



Report to Customers and Communities Committee

10 September 2015

Title: Tenancy Management Activity – 2014/15

Report of: Head of Neighbourhood Services

Purpose of Report

1. To update committee on tenancy management activity in 2014/15.

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.

Tenancy Management Performance

HomeViews and New Tenancies

4. Alongside an increase in refusals there was an increase in the number of HomeViews on residential properties; from 2165 in 2013/14 to 2586 in 2014/15.
5. The amount of lettings these HomeViews generated also decreased slightly from 1893 in 2013/14 to 1811 in 2014/15. There was a slight increase in new introductory tenancies in 2014/15 (906) compared to 2013/14 (857).
6. Following recommendations from the Talisman's review of Customer Services new tenants have benefited from a more streamlined sign up that focuses on rent payments, housing benefit, fuel supplies and fire safety.
7. We let 346 garage tenancies in 2014/15 compared to 430 in 2013/14. This coincides with a similar decrease in garage terminations outlined at point 19.

Home Welcome Visits (HWVs)

8. Our service standard is to visit new tenants within six weeks of their tenancy start date. Of the 1700 new tenancies that were eligible for a visit during 2014/15, 1514 visits were carried out in total (compared to 1682 during 2013/14). 1510 (88.8%) were carried out within 6 weeks of the tenancy starting, exceeding the annual target of 87% and a slight improvement on the 2013/14 performance of 88.1%.
9. As a direct result of the visits 330 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, 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 2014/15 the caretaker service carried out a total of 352 visits (up from 217 in 2013/14) of which 307 (87.2%) were carried out within 21 days – a slight decrease in 2013/14's figure of 90%
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 2014/15, SSOs carried out a total of 118 visits (111 in 2013/14); all of which were carried out within seven days (an increase from the 90% achieved 2013/14). 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 were a total of 331 (380 in 2013/14) requests received for tenancy changes in 2014/15 broken down as follows:
 - Successions – 130
 - Assignments – 96
 - Sole to joint - 70
 - Joint to single – 35

328 (99%) of these requests were responded to within 10 working days – the same performance as in 2013/14.

13. Of the 331 requests received 279 (84.3%) were approved (87.2% in 2013/14) and 52 (15.7%) were not approved (2.8% in 2013/14). The main reasons for not approving requests remained the same as the previous year and were: rent arrears, not living in the property for the required minimum period or customers not supplying the required information to complete their request.

Mutual exchanges

14. As in 2013/14, we processed every mutual exchange application within the legal timescale of 42 days during 2014/15. Whilst the average timescale to assess each application increased from 11.7 days it still remained very low at only 18.1 days.
15. 139 mutual exchanges took place in 2014/15 compared to 165 in 2013/14. 17 applications were not approved (57 in 2013/14); the main reasons were rent arrears, property condition 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 (property condition for example) identified during the application process are appropriately dealt with.

Abandoned Properties

16. During 2014/15 there were 33 suspected abandoned properties – a decrease from the 54 in 2013/14, all of which received a visit within our service standard of 24 hours. After further investigation 16 of these properties were found to be abandoned and legal action was taken to take possession. Tenants in the other 17 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

17. In 2014/15, 632 improvement requests were received (671 in 2013/14) of which 605 (95.7%) were responded to within one week (target 97%) – this is a slight decrease on the 97.6% figure of 2013/14. Of the seven improvements that required building or planning approval all (100%) were advised within two weeks (target 90%) – an improvement on the 93.8% figure of 2013/14. As in 2013/14 the five most common improvement requests in 2014/15 related to fencing, showers, driveways, sheds and bathroom suites

Tenancy terminations

18. During 2014/15 we received 1826 tenancy terminations. This was a decrease from the previous year where we received 1926 in 2013/14. Tenants are given advice and information when giving notice to try and prevent them leaving their home where its appropriate to do so.
19. There were 400 garage tenancy terminations in 2014/15, which was a significant decrease from the 517 received in 2013/14. The main two termination reasons were “No longer has vehicle” - 144 (197 in 2013/14) and “Moved - garage too far away” - 77 (72 in 2013/14)
20. Other reasons include tenant deceased (30), no longer required for storage (25), repairs (24), Notice to Quit (23) and increase in garage rent (20).

Temporary rehousing

21. During 2014/15 we supported 32 households (25 in 2013/14) to move into temporary accommodation whilst major repairs were carried out to their homes.

As in 2013/14 most of the repairs were for structural issues or following fires. 20 households were placed in alternative council accommodation whilst 12 households were placed in short term hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation.

22. 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

23. During 2014/15 we helped rehouse 26 tenants at Bleach Green and Clasper Village 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.
24. At the end of August 2015 we had assisted all tenants at Clasper Village to be relocated and there are three tenants at Bleach Green awaiting rehousing.

Energy Angels

25. Since the end of May 2014 we have been working with Energy Angels to help ensure new tenants are supported to quickly access cost effective fuel supplies.
26. During 2014/15, 424 tenants switched energy suppliers as a result of contacting Energy Angels, saving a total of £50, 255. This represents an annual saving for each tenant of £118.52

Service Improvements 2015/16

27. We aim to continuously improve the services we are delivering to tenants which links directly with the four strategic objectives within the five year delivery plan. Key service improvements planned for 2015/16 include:
 - Introduction of mobile working to provide customers with accurate and timely advice/information at the first point of contact.
 - Reviewing key tenancy management processes to ensure we are delivering the most effective and efficient services.
 - Identifying and visiting all tenants who have had their gas supply disconnected and provide the appropriate support to assist them.
 - Work with the Council to review the tenancy agreement.
 - Review the sign up process in light of recommendations from the “Talisman’s review of Customer Services

Link to values

28. This report links to the Company values of being: -
 - Customer focused
 - Open and honest
 - Accountable

- Inclusive, valuing diversity
- Innovative
- Passionate about what we do

Impact on tenants

29. 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 2015/16 will continue with our commitment to deliver customer focused housing services.
30. 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

31. 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

32. 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

33. 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

34. As outlined throughout this report tenancy management work plays an important role in ensuring that we can support tenants to sustain their tenancy. By doing so we can minimise void rent loss and relet costs and maximise rental income.
35. 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 enables tenants to access the most cost effective fuel services, which in turn increases their disposable income.
36. The support to tenants via advice and assistance around dampness/condensation should help to reduce potential repairs and their associated costs.

Health Implications

37. 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

38. 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.

Recommendations

39. The views of the committee are sought on whether it is satisfied with the information on tenancy management activity for 2014/15.
40. To receive annual activity reports on tenancy management activity.