

ROTHERHAM FEDERATION TENANT SCRUTINY



**Rotherham
Tenant Scrutiny**

SUMMARY OF THE REPORT:



For presentation to Rotherham Metropolitan
Borough Council

April 2024

Rotherham Federation



This is a summary of the eighth report of the Rotherham Federation Tenant Scrutiny panel resulting from an investigation into how Rotherham Council supports new tenants and if this is improving sustainability of tenancies.

This topic was chosen as part of a three-stage investigation into the voids processes used by Rotherham Council. This area of work had previously been highlighted by both tenants and council officers as having potential for some improvement.

The following summary includes the findings of the investigation, the recommendations made by the panel, and the evidence leading to these conclusions being drawn. A more detailed explanation of the investigation and findings can be found in the full report (please ask for a copy if required).

Terms of Reference

Aim: To investigate how Rotherham Council supports new tenants and if this is improving the sustainability of tenancies

Objectives:

To:

- ✓ Review the target time for re-letting void properties
- ✓ Consider whether the support provided for tenants during the re-let period is suitable and is leading to more sustainable tenancies, including:
 - tenancy ready workshops,
 - affordability,
 - virtual viewings,
 - furnish scheme and decoration allowances
- ✓ Benchmark against other housing providers as regards their void policies and procedures
- ✓ Review the communications around void policies and services

Scope

- ☒ Phase Two of the voids investigation will avoid the areas to be covered by Phase One and Three i.e. lettable standard; downsizing.
- ☒ The voids investigation phases will also not consider the allocations policy.

Methodology:

The investigation included:

- A survey of new tenants
- Benchmarking with other housing providers
- Interviewing Council officers
- Meetings of the Tenant Scrutiny panel.

KEY FINDINGS

The panel has prioritised its recommendations in order of importance. The supporting evidence for each recommendation is listed:

Recommendation A: Affordability meeting information

Provide a document after the affordability meeting with finance colleagues with all the calculations and key information, including how people can make arrangements to pay their rent.

The Evidence:

- Affordability interviews were seen as really valuable and compared well to other housing providers, supporting the sustainability of tenancies. It is good that the meeting is offered to all new tenants, and to previous tenants who have had issues with paying their rent.
- It was also reassuring that 64% of the survey respondents attending the meeting with the Financial Inclusion Team found it to be useful.
- However one survey respondent commented: *'They should include a piece of paper with all the costs on it so you can peruse it at your own leisure instead of having it all force fed inside 15 minutes and then forgetting it all because of information overload.'*
- It was also concerning that four survey respondents said that they were still unsure on how to physically pay their rent.
- It was felt that the interview may sometimes be seen as 'information overload' and a reminder afterwards of the discussion would be useful.

Full report pages 23-26

Recommendation B: Key choices description

Manage new tenant expectations by providing additional information on the key choices website, including:

- That the property is unfurnished and is likely to need decoration
- A plan of the layout and room sizes (rather than a list of dimensions)

The Evidence:

- 44% of respondents were disappointed with their new home. The main reasons for people giving negative responses were the state of decoration and poor wall/floor surfaces.
- Some of the comments from the new tenant survey were:
 - *'It looked fine on video. When I signed for the keys, it was the worst mistake I'd ever made.'*

- *'I love the house etc. however the state of the walls and garden has been left in is shocking.'*
- *'The video doesn't give you a full image of how much work you really need to do when you move in.'*

➤ Another person said: *'There really should be a grace period to allow for decorating, had to pay rent up front even though the house was not habitable until 20 days later when it was finally decorated due to full time work commitments.'*

➤ Relating to room sizes, there were comments made:

- It felt brighter and bigger than the video.
- The little bedroom was very small.
- Much more spacious in person.

➤ Panel members felt that when viewing the videos and reading descriptions on Key Choices, it was not clear how much space there was in each room for furniture, and how the home was laid out. It was also the experience of some members that they had been surprised by the room sizes and layout when they had moved to a new home themselves.

➤ Panel members felt that the expectations of new tenants could be managed better if the state of decoration, the need for furniture, and the layout of rooms was also provided on the Key Choices description.

Full report pages 13-16 and 36-37

Recommendation C: Virtual viewings re-evaluation

Following expiry of the current contract, plan to re-evaluate the policy of minimising in-person viewings and potentially offering them to ALL new tenants by:

- Carrying out a wider survey of tenants to ask if they would prefer virtual or in-person viewings.
- Costing out if virtual viewings make substantial savings when considering the cost of the video contract.

The Evidence:

➤ Officers reported that very few people request an in-person viewing, but also that this option is not advertised.

➤ The panel was unable to consider the savings made by the service through restricting access to in-person viewings, as opposed to the cost of the video contract, due to the contract being out to tender during the investigation.

➤ The survey of tenants moving to new homes found that 71% of all viewings took place via video. From these, 74% of people who had viewed online would have preferred an in-person viewing.

<p>➤ Comments from the new tenant survey included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The video doesn't give you a full image of how much work you really need to do when you move in. • The video didn't show the extremely shoddy work that had been done. • The outside wasn't that great, there wasn't much of the garden included in the video.
<p>➤ This was also confirmed in the comments made by three of the respondents to the previous investigation survey, who said that a face-to-face viewing would have improved their experience of moving home.</p>
<p>➤ It was noted that officers had said that very few people requested in-person viewings, but the panel had received information from people who had tried and their request had been denied.</p>
<p>➤ It was interesting that all other housing providers who gave a response were themselves offering 100% of their viewings in person.</p>
<p>➤ There was also some concern that officers were telling people that they should visit the area before deciding whether to sign, but that the time to visit was restricted by the sign-up deadline.</p>
<p>➤ The panel felt disappointed that very few viewings took place in-person and that in-person viewings were not offered to more new tenants.</p>
<p>Full report pages 17 - 22</p>

<p>Recommendation D: Viewings for vulnerable new tenants</p> <p>➤ Improve the application form to provide more support to vulnerable new tenants by including questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Whether the applicant needs to request an in-person viewing due to physical and /or mental health needs. ○ If the prospective new tenant needs their support worker to view the property with them. <p>➤ Allow more than 48 hours' notice for the viewing if needed to ensure that their support worker is available to attend.</p>
<p>The Evidence:</p> <p>➤ It was estimated by officers that approximately 20% of all viewings are in-person. This would be if the person had a physical disability, mobility issues, or a visual impairment.</p> <p>➤ The Housing Application form includes a question about whether support is needed during the application process, including the viewing, and a section on 'any special requirements' where people can add any disabilities that they may have.</p>

- Panel members were of the opinion that the 'special requirements' part of the application form would not always make it clear to people that they could be offered an in-person viewing.
- They also thought that some people with Mental Health needs may not have the confidence to ask for an in-person viewing.
- The panel was also concerned that new tenants were being allowed only 48 hours to make a decision on whether they wanted to accept the new home offer; but this would put pressure on them if they wanted to arrange for a specific person to view the property with them.

Full report pages 16 - 22

Recommendation E: Welcome pack

Provide a welcome pack for new tenants that is handed out at sign up. The pack should include information such as neighbourhood / community activities, how to report a repair, and advice about damp and mould. It should also give details specific to that home such as how to work the boiler, location of the stop tap, and days for bin collections.

The Evidence:

- It was noted by the panel that there is no information given to new tenants on moving day other than meter readings, arrangements for gas uncapping, and a plaster disclaimer.
- The panel also confirmed with officers that there is not an information pack at this time for new tenants moving in, giving further details of their new home and neighbourhood.
- One of the survey respondents said: '*... Also the Neighbourhood Centre has helped me settle into the area and make new friendships.*'

The Berneslai website has an 'Information for new tenants' section, which includes very clear advice on:

- moving in what to expect;
- moving checklist;
- rent (including how to pay it);
- insurance;
- gas and electricity;
- repairs;
- safety;
- your estate;
- bins etc.

- Wolverhampton include advice on damp and mould in their tenancy videos '*Are you ready*'.

- It was noted that reporting repairs is discussed at the welcome visit (4-8 weeks after moving in) but probably should be from the first day of a new tenancy.
- The panel discussed the things that would be important to know when moving into a new home and agreed that for safety they would like to know about damp and mould, how to work the boiler, and the location of the stop tap. They would also like to know other local information about bin collection days and neighbourhood community activities to help them to settle in better. Having some advice on how to report a repair would help new tenants to feel less stressed if they need to do so.
- On the whole, the panel thought that a welcome pack for new tenants would really help people to settle in more easily and potentially aid sustainability by encouraging involvement in their new community.

Full report pages 14-16, 34, 37 and 46

Recommendation F: Welcome visit feedback

Make sure that feedback from the welcome visits on what could have been better for the tenant is collated and shared with the voids team on a regular basis.

The Evidence:

- Panel members were pleased that welcome visits take place around 4-8 weeks after moving in, for 90% of new tenants. They were also happy that the visits focussed on making sure that new tenants are settling in and are happy with their new home, as well as answering any queries/ offer support.
- The details from welcome visits are entered onto a database, but it was unclear how the service analyses this data for any recurring themes including any issues with new tenant support.
- The panel felt that it was important that welcome visit feedback is used to highlight trends in new tenant concerns that may lead to tenancies failing e.g. not accessing local community support.

Full report pages 33-36

Recommendation G: Clarity around the Furniture scheme

- Provide more clarity around the scheme by addition of up-to date information in the leaflets and on the website, including:
 - The current prices.
 - Confirmation that the furniture package isn't a life-time commitment (participants can switch/ hand back at any time).
 - How the furniture package can be paid for from housing benefit.
- Work with learning disability organisations to let them know about the furniture scheme and the benefits.

The Evidence:

- Panel members were pleased that Rotherham have a Furnished Homes scheme which helps new tenants and hopefully supports more sustainable tenancies.
- The panel was surprised that only 35% of new tenants that had not previously lived in a Rotherham Council home were taking advantage of the furniture scheme. Panel discussion thought that this may be due to lack of clarity around the scheme.
- It was concerning that only 35% of eligible tenants responding to the survey said that they had received the leaflet advertising the scheme. (However the vast majority of people not receiving the information said that they wouldn't have joined the scheme).
- The survey also found that only half of those people receiving the leaflet thought that it made sense to them.
- It was also worrying that one person thought that the furniture scheme meant paying for a lifetime with no chance to 'opt-out' when circumstances changed.
- The panel became aware that the furniture package can be paid for through housing benefits; however this is not advertised in the leaflet or explained fully in pre-tenancy discussions.
- There was also a view that the leaflet should contain more information on the carpets scheme and should include a separate insert or a link to the Council website to be able to see current prices.
- One panel member was aware that learning disability organisations are discouraging people from signing up to the furniture scheme and instead encouraging people to buy the items second-hand. Further information on the scheme may help these organisations to explain it to new tenants.

Full report pages 29-33

Recommendation H: Furniture scheme extension

Proactively extend and publicise the furniture scheme to other tenants (not just new tenants) including people who are struggling to buy new furniture and those who would like to move in first before deciding what they need/ can afford.

The Evidence:

- Not many panel members had heard about the furniture scheme prior to this investigation.
- A panel discussion further to finding that only 35% of new eligible tenants were signing up to the furniture scheme focussed on the timing of the information. It was concluded that this may be due to lack of clarity around the scheme, but may also be due to people not feeling ready to commit to a package until they had moved in and decided what furniture they wanted and could afford.
- There was also a view that, to sustain tenancies further down the line, the furniture package should be offered to long-standing tenants as well; personal circumstances may have changed or furniture/equipment may have broken leading to financial stress and a need for some support from this scheme.

[Full report pages 29-33](#)

Recommendation I: Measuring sustainability

Ensure that the length and sustainability of tenancies is monitored and reported such as measuring how many tenants remain in their new homes for 12 months.

The Evidence:

- It wasn't made clear to the panel how Rotherham Council measures the sustainability of tenancies. The only mention was that monitoring was in place for tenancies ended by the council i.e. evictions.
- The vast majority of survey respondents (86%) intended to stay in their new home indefinitely. It would be interesting to know how many achieve this and the reasons for leaving if not.
- Two of the housing providers responding to the benchmarking exercise reported that they record the length of tenancies to help with monitoring sustainability; St Leger monitor what proportion of tenancies are still sustained 6 months after their support has ended; and Waverley Homes record the number of tenancies lasting for more than 12 months.

- The panel appreciated that there are a variety of reasons for failed tenancies and that it is difficult to offer sufficient support to prevent them from failing in some situations. However, it would be useful to measure the length of new tenancies to allow for review and ideas for enhancing new tenant support further.

Full report pages 39-40

The full report includes further detail of each recommendation and the related evidence, incorporating 'Panel Views' sections for ease of reading.

Suggested improvements

The following suggestions were considered to be important further considerations for officers:

1.	<p>Support workers Make sure that vulnerable applicants can have involvement from the same support worker throughout the process. (Page 22)</p>
2.	<p>Viewings analysis Analyse whether there is a link between people staying longer in their new home when they have viewed in—person as opposed to virtually, taking into account other factors. (Page 22)</p>
3.	<p>A Place of Your Own training Consider whether further information should be added to the 'A Place Of Your Own' modules such as fire safety, preventing damp and mould, and getting involved. (Page 23)</p>
4.	<p>Furniture scheme Consider extending the scheme to include vacuum cleaners, irons and ironing boards. (Page 23)</p>

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