

Minutes from Housing Services Forum - 23/01/15 – Media Resource Centre, Llandrindod Wells

Present:

Scott Sanders (Chair) - Derwen
Stephen Evans (Vice- Chair) - Charter
Hugh Russell - CHC
Gary Jordan - Cartrefi Conwy
Jon Highcock - Cartrefi Conwy
Carl Woodhouse - CT Cantref
Donna Lloyd-Williams - First Choice HA
Nick Read - Grwp Gwalia Cyf
Simon Halling - Hafod Care Association Ltd
Lesley Mower-Hill - Hafod HA Ltd
Bethan Gladwyn - Hugh James Solicitors
Elgan Rees - Melin Homes
Jean O'Neill - Mid Wales HA Ltd
Sharon Wilkins - Newport City Homes
Dale Barlow - NPT Homes
Jane Robinson - Pembrokeshire Housing
Shelagh Iles - Rhondda HA
Simone Devinett - Rhondda HA
June Blake - Tai Ceredigion Cyf
Lara Lee - Tai Ceredigion Cyf
Jenny Wilson - The Royal British Legion Wales
Vicki Miller - United Welsh
Christopher Walton - Wales & West Housing

10:00 Welcome & Introductions

Scott updated the group on the slight change to agreed process, whereby the HSF would ordinarily discuss issues fed in from Directors strategic group: January's Directors meeting was postponed, so this HSF is a standalone meeting and normal service will be resumed in March.

Scott requested that anyone with ideas for future themes or sessions at HSF should contact Hugh (hugh-russell@chcymru.org.uk or 029 2067 4802).

10:15 Rhondda Housing Association Simone Devinett - Development Worker & Shelagh Iles - Director Find Your Future Project

See attached presentation for the main points from this session

Additional notes:

Project born from 'Action for Change' project. Initial expectation was that the project would help its service users to find work, but it was soon found that enabling the disengaged people, whom the project supports, to achieve long term work was a very difficult process.

Consultation for the project was carried out with the support of the University of South Wales

The project aims to establish new peer groups for its service users or to support those involved to link with established community groups

The project employs one member of staff to support service users who do achieve employment to access benefits and maintain their employment

The best engagement method the project has found is to knock on tenants' doors

The project has enabled 25 people to achieve employment across a variety of locations and at a variety of levels. Other activities include enabling people to acquire CSCS cards so they can work on building sites, undertaking environmental projects, depression busting (they found a lot of undiagnosed mental ill health amongst tenants), arts and crafts sessions and a ladies group (New Connections).

The project's success is partly down to the work undertaken in partnership with other organisations. E.g. The Phoenix Initiative IT project/ job club, run by a tenant, partnered with Remploy to great effect (84 people supported in 6 months, 5 into work!). This project exhibited at Festyval. Works because it is participant led and came from consultation work with tenants. Rhondda HA sourced all the training needed. Mixed, representative steering group.

Mental ill health – effect on housing services

Most involved in the project had anxiety or depression (often undiagnosed)

No support or coping mechanisms in place

Project enabled these people to make small steps to improved well being.

Financial inclusion team linked in with the project – the project imbued confidence in participants to work to tackle their money issues.

The project has had positive knock-on effects for NEETs whose parents were involved in the project

Part of the wider impact of the project is that it has raised the issue of linking services; upon engagement staff discover which other agencies the tenant is working with so that care and support can be coordinated.

The project has become one of the main routes for housing support. It's enabled RHA to find the root causes for people's financial problems. The housing team refer into it when they come across tenants with problems.

NPT: Can the model be shared more widely? In NPT there are lots of support agencies but they don't achieve the same engagement levels as this project.

RHA: Peer engagement is key. It works because we're going back into the communities. DWP now offering funding to facilitate future engagement. RHA are applying for this to undertake a pilot.

Hugh: How did the relationship with Uni of S W benefit the project and have you developed it?

RHA: Recommend putting money aside in future funding bids for independent consultation (in their case they used Uni of South Wales, also inspirational tenants are now engaged with consulting their peers). Funders like this so it can really strengthen a bid. Also, external verification of a project can be really valuable for the provider. A further tip was to video record consultation events as evidence

for future bids. For RHA, the relationship with USW has been fantastic and they link in with them on research projects now.

Scott: Why weren't people engaging with housing officers? What could the HSF learn from your experiences in this regard?

RHA: there's an imbalance of power between the tenant and the housing officer. Engagement can be put under real strain by this and trust can be lost when the issue of rent arrears, for e.g., comes up. Sometimes Housing Officers are just not the right people to deliver this kind of support. One of the major pieces of learning to come from the project is that it has highlighted how important it is to have an appropriate member of staff to deliver certain projects. Housing officers, for example, do not have enough time to deal with a tenant's literacy issues if they're working on a form with them and find that they're not able to read it properly. Separate, targeted support necessary here. On this note, the project has found that literacy issues are a huge problem, particularly given HAs reliance on written correspondence with tenants – often this is not understood.

* Given the shift in what housing officers' roles seems to encompass these days, is the focus of boards going to change to core funding for projects like this one?

RHA: We're pushing for core funding for this project. Also looking at ensuring teams are multi-skilled.

Vicki Miller: At United Welsh, we're considering how best to research tenants' needs. Looking at those who need additional support and trends in engagement/needs. Early days.

Scott: Building strong relationships with tenants, early engagement has to be at the heart of what we're doing. It's becoming the norm.

11:00 **Hugh James Solicitors**
Bethan Gladwyn - Associate
Update on recent changes in the law regarding evictions and associated matters

See attached presentation for the main points from this session

Additional notes

'Reasonable length of time' to store tenants' goods – 7 days, 14 days would be considered reasonable (taking into account tenants' vulnerabilities and particular issues).

If tenants' items are damaged in RSL's care, then the RSL is liable – be careful!

*Can we recharge outgoing tenants for storage of goods?

BG: If made clear from outset that this is the policy. Practically it will be hard to recoup the money though. RSL can keep items that are stored but not paid for.

11:45 **The Royal British Legion**
Jenny Wilson - Advice & Information Team Leader
JWilson@britishlegion.org.uk
Providing Housing for Veterans

See attached presentation for the main points from this session

Additional notes

RBL support anyone who's served over 7 days.

Debate ongoing re: war widows who've remarried – still eligible for support? (not currently)

It is believed that 12% of the population of Wales are eligible for support. The RBL do not capture the data for how many tenants of RSLs are veterans. It's considered that a large proportion would be, though.

Provide really wide variety of support (from means tested grants for white goods to travelcards to help veterans get to work). Crucially for HSF, this has included paying off rent arrears in the past (normally a £500 cap put in place). Also council tax or utilities arrears where this is detrimental to the health of the service user. Often the funding for these payments is split between RBL and the client's former unit.

They can provide volunteering opportunities for tenants (could be useful for improving confidence, self-esteem, building up a CV).

RSLs need specialist support from orgs like RBL when it comes to dealing with veterans. Major and specific associated health problems: Est. 80% of vets suffer from PTSD, also skin cancer for desert vets a huge problem.

New RBL grant scheme coming in which orgs that work with veterans can apply to (provided the work achieved with a grant is aimed at supporting a minimum of 90% of veterans).

Est. that 40% of queries to RBL are housing related. Tenancies often break down – veterans who've been looked after to that point (bills paid, etc.) may lack the independent living skills to maintain tenancy successfully.

**13:15 Change to Water Regulations
Regulation Update/ Discussion
Liz Franks (WG, below) - Energy, Water and Flood Division - Department for Natural Resources -Welsh Government
Sarah Falder (DC, below) - Head of Key Customers & Affordability – Dŵr Cymru**

WG's presentation covered the following points:

The change in regulation followed the Walker Review (2009) (<http://bit.ly/1zXx0wZ>). It was driven by the fact that the WG felt a need to intervene in the cost of arrears recovery, which they estimate adds £15-20 to an average household's bill costs.

The regulations require the occupants of households to identify themselves so that the water companies (only those based in Wales, i.e. Dwr Cymru and Dee Valley) can charge them for usage. WG intervened to simplify the data required, which it was confirmed is the following:

- Name of Occupant
- DOB (if available – it was noted that this is requested for the sole purpose of distinguishing between people with similar names)
- Date of occupation of property

This info can be provided by post/phone/email or via the Landlord TAP – a purpose-built portal.

There are a number of private organisations set up specifically to collate this type of information and to provide it to utilities companies. WG confirmed that it was no problem if these companies were engaged for this process; the landlord merely has to arrange for the data to be provided.

WG stated that the landlord has to tell tenants that the data will be passed on to the water companies. This does not make the landlord liable for this data. WG stated that a link to the guidance on this subject would be provided on her presentation notes (which she will provide to CHC at a later date).

The WG will review how the process is going in 2 or 3 years' time. In the meantime, they will work with the water companies to ensure compliance and monitor progress.

The new regs will be covered in the training for registered landlords under the housing act.

DC's presentation was considerably shorter: welcomes new regs, wants to keep communications open with RSLs, no desire to make life more onerous for landlords.

Q&A (N.B. I didn't know everyone's names/employers), so a * represents an unnamed attendee

First Choice Housing Association:

With FCHA's housing there is the possibility of up to 5 tenants being housed at one address, many with severe learning difficulties. Often the utility bills are set in the name of the support provider. In this case, do they need to provide the data of the tenants or leave it as it is?

DC: YES – responsibility still lies with the tenant

WG: If there's already a name on the bill and the bill is being paid, it is best to stick with it. "There are exceptions to every rule"

DC: We want to work closely with you to understand these individual issues without putting undue pressure on your tenants.

Scott Sanders: Would the support provider take responsibility for arrears?

FCHA: Not sure – lot of movement of tenants.

Steve Evans: How does this apply to leaseholders?

WG: technically, the leaseholder is the responsible party

* If a HA owns a freehold which a leaseholder sublets, who is responsible?

WG: We would expect the leaseholder to bear responsibility

* Are HAs required to provide leaseholders' names and other info?

DC: In the short term, we won't force you to go and find this information. Let's have these conversations as they arise. If there is wilful avoidance of payment, then this is a problem, if it's not then let's talk things through.

Several people expressed concern that HAs will be caught out at a later stage by bills accrued by tenants

DC: Talk to us. If we can have a conversation about these issues early we can try and resolve them.

NPT Homes: the regulation refers to 'reasonably practical efforts' – could DC provide written confirmation that reasonably practical efforts have been taken by the HA so that they are covered from future demands for payment.

WG: We'll need to give more thought to leaseholders. Will add to FAQ doc once lawyers consulted. Also shared ownerships.

* Can a YP (18+) be chased for arrears if they live with parents?

* If a large tranche of data is collected at once there is likely to be a degree of human error in the recording/submission of this. Is this going to be accounted for?

DC: Our culture is not to chase down every individual error. That's not our culture. We're a social business.

SS: This is a trust issue; there is no risk in these new regs for the water companies, but there is risk for RSLs

* The regs ask us to provide info for all occupants over the age of 18. What's the logic behind this?

WG: 'Occupants' is the term used in the original legal document on which this is based. Only provide info for the named tenant according to your records.

* Do carers count as occupants?

WG: Assume that the regs are asking for permanent occupants.

* Can we take 'occupant' to mean 'tenant'?

WG: Yes

DC: Yes

* Is there any legislation supporting the release of data if the tenant doesn't wish to provide it?

Steve Evans: The Data Protection Act covers this.

WG: It's already in law that occupiers need to inform water companies of their presence

Shelah Iles (Rhondda HA): Many tenants are not taking responsibility for their bills. It's part of our job to help them to take these responsibilities.

* Will RSLs be eligible for payment of bills where properties are void?

DC: You'll be responsible for the standing charges but not for additional bills on void properties. If a property is going to be long term void, just give us a ring and we can disconnect that property on our system so there'll be no charge. Just let us know when it's going to be filled again. Give us a meter reading at the time where possible. All about communication!

NPT: we've emailing DC for a long time re: Standing Charges. There is legislation saying that there is no responsibility for standing charges in void properties. **Liz, would you mind digging out a link to this?**

DC confirmed that they have no database of property information

* Is the Portal secure?

DC: Yes

* Are DC geared up to receive the data yet?

DC: Yes and no! Getting there! Weren't prepared for the speed of response, nor the volume of data being sent through. Many orgs are sending all the data they have over so it's taking time to clean up.

* Our IT dept. are struggling to send our data through the portal. Can you share info on who has used the portal successfully, so we can contact them for advice?

DC: Action?

Scott: In summary:

We need to provide every tenant's info

Every time someone leaves we need to tell the water co.s

We need to update the water co.s every time there is a change of occupation

* What about liability for hidden debts that are uncovered by these regs?

DC: we'll handle these on a case by case basis.

Scott: Can you confirm involved please?

WG: Legally, these came into force on 01.01.15 (+21 days) but the water co.s agreed a cooling off period to enable everyone to adapt to the new way of working. As such, the end of March was confirmed as the date from which these would be enforced. N.B. not 21 days from the end of March.

WG: Regs only apply to Welsh water co.s, i.e. Dwr Cymru and Dee Valley.

* If we have tenants who receive water from one of those co.s and an English co. what do we do?

WG: Send all the data through the portal. It's designed to separate out who is who.

Scott: Given that the purpose of this is to provide reduced bills for customers, how long til our tenants can start to see a benefit?

DC: Social tariff comes in in April, so this will help. Pricing governed by OFWAT . DC are trying to reduce prices as a not-for-profit company.

*Do you need property postcodes?

DC: Ideally, yes.

DC: Recommended putting info about this in the next landlord rent increase letter so that tenants definitely read it.

Hugh: Confirmed that if all queries are sent to him, he can send on to Liz who will write up an FAQ