



Orkney Resident Panel

Tenant Scrutiny Project

Estate Management

November 2019

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Introduction

Tenant scrutiny is an important part of meeting the expectation to continuously improve landlord performance. Tenant scrutiny involves adopting a tenant-centred approach to landlord activities, which delivers benefits to tenants, landlords and communities alike. It is about tenants being actively involved in reviewing how housing services are being delivered, and even more importantly, how they can be improved.

The Orkney Resident Panel was formed in 2014 with training delivered by TPAS Scotland which walked the group through the different stages of scrutiny, from their desk top research to carrying out surveys with other tenants through to producing their final report. Members agreed that a Code of Conduct should be created to clarify the roles and responsibilities for individuals joining the group. Since then we have completed 2 scrutiny projects on the reactive repairs service and the allocations process. We have also received training/briefing sessions on a wide variety of topics such as: the future of Housing Regulation in Scotland, regarding the new regulatory framework and tenants role within this, and the Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing.

The Resident Panel consists of both tenants and sharing owners from Orkney Housing Association and Orkney Islands Council who are actively involved in Tenant Participation. We play a central role in promoting the voice of the tenants and ensuring their views are taken into account.

This report was produced with assistance and support from Suzy Boardman, Communications & Engagement Officer, OHAL and Ria Leslie, Tenant Participation Officer OIC.



Legislative Background

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 saw the introduction of the Scottish Social Housing Charter which sets out clear standards and outcomes on what all social landlords should aim to achieve when delivering housing activities, including customer participation. Each year every Scottish social landlord must complete and Annual Return on the Charter (ARC) to the Scottish Housing Regulator.

The outcome below is specific to the panel's chosen area for scrutiny;

Outcome 6: Estate management, anti-social behaviour, neighbour nuisance and tenancy disputes states that;

Social landlords, working in partnership with other agencies, help to ensure as far as reasonably possible that:

- *Tenants and other customers live in well-maintained neighbourhoods where they feel safe.*

This outcome covers a range of actions that social landlords can take on their own and in partnership with others. It covers landlord action to enforce tenancy conditions relating to estate management and neighbour nuisance, to resolve neighbour disputes, and to arrange or provide tenancy support where this is needed. It also covers the role landlords can play in partnership with others to address anti-social behaviour.

Selecting the topic for review

In February 2019 the panel were involved in procurement training with AM Bid. Following this session members decided they would like to look at estate management, with a focus on grounds and garden maintenance.

Following this the group decided to carry out a desk top audit looking at the satisfaction survey results, ARC information, Policy and procedure documents and discussions with staff. Below are the results of the satisfaction relating to the panel's chosen area for scrutiny.

In the OHAL tenant satisfaction survey 2018, 86.3% of tenants were very or quite satisfied with the management of their neighbourhood. However, during 2018/19 we had 29 complaints regarding the grass cutting which was an increase of 25 from the previous year. The panel decided this would be a good starting point for their next scrutiny project.

The OIC tenant satisfaction survey 2018 revealed that 76% of tenants are very or quite satisfied with the management of their neighbourhood. This has reduced from previous years and was highlighted in the 2018-19 Housing Services Report. The report also states that:

“The feedback relating to the management of the neighbourhood has declined which is a concern given that Orkney has low levels of anti-social behaviour. We will endeavour to determine the reasons behind this and to make improvements.”

Members anticipate that some of the findings from this report could be used to help improve these satisfaction levels.

Review of Current Policies

The Association's Estate Management Policy was last reviewed and updated in May 2019 and the Council's procedure on Gardens and Close Maintenance last reviewed in November 2016. Both documents give very clear instructions on what is expected from the tenant and what they can expect from their landlord to promote and sustain safe secure and desirable communities.

Panel members met with OHAL Head of Housing & Customer Services for an overview on Estate Management and what they would need to be aware of when carrying out their tenant led inspection. During the review, panel members deemed the policy and procedure to cover all aspects of estate management.

The panel noted that the OIC procedure included details of steps to be taken, should any tenant be found in breach of their tenancy for failing to meet the standards they signed up to. They spoke about the wording of the procedure and how it was purposely vague, using terms such as 'reasonable care'; the question was raised about what is reasonable.

There are also clear standards which OHAL tenants are expected to meet but nothing stating what happens if they do not.

Panel members discussed where this information could be found – and were told that this information is provided to all tenants at sign up and is available on OHAL website, but not on OIC's. The schedule of garden and grounds maintenance is published in the newsletter, website and Facebook page. Alternatively, tenants can speak to their housing officer about any estate management issues.

The group then looked at the Estate Inspection Form which gives an example of the type of things that staff are looking for when carrying out their visit and to help them to draft the survey questions.

Methodology & Process

A meeting was held on 13 May 2019 to discuss the Scrutiny Project/Tenant Led Inspection. Included were Orkney Island (OIC) tenants, OHAL (Orkney Housing Assoc.Ltd) tenants & OHAL Shared Owners.

Members of the Orkney Residents Panel were asked to keep in mind that when looking at the two organisations (OIC and OHAL) that the group were not comparing like for like as each organisation offers a very different service. The group had to work with what is available.

OIC does not have an Estate Management Policy. It has a Garden & Close Maintenance Procedure for staff use and is not published on the Council's website. It was adopted in 06/2004, reviewed 03/2012 and 11/2016. It has particular emphasis on tenants' contractual obligations and on the landlords' obligations it relies on what is reasonable but not quantifiable.

OHAL has a published Estate Management Policy. Staff use an Estate Inspection Form to be completed at each of twice yearly inspections. Current policy is under review. OHAL has a Garden & Grounds Maintenance contract in which OHAL tenants' rents include a Service Charge to cover the cost of this service. OIC do not offer this service.

The residents' panel met on 12 June 2019 to draft questions for the Tenant Led Inspection. It was agreed to an inspection of Liberator Drive which is a new estate with a mixture of tenancy and occupancy types. It was also agreed to travel out to Finstown to look at Jewadale Drive *et al* and Parkview.

Questionnaires were sent out to all occupants who could either send them into the offices of OHAL or OIC or hand them to the Residents Panel on the day.

Visits were subsequently arranged for 16 July 2019 to Liberator Drive and 4 September 2019 to Finstown

17 written responses were received and a number of residents at Liberator Drive came out to speak to the group during the visit.

Unfortunately the visit to Finstown had to be abandoned on the day due to the weather. It was agreed the group had received a number of written responses and two of the group reside in each of the estates and perhaps this should suffice until the weather improves.

The Residents Panel met on 23 October 2019 to discuss further the Scrutiny Report for the first draft and the issues and recommendations so far. One suggestion to be taken further is carrying out additional surveys and visits to at least two other areas. Suggestion was an area in Stromness where there is a strong tenants group and perhaps Stenness. This would have to be in the spring when it is hoped the weather will be a bit more predictable.

Findings

Following the initial visits, the group have discussed the feedback received from the tenants who completed the surveys and spoke to panel members when we carried out our visit.

In general, there were no serious complaints or areas of major concern; See below for a summary of the feedback received from the questionnaires.

One OHAL resident stated they had chosen to cut their own grass as they were not satisfied with the standard being achieved by the contractor, however the tenant is happy to do this to achieve their preferred standard.

Another tenant stated that bits of grass had been missed but when they approached the contractor they returned and cut it.

There was a comment about a particular communal area that was overgrown from one tenant during the tenant led inspection.

One resident suggested CCTV be used on their estate, which was to do with parking and speeding vehicles which is not covered by this report.

Two residents ticked the box about a "Residents Association" being a good idea but neither wanted to be on it, one said they didn't have time.

One resident stated they were happy with the service that they were receiving.

Comments were noted during the visit regarding some tenants leaving bulky items in their gardens and the panel thought that due to the increase in cost to have large items removed, affordability would impact if tenants were able to use this service and would be something to for the group to consider when carrying out future visits.

Most of the comments made were not covered by the terms of this exercise, which is dealing with Estate Management.

These comments were about traffic calming, estate design, and individual tenancy issues. These were mainly in respect to speeding, poor parking/pavements, overnight commercial vehicles, problem tenants, no lock ups, rubbish left in gardens and children's play areas/safety.

These comments have been acknowledged, they are legitimate concerns, and they will be forwarded to a more appropriate forum.

On the whole, the tenants that responded found that their local area was managed well and looked attractive.

Following the visit some discussions were held, in the meetings about cutting communal areas with some wanting more cuts for play areas. It was stated that communal areas get two cuts per year as standard; some would welcome more cuts

to keep it tidier, better for children. A suggestion was made that the timing of the cuts could be aligned to the start of school holidays.

Others in the group felt some areas best left as wildlife refuges. It was stated that this had been tried in some areas however, to ensure the success of a wildflower meadow it requires proper interventions to stop weeds, such as docks, taking the area over. There was no overall agreement of best practice, and the group discussed whether the local community could be consulted as to what they would like in their communal area.

During the meetings following the visits, panel members stated that they had noticed weeds growing on the paths and roadside could make the surface slippery and could be hazardous for elderly or less mobile residents. In some cases, these areas should already be treated by the contractors, if they are covered by the OHAL grounds & garden maintenance. However, there were some grey areas on where these areas start and finish and which were the responsibility of OIC.

There was also some discussion about winter maintenance and the upkeep of salt bins in certain areas. It is unclear to the tenants who is responsible for their maintenance. Panel members also thought that it was unclear about who is responsible for putting salt on paths, although some tenants are happy to do this some are concerned that this could make them responsible should anyone slip and fall. A suggestion was made that something should be added to the winter newsletters to encourage tenants to use the salt when required.



Recommendations

Following our visits and further discussions, we found there were some clear themes that could be addressed to improve the management of estates. We also noted that there were things that were perhaps outside the remit of estate management but we felt that they were worth noting and possibly addressing when designing new build sites. For ease we have split them into two lists and clearly marked who the recommendations are for.

Estate Management	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase frequency of weed spraying and include moss removal as it can be very slippery underfoot for those with mobility issues or older people. 	OHAL & OIC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To make our estates more child friendly, could we schedule the large areas that get a cut and drop to take place to coincide with the school holidays. This would create a more inviting space for children wishing to play and encourage them off the roads without any additional costs. 	OHAL Only
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Officers to make regular estate visits to see any areas that may need attention and to follow these actions up by making contact with the tenants. 	OHAL & OIC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OIC to consider consulting tenants on providing a grass cutting service to ensure that individual gardens are kept tidy. 	OIC Only
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenants to be issued with a check list to remind them to periodically check and report any signs of deterioration on their properties. (The Resident Panel could discuss the design of the list). 	OHAL & OIC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OHAL policy could clarify what steps can be taken with tenants who fail to maintain their gardens or meet the requirements in the estate management policy. 	OHAL Only
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the Garden & Grounds maintenance contracts are very specific with their instructions to the contractors, for example to strim on the first cut of the season and thereafter every second cut. OIC could inform tenants if there is a schedule for maintaining communal areas. 	OHAL Only
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OIC to consider making information on tenant responsibilities, in relation to garden & grounds maintenance, available on their website. 	OIC Only
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Item for future winter newsletters – to encourage tenants to use the salt in their local bins on nearby pathways and road 	OHAL & OIC

There were a lot of responses from tenants on matters unrelated to estate management, however as the following items were brought up several times the Resident Panel felt that it was important that they were acknowledged and recorded to be considered at a future date by an appropriate forum

New Build/Estate Design	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parking – regarding lack of spaces. 	OHAL & OIC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speed of traffic – residential areas experiencing cars speeding through estates. Traffic calming design measures not effective to slow some cars. 	OIC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pavements – can look untidy if not maintained and weeds allowed to grow. Having no defined paths meaning pedestrians are having to walk on the road. 	OHAL & OIC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design layout of new homes to make the most of natural sunlight, helping to reduce cost of heating homes. For example, sitting/living rooms situated, where practical, to be south facing. 	OHAL & OIC



Next Steps

During their investigation, the Panel did not come across any major issues which required addressing and encountered a high level of service.

This part of the scrutiny process saw members reviewing the report and agreeing that the draft version should be submitted to OHAL & OIC.

A draft report will be presented to OHAL Management Committee in November. Management Committee will look at the recommendations made and thereafter at the start of 2020 the Head of Housing & Customer Service will meet with the Resident Panel to discuss responses and agree specific actions to the recommendations.

At the same time the draft report will be presented to the Head of Housing, Homelessness and School Accommodation, OIC, the Panel would welcome feedback on specific recommendations and to agree any actions.

Following these discussions, it will be possible for the panel members to monitor progress on any recommendations or actions while finalising the report.

Members have also agreed that they would like to continue their examination of a wider range of estates and plan to carry out more visits to Stromness and more rural estates to view how they are managed during the spring/summer 2020.

Monitoring & Evaluation

Overall, the areas visited were of a good standard but there is a definite difference between the areas managed by OHAL and those managed by OIC. The gardens in OHAL areas are by far much neater and this makes the whole area looked after and cared for. Some of the OIC gardens are being kept neat and tidy by the tenants however there were some that stood out as they were overgrown and unkempt, this gives the impression of an area being less desirable to live in. Panel members did discuss some of the reasons behind tenants not being able to take care of their gardens such as disability, mental health or unable to afford the equipment.

In this report panel members have made several measurable recommendations. In order to ensure that the objectives of this scrutiny project are being met it is vital that the panel seek feedback and that they monitor where any actions are being taken and the outcome of these.

Members will review the agreed actions after 6 months to find out if agreed objectives have been met, to recognise what works well and what may need to be adapted to meet the changing needs and priorities of the customers. This is about evaluating the effectiveness of the scrutiny project itself but also monitoring that the implementation of the agreed actions have been carried out.

Further Information on the Panel

The Panel are always happy to welcome new members and would like to encourage more tenants and residents to come along to a meeting to find out more about the group and the work they do.

If you think you might be interested and would like to find out more please contact Suzy Boardman Communications & Engagement Officer, OHAL on 875253 ext 205 or Ria Leslie Tenant Participation Officer, OIC on 873535 ext 2191