

Committee: Housing Management and Almshouses Sub-Committee	Date: 30/09/2020
Subject: Service Improvements Following the Tenancy Visits Project	Public
Report of: Director of Community and Children's Services	For Information
Report author: Liam Gillespie, Head of Housing Management	

Summary

The tenancy visits project was commissioned in 2018 and completed in 2019. It involved trained officers visiting all our tenanted properties, in order to satisfy several aims. These included obtaining up to date household composition data, ensuring our homes were let in accordance with our duties as a social landlord, identifying any repairs issues and raising awareness of fire safety in the home.

The data we gathered will be used to satisfy several objectives around providing more personalised and appropriate services to our residents, improving communications and safeguarding vulnerable households.

This report explains some of the improvements we have already made and how we might improve our housing management services in future, by using the information gathered.

Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. The tenancy visits project was completed in April 2019. The aims of the project, approved by Members in July 2018, were to:
 - improve resident safety and comfort by providing advice or referral to other agencies on:
 - home and fire safety, including evacuation advice and an assessment of any risks
 - repairs and maintenance
 - domestic energy advice and housing benefits

- issues such as hoarding and safeguarding
 - improve the quality of tenancy data on the housing management information system to a minimum baseline standard
 - improve future communication and engagement with residents by updating electronic contact details and preferred methods of communication
 - help ensure proper and efficient use of housing assets by identifying instances of:
 - tenancy fraud, misuse, disrepair or unauthorised alteration of properties
 - under-utilisation (including illegal sub-letting, non-occupation, under-occupation
 - overcrowding
2. Successful visits were made to over 95% of tenanted homes. Outstanding properties were referred to the estate management team, or other relevant teams, for investigation.
 3. Updated household information has been entered into the Orchard housing management system, which already marks a vast improvement on data we held previously.
 4. Members are aware that the Orchard housing management system is due for replacement by Civica CX. Additional data can be held by Civica which cannot be held in Orchard; Civica is also capable of doing much more with the information contained within it. Our ability to use some of the gathered data for insight purposes and service improvements is therefore limited until Civica comes online.

Understanding Household Needs

5. Accurate household data is vital to our understanding of our tenants' needs. Prior to the project, for instance, we had a relatively low number of tenants' birth dates and very few for household members. This information is sometimes requested by other teams within DCCS, for instance to inform targeted communications, or help the planning of commissioned services. Historically, we were unable to offer accurate information and had to rely on estimates based on officers' local knowledge, or census data from 2011, which was very broad in scope.
6. The data we now hold is more comprehensive and useful, and capable of giving us very specific information that we previously did not have. It may be used in the following ways:
 - **Planning services:** we now have a more accurate picture of our households by characteristics like age, sex, marital status, disability and so on. This can be used to inform the planning of local services, both by the Housing Service itself and other teams within DCCS (e.g. commissioning of youth services on a particular estate, or the planning of activities at a community centre)

- **Safeguarding:** the data we gathered on disability and support needs has already been used to ensure that those residents requiring assistance in an emergency is as accurate as possible. We have also been able to arrange support for tenants who were not previously known to us a needing tenancy support.
- **Prioritising responses:** we are also able to prioritise services more efficiently for vulnerable residents; for instance we can now more easily identify residents who may need a more urgent response when they report a repair (e.g. a vulnerable household reporting a repair out of hours, or identifying people who may need special assistance as part of the planning phase of major works projects)

Equalities Duties and Service Delivery

7. One of the aims of the project was to gather accurate demographic and equalities data on tenant households, to help us ensure that we are meeting our duties as a housing provider and public body, and to help us in planning services with due regard to equalities implications.
8. The Equality Act 2010 (s. 149) imposes a Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) on public bodies, which requires them to consider the impact on those with certain protected characteristics when making decisions affecting them, to avoid discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity. To fulfil this duty properly, and assess the potential impact of decisions, it is vitally important to have an accurate picture of household composition and the prevalence of protected characteristics among those likely to be affected.
9. Equalities Impact Assessments (EIAs) are completed for new policies and initiatives in order to ensure compliance with the PSED and fairness in the application of the policies.
10. When planning service changes, we would use an EIA to examine whether any people might be disadvantaged by the changes. For example, if we made a proposal to end a commissioned service, or close an estate office, the potential impact of the decision would be fully assessed, and the decision reviewed considering the impact assessment.
11. Decisions on commissioning require detailed equalities assessments to be completed, and this task is made easier in relation to our estates now that we have accurate information on household composition.

Improving Communication and Engagement

12. The data gathered during the project is proving valuable already and will support further improvement to the way in which we communicate with residents.

Improvements made to date

13. We have already significantly increased the proportion of tenants with whom we can communicate by e-mail. This has allowed us to improve the efficiency of our communications work:

- **Reducing printing and administration costs:** when communicating with residents, we now print fewer copies of items like the Tenant Annual Report or @Home magazine, instead sending out copies by e-mail and targeting those people we know may need a hard copy, instead of sending a hard copy to every household. This saves a significant amount of money and administration time.
- **More effective tenancy audits and visits:** the legacy of the project is that we have created a more comprehensive and standardised process for tenancy audits. We have used this experience to formalise the introductory tenancy visits process, where several visits are conducted within the first year of every new tenancy to ensure that tenants are settling in well.

Potential improvements

14. Several ideas are under discussion on improving communications and engagement, all of which rely on accurate tenant data and contact details:

- **Targeted communications:** for instance, we may need to publicise a service or initiative aimed at those of a certain age group, or households with children. We are now able to identify these households much more easily. More relevant communications will be more effective and will reduce 'blanket' letters to all households, which are often of limited use and very time-consuming to produce and deliver

We can also tailor messages to individual circumstances. For example, we could include relevant advice and information in our rent statements; households in arrears could receive a message signposting them to advice services. We could also include messaging about payment methods and encourage those without a Direct Debit to set one up

- **Multi-channel communication:** we still use letters and limited e-mail communications for most of our publicity or messaging. Holding up to date contact details for our households, as well as communication preferences, will enable us to contact people in their preferred medium and increase the reach of our communications.

This decreases administration and wasted resources. Using the same data, we can also innovate with new ways of working, for instance automated text messaging to confirm repairs and gas safety appointments, or to issue rent account balances by text without the need for the tenant to call us or visit the office.

- **Speedier communication:** increased use of email and text messaging allows us to get messages out to tenants much more quickly and will help us move away from relying on notice boards to deliver important messages. For

example, in an emergency affecting a whole block, we could quickly contact residents to inform them what we are doing to resolve it and include a link to our website, or Twitter account, where they can find updates

15. Engaging and consulting with residents is obviously a vital part of our work, as well as a legal duty in many circumstances. It is therefore important that we have an accurate picture of our household compositions and up to date contact details for carrying out engagement and consultation activity.
16. We have been reviewing our engagement work and plan to deliver various improvements to the work we do. This is closely tied in with the improvements we plan to make to communications, though accurate data on our households is particularly useful in:
 - Increasing the reach of consultations (less reliance on paper surveys sent to every home)
 - Tailoring engagement and involvement work to reflect local demographics (e.g. we may focus on youth provision where there are larger proportions of households with teenage children)
 - Targeting corporate initiatives more successfully (we are often asked to promote Departmental or Corporate activities or messages around community involvement or events – we will be able to ensure that information is publicised more accurately and easily)

Fire Safety

17. The visits included an inspection for obvious hazards, a check that there were working smoke and carbon monoxide alarms, and a discussion with the tenant about fire safety and sources of help and advice. It was also used as a chance to ensure that tenants knew what to do in an emergency and were familiar with the policy in place for their building (stay put or full evacuation).
18. Common hazards such as overloading of plug sockets were identified, and appropriate advice given to the tenant. Potential hazards such as hoarding or inappropriate storage in communal areas were referred to Estate Managers and Tenancy Support colleagues for further intervention.
19. Households were also asked if they required special assistance in an emergency, and this data has been used to update information stored in Fire Boxes at each block, for use by the London Fire Brigade during an emergency.

Proper and efficient use of assets

20. We have a duty to ensure that only those people who are eligible to occupy a social rented home are offered one, and that they abide by their tenancy conditions in order to retain security of tenure, perhaps most importantly by occupying the property as their sole or principal home.

21. Given the scarcity of social housing, and the number of households awaiting new homes or transfers to more suitably sized accommodation, we also must look at incentivising downsizing for those who are under-occupying larger properties. To enable this to happen, it is vital that we have an accurate picture of household composition.
22. Having this data enables us to compare occupation data against property information, giving us a better picture of under/over occupancy, which in turn could inform targeted measures and initiatives to promote transfers and free up homes for those in need.

Tenancy Fraud and Unlawful Sub-Letting

23. Local authorities invest significant resources in ensuring that their homes are let only to those who are eligible to receive them and that they are occupied in accordance with the tenancy terms. The criminalisation of obtaining a property by making a false statement, and unlawfully sub-letting, is an indication of how seriously this issue is now regarded.
24. During the project, there were a total of 123 referrals made to the Corporate Fraud Team. The majority of these were cases where contact could not be established with the tenant by the visiting team for whatever reason, despite multiple attempts.
25. Intelligence checks were completed on these properties and the majority did not disclose any issues of concern.
26. Evidence of potential tenancy fraud was detected in four cases; three properties have since been recovered and a further case has resulted in a criminal prosecution, which is ongoing at the time of writing.
27. Members will recall that detecting fraud was not the main purpose of this project and the visits were announced by publicity on each estate. The recovery of three properties is, however, a positive result and the information we have gathered on our households will make it easier to investigate irregularities in future.

Housing needs and allocations

28. As well as obtaining household composition details, the project involved measuring each property's bedroom dimensions, which are useful when assessing applications for transfer due to overcrowding and making decisions on the suitability of properties upon allocation. This saves time and effort when assessing applications against the space standards contained in legislation and our *Allocations Scheme* and can ensure the quicker resolution of queries and complaints.
29. We are also in a better position to make decisions on issues like succession applications from household members, and to verify household composition against applications made for transfers.

30. This project helped us identify tenants who were overcrowded and had not applied to be rehoused in more suitable accommodation. The Housing Needs Team were notified in these cases, or Estate Managers requested transfer applications for these households.

Conclusion

31. The tenancy visits project was commissioned with several aims, though it was intended principally to ensure that we had accurate household information for our tenanted properties, which gives us the ability to better discharge our duties as a public body and landlord.

32. The opportunity was also taken to raise awareness of fire safety in the home, which is an ongoing priority for social landlords nationally.

33. The data we gathered has already been used to improve communications by better reflecting tenants' preferences. We will be able to implement further improvements once our new housing management system is implemented.

34. The limitations of the current housing management system mean that the full potential of the refreshed information have not yet been realised, though the new system will allow us to use innovative ways of communicating with residents and to use insight data to better plan and deliver services.

Appendices

- None

Liam Gillespie

Head of Housing Management

T: 020 7332 3785

E: liam.gillespie@cityoflondon.gov.uk