



## **CUSTOMERS AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE**

**9 May 2013**

PRESENT:

### **Directors**

Robert Buckley (Chair)  
Joanne Carr  
Pauline Dillon

### **Advisers**

Neil Bouch	Director of Customers and Communities
Julie McCartney	Head of Neighbourhood Services
Kevin Johnson	Head of Customer Service
Louise Taylor	Involvement and Diversity Manager
Deborah Ewart	Housing Services Manager
Debbie Taylor	Support Officer

### **Apologies**

John Hamilton  
Gordon Spring  
Kathryn Ferdinand

## **46 MINUTES**

The minutes of the last meeting of the committee held on 25 February 2013 were approved as a correct record.

## **47 GROUNDS MAINTENANCE SERVICE AGREEMENT 2013/14**

The committee received the revised service agreement between the housing company and the Council for the delivery of grounds maintenance services.

The existence of the service agreement supports delivery of the customer priority of having a clean and well-maintained environment outside the home.

The revised Grounds Maintenance Service Agreement has been informed by the involvement and consultation with Customers through the Service Improvement Groups. During January 2013 the service improvement group discussed and shared details of the changes to the service agreement for 2013/14 with TGHC and LES.

The updated service agreement incorporates the amendments, updates, and performance management framework, and contains a review

timetable to ensure the agreement is updated annually with customer involvement.

An updated version of the Service Agreement, highlighting the changes will be published on TGHC's website and the service standards will be published through TGHC's newspaper.

Tenants who expressed dissatisfaction as part of the 2012/13 survey have been contacted in order to address the issues raised. This follow up activity is complete and will be reported to committee in September 2013 as part of the Estate Management Activity report for 2012/13.

The outcomes from the follow up contacts will be captured as part of the monitoring meetings with LES and form part of the service agreement monitoring meetings in each neighbourhood.

- RESOLVED
- (i) That the Ground Maintenance Service Agreement for 2013/14 be approved.
  - (ii) That a report be received in September 2013 on estate management activity undertaken in 2012/13.

#### **48 CONSULTATION EXERCISE ON REPAIR REPORTING**

**The committee received an update on the** consultation exercise undertaken on options to improve access to repair reporting has been undertaken.

The committee received a report in February identifying that due to the volumes of calls made, customers can experience long queuing times at peak times when reporting repairs via the HomeRepairs telephone line. The report identified the methods currently available for reporting repairs and the out of hours arrangements.

Four workshop events were held with customers organised between 26 March and 4 April 2013, with 34 customers who had previously agreed to "get involved" and who were on our involvement database. During the workshops, customers made suggestions using sticky notes, and then talked through the issues.

Customers were mindful of the need to provide options for all tenants to report repairs, but were also keen that more telephone calls were answered quickly during the busiest hours.

A proposal has emerged including the following key points:

- Improving the method of reporting repairs online
- Improvements to the telephone messaging system used to select options and to provide information whilst in the queue
- More staff to be available to take calls during the busiest hours

With the same level of staffing, the proposals would allow for the equivalent of at least two additional employees taking calls from 8:45 am until 5:00 pm, and with improvements to other reporting methods would promote other options too. Tenants who are unable to ring whilst at work

would be able to report non emergency repairs by internet, text or email, or could telephone during the one late evening. Emergency repairs could be telephoned at any time.

RESOLVED - That development of the proposals developed during the consultation exercise, subject to further consultation with Gateshead Council, Mears, employees and trade unions be approved.

#### **49 CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITY – UPDATE**

The committee received an update on customer involvement activity for the final quarter of 2012/13.

During the period, 1 January to 31 March 2013, 74 involvement activities took place. A range of activities are offered to provide tenants and leaseholders with the opportunity to get involved and influence decision making in a way which suits them.

During this quarter, customers were involved in various activities including panel meetings, Service Improvement Groups, drop in sessions, focus groups, forums, workshops and training courses.

Customers have been involved in our involvement activities on over 1,150 occasions although some may have been involved in more than one activity.

In the last quarter the company has been recognised and shortlisted for two awards for projects where tenants and leaseholders have been actively involved. In the Northern round of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) awards for 2013, the company were shortlisted in 'Excellence in Annual reports and 'Working together' - for the 'Shaping the Future'.

Each Service Improvement Group (SIG) developed a work plan at the start of the year with key areas for the group to focus on during the year. Groups are now agreeing workplans for the forthcoming year.

All groups receive performance information relating to the service's Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) or service standards at least every 6 months.

Where a TALISMAN review is conducted on a particular service area, the action plan developed as a result will be monitored by the relevant SIG.

Activities planned for the forthcoming year include:

- Opportunity Knocks events to promote involvement in our services and advice on managing your money effectively
- Analysis of results from Annual Survey to tenants and leaseholders
- Development of Annual Report

RESOLVED - That the report be noted.

## 50 MOVING FORWARD CUSTOMER TRAINING PROGRAMME - ANNUAL REVIEW

The committee received an update on progress of the Moving Forward Customer Training Programme 2012/13 and inform committee of the programme for 2013/14

The 2012/13 programme offered 14 scheduled customer training courses running from 1 April 2012 - 31 March 2013. Demand led courses were offered again this year with a range of 14 capacity building courses available from April. This year the number of scheduled courses was reduced, moving more to a demand led basis allowing for a more flexible approach to delivering training.

At 31 March 2013, 23 courses had taken place, including 12 demand led and 11 scheduled sessions, with a total of 171 people attending. On average, there have been 8 attendees per course.

Overall attendance figures of courses delivered up to 31 March 2013 show the most popular courses are delivered by B&Q, followed by TPAS, TGHC and Gateshead Council. An 'other' category combines courses delivered by various organisations for the following courses; Social media made simple, How to manage your money and Understanding Health Improvement.

TALISMAN members have attended various training sessions during the year to support them in their role. New members recruited in December 2012 attended a two day induction training session that was delivered in-house in January 2013.

In recognition of the increased pressure on people's finances including rising fuel bills, the company applied for funding from FINCAN (Financial Capability North East) to deliver a number of Energy Best Deal (EBD) sessions, aiming to target at least 81 people with the information.

Overall 254 tenants and leaseholders have attended training provided by or funded by the company.

The Moving Forward training programme for 2013/14 was launched in April 2013. The programme is available on the company website and has been sent to all tenants and leaseholders and has been developed following discussions with existing providers, service managers and customers to ensure that it meets the current needs of our tenants and leaseholders.

Following customer consultation, some courses have been merged to aim to make them more cost effective and streamlined in their delivery, which is one of the reasons for the reduction in scheduled courses available this year.

RESOLVED – That the information be noted.

## **51 MYSTERY SHOPPING 2012/2013**

The committee received a summary of the mystery shopping undertaken across the company during 2012/2013 and the plans for the forthcoming year.

Customers who take part in mystery shopping have all attended the Moving Forward course, 'Inspecting our services (Mystery Shopping)' and therefore have an understanding of the methods used to test services. This includes a full explanation of the company's vision and values which our service standards underpin. To date there is a pool of 42 customers who have received the training.

The Involvement Team works with service managers where they wish to use mystery shopping to test a service; this includes offering assistance in the development of the appropriate approach to take when undertaking mystery shopping such as face to face, phone conversations or via post.

Based on the overall objectives for carrying out the mystery shopping exercise, the team works with customers to agree the scenarios, carry out the exercise and then produce a report for the service manager with the findings and if applicable an action plan to address areas for improvement. The action plan is discussed with the service manager to agree reasonable timescales for any actions required.

Customers have recently advised that they wish to be more involved in re-assessing services to ensure that service levels remain consistently and then actions are followed up and this is now being recognised within our approach.

RESOLVED - That the information be noted.

## **52 ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR PARTNERSHIP UPDATE – 2012/13**

The committee received an update on anti-social behaviour (ASB) performance.

1898 new cases were opened, which is a 2% increase compared to the same period last year where 1868 cases were opened.

There were 460 current ASB cases open at the end of March 2013. This is a slight decrease of 9% compared to the end of March 2012 where 505 were open. The ASB cases opened during this period are broken down by case type in appendix one.

There were 1890 cases closed during this period. Of these cases 1830 (97%) were resolved without the need for legal action. Performance remains the same as last year where 1834 cases were closed and 1770 (97%) were resolved without the need for legal action.

246 (13%) of customers were surveyed following the closure of their ASB case. Of these, 230 (93%) customers stated that they were satisfied with how their case was investigated. During the previous year we surveyed 261

customers following the closure of their ASB case, of these 247 (95%) were satisfied with the way the case was investigated.

16 customers said that they were dissatisfied with the outcome of their ASB case. Of these, 2 said their complaint was still ongoing, 4 said they did not receive regular updates. 1 customer said they have moved house due to the problems, 7 customers felt that more could have been done to resolve their case and 2 customers felt that the case took too long to resolve.

59 Hate Crime Incidents have been received by TGHC. There are currently 15 cases relating to Hate Incidents being investigated in partnership with other agencies.

There are currently 47 cases relating to Domestic Abuse cases being investigated in partnership with other agencies.

111 security measures were completed for 83 victims of domestic abuse. This equates to 39% of domestic abuse cases which were investigated. Further detail in respect of the specific repairs undertaken and a value for money evaluation of these will be included within the next committee report.

702 Customer Assessment Tool forms were completed with customers reporting anti-social behaviour complaints. These forms were in relation to 625 ASB cases.

During this period 5 ASB Service Improvement Groups have taken place with on average 8 customers attending each meeting.

A draft service improvement programme linked to future key developments and interests of the group members has been developed for 2013/14. This includes further awareness and discussion in relation to Value for Money and length of time taken to investigate ASB cases.

396 Safer Estates Vetting requests have been received. Of these 310 were in relation to male applicants and 86 were female applicants. Of the 396 requests received 115 met the criteria to be excluded from the Housing Register, 256 did not meet the criteria to be excluded and were given access to housing and 25 are currently being processed.

The draft Anti-Social Behaviour Bill was published by government in December 2012. It follows the proposals contained in the Government White Paper entitled "Putting Victims First: More Effective Response to Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour" published in May 2012.

TGHC are members of a Task and Finish group that has been established to review the current ASB Strategy and framework, and to implement any necessary changes required in preparation for the implementation of the ASB Bill.

RESOLVED - That the information be noted.

## **53 HOUSING SERVICES PROVIDED FROM FELLING HIGH STREET HUB**

The committee received an update on the outcome of the six monthly evaluation carried out on the housing services provided following the relocation of housing services from Felling District office to Felling High Street Hub.

To assess the impact of the housing service provided from Felling High Street Hub a monitoring exercise has been undertaken to review service delivery.

Customers visiting the new office significantly reduced after the first 2 months of opening. In August 480 customers visited and this reduced to 171 in January 2013. A high number of visitors in the first 2 months made enquiries and making payments and payment options. Customers were provided with detailed information on how and where they could continue to make payments.

Calls received to the main Felling High Street Hub telephone number are managed across the East neighbourhood. Prior to the closure of Felling District office, Leam Lane Office received 485 calls a month, this increased during August 2012 to 944 calls. Over the last six months telephone calls to Leam Lane have averaged at 908 a month, which is an increase of 423 a month since Felling housing service relocated.

Between 19 November and 10 January 2013, 216 housing customers visited the office in the afternoon, 58% of customers were directed to the free phone and 25.5% of customers were directed to the back office for with a private interview or pre arranged appointment.

The number of Felling customers paying rent at a cash counter has significantly reduced from 49% (prior to the re-location) down to 26%. There has also been a slight increase of 2.5% in the uptake of direct debits and an increase of 1.4% paying online or over the phone

Since the closure of Felling District Office Council Tax direct debits show an increase of 2% for NE10 area which is an increase of 140 new customers paying by direct debit.

Pre-arranged surgeries at Felling High Street Hub were set up to operate 3 times a week in the afternoons where customers can drop in to discuss estate and tenancy issues. The surgeries have been well advertised but are not well attended. During the period August to October 2012, 15 customers attended a total of 36 pre-arranged surgeries. During November and January 2013, no customers attended any of the 36 surgeries. It was proposed that the operation of the surgeries be reviewed in June 2013.

RESOLVED - (i) That the services from the Felling High Street Hub be noted.

- (ii) That the proposed review of the afternoon surgery provision with customer involvement and ward councillor involvement by June 2013 be noted.

## **54 RENT ARREARS MONITORING AND PREVENTION - 2012/13**

The committee received an update on rent arrears monitoring for the year 2012/13, and on the company's approach to rent arrears prevention.

Rent rises in the last three years have increased the risk of rent arrears, and the government's welfare reforms are expected to lead to large increases in rent arrears in future years.

In 2012/13 there was an increase in current rent arrears from £1,690,940 to £1,780,798 (an increase of 5.3%). The rent increase for the year resulted in a 6.4% increase in the amount to be collected, within this context the rent arrears are at their lowest ever level when expressed as a proportion of the rent roll (2.16%).

Former tenant arrears reduced in 2012/13 from £1,686,530 to £1,674,391. Significant progress has been made in recent years to reduce the amount of debt being left when a tenancy ends, which means there is less debt being passed to the Former Tenant Team to recover. The amount of new former tenant debt is almost half what it was in 2007/2008.

A key focus for the service is dealing with the impact of welfare reform. The first of the key changes which came into affect from April 2013 is the social housing size criteria, or under-occupancy penalty. The rent and income service with the help of housing management staff conducted an extensive visiting program to discuss the reforms with tenants who were under occupying.

Between November 2012 and April 2013 a total of 2797 contacts (vast majority were home visits) were made with tenants affected by under occupation. Officers discussed the changes and explained exactly how the reforms would affect each tenant.

In order to monitor the impact of under occupation over time, baseline arrears figures for those tenants affected have been established.

Two new roles were created within the rent and income service to help mitigate the negative affects of Welfare Reform. The new Advice and Support Officers started in February 2013 and have to date mainly been working with tenants affected by the under-occupancy penalty.

The Advice and Support Officers have both been trained to provide debt and budgeting advice and have proved to be a valuable resource since commencing their roles. They are currently working with those tenants under 25 who are under occupying their home.

**RESOLVED -** That information on arrears monitoring and progress on managing and preventing arrears be noted.

## 55 LETTINGS REPORT 2012/13

The committee were advised of the lettings activity in 2012/13 and the launch (in Gateshead) of Tyne and Wear Homes in September 2012.

2012/13 the transition from HomeChoice to Tyne and Wear Homes took place. The new sub-regional lettings scheme advertises Gateshead properties alongside those in Newcastle, North Tyneside and South Tyneside.

Estate regeneration activity in Gateshead has contributed to changes in the supply of housing as tenants are rehoused from some estates, and as properties are demolished. In 2012/13 there was a considerable reduction in properties available for letting when compared to previous years.

In recognition of the impact of aspects of welfare reform, an amendment was made to Gateshead Council's lettings policy in December 2013 to include an award of priority for those tenants affected by the penalty for under-occupation. A separate "downsizing" scheme to encourage tenants to move from larger properties to smaller properties in lower demand has operated since February 2009.

In April 2012 there were 11,896 applicants registered on the Gateshead Housing Register who potentially could place bids for properties on the HomeChoice scheme. Some applicants did not re-register their details on the Tyne and Wear scheme, and when this new scheme launched in September 2013 there were 7,514 applicants on the register who had stated they were looking for housing in Gateshead.

By the end of March 2013 the numbers had increased back up to 9,671. Across all of the partner authorities on the scheme the full total of applicants was 32,052.

1,451 properties were let to applicants on the housing register in 2012/13.

1,192 properties (82%) were advertised on the Tyne and Wear Homes scheme. The remaining 259 (18%) were allocated directly to applicants with a specific urgent need for rehousing, and where bidding would not have been appropriate. The lettings policy sets out the grounds for such direct lets, and any exceptional circumstances are approved under delegated authority by a Senior Officer at Gateshead Council.

65 properties were let to those living outside of Gateshead (4% of all lettings). 53 of these were to applicants living within the Tyne and Wear area.

At the end of March 2013 14 applicants were assessed to be severely overcrowded and awarded Urgent Housing Need priority (deficit of 3 bed spaces / 2 spaces in a bedsit or 1 bed flat / or where children have to share with parents). There were a further 291 applicants awarded Substantial Housing Need priority (deficit of 1 bed space).

46 tenants were rehoused in smaller properties that were in lower demand through the downsizing scheme in 2012/13.

In recognition of the impact of a reduction in eligibility for Housing Benefit, an amendment to lettings policy in December 2012 allows for the award of Substantial Housing Need for those tenants who are Housing Benefit claimants of working age who under-occupy their homes and who are looking to move as a result.

Some property adverts are targeted specifically at tenants affected by welfare reform. By end of March 2013 178 tenants had been awarded this level of priority and 15 tenants with this substantial priority had been rehoused.

Mutual Exchanges are an alternative way of tenants resolving their housing need. 140 mutual exchanges took place in 2012/13.

RESOLVED - That the Lettings activity in 2012/13 be noted.

## **56 FORWARD PLAN**

A forward plan of reports that will be presented to meetings of this committee during the next year was submitted.

RESOLVED – That the forward plan be noted.

## **57 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

Thursday 12 September 2013 at 10 am in Board Room 1.