



Report to:

Northwards Housing Board

14 September 2016

Item No:

14a

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| Title: | Update on Tenants' View Surveying Service Scrutiny Report | | |
| Date: | 10 June 2016 | | |
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| Confidential: | No | | |
| For: (Please tick action required) | NOTING ✓ | DISCUSSION | APPROVAL |
| PURPOSE OF REPORT | | | |
| To update the Board on the actions taken as a result of the scrutiny exercise undertaken by Tenants' View in the winter of 2015/16. | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION | | | |
| The Board is asked to note the report. | | | |
| IMPLICATIONS | | | |
| Risk Management | Doing surveys poorly carries H & S and reputational risks. | | |
| Regulatory & legal compliance | Tenants' View is part of tenant scrutiny which aids good governance by the Board. | | |

Consultation/Consideration:

| | Yes, No or N/A: | Name: | Date: |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-------|-------|
| Sub-Committee: | No | | |
| Task Groups: | No | | |
| Ward Councillors: | No | | |

1. In May 2016, the Board considered a report from Tenants' View setting out the findings of an exercise they had carried out to look at the effectiveness of surveying service inspections.
2. The report was generally positive and the Tenants' View's recommendations were as follows:
 - We would like Northwards to review the way reports of damp are handled and to provide reassurance that the existing procedures are adequate and that nothing further can be done to improve the situation for those tenants affected by this problem. We would also like assurance that the team have access to enough moisture meters to avoid unnecessary delays to tenants reporting a problem.
 - We think Northwards should implement portable devices for surveyors as a priority.
 - We think it would be wise for Northwards to review the updating of the RRL by surveyors in the next 6 – 12 months. This is to check the existing procedure is not putting an unnecessary burden on the surveying team given their already busy workload.
 - We recommend the policy of requiring authorisation from a manager is reviewed and consideration be given to setting a higher limit.
 - We recommend Northwards considers if there is a more effective way of measuring and reporting satisfaction with the work carried out by the surveying team.
 - Even if the follow-on work involves a delay, we think tenants should always be updated within the agreed timescale of up to 48 hours. If work is added to a future home improvement scheme, this should be explained in a letter and - if possible - follow on work, including a description of the work ordered with a job number, should be sent to the tenant in a manner of their choosing (e.g. text message).
 - We don't think it is always clear to the tenant why a surveyor inspection is necessary and this should be fully explained during the call. We think refresher training might be helpful to ensure all the customer service advisors provide the same high standards of service when booking surveyor inspections. The possibility of a joint training session between the customer service advisors and the surveyors might also be worth exploring so they can appreciate one another's perspectives.
3. The report can be seen in full at <http://www.northwardshousing.co.uk/media/134725/13a-tenants-view-scrutiny-report-surveying-service-inspections.pdf>
4. This report updates on the actions taken in response to the recommendations made by Tenants' View:

Recommendation 1

We would like Northwards to review the way reports of damp are handled and to provide reassurance that the existing procedures are adequate and that nothing further can be done to improve the situation for those tenants affected by this problem.

In recent years, many landlords have experienced an increase in reports of damp and mould problems. This is mainly due to tenants being unable to afford to heat their homes and how tenants interact with their homes following improvement work.

A family living in an older, poorly insulated draughty home that was expensive to heat prior to improvement works would ensure that as little heat as possible escaped. They would keep windows closed and perhaps only heat one or two rooms at a time.

This type of behaviour might be the best way to conserve energy in a thermally inefficient property. However, in an improved energy efficient property, such behaviour can exacerbate problems with condensation and the mould that thrives under those conditions.

Behaviours we regularly encounter and are clearly linked to fuel poverty include those of tenants not using ventilation fans that draw heat out of the building and tenants taping up window vents and air bricks to avoid heat loss. Tenants are trying to save money and one way to do that is to not ventilate the property in winter but this doesn't allow the property to breathe. However, there is more to fighting damp and mould in energy efficient properties than good ventilation. Not heating a home properly due to the rising cost of fuel and, for many tenants, the impact of welfare reform has also contributed to an increase in reports of damp and mould problems.

By far the most common report of damp is found to be mould growth caused by condensation. The cause of condensation related mould growth is often complex and a combination of factors including heat and ventilation as detailed above, but also moisture production and insulation. It is sometimes caused by or worsened by building defects which we can repair and treat, and generally tenants are satisfied with the outcome. However, the main cause of mould growth is tenant behaviour and management of the internal environment of the property. We can only advise tenants on how they can combat mould but unfortunately this is regularly not well received and is the main source of dissatisfaction for tenants.

Consequently, it is an area of the service that is continually under review and has been the subject of various initiatives in recent years including:

- Website and Natter campaigns
- Introduction of an information leaflet for tenants, and a damp and condensation good practice guide for surveyors
- Sending surveyors on damp and condensation refresher training
- Subscription to a technical library of Good Repair Guides from the Building Research Establishment that includes the most commonly encountered damp and condensation problems in houses and offers sound advice on putting them right
- 6 weekly cycle of surveyor monitoring of tenant management of the internal environment of their homes

After the scrutiny, a meeting comprised of a Repairs Service Manager, Legal Surveyor, Senior Surveyor and 2 Surveyors was held to consider improvement of the existing procedures and the situation for those tenants affected by this problem. It was agreed that this group will carry out an investigation of this part of the service with the aim of identifying and implementing better practices and new or emerging practices or technology that can provide viable improvement to this problem for affected tenants. The group will monitor and measure the outcomes of anything implemented.

We would also like assurance that the team have access to enough moisture meters to avoid unnecessary delays to tenants reporting a problem.

A meeting of surveyors also considered whether the team had access to enough moisture meters to avoid unnecessary delays to tenants reporting a problem and the meeting concluded that access to moisture meters did not cause delays. All staff who need a moisture meter are issued with their own personal moisture meter and most damp surveys are completed at the first visit.

The only cases where a damp survey cannot be completed at the first visit is where there are signs of rising damp. The signs are quite distinct – a horizontal ‘tidemark’ sometimes several feet above the floor; below it the wall is usually discoloured, with general darkening and patchiness; there may also be loose wallpaper, deterioration to plaster and hygroscopic salts brought up from the ground that tend to concentrate in the ‘tidemark’; mould is rarely present where there is rising damp. These average 6 per week in the winter and reduce greatly in the summer months.

The Building Research Establishment recommend that rising damp can only be diagnosed by invasive testing involving drilling walls, taking samples of the brickwork and testing its moisture content using a Carbide / Speedy test – this is the test we use for rising damp and the test we rely on in court. In these cases, a referral is made to a senior surveyor to carry out the invasive tests at a follow up inspection because they can take up to 1 hour to complete and would cause delay or cancellation of the surveyor’s other appointments if undertaken at the initial visit, and thereby inconvenience more tenants.

It is appreciated that the further visit by the senior surveyor is an inconvenience to the tenant but it would be far more inconvenient to wrongly install a damp proof course that would involve removing a 1m high band of plaster and destroying the existing decoration.

Recommendation 2

We think Northwards should implement portable devices for surveyors as a priority.

We agree that this should be a priority. The implementation of portable devices has been a longstanding aspiration but has not been possible with the existing Housing Management System due to the age and functionality of the system. The implementation of portable devices for surveyors is expected with the launch of the new Housing Management System scheduled for February 2017.

Recommendation 3

We think it would be wise for Northwards to review the updating of the RRL by surveyors in the next 6 - 12 months. This is to check the existing procedure is not putting an unnecessary burden on the surveying team given their already busy workload.

The RRL has only needed updating by surveyors on 25 occasions in the last 12 months and the Repairs Service Managers have confirmed that this can be managed within existing resources.

Recommendation 4

We recommend the policy of requiring authorisation from a manager is reviewed and consideration be given to setting a higher limit.

We agree that the authorisation limit required review and it has been increased from £100 to £200 but we are monitoring that this does not have a detrimental impact on budget management.

Recommendation 5

We recommend Northwards considers if there is a more effective way of measuring and reporting satisfaction with the work carried out by the surveying team.

We agree that the existing satisfaction survey is limited. It is planned to implement a more effective way of measuring satisfaction as part of the implementation of portable devices for surveyors with the launch of the new Housing Management System scheduled for February 2017.

Recommendation 6

Even if the follow-on work involves a delay, we think tenants should always be updated within the agreed timescale of up to 48 hours. If work is added to a future home improvement scheme, this should be explained in a letter and - if possible - follow on work, including a description of the work ordered with a job number, should be sent to the tenant in a manner of their choosing (e.g. text message).

We agree tenants should always be updated within the agreed timescale of up to 48 hours. The launch of the new Housing Management System scheduled for February 2017 is expected to provide improved effective communication with tenants. It also has the advantage of prompting managers in advance of target timescales being exceeded.

Recommendation 7

We don't think it is always clear to the tenant why a surveyor inspection is necessary and this should be fully explained during the call. We think refresher training might be helpful to ensure all the customer service advisors provide the same high standards of service when booking surveyor inspections. The possibility of a joint training session between the customer service advisors and the surveyors might also be worth exploring so they can appreciate one another's perspectives.

We are pleased that members of Tenant's View highlighted telephone calls that were handled well and we want to make sure that all our customers receive the same positive experience when contacting us. We agree that everyone should expect a consistent service and it is entirely appropriate that customer service centre advisors obtain as much relevant information as possible, to assist the surveyor in their inspection. The issue raised by Tenants' View will be addressed during a team meeting at the customer service centre in June and further training

will be offered to those advisors who need it. In addition, once the customer service centre transfers to Northwards, we will look to schedule a number of opportunities (e.g. job shadowing) to improve mutual understanding of one another's roles.

5. Recommendation

The Board is asked to note the report.