July 2014 agreed that our first piece of work should focus on tenancy visits.
 - The current arrangements for tenancy visits
 - Why visits are undertaken
 - The benefit of visits to landlord and tenant
 - The procedures for tenancy visits
 - The resources allocated to visits
 - Who undertakes visits, what time is allocated within job descriptions
 - The skill set of those undertaking visits/training provided
 - The questions asked and the information gathered by the visits
 - The use of technology in collecting data
 - What use is made of the collected information, is it shared elsewhere
 - Using information to safeguard vulnerable tenants
 - Current performance levels in terms of number of visits completed/repeat visits/value for money/cost of a visit
 - Performance monitoring arrangements
 - Tenants' own experiences of visits
 - Publicity, communications and information around tenancy visits

Scope of the Inquiry

3. Terms of Reference for this Inquiry were agreed at our Board meeting on 24th September 2014 when we concluded that the purpose of the Inquiry would be to make an assessment of and, where appropriate, make recommendations on the following areas:
 4. The Inquiry was conducted over six evidence gathering sessions which took place between September 2014 and January 2015, when we received a range of evidence both written and verbal.
 5. Members of the Board also interviewed housing officers in individual housing offices and conducted paper survey with housing managers and tenants. In addition a visit to Wakefield District Housing was undertaken by representatives of the



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Board to discuss the use of mobile technology. We are grateful for the contributions of those who 'do the job' and for the open and informative information provided which highlighted the many complexities of their work.

6. We would also like to thank all those involved in providing written evidence to us on this matter. Particularly we would like to thank officers in the Tenant and Community Involvement Team, who have helped us with the transition from three scrutiny panels to one Tenant Scrutiny Board. A full list of those who participated is detailed at the end of this report.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

7. From the offset it is important for us to stress that we are 100% supportive of the notion that landlords should know their tenants well and that there should exist a relationship where respective rights and responsibilities are understood and where appropriate enforced.
8. We are also of the view that the management of social housing should not just be about the management of housing stock but about understanding tenants' needs and responding accordingly. We acknowledge therefore that this cannot be achieved without some form of meaningful contact between landlord and tenant.
9. We were advised that the Annual Tenancy Visit (ATV) was designed to fulfil this function. ATVs were to be the means by which every tenant received a quality visit from their landlord in order for that landlord/tenant relationship to be nurtured. Having finished our Inquiry we have concluded that the ATV in its current form does not achieve that objective and that, as it stands, is not fit for purpose.
10. This report suggest a number of improvement measures which, if implemented, will achieve the landlord's (and our) wish to have in place a system where landlord/tenant contact is maintained, whilst at the same time raising performance and customer satisfaction.
11. Having acknowledged the need for meaningful tenant contact we are of the view that Housing Leeds should reconsider how these contacts are made. In our view ATVs suffer from an identity crisis as a result of them trying to address two aims, firstly to undertake tenancy verification to address tenancy fraud and secondly as a means to get to know the tenant and their family circumstances to ensure the tenancy is being effectively managed and the appropriate support mechanisms are in place. Our conclusion is that they are not wholly effective in either.
12. As a means to detect fraud, the ATV has not been proven to be an effective tool. Whilst issues of tenancy fraud are picked up at ATVs, records do not confirm whether there has been an increase in detection as a direct result of ATVs. An increase in the detection of fraud is largely attributed to the appointment of 3 dedicated Tenancy Fraud Officers. (There were 90 fraud investigations in 2013/14 and this increased to 231 in 2014/15. Of those 231 only 14 had been proven. In addition, the Council utilises other methods for determining tenancy fraud, such as sharing data with other Council services, including Leeds Benefit Service and Leeds Home Ownership Team. Generally the



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available data available does not answer the specific effectiveness of ATVs in detecting tenancy fraud.

13. This is ironic as our understanding and that of those tenants we spoke to and also a number of housing officers is that the sole purpose of ATVs is to detect fraud. This opinion is reinforced by the title of the form used; *Annual Tenancy Verification Form*, the tone of the data collected and not least the need to prove identity. Similarly the unannounced nature of the visit suggests that fraud detection is the sole purpose of the visit. If this is a misinterpretation of the purpose of an ATV then the ATV image needs a thorough overhaul.
14. We believe the purpose of the ATV needs to be redefined and clearly explained to both tenants and housing officers. It is our view that the primary purpose of the ATV should *not* be to detect tenancy fraud but to get to know tenants and understand their needs. To facilitate this re definition and to remove the stigma of the present ATV we would recommend a change of name. The phrase '*Home Environment Review*' was suggested as an umbrella term to capture information about the built environment and social environment.

Recommendation 1 –

That the confused purpose of the ATV be clarified to clearly show that the primary purpose of the ATV is to get to know tenants and understand their needs *not* to detect tenancy fraud.

Recommendation 2 –

That the 'tarnished' image of the ATV be improved with a change of name. The phrase '*Home Environment Review*' is suggested as an umbrella term to capture information about the built environment and social environment.

15. We also believe that to reflect the revised way in which Housing Leeds interacts with its tenants, 'Home Environment Review's should be by appointment where ever possible. We are not supportive of the current policy of unannounced visits which operates on the principle that all social housing tenants are suspects in criminal activity. We view this as insulting and unnecessary as well as being inefficient and expensive in terms of unnecessary and repeat visits, a common frustration cited by housing officers.

Recommendation 3 –

That visits be by appointment in the first instance.

16. We do recognise however that the performance levels of housing officers undertaking visits should still be monitored and targets set. However we think it unrealistic and indeed unnecessary that *all* tenants should



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and can be seen annually. This view is echoed by the majority of those housing officers we spoke to and played out by the current performance statistics.

17. We recommend that the housing manager has local discretion to extend the period to two years for those tenants they feel are not at risk.

Recommendation 4 –

That housing managers have local discretion to extend the period between visits to two years for those tenants they feel are not at risk.

18. We do acknowledge that there will be occasions when tenants do not cooperate in the making of appointments and on those occasions we would expect the housing officer to seek alternative methods including 'cold calling'. We are of the view that in this regard housing officers could work smarter with other agencies in terms of planning visits and gaining access. For example, if a repair or gas appointment has been made, an exchange of this information with a housing officer would give that officer the opportunity to plan their visit at the same time. It is significant that gas visits have a 98% success rate. At rent week 40 a 63% ATV completion rate was recorded.

Recommendation 5 –

That housing officers work smarter with other agencies in terms of planning visits and gaining access.

19. Housing Leeds should also look at the ad hoc deployment of housing staff across the city to improve landlord /tenant contact in those areas where performance might not be as good as expected. This could be achieved by the increased use of 'Action Days'.

Recommendation 6 –

That 'Action Days' be used to target areas in the city where landlord/tenant contact is low

20. We believe that certain groups can be removed from the current (or remodelled) visit arrangements. We believe that those living in sheltered accommodation already receive numerous visits from scheme managers and we understand contact is to be increased. These officers are familiar with the circumstances of their tenants and therefore it is not necessary for them to receive an ATV or variation thereof. We believe doing this will make significant savings. We have been advised that the average cost of a tenancy visit is £20.65. With approximately 4188 sheltered homes, stopping these visits would generate a saving of approximately £86,500.



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Recommendation 7 –

That those living in sheltered accommodation be removed from the formal visiting arrangements.

21. We also believe that a revised visiting regime provides Housing Leeds with an opportunity to review alternative contact methods for identified groups. For low risk tenants contact could be less frequent and perhaps by phone. Conversely, high risk tenants might be seen more regularly. Again this would be determined locally, but within a corporate framework.

Recommendation 8 –

That Housing Leeds reviews alternative contact methods for identified groups.

22. Having commented on the frequency of the visits, their primary purpose and name, we now move on to the method in which tenant information is collected, the data collected and how the information is ultimately used

Method of collecting information

23. During our review we were struck at how labour intensive and paper based

the ATV process was. There is considerable officer prep time, a lengthy form to complete and then the back office transfer of the collected information on to other data bases. Our immediate view was that the introduction of mobile technology could dramatically increase efficiency. To substantiate that view a visit to Wakefield District Housing was undertaken to see first-hand how mobile technology could be utilised.

24. Wakefield District Housing use Android devices - phones and tablet computers for a range of functions including, terminations, termination inspections, void listing, shortlisting, offers and sign ups.
25. There is huge enthusiasm for the devices from staff particularly in their use during 'Periodic Tenancy Visits' (the equivalent to our ATVs) where they have managed to almost totally eliminate paper form filling and back office data entry. We noted that the devices could enter all the required data, scan ID documents, record house conditions, take photographs etc. In addition the data becomes available on the back office system by the time the officer returns to the office.
26. We acknowledge that to implement a similar computer system in Leeds would require substantial development costs. We were told that the cost to Wakefield was £1.2m (1/3 on hardware, 1/3 on software and 1/3 on



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data connectivity). However we feel that there is a sound business case for mobile technology, not just for ATVs but across the housing management/landlord function.

27. We are aware that Housing Leeds is in the early stages of looking at options and putting together a business case for funding. We are aware that approval to purchase 13 Dell Venue II Pro Atom tablets to carry out a pilot to evaluate usage within two housing offices has been sought. We would recommend that full support is given to this initiative.

Recommendation 9 –

That the Director of Environment and Housing supports the business case for funding to introduce mobile technology in housing management (subject to a successful pilot). We also request that this Board be provided with an update on the pilot outlining the financial and operation viability of the technology.

The data collected

28. The introduction of mobile technology would inevitably require a review of the data collected on home visits. We would welcome this. From our discussions with housing officers we got varying views as to whether the data collected was the right data or whether some was missing. For example it was remarked that no data is asked for in relation to anti-social

behaviour or incidents of break-ins or burglary. Similarly no data is collected on adaptations knowledge of other council services.

29. Another issue relates to capturing the needs of the whole household. The ATV form focuses on the named tenant and does not explicitly refer to the possible needs of other members of the household. We acknowledge that this may be picked up during conversation however; the current form does not prompt those discussions, which we believe it should.

30. We also believe that consideration be given about how the data collected can be shared with other agencies within the confines of data protection law.

Recommendation 10 –

That the data collected be reviewed as part of the development programme for the introduction of mobile technology and an evaluation be undertaken about how the information collected is shared and translates into service improvement.



Evidence and Witnesses

Monitoring arrangements

Standard arrangements for monitoring the outcome of the Board's recommendations will apply.

The decision-makers to whom the recommendations are addressed will be asked to submit a formal response to the recommendations, including an action plan and timetable, normally within two months.

Following this the Scrutiny Board will determine any further detailed monitoring, over and above the standard quarterly monitoring of all scrutiny recommendations.

Reports and Publications Submitted

- Terms of Reference for the Board's inquiry into ATVs
- Report of Chief Officer (Housing Management) to Tenant Scrutiny Board on 24 September 2014
- ATV Verification Form
- ATVs completed by Ward 2013-14
- Leeds City Council Tenancy Agreement
- Housing Management response to questions and areas of clarification arising from Board meeting on 24 September 2014
- Ward Summary of ATV Performance
- Submission of Board Member, Roderic Morgan, ATV Interview (September 2014)
- Submission of Board Member, Barry Stanley, ATV Interviews (September 2014)
- Submission of Board Member, Jackie Worthington, ATV Interview (September 2014)
- Submission of Board Member, Jim Fergusson, ATV Interviews (October 2014)
- E-mail correspondence received from tenants in relation to ATVs
- Housing Management response to questions from Board Members dated 2 December 2014
- Notes of meeting with Housing Management on 3 December 2014
- ATV questionnaire template for Housing Managers
- ATV questionnaire template for Tenants
- ATV questionnaire responses from Housing Managers
- ATV questionnaire responses from Tenants
- Housing response to questions from Board Members for 21 January meeting
- Notes of meeting from visit to Wakefield District Housing on 27 January 2015



Evidence and Witnesses

Witnesses Heard

- Councillor Peter Gruen, Executive Board Member (Neighbourhoods, Planning and Personnel)
- Liz Cook, Chief Officer (Housing Management)
- Mandy Sawyer, Head of Neighbourhood Services
- Amanda Britton, Service Manager (Tenant and Community Involvement)
- Sharon Guy, Housing Manager (Scrutiny and Customer Relations)
- Lee Ward, Neighbourhood Services Officer (Tenant Scrutiny)
- Information gathered from Housing Managers as part of ATV interviews
- Information gathered from tenants regarding their experiences of ATVs.
- Information gathered from Housing Managers in response to ATV questionnaires
- Information gathered from tenants in response to ATV questionnaires
- Geoff Kirk, Service Director (Business Systems), Wakefield District Housing
- Craig Wood, Corporate Debt Manager, Wakefield District Housing
- Louise Muirhead, Senior Business Analyst, Wakefield District Housing
- Matt Owens, Estate Officer, Wakefield District Housing
- Nicola Guy, Home Search Officer, Wakefield District Housing

Dates of Scrutiny

Tenant Scrutiny Board meetings on:

- 24 September 2014
- 16 October 2014
- 21 January 2015
- 18 February 2015
- 5 March 2015
- 19 March 2015

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**Tenant Scrutiny Board
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March 2015
Report author: Peter Marrington**



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CITY COUNCIL

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