

TENANT SCRUTINY BOARD

FRIDAY, 21ST OCTOBER, 2022

- PRESENT:** John Gittos in the Chair
Stanley Burton
Mary Farish
Neil Battison
Sue Easton
Jackie Worthington
Sallie Bannatyne
Peter Middleton
Dennis Moody
- APOLOGIES:** Rita Ighade
- GUESTS:** 4 Housing Officers
Ian Montgomery (Service Manager for
Tenant Engagement)
Press Attendee: David
- OFFICERS:** Emma Lomax
Peter Greenwood

1 Welcome Introductions and Apologies

JG welcomed everyone to the meeting and apologies noted for Rita Ighade.

2 Exempt Items

None.

3 Late Items

None.

4 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes from the last meeting were approved as a true record.

5 Chair's Report

JG addressed the board and guests and explained the purpose of the Chairs update.

Draft minutes to be approved at the meeting
to be held on Date Not Specified

JG advised of conversations with Peter, to finalise the agenda and forward plan of meetings until the end of the year. Works is also under way to update the Terms of Reference and re writing this in more tenant friendly language. The changes will be brought to the board via a draft and then tabled for approval. JG will also ask a member of the board to support him in this. JG is due a meeting on 8th November with Councillor Rafique, Executive Member for Environment, Housing and Communities to update him on the work of the Board. JG will also be attending the Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board, as well as the Housing Ombudsman Resident Panel next week.

6 Discussion with Housing Officers

JG explained to the Board why the Housing Officers have been asked to attend the meeting, to find out more about the work they do. This will then be followed on at next months meeting with a discussion with Team Leaders and Housing Managers from the same areas for the same questions and discussion. In December, Gez Tinsdale, Chief Officer Housing, will be attending, and we can ask further questions of him to give a full picture of the local housing management service.

For anonymity and allowing them to speak freely, the Housing Officer's will be referred to in these minutes as **Officer A, B, C and D.**

JG asks the first Housing Officer to describe some of their common duties.

Officer A described how typically on a Monday the focus is on rent account checks which need any action, contact with the customer, payment or formal action to escalate from the prior week. Each week reviewing activity and any rent recommendations made. There are usually between 50-60 cases to review through CX, the computer system. Additionally, there can be further cases not processed by the system or to help with if there are other officers are on leave. Rents related work is the main activity for Monday and can include looking at introductory tenancies and also considering the support needs of tenants who may be in financial difficulty.

JG – How long have you been a Housing Officer?

OA – Just over 3 years

JG – Is your patch an estate?

OA – It's recently changed to a combination. I also have several high rises, two 16 storey blocks and two 11 storey and some maisonettes.

SB – How many tenants in total?

OA – Was around 360 at start, but due to staff shortages peaked at 405. It has recently been changed and now back down to 250 properties.

JG asked OB the same questions

OB – I have been a Housing Officer in Seacroft for one year and I've moved patches twice. There were lots of bungalows on my first patch, so was managing issues related to more elderly tenants. I was then asked to move to

a larger patch with more variety of tenants in Seacroft North which has 343 properties. There is a mixture of 2 high rise blocks and a mixture of maisonettes and 2/3 bed homes. The last estate walkabout I did was around 7.5 miles of walking the area in total.

JG – What is your Monday day like? On your patch are you alone and how many other officers in your Housing Office are there?

OB – My Monday is very similar to Officer A, we prioritise rents related work. In our office we are trying to look at tenancies over £150 in arrears.

There are 3 types of contact if you are progressing arrears, call, text/email and then visiting the tenant. On my current patch when I first started 80-120 would be the usual number of recommendations I needed to action, and I would really struggle to finish on Monday, so activity would go into Tuesday. It can take a while to contact tenants depending on their circumstances. I work in an open office and my patch is very close by so a lot of tenants walk in and ask to see me, so I like to be available for tenants to talk to me if there is an issue I need to resolve. We are not an emergency service, but we are the first point of contact so need to make sure we are available. It is just me that covers this area, rent side, Anti-Social Behaviour, estate management, any involvement with Police, Fire, Childrens, Adults etc are all part of the role. We have 13 officers in total and 1 vacancy, and it can sometimes be challenging to cover other patches when people are on leave. We need to ensure all important contacts are being made and arrears letters are processed.

JG asked Officer C the same question.

OC – I manage a patch that has a mix, there are 19 blocks in total with 11 high rise and 8 low rises. There are a mixture of Retirement Life homes and general houses within my area, a total of 306 properties. I used to manage alone full time, but now I work part time hours and job share. Generally, there are 10 officers in my office

JG – How long have you been a Housing Officer?

OC – 5 years.

JG – Is Monday the same as your colleagues?

OC – Mondays generally are the same. In terms of managing my accounts with ones that need more support, I go through accounts and see what needs. Once they have been taken care of I then look at Universal Credit payments and make sure payments are coming through that are supposed to be and making contact to people who need reminders. My recommendations are on average 15-22 a week.

JG asked Officer D the same question.

OD – I have been a Housing Officer for 6 years now and my patch is mainly houses and bungalows. I have about 360 properties on my patch. If other areas are struggling, we help as and when we can. On a Monday it's very similar to the other officers, also, I have tenants with vulnerable needs so I sometimes can get calls on a Monday and they can take up time depending on the scenario that's happened over the weekend, that can delay and

sometimes push the rest of my day. I must juggle things best I can whilst supporting tenants to the best of my ability.

JG – I get the impression that Mondays are a busy day. Do you feel that sometimes you don't have enough time to appropriately manage your activity?

OA – It can be difficult at times. We try and focus the rents related work on Monday, but we will deal with any emergencies or cases where tenants need extra support at short notice, or there are safeguarding issues for example. This can then have a knock on effect to the work you'd planned to do, but needs to take priority. There are 12 patches in my office. We have full time and part time workers and when support needs or urgent issues come in we work as a team as best we can to try and deal with it on that day.

DM – Would you say that your offices are understaffed, and do you have a lot of sickness?

OA – Yes there can be high levels of sickness, but at the moment I'm working in an office where there is a full count of Housing Officers. Income recovery is the focus on Mondays, but we devote time to Anti-Social Behaviour, estate walkabouts, etc. The difficulty is when it's a single person on a patch it can take a while to deal with lower level issues as I need to deal with other things.

OB – We also can at times have long periods of sick leave in the office. It's difficult for colleagues that are unable to come in to work, the patches then don't get the same scrutiny and level of support that others do. Our office building is now open until 7pm and I tend to work quite long hours as I have a large workload to try and keep on top of. The workload can sometimes be difficult, tenants are asking questions re repairs, gardens getting cut, paving slabs, etc. low level enquiries or serious enquiries, what's happening with my Housing Application, neighbour disputes, mental health worries. I completed six annual home visits this week, three of which were with tenants that had a drug and alcohol abuse and had high support needs, however, only one was engaging with support services. It's very common on my patch in 1 bed properties and older men that are isolated. These conversations can be very difficult to navigate as you go with the intention of talking about rent for example, but can often end up being a wellbeing conversation, which this isn't an area of expertise. Things crop up and you want to dedicate time to tenants in that moment but it can have a knock on effect for other work planned for that week.

OC – We are staffed quite well now, however when staff members leave, we then have a few months of picking up work until the position is filled. I usually have 50 rent related recommendations on a Monday, then can help with other areas. Annual home visits can be difficult to get in/access. Some tenants haven't seen people in a long time and want to have a long conversation, and whilst this can be really helpful to build trust and offer advice and support, it does place demands on our time. The role can also be stressful, sometimes dealing with extreme cases that can impact you.

OD – In my office we have two teams, one fully staffed, the other is two officers down. We help colleagues whenever we can and help cover for staff absences. There is always a large workload and extra work to be done, we in our office work as a team and help each other as best we can.

SE – Thank you for sharing more about what you do. It seems to me that housing is becoming more commercially minded to help support the councils' finances, getting the money into the service. However, do you also have a duty of care towards people and can you meet this as well as you would wish?

SB – many years ago arrears were dealt with by one specialist department. Now Housing Officer's deal with this. Do you feel the specialist rent team/role helped, and would this help with workloads?

JG – If we had this system where admin and rents etc were taken care of by another team – how much time would this free up for you?

OD – I think yes it would free up time to deal with estate management issues if others managed the rent side. It's the other aspects of our role which can take a lot of time, for example, we deal with estate management, low level anti-social behavior reports and also make enquiries into the status of repairs for example.

OA – Feel that the main function is rent collection which is essential to then pay for our wider service. But we also have a wider remit that supports tenants, signposts guidance, makes referrals to other agencies and generally tries to make sure that someones tenancy is a successful one. Ideally we'd also have more information available about repairs so that we could better respond to queries about this.

OC – As a Housing Officer you must have a rent collection and arrears recovery hat on most of the time but then also offer other means of support. It does go hand in hand, and you can guide residents with support for debt and get an understanding of why there is rent arrears in the first place.

OB – In my experience, training focusses on the rent collection work, but both rent work and the support role are intertwined, separating them could be difficult. We have wider conversations regarding other payments and issues. We offer support through various means; this then leads to how did they get in that position? They then open up more on support they need. We are often the first point of contact, but we are generalists and have such a wide variety of work that we do. No day is the same, the enquiries we deal with are always different.

JG – When dealing with rent this then opens for other questions. Can you all tell us when you're doing rent work, what percentages are phone calls/door knocks?

OD – My rents are paid well by tenants.

OA – Probably 20 calls on Monday, then emails/texts. Usually between 12-20 visits.

OB – Majority is calls, throughout the week maybe 50-60%. Quite a few texts, anywhere between 6-20 visits a week or potentially more if annual home visits aren't in.

OC – I do 40-60 calls a week and maximum 20 visits if needed, sometimes less.

JG advised the board that walkabouts, annual home visits, anti-social behaviour and repairs will be discussed after a 10-minute comfort break.

JG – In term of estate walkabouts, are they being published in advance, and do you get members of the public or local councillors attending?

OC – Previously we used to put all dates in a calendar, would send to Councillors and then published on the council website. I don't get any tenants that want to take part or Councillors attending. I always feedback to Councillors and give them a breakdown of what I've found and that way there's some correspondence and there's a reference should anything come to them that they might be approached or wish to know more about.

JG – When you do a walkabout and find something in a garden for example, do you return and knock on the door, or do you send a letter? If so, how many letters?

OC – With my cases, I tend to send letters; walkabouts are usually 1-2 hours. Sometimes I drive to different streets, if I'm knocking on doors this will make the walkabout longer. Based on the last walkabout I sent around seven letters to about overgrown gardens to tenants.

OA – My patch is three distinct areas, so carry out four walkabouts. They take me roughly an hour and half. I input my findings into 'CATs', (a system to record contact and make referrals) and everything is fed back to Councillors, who are invited. I've had a tenant attend but usually they don't.

OD – My walkabouts are advertised on the website; I send dates to Councillors at the beginning of the year. In terms of my estate the Councillors don't come, if there is an issue they come and look regardless of walkabout. I would knock and speak to the tenant if I am there, if they are not in, I schedule a phone call and then letter. I don't have any messy gardens or estate management issues right now.

OB – Have just done the one walkabout on this patch so far. Advertised online and contact Councillors and the Tenant Engagement Officer to invite also. The Housing Advisory Panel meets in a community room within one of the blocks and the community group is invited also. If I see items outside gardens I will knock and see if they're in, if so, I will give them bulky collections team

information. I send letter after 2 weeks, would then start messy gardens process. Have around 4 currently in progress.

DM – When on walkabouts and you see a homeless person, would you be able to help them at all?

OD – I would speak to Team Leader or Housing Manager in first instance and then see how we can assist.

OC – I agree with OD, that's what I'd do. I would maybe leave a card with my details.

JG – I believe walkabouts are becoming less relevant, everyday work should be seeing what the issues are on the estates.

OA – We have a general expectancy that 60% of Housing Officer time is out and about on estates, we're encouraged to report any issues and we do report when we come back. We wouldn't wait for a periodical visit. However, due to the amount of nature of work, it's unusual we would be able to spend 60% on estate, and we also need to spend time making telephone calls from the office. I generally spend around 20% of my working week on the estate.

JG – Anti-social behaviour, can we ask OC about some of the challenges and also support you get from Anti-Social Behaviour team?

OC – The Anti-Social Behaviour team are currently investigating my cases due to the nature of them.

OD – In terms of ASB, I have a couple of properties now where it's been ongoing for for some time with noise related complaints. An investigation can take some time, and take up time to investigate, e.g. finding where the noise is coming from, investigating, discussions with tenants who may deny making a noise and so on.

JG – Would mediation services help?

OC – In some cases yes. Some tenants can and will happily discuss things in a controlled area. They have mentioned mediation, but we don't have that facility now.

OB – Feel not managing Anti-Social behaviour would make role easier. We have more thorough training on other issues like rent collection. Members of the Anti-Social Behaviour Team work in our office so I can ask them which is really helpful, but we aren't trained on how to deal with certain situations, if the perpetrator has a lot of animosity and doesn't want to deal with you, not going to pay rent etc, makes all the other elements of tenancy management harder.

JG – Does each area differ in the levels of Anti-Social Behaviour?

OB – In the area I'm in there is some quite serious crime, such as knife crime has happened.

JG – The board might want to consider asking for more information perhaps in a questionnaire about Anti-Social Behaviour cases and workloads

DM – Would like to understand more about the mediation service and if this is available or not, would like to discuss this more at a future meeting.

OA – With Anti-Social Behaviour if I receive a call from resident we go through a 'triage', the online report takes around 30/40 mins, goes to Anti-Social Behaviour team and they decide who it goes to, if it comes back to us we then action/take the next steps. Mediation in my area could be difficult depending on the issues faced.

JG – Are tenants approaching local housing staff to ask for help to follow up on repairs?

OD – For outstanding repairs, I give the tenant a number so they can contact Leeds Building Services directly, but there has been some delays in repairs which means tenants have been chasing or contacting us more.

JG – Do you have a direct line to the repairs service?

OD – We have a direct number to the admin team in Leeds Building Services.

OC – Some tenants report that they are having to wait to have their call answered.

OD – We sometimes wait for up to 20 minutes.

JG – You have all shown some kind of frustration this afternoon, do you tell your managers? What empathy do you get?

OB – Yes, I say exactly what I've said today to my Team Leader and manager, we are very transparent in our office. We can generally get through to Leeds Building Services planners but it's not always the case.

JG – Not just about repairs, everything?

OB – Yes

OC – I just get told we must get through it.

OD – My manager is very supportive and escalates issues appropriately. My Team Leader has helped me and completed home visits etc. management in my office is great.

JG – Do you think that some Housing Officers can't make decisions and they must refer back to a Team Leader?

OA – I wouldn't say that's the case. I have never come across a situation where my line manager wouldn't allow me to decide.

OB – Agree.

OD – Agree.

JG – After Grenfell, are the appropriate checks being done at the moment in the blocks?

OD – Yes, we do them, weekly block sweeps and quarterly fire safety checks.

OA – We also do weekly checks, and feedback on reports.

OB – Fire checks are regularly done.

JG thanked the Housing Officers for attending the meeting and will send on any further questions from the board.

7 Tenant Voice Panel - Update

IM – We have shared an update with those members on the board who we have been asked to keep updated with progress and are happy to have feedback from them. We have created a draft application form, promotional flyers and set up a database for the information about members to be held. We are still working on other items, such as email and social media communications, internal guidance for staff and the induction material to launch and welcome new panel members.

JG – asked if there was a launch date?

IM – No launch date as yet, we need to ensure what I've just spoke about is all in place, but will aim to do as soon as we can, avoiding launching anything over the Christmas period.

8 Forward Plan

November Meeting – Learning further on issues within local housing management service - Four Housing Managers/Team Leaders attending.

December Meeting – considering the TSM satisfaction data and an overview of the service from Gez Tinsdale

As discussed, November/December meetings will now be held at Civic Hall, Committee Rooms 6/7.

9 Date and Time of Next Meeting

18th November 12:00 – 14:00pm.
Committee Rooms 6/7