



Renfrewshire Tenants Scrutiny Panel

Report on First Year Tenancy Sustainment

Acknowledgements

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- Alasdair Miller and Paul MacLean
- The council staff whom we had discussions with.
- West Dunbartonshire Council Housing Services

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1. Introductions

Following the introduction of the Scottish Social Housing Charter, tenant led scrutiny is now a key aspect of external appraisal to landlords regarding the delivery of housing services.

Renfrewshire Council was an early adopter of tenant-led scrutiny and Renfrewshire Tenant Scrutiny Panel was set up in 2013.

Currently the TSP is made up of the following tenants

Chris Gilzean {Chair}

Margaret Dymond {Vice-chair}

Mary Logan

The Tenant Scrutiny Panel is independent of housing, and supported by the Consultation Officer, it will

- Scrutinise housing's landlord services only
- Look at high level long term service planning
- Monitor performance
- Challenge Weakness
- Undertake one off in depth examination of specific service aspects

- Prioritise work on services which show low tenant satisfaction

2. Why we selected First Year Tenancy Sustainment

-2. We were asked by Housing to look at the question of how they could sustain more first year tenancies, as they were only sustaining 82%. Which meant almost a fifth of new tenancies were being lost in the first year. The Tenants Scrutiny Panel were happy to look at this issue.

3. Our Approach

-3.1 We aim to conduct short sharp reviews wherever possible, that offer the landlord constructive challenge. We aim to minimise the cost both to the landlord in terms of supporting the review process, while also taking into account the capacity of the volunteer Tenant Scrutiny Panel membership. This is the third review undertaken by the Panel.

-3.2 We read all relevant data made available to us comparing like Registered Social Landlords from the Scottish Social Housing Regulator and the Scottish Housing Networks.

We read the following reports;

Chartered Institute of Housing- How to create sustainable tenancies
Sheffield Hallam University- Tenancy sustainment amongst those under 35. {December 2015}

The Guinness Partnership- Tenancy Sustainment {May 2015}

Housemark Scotland- Renfrewshire Council Tenancy Sustainment Data Analysis Report {February 2018}

-3.3 We conducted open discussions with staff from Housing Services and the Homeless Unit.

-3.4 With the help of Paul MacLean, we devised a questionnaire on tenant sustainment for posting on the Scottish Housing Network's website. We got one responder to the questionnaire and that was West Dunbartonshire Council. A copy of our questionnaire and their response can be found in the appendix.

4. Our Findings

Homeless Unit:

On the 10th May 2017 we visited the Homeless Unit in Abercorn Street, and had a very good, open and informative discussion with staff as to what support this service provided.

We were given a short presentation of the work carried out by the Homeless Unit to open proceedings.

We were informed that annually approximately 2,000 people approach Homeless Unit for help. The majority of these are roofless due to domestic break-ups i.e. marriages, kids kicked out by parents, etc.. There is a statutory definition of homeless, and in the year to March 2017, 600+ people of those presenting themselves at the Homeless Unit met this statutory definition.

It was explained to us that there are 130 scatter flats around the towns in Renfrewshire. The Council also have support partners who provide supported accommodation, this supported accommodation will be a growing need long-term.

Not all the people presenting themselves at the Homeless Unit will get a council house in Renfrewshire, but may eventually be housed by other Regulated Social Landlords, private landlords, or other local authorities. Roughly about five to six months down the line about half of the 600+ who met the statutory requirements of being declared homeless will be get a Renfrewshire Council tenancy. Currently about 1 in 5 new Council tenancies per year are filled from the homeless list.

Within the Homeless Unit there is a team who investigate the many complex circumstances for someone being homeless. Are they genuinely homeless? Do they meet the statutory definition of homeless?

The team also provide a mediation service, which has helped to get families back together, especially where the young are concerned.

The aim of the unit is to help people to get their tenancies up and running, with practical advice on utilities, benefits, etc. They encourage new tenants to decorate the flat, etc. allocated to them. To personalise it. These new tenancies from the homeless unit are monitored with three monthly checks.

We were informed that less than 10% of those given a tenancy through the Homeless Unit give up that tenancy, but this can be a positive outcome in some cases, with youngsters moving back to the family home, taking up a tenancy with a Housing Association, or simply leaving the area. Less positive outcomes can involve absconding, or prison. Staff are always keen to build up working relationships with young tenants, and currently 16-24 year olds would get support in this manner. It was also pointed out to us that Turning Point Scotland are paid by Renfrewshire Council to work with ex-prisoners, alcoholics, etc. And that through a monitoring process this has had a massive effect in helping these people to maintain their tenancies.

A report is prepared for everyone coming through the system and the appropriate support can then be set up. The report is given to housing officers, and other Regulated Social landlords. This helps with continuity of support and lets others know of any problems.

Housing Services:

We also had a very good, open and informative discussion with staff from Housing Services at Paisley Town Hall on 21st June 2017.

Staff present included those from allocations, housing officers and tenant support.

The present procedure for allocating tenancies was explained to us: Housing options interviews at Renfrewshire House or Moss Street Office. Tenancies allocated on a needs, not points basis.

Face to face interviews are held with prospective tenants, which staff feel are best way forward.

One problem is that applicants can often have aspirations above what properties are available. Renfrewshire Council has a higher proportion of flats, 80% of the current housing stock, which is higher than any other local authority.

Allocations staff will look at what income, benefits and support would be needed for an applicant to sustain a tenancy, especially cost of moving in, and making them aware of what bills they will have to pay.

An applicant's previous landlord would also be contacted.

Owner occupiers are not a priority for council housing and would be put into group 5, except where there were extenuating circumstances.

Support is available for 16-25 year olds who take on a tenancy.

Housing officers are required to interview a selected prospective tenant at the property they have been offered. If they no longer wish to be housed in the area where the property is available, no offer will then be made to the applicant in respect of the property.

Feedback from Housing Officers was that younger tenants are often not fully aware of what they are signing up for, even though it is explained to them during the applications process.

A week after the commencement of a tenancy a Housing Officer will visit to see how the new tenant is doing.

A tenant's previous tenancy history may be looked at to see if they have had problems sustaining a tenancy in the past through such things as rent arrears, eviction, abandonment, etc. This helps the Housing Officer to predict if a tenant needs additional support to sustain their tenancy.

We were then made aware of what support is currently available to tenants and how closely the Support Team rely on feedback from housing and a tenant's previous history, to determine, and offer, what support they require.

It was explained that support and help with financial issues is always available.

There are a lot of social and financial issues than can lead to a tenant struggling to sustain their tenancy. In the present climate zero hours contracts are a real bugbear, with staff helping tenants to sustain their tenancies if their income drops. Support to access benefits and manage income is readily available. Foodbank vouchers are also available. In some circumstances Council care grants may also be an option.

One of the biggest problems where people are struggling is that some just bury their heads in the sand and don't seek support from staff.

As part of our discussion with the Housing Services staff we asked them what they thought would help with tenancy sustainment?

They felt that more support staff would be great. The greater use of modern technology {i.e. ipad, etc.} to help people instantly on the ground.

At the moment there is no feedback regarding a tenant's personal problems, which could have a bearing on their tenancy, i.e. someone on

addiction services, currently there is no feedback to housing. A better crossover of information between support services would be helpful, though housing staff are conscious of Data Protection Act, and this probably not helping to bring this about.

5. Our Report Summary

The Tenants Scrutiny Panel have found the question of 'First Year Tenancy Sustainment' a very challenging, emotive, and far from clear cut subject to look at. We believe there are no definitive answers as to how you improve, or maintain your current level of First Year Tenancy Sustainment.

Reading the reports {which we have listed in the appendix} only strengthened our belief in our findings, as we felt these reports brought up as many questions as answers, and strengthened our belief there are no definitive answers to this particular subject.

We feel that at the present time Renfrewshire Council's Housing Department are doing a very good job keeping their First Year Tenancy Sustainment figure above 80% year on year, given a turnover of around 1200 new tenancies a year.

There are too many factors that have to be considered to make this particular sustainment figure an exact science. Tenancies can be given up for a variety of reasons and we came up with our own headings list while putting together this report – Death, Lifestyle, Family, Health, Employment, Unemployment, Area, Type Of Accommodation, Anti-social Behaviour, Transport. Then think of all the variables under each heading i.e. the benefits system, illness, marriage break-ups, poor public transport, etc.

We're sure there's a mathematician somewhere who would be happy to give us the odds of maintaining 100% sustainability given all the factors involved, and the many permutations of those factors. We're also sure these odds would be astronomical.

On top of all these headings and variables, there are people who will simply not except help, no matter how much is available to them.

The Homeless Unit are also doing a very good job, often working with the most vulnerable in society. We were impressed with their dedication

in dealing with the often very complex issues, surrounding those persons presenting themselves as homeless. They are also very proud of their mediation service, and that shone through during our discussion with them.

The only way at present we can see that would possibly, and we emphasise the word possibly, improve the sustainment of first year tenancies is the introduction of more housing support staff.

This of course would require more money and resources, but is it financially viable? At what point does funding resources to keep someone in a tenancy become financially untenable? There is no point in spending more money to keep first year tenancies in place, if you spend more money in sustaining these tenancies than they actually bring in. There needs to be a balance.

In summing up the Tenants Scrutiny Panel would like to express once again the fact that Housing services and the Homeless Unit are doing a very good job in helping to sustain first year tenancies above 80%.

Report Timetable

- The report will be presented to the Housing Service Senior Management Team {SMT}
- The SMT will be asked to produce a response to the report, in eight weeks from the presentation.
- The report by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel together with the SMT response will be published in the Peoples News, the Annual Report to tenants, the internet and other methods available to the Council.
- The Tenant Scrutiny Panel will review their report in six months.

Appendix

- Questionnaire that was posted on Scottish Housing Network's website.

- Response to questionnaire from West Dunbartonshire Council Housing Services