

Housing scrutiny panel

Review of LBC tenancy officers' communication with tenants

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1. Date of review and staff involved

Date of review tenancy officers' communication with tenants: 1 July 2024

Date report to be presented to Service Director Housing and operations delivery manager: 21 August 2024.

Service director in Sarah Markham - head of housing operations

Review lead – Steve Berresford

Report author – written and agreed by all scrutiny panel members

Scrutiny members directly involved in the review:

Steve Berresford

Curla Bruce

Vanessa Moffat

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Christine Williams

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David Bird

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Staff involved in the review:

Sarah Markham - Head of Housing Operations

Maureen Herdman – TP Manager

Maurice Franks – TP Officer

Olalekan Adebayo - Tenancy Officer

Mike Rowley – Tenancy Officer

2. Executive summary

In September 2023 the Housing scrutiny Panel (HSP) discussed and agreed to review the communication between residents and tenancy officers (previously known as housing officers).

The decision was taken based on a previous review of Town Hall, Customer Services Centre. The CSC review identified communication issues between tenancy officers and residents. 2 tenancy officers briefed the HSP to confirm their views on communication between tenants, tenancy officers and other staff and agencies.

Resident survey with housing key customers - a survey was conducted with our key customers. We received 13 responses. Of the 13 responses 7 residents informed they were not happy with the outcome of communication with their tenancy officer.

The HSP agreed that the review will focus on how residents are being notified when changes occur. This includes changes of tenancy officers. The review examined how does resident communicate with their tenancy officer. The objective was to identify barriers to communicate and recommend how to improve communication between tenancy officers and residents.

3. Recommendations

1. That management note and agreed the report
2. That management agree and support an improvement plan to implement recommendations
3. That managers' report on progress against the improvement plan to the HSP in six months' time.

4. Background

An experienced tenancy officer who has been assigned for many years was interviewed on 15th January 2024. A potential 12 recommendation arose from this interview. All HSP members voted for the top three recommendations.

A tenancy officer assigned for three months was interviewed. This tenancy officer raised several issues and suggestions which were compared with the priorities raised by the other tenancy officer. Most of their comments were similar.

5. The review

At the scoping meeting the HSP asked to see the key customers survey. It was noted that the numbers of replies were small however it showed half of the responses raised communication as an issue.

The tenancy officers were asked identical questions which were agreed by the panel in advance the questions asked were:

1. What are the main challenges you face in your role as a tenancy officer?
2. How do tenants communicate with you?
3. In your opinion what communication channels works well?
For you?
For the tenants?
4. Do you have any problems responding to the queries that tenants raised with you?
5. What is your view on patch sizes regarding staying in touch with residents? (Patch is the number of tenancies each tenancy officer manages)
6. What are the main questions that that tenants contact you for?

The panel individually reviewed the 12 recommendations made by the tenancy officers and prioritise which ones were a priority.

The priorities reviewed by the panel were:

Job role: the job role has become more social worker based and the officers are very evolved in crisis support. Consistently moving from 1 tenant crisis to another. New tenancy officer do not stay in the role long because the function of the job has changed from what they often misunderstood when they took the job on.

Staffing: because of recruitment issues a tenancy officer often cover areas outside their patch (area) which do not have a tenancy officer. This is difficult as the tenancy officer is not familiar with the patch and it increases their workload. This situation can last from a couple months to over a year.

Joint working: it feels as though there is no one to pass over your case work too, even though the case work is offered outside your area of expertise. For example: dealing with mental health issues.

Mobile working: mobile working makes the job more difficult, as there is little support from colleagues which you would receive from an office environment. This is particularly difficult for inexperienced officers.

Workload: an experience tenancy officer can have 30 to 50 cases on their patch which they hear from the same person at least monthly and where they are supporting them in many ways than what is tenancy related. A newly assigned tenancy officer typically can start in the role with an average of 12 to 20 cases of tenants with additional support dates. These cases can include issues with mental health, social services issues and others.

Mobile phones: tenants have the tenancy officers' mobile numbers. Taking phone calls can keep you busy all day. In 2015, 4 to 5 staff were assigned and trained to deal with customer housing queries. They later were replaced by two housing admin officers. The admin officers do not take calls from the public and concentrate on routine admin functions. The calls from the public now go directly to tenancy officers' mobile numbers or through customer services.

Understanding tasks: customers believe that tenancy officer deals with everything at the council. Many council staff seem to believe this too. Tenants often believe the tenancy officer can override other decisions.

Phone listing: when a customer is unable to reach through customer service they contact the tenancy officer for all types of issues.

Raise profile: tenancy officers need to be respected as housing managers. Their status also needs to be recognised outside the housing service, internally and externally.

Information and advice: Feels tenants should be put through initially to a first responder, who deals with simple tenant queries. Establishing the issues and providing advice to the tenant, instead of passing all calls to the tenancy officer. This would also help first responders learning.

First responders contact numbers: first responders should give their name to customers, there should be training for all frontline staff including counsellors and staff answering phones.

Team hub: a team hub would be helpful in working out problems from tenants.

6. Methodology

The panel used the following methods to carry out the research for this service review which included:

- Document review
- Survey from key customers
- Discussion with housing operations manager
- Interview with two tenancy officers
- Information from customer service communication review

Other methods of investigation

- Discussions with tenants who communicated with their tenancy officer

7. Positive findings

It was noted that tenancy officers are committed and desired to provide a courteous and professional service. This is despite difficulty dealing with issues which are outside their scope.

The tenancy officers cover areas outside their patch despite not being familiar with the area.

8. Areas for improvement

Raise job profile - job profile needs to be raised and respected throughout authority. The role of a tenancy officer should be explained on the council's website (this may stop calls being wrongly directed by other parts of the council and help residents to understand the rules and the times they are available).

Mobile phones - new phone number should be issued which resident do not have a direct contact with the tenancy officer.

Staffing - the panel noted that the service was understaffed resulting in tenancy officers having an excessive workload. It is understood staffing has improved recently.

Social worker assistance - tenancy officers spend a lot of time handling issues which are normally done by a social worker, particularly around mental health. Support from other agencies is lacking. Tenancy officers remarked the job has changed from what they expected. This has made it difficult in recruiting and maintaining tenancy officers.

9. Recommendations from 3 priorities

Job profile

Option 1: Raise job profile on council website and other media areas.

The role of a tenancy officer could be explained on the council website. This would stop some calls being wrongly directed by other parts of the council and help residents to understand the rules and the times they are available. An advertising campaign could be launched informing residents and staff on the tenancy officers' role.

Option 2: Coordinate joint working with social services and other teams.

Have a 'task and finish' group of housing, social services and public health managers. Purpose is to establish a working agreement how tenancy officers can get immediate access to working with social workers. Once agreed this to be filtered down to staff. A memorandum of agreement could be agreed. Quarterly meetings could be held to ensure the agreement is effective.

Option 3: Change job description to tenancy managers

This would make the role comparable to other local authorities in the area. It would improve recruitment and result in a more experienced workforce. The manager's role also commands respect and assistance from other departments. It is understood there is a cost implication in this option.

Mobile phone numbers

Option 1: Change tenancy officers' mobile numbers. Change these and make them private numbers. This would mean all necessary calls to go through BTS or customer services - this would make monitoring easier and more effective.

Option 2: Do nothing. Continue with anticipation that joint working and other advertising campaign will eventually eliminate unnecessary calls.

Housing hub

Option 1: Create a housing hub. Recruit staff for housing hub. Previously there was a housing hub maintained by 5 to 6 experience housing staff. All housing queries from residents were answered and processed by the housing help. As a cost saving measure the staff were replaced by 2 to 3 admin officers. The admin officers were not responsible to speak with residents on housing issues.

Option 2: Have touchdown locations. Tenancy officers can meet and discuss their cases. The locations could be manned by current housing staff on a rotational basis. Workloads would have to be closely monitored to ensure it is manageable.

10. Summary

The review did meet the objective of identifying workload issues and how they could be reduced. From listening to the tenancy officers, it was noted that they have multitude of task which are outside their job description and level of training. They have difficulty getting support from other department on high profile cases. This has led to frustration and problems with maintaining staff.

The barrier to communication is the amount of phone calls they receive which are not part of their duties. This prevents genuine concerns from communicating with their tenancy officer. A decision was made years ago to give out tenancy officers phone numbers to residents. This has resulted in the access unnecessary calls.

11. Next steps

Review the situation in 6 months' time.