**HOUSING OPTIONS QUALITY GROUP**

**REPORT**

**March 2015**

Index

Page

1. Introduction 3

2. The Scrutiny Process

2.1 Review of Mystery Shopping Exercise 4

2.2 Review termination reasons 5

2.3 The Void Process 5 - 7

2.4 Post Let Courtesy Visits 8

2.5 The Handover Pack 8

2.6 Survey of new tenants 9

2.7 Review of IHA website 9

3. Good Practice 10 - 11

4. General Comment 11 - 12

5. Summary of findings 12

6. Recommendations 13 - 14

7. Group members 14

1. Introduction

The Housing Options Quality Group was established in 2014 as part of Irvine Housing Association’s scrutiny structure. The remit of the Housing Options Quality Group includes:

* Ensuring that tenants and prospective tenants have the ability to make informed choices about housing options
* Ensuring that Irvine Housing Association provides a range of advice to enable people to access affordable housing
* Prevention of homelessness
* Mutual exchanges – local and national
* Best use of housing stock to ensure that policies reflect need

Using this framework and information contained within the Annual Return on the Charter (ARC) 2013-14 and STAR Survey 2014, the group identified the following issues:

* Irvine Housing Association operates across three Local Authority areas which means that three individual allocation policies have been developed as to how people access housing and the priority they are allocated differs across each operating area. Whilst this leads to inconsistency relating to the particular circumstances of the applicant, this is acceptable as it is based on an evaluation of local need which reflects the local housing market. What is crucial, however, is to ensure that the level of service, advice, support and positive outcomes for customers is consistent.
* All three areas now have Common Housing Registers and where areas of best practice can be identified, from an applicant’s perspective, these can be shared across each local authority area.
* In 2014 the Housing Options Quality Group identified that customer satisfaction with their new home is 81% (STAR, 2014) which indicates that there is scope for significant improvement in this area.

2. The Scrutiny Process

2.1 Review of Mystery Shopping Exercise

From 28 April to 16 May 2014 a Mystery Shopping exercise, led by North Ayrshire Council, was carried out across the partners of the North Ayrshire Housing Register (NAHR). The five different scenarios used were:

Scenario 1 – Applying to join the NAHR register

Scenario 2 – Making changes to an existing application form

Scenario 3 – Applying to get on to Mutual Exchange list

Scenario 4 – Applying for a house due to medical reasons

Scenario 5 – Requesting information about Housing Options

Overall, the results for Irvine Housing Association are very encouraging and positive but inconsistencies in the quality of information provided has been highlighted as an area for improvement. We have however been assured that following the publication of these results in May 2014, further training has taken place to improve this. It is not therefore felt that further action in this respect is required at the present time but consideration should be given to further mystery shopping exercises to ensure that improvements have been made.

2.2 Review termination reasons

A review of termination reasons for the year 2013-14 was undertaken by members of the group. The group has requested that this information be presented for scrutiny on a six monthly basis to cover the periods April to October and November to March. Through ongoing analysis of termination reasons, it will become clearer if any trends are emerging allowing for early intervention should this be the case. It is recommended that a formal mechanism be developed to enable this analysis.

2.3 The void process

Members of the group visited three void properties. The properties were selected as those which were deemed ready for prospective tenants to view on 24 February 2015. Technical Inspectors were made aware of these visits on the day and no advance notice was given.

In summary, the main issues identified at each property are:

Property 1, Irvine

* In the kitchen, the cooker space is 500mm which is too small for a standard cooker of 600mm.
* In the kitchen, there is badly fitting flooring which could pose a trip hazard.
* The standard of decoration could be improved including re-grouting where required and infill to holes in walls.

Appendix 1 shows photographs of the main points noted at Property 1.

Property 2, Drongan

* In the living room, repairs required where a wall-mounted television has been removed (it was noted that this repair had been requested prior to handover)
* In the kitchen, there appeared to be exposed wires where the cooker has been removed.
* Bins in the back garden were full of rubbish.
* Damaged paintwork to the living room radiator.
* Personal effects from drawers (not in useable condition) in the bedroom cupboard to stickers on doors remain in the property.
* In one of the bedrooms, the Thermostatic Radiator Valve (TRV) requires to be reinstated.
* The standard of decoration could be improved including re-grouting where required and infill around sockets.

Appendix 2 shows photographs of the main points noted at Property 2.

Property 3, Irvine

* There is no handrail to the stair from the ground floor to the half landing.
* There is a large hole to the wall in the downstairs wc.
* Electrical sockets throughout the property are loose and the light switch in the hall appeared to have burn marks.
* Throughout the property, decoration is to a very poor standard including re-grouting, wallpaper, paintwork etc.
* Burst seals to double glazed units.
* Damaged front door.

Appendix 3 shows photographs of the main points noted at Property 3.

What the inspections of the void properties has revealed is that the quality of homes being offered to tenants can vary greatly. Whilst there is no doubt that all three properties will meet with legislative requirements, for two of the properties, a new tenant could, in all likelihood, move in straight away with only some cleaning and minor decorative works requiring to be undertaken. It was felt, however, that the third property would require extensive cleaning and preparation before being considered as ‘move-in’ condition. The property in question, property 3, is a 3 bedroom home meaning it would be let to a family with children who may or may not have a local support network or the finances to help out with moving, decoration etc. There is a danger that if this sample is truly representative of the standard of homes offered to our tenants, then one in three properties would exhibit similar characteristics.

Paperwork relating to the void properties was also reviewed. The garden area is not taken account of within this paperwork. As some of the problems noted relate to the garden area, eg bins full of rubbish in one garden, this should be formally noted on the void inspection sheet to ensure that it is taken care of prior to handover to the incoming tenant.

The findings from the void inspections have been shared with the Repairs and Maintenance Quality Group.

As noted above, the Housing Options Quality Group propose to carry out a regular review of termination reasons. This review should also take account of the condition of properties at the handover stage to determine whether this is impacting upon tenancy sustainment.

2.4 Review of Post Let Courtesy Visit

Post Let Courtesy Visits are carried out approximately 4 weeks after commencement of a new tenancy. The group reviewed the post let courtesy visit procedure and associated paperwork – see Appendix 4. The group felt the existing form meant that staff conducting the post let courtesy visit were doing a lot of ‘telling’ and this approach would not serve well the purpose of increasing customer satisfaction. It was felt that by overhauling the form, the entire procedure would improve by asking questions in such a way that open dialogue would be encouraged. A revised form was developed with the Housing Options Quality Group and staff began using this in February 2015 – see Appendix 5. We would therefore suggest that the next stage of this would be to record and analyse the feedback received from the post let courtesy visits – this should be shared with the Housing Options Quality Group on a quarterly basis.

2.5 The Handover Pack

The group were presented with a copy of the ‘handover’ pack which every new tenant receives. It was noted that some of the information contained appears to be out-of-date and a full review of this requires to be carried out. The Housing Options Quality Group will carry this action forward to review the handover pack and feed back their opinions and findings over the course of 2015.

2.6 Survey of new tenants

We attempted to arrange a focus group to speak to new tenants but due to the low number of people agreeing to be participants, this has not been pursued at the present time. We did however conduct a telephone survey which revealed:

* Outstanding repairs were present when tenants moved in – these had to be reported to IHA by the tenant
* The entire process was described as “rushed”
* There are inconsistencies in the services offered with one tenant getting “all the help needed to change housing benefit etc” whilst another was not offered or made aware of Employability/Money Advice/Affordable Warmth.
* The tenants surveyed were asked how IHA could improve the process and suggestions include feedback on repairs and keeping the tenant informed.

2.7 Review of Irvine Housing Association Website

The Housing Options Quality Group reviewed the information provided on Irvine Housing Association’s website in relation to applying for a home, mutual exchanges, transfers etc. The group acknowledge that the entire website is under review at present but significant failings exist which could be remedied immediately. These include out-of-date information and broken links to other areas of the site and to external sites. The group would suggest that nominated staff require to take control of reviewing specific areas of the site on regular and ongoing basis. The group also note that immediate improvements were made such as fixing broken links as soon as these were brought to the attention of Irvine Housing Association.

3. Good Practice

During the course of our investigations, we came across areas of good practice. Whilst these are not noted within our formal recommendations, it is felt that further analysis into the pros and cons of implementing a similar initiative would be beneficial.

* The Riverside Group

From information available on the Riverside website, it appears as though tenants of Riverside can benefit from £100 incentive if they meet certain conditions when leaving a property. This does not appear to be offered to tenants of Irvine Housing Association despite the implication online that this is a nationwide initiative. The Riverside website states:

*Help us, and help yourself to £100*

*To encourage you to provide four weeks’ notice, we offer an incentive so we can inspect, advertise and prepare your home for our next tenant. This helps us reduce the time your home is empty and your reward will be a cheque for £100.*

*If we have time to prepare and advertise your property, as well as carry out repairs before the next tenant moves in, we can reduce the number of boarded up properties and make our communities safer.*

*Do all of the following and £100 will be yours.\**

*— Give us at least four weeks’ notice before you move.*

*— Make sure your rent account is clear on the day you move.*

*— Let us inspect your home and carry out any minor repairs.*

*— Allow us to advertise it during your notice period.*

*— Let us carry out viewings with potential new tenants.*

*— Leave your home clean and tidy inside and out, taking all your belongings and rubbish.*

*— Provide us with a forwarding address.*

*— Hand all keys, including window lock keys etc., into the office.*

Source: <http://www.riverside.org.uk/national/find_a_home/rent_a_home/notice_when_moving_out.aspx>

* Waterloo Housing Group

The Waterloo Housing Group (based mainly in the Midlands and Lincolnshire) offers a similar scheme. Their “golden goodbye” offers:

*If you leave your property in a good condition, we will give you a ‘golden goodbye’ thank you payment of £100. To qualify for a golden goodbye you must:*

* *leave the property in good decorative condition with no damage that is not fair wear and tear*
* *remove all belongings, non-standard fittings and fixtures and rubbish from the property*
* *return the keys to us on or before the end of tenancy date*
* *be up to date with your rent with no outstanding debts owing to us*

*Please let us know when you give notice if you wish to apply for a golden goodbye.*

Source: <http://www.waterloo.org.uk/residents/your-tenancy/leaving-your-home/>

4. General comment

Whilst the recommendations below are as a result of this scrutiny exercise, during the course of our work and discussions, other suggestions for improvement were made, including:

At the post let courtesy visit (and possibly other times) Housing Officers may have trainees with them. Whilst the group are supportive of this, it would be good practice to ask if the tenant has any objection to this prior to visiting as some tenants may be uncomfortable speaking about confidential matters in front of trainees.

28 days notice of termination appears to be standard practice but consideration should be given as to whether this best serves the tenant. The group would suggest that tenants be asked if this period is appropriate and speak to other landlords to establish what alternatives there might be.

The Association used to give out magnets with useful information and contact numbers. This was arranged by the TARA in Pennyburn. This action should be carried forward to our scrutiny of the handover/let day packs.

5. Summary of findings

The Housing Options Quality Group identified that customer satisfaction with their new home is 81% (STAR, 2014) which indicates that there is scope for significant improvement in this area. The low levels of satisfaction informed this scrutiny exercise as we set out to uncover the reasons which lie behind this. It has become apparent, not only from this scrutiny exercise but from information which has been shared by the Repairs and Maintenance Quality Group, that outstanding repairs at the point of handover impact on a new tenant’s satisfaction with their new home.

Overall, it is felt that whilst a quick turnaround of voids is good from the perspective of minimising loss of rental income, this quick turnaround is also meaning that properties are let with outstanding repairs which is impacting upon the tenants satisfaction. The current target for voids is to relet properties within 14 days. Whilst we have been reluctant to suggest that this target should be revised, the focus of this scrutiny exercise is to increase satisfaction levels and it is felt that by relaxing this target, the extra time allowed would mean that repairs are carried out to the requisite standard, thereby increasing the tenant’s satisfaction with their new home. We would therefore suggest that 20% of properties are allowed to fall outwith this timescale.

The Housing Options Quality Group will continue to monitor and review the recommendations noted within this report. We will also pass our findings to the other Quality Groups, particularly Repairs and Maintenance, to share knowledge and avoid duplication of work.

6. Recommendations

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Recommendation** | **Why we are recommending this** | **Timescale** |
| **Regular mystery shopping** | **Mystery shopping allows us to experience the services as a customer would to identify nor only areas for improvement but areas of good practice** | **Yearly** |
| **Void inspection sheet to include gardens** | **It was noted from the void inspections that one of the properties was deemed ‘lettable’ despite having full rubbish bins. By including gardens, we can ensure that issues such as bins and fences are taken care of as standard.** | **To be implemented immediately** |
| **Review and analyse termination reasons including the cost of failed tenancies** | **To determine if any patterns are emerging which will allow for early intervention.** | **Six monthly** |
| **Full analysis of benefits and disadvantages of offering incentives to outgoing tenants** | **The £100 incentive offered by Riverside would appear to be good practice but only by carrying out a full cost benefit analysis can we establish whether Irvine should be included in this.** | **To be complete by March 2016.** |
| **Void relet targets to be revised.**  **80% of properties to be relet within 14 days.** | **To increase customer satisfaction in their new home.** | **From June 2016 and ongoing subject to review after each STAR survey** |

7. Group members

The members of the Housing Options Quality Group who have contributed to this report are:

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