



Report to Customers and Communities Committee

11 September 2014

Title: Tenancy Management Activity – 2013/14

Report of: Head of Neighbourhood Services

Purpose of Report

1. To update committee on tenancy management activity in 2013/14.

Background

2. Tenancy management services are provided to almost 21,000 residential homes and 3700 garages through a network of seven neighbourhood service teams who work closely with colleagues from the Neighbourhood Relations Team, Older Persons Services and the Multi Storey Management service.
3. The Neighbourhood Services Team carry out a range of activities to help ensure that the company's business plan objective of "sustaining tenancies and estates" is achieved. This report highlights the key tenancy management activities delivered to homes across the borough.

HomeViews

4. Before a tenant accepts an offer of a property that they have successfully bid for, an appointment (HomeView) is made for them to view the property with an Estate Officer and where relevant a Caretaker (for multi storey blocks) or a Sheltered Scheme Officer (for sheltered schemes). The officers will provide advice and information about the property and answer any questions the customer may have. In 2013/14 we carried out a total of 2165 residential HomeViews resulting in 1893 lettings.

New tenancies

5. During 2013/14, we let 1893 new tenancies, of which 857 were introductory. In addition we let 430 garage tenancies.
6. New tenants are invited into the local housing office where they are taken through a comprehensive "sign up" procedure which outlines their rights and responsibilities as a council tenant. They are also provided with a range of useful information to help them settle into their new home. This includes advice and

guidance relating to rent, housing benefits, gas/electricity connections and fire safety.

Home Welcome Visits (HWVs)

7. The HWV is an important first point of contact between the Estate Officer and a new tenant. A HWV is a courtesy visit to welcome the new tenant and check how they are settling into their home. It also allows the tenant to provide the company with their views on their home and the services they have received so far.
8. The company's service standard is to visit new tenants within six weeks of their tenancy start date. Of the 1682 new tenancies that were eligible for a visit during 2013/14, 1506 visits were carried out in total. 1482 (88.1%) were carried out within 6 weeks of the tenancy starting, exceeding the annual target of 86%.
9. As a direct result of the visits over 400 follow up actions took place including investigating alleged anti-social behaviour, arranging for repairs to be carried out, assisting with rent/housing benefit issues, resolving difficulties with utilities and referrals to social services, the small tasks team and our gardening scheme.
10. In the 25 multi storey blocks across Gateshead, Caretakers aim to carry out an additional visit to all new tenants within 21 days of their tenancy starting. The visits are used to personally introduce the block's Caretaker, explain the service and provide practical information about living in a multi storey block. For example, information and advice about fire safety, waste disposal and how to operate the heating system is provided. During 2013/14 the caretaker service carried out a total of 217 visits of which 195 (90%) were carried out within 21 days.
11. Similarly in the 31 sheltered schemes, Sheltered Scheme Officers (SSOs) aim to carry out an additional visit to new tenants within seven days of their tenancy starting. The visits are used to personally introduce themselves and to explain about the facilities in the scheme and what activities take place. In 2013/14, SSOs carried out a total of 124 visits of which 111 (92.5%) were carried out within seven days. During the visit the SSO also arranges a further appointment to complete a care plan which outlines the level of support required from the SSO.

Tenancy changes

12. There are several reasons why people request a change to a tenancy. The most common are:
 - The tenant has died and someone wants to take over the tenancy (succession)
 - The tenant wants to pass on their tenancy to someone else (assignment)
 - A sole tenant wants a joint tenancy (single to joint)
 - A joint tenant wants a sole tenancy (joint to single)
13. The company's service standard is to respond to such requests within 10 working days. To assess whether a tenancy change can be granted officers carry out a number of checks relating to a range of factors including length of residency, rent arrears, tenure type, suitability of property, relationship between household members and levels of debt.

14. Overall, there were a total of 380 requests received for tenancy changes in 2013/14 broken down as follows:

- Successions – 163
- Assignments – 58
- Sole to joint - 72
- Joint to single – 87

377 (99%) of these requests were responded to within 10 working days.

15. Of the 380 requests received 331 (87.2%) were approved and 49 (12.8%) were not approved. The main reasons for not approving some requests were rent arrears, not living in the property for the required minimum period or not sufficient evidence to prove they were a qualifying member of the family.

Mutual exchanges

16. A mutual exchange occurs when tenants swap their home. People who hold a secure tenancy with Gateshead Council have a legal right to apply for permission to mutually exchange their home with another Council or housing association tenant and there are only certain legal grounds where permission can be refused. In 2013/14 we processed every mutual exchange application within the legal timescale of 42 days. The average timescale to assess each application was only 11.7 days.

17. 165 mutual exchanges took place in 2013/14. 57 applications were not approved; the main reasons were rent arrears, unauthorised alterations or because one or more of the parties involved in the exchange were not secure tenants (introductory tenants do not have a legal right to a mutual exchange). Where necessary a housing officer will carry out follow up work with tenants to ensure that any problems (unauthorised alterations for example) identified during the application process are appropriately dealt with.

Tenancy terminations

18. There were 2324 residential tenancy terminations in 2013/14, of which 447 were related to tenancies less than two years old and 1877 more than two years old. In terms of the age of tenants who ended their tenancy, 159 were received from tenants under the age of 25; 1379 aged 25 to 59 and 786 from over the age of 60.

19. The main reasons for tenants terminating their tenancies were:

- Tenant deceased (295)
- Medical reasons (267)
- Property too small (221)
- Property too large (193)
- To be closer to family (175)
- Right to buy 165
- Eviction (101)

Other reasons include (but are not limited to) dislike of estate, dislike of property, fleeing violence, harassment, move closer to friends and relationship breakdown.

20. There were 517 garage tenancy terminations in 2013/14. The main reasons for terminations were:
- No longer has vehicle (197)
 - Moved home - garage too far away (72)
 - No longer required for storage (64)
 - Notice to quit (40)
 - Deceased (31)
 - Garage too small (27)
21. There were 347 more residential tenancy terminations in 2013/14 than in the previous year (excluding those terminations which did not result in a vacant property such as RTBs and properties in redevelopment areas. This increase has coincided with welfare reforms and more specifically the reductions in housing benefit faced by tenants underoccupying their home.

Temporary rehousing

22. During 2013/14 we supported 25 households to move into temporary accommodation whilst major repairs were carried out to their homes. Most of the repairs were for structural issues or following fires. 14 households were placed short term in hotels or bed and breakfast accommodation. 11 households were accommodated in other council properties temporarily.
23. Officers provided tenants with practical advice and support with regard to issues such as removals, redirection of mail and the disconnection/reconnection of utilities, domestic appliances and telephones.

Redevelopment areas

24. During 2013/14 we helped rehouse 152 tenants at Bleach Green, Clasper Village, Chandless and Flowershow Field prior to the redevelopment of the estates. An Estate Officer provided each tenant with support and guidance through the relocation process. This included advice about rehousing options; support with the move itself (arranging removals, disconnections/reconnection of services and appliances and so on) and the processing of statutory home loss and relocation payments.

Abandoned properties

25. Dealing quickly with suspected abandoned properties ensures that properties that have been vacated without our knowledge are identified early so that we can minimise any rent loss and impacts to the community.
26. When we become aware that a property may be abandoned the Estate Officer carries out a range of checks to determine whether or not the tenant is still living in the property. These checks include (but are not limited to) investigations into rent payments, liaising with next of kin, neighbours and other agencies, visiting the property to assess evidence of abandonment and so on.
27. During 2013/14 there were 54 suspected abandoned properties, all of which received a visit within our service standard of 24 hours. After further investigation 15 of these properties were found to be abandoned and legal action was taken to

take possession. Tenants in the other 39 properties were found to be living in their home. Estate Officers then provided appropriate advice and assistance to these tenants to ensure that they were supported in their tenancies.

Home improvement requests

28. Secure tenants have the right to improve their home but must get our written agreement before carrying out any work. This helps to ensure that improvements are carried out safely and with regard to relevant regulations and to a professional standard. The company's service standards are to acknowledge requests within one week and advise tenants within two weeks if they require any building regulation approval or planning permissions.
29. In 2013/14, 671 improvement requests were received of which 655 (97.61%) were responded to within one week (target 97%). Of the 16 improvements that required building or planning approval 15 (93.75%) were advised within two weeks (target 80%). The top five most common improvement requests related to fencing, showers, sheds, driveways and bathroom suites.

Service Improvements 2014/15

30. We aim to continuously improve the services we are delivering to tenants. Key service improvements planned for 2014/15 include:
 - Review the sign-up process for new tenants, focussing on key issues around rent, housing benefits and fire safety.
 - Work with Energy Angels to help ensure new tenants are supported to quickly access cost effective fuel supplies.
 - Develop a programme to review managing tenancies and ensure procedures are kept up to date.
 - Work with the Council to review the tenancy agreement.
 - Review how we carry out home visits to assess properties suffering from dampness/condensation and offer appropriate advice and guidance to the occupants.

Link to values

31. The following values apply:
 - Being customer focused, innovative and professional
 - Being honest, accountable and transparent
 - Embracing equality
 - Being a listening and learning organisation

Impact on tenants

32. The tenancy services activity helps tenants to sustain their tenancies and clearly impacts on the quality of life of their lives. The improvements planned for 2014/15 will continue with our commitment to deliver customer focused housing services.
33. Advice provided at sign up and during the HWV helps new tenants maintain their tenancies and increases the chances of them becoming reliable rent payers from

the outset. This helps to reduce void relet costs, voids rent loss and increases rental income.

Risk Management Implications

34. The impact of welfare reform is a key strategic risk for The Gateshead Housing Company. The tenancy management work outlined in the report is an important element in reducing its negative impact.

Financial Implications

35. There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report, however the effective management of tenancies enables us to minimise any rent loss and improve the sustainability of tenancies.

Equality and Diversity Implications

36. Employees delivering tenancy management services have undergone a range of mandatory training relating to equality and diversity. This includes learning how to access relevant information about customers prior to providing services and utilising the company's Diversity Resource for guidance on how to tailor services to a particular individual or group.

Value for Money Implications

37. As outlined throughout this report tenancy management work plays an important role in ensuring that void rent loss and void relet costs are minimised and rental income is maximised.
38. The effective management of tenancies reduces the opportunity for missed rent payments and reduces the possibility of tenants terminating their tenancies or moving home, minimising potential void relets costs and void rent loss. The Energy Angels scheme will enable tenants to access the most cost effective fuel services, which in turn increases their disposable income.
39. The support to tenants via advice and assistance around dampness/condensation should help to reduce potential repairs and their associated costs.

Health Implications

40. The effective management of tenancies enables us to build relationships with tenants and families whereby we are able to identify any support needs. Carrying out visits to tenants reporting condensation and dampness issues will lead to improvements in the health and wellbeing of households currently impacted by this issue.

Environmental Implications

41. Rehousing tenants and decommissioning properties in an efficient manner has helped to reduce the negative environmental impacts often associated with estates which are being redeveloped.

Consultation carried out

42. There was no specific consultation carried out for this report.

Recommendations

43. The views of the committee are sought on whether it is satisfied with the information on tenancy management activity for 2013/14.
44. To receive annual activity reports on tenancy management activity.