

Tenancy Sustainment

Summary Report
May 2015

Foreword

We have always offered more for our customers than just a roof over their head and a repairs service. Their needs, and how we provide additional support to meet them, are always evolving. Welfare reforms in particular have challenged us to think about how we assist them to establish and maintain successful tenancies.

This report is about how – together with other members of CASE – we challenged ourselves to think about what we mean when we talk about tenancy sustainment.

Whether it's about support and training to help our customers find a job, assistance with understanding benefits or advice on managing money, why do we offer support that goes beyond the basic services in a tenancy agreement, and does this support have the outcomes we expect? During this project, all the organisations shared their ways of working, knowledge and experience with each other. It has helped us all to make sure we are working in a way which offers real benefits for our customers.

Margaret Dodwell
Executive Director,
Customer services

Who we are

CASE is a group of ten major housing associations providing affordable homes in the South East of England.

The objective of the group is to share thinking on best practice, as well as to prepare and commission research on matters of common interest.

The group comprises:

- AmicusHorizon
- London & Quadrant
- Moat
- Paradigm Housing
- Radian
- Sovereign Housing Association
- Thames Valley Housing
- The Guinness Partnership
- The Hyde Group
- West Kent Housing Association.

Introduction

The number of evictions from rental properties has increased significantly. In the 12 months to September 2014, there were 41,195 landlord repossessions by county court bailiffs in England and Wales, an increase of 49% on the same 12 month period to September 2010. The 11,100 landlord repossessions in the latest quarter – the three months to September 2014 – was the highest quarterly total on record¹.

Where a tenancy ends in eviction there are costs to the customer, the landlord and the taxpayer. For some tenants, the loss of their housing association home will result in homelessness. For others there are the financial and personal costs associated with finding a new home and weakening of ties to family and neighbourhood, schools and local services. For the taxpayer there can be the cost of supporting a vulnerable household to find new housing.

For the landlord there are costs arising from the administrative and legal processes, void loss, the costs associated with re-letting the home and, in many cases, rent arrears that are no longer recoverable. These costs, per eviction, are calculated as being close to £10,000.

Supporting our customers to sustain their tenancies

With welfare benefit changes and other pressures on household budgets making it harder for many social housing tenants to pay their rent, housing associations are focusing more than ever before on how they can support tenants so as to avoid evictions and abandonments.

This paper summarises the findings of research commissioned by Guinness, and undertaken with the co-operation of CASE (Consortium of Associations in the South East), with the aim of understanding the ways in which housing associations help their customers, to sustain their tenancy and how they evaluate the effectiveness and value for money of this work.

The research was undertaken with the active participation of nine CASE organisations: AmicusHorizon, Moat, Paradigm Housing, Radian, Sovereign Housing Association, Thames Valley Housing, The Guinness Partnership, The Hyde Group and West Kent Housing Association.

The research, led by Campbell Tickell, included a survey of residents who had received tenancy sustainment support and a visit to each of the participating organisations to discuss current and developing approaches to tenancy sustainment with frontline and other staff.

We would like to acknowledge with thanks the contributions of all the participants in this project, both staff and tenants, and Sarah Brown and her colleagues at Campbell Tickell.

¹ Ministry of Justice figures reported by Labour Press, 29 December 2014.

Defining ‘tenancy sustainment’

‘Tenancy sustainment’ is a relatively new term and is used in different ways by different organisations. It is used to refer both to:

- specific activities aimed at helping customers to sustain their tenancy; and
- an organisational objective that is delivered not just through these specific activities but also through the wider approach the organisation takes to tenancy management, for example to the way in which it lets property and collects rent.

While all CASE organisations have tenancy sustainment as an objective, not all attach the term to a specific activity or group of activities.

Where an organisation does attach the term to a specific activity, it usually refers to short term intervention aimed at helping individual tenants to resolve whatever issues are threatening their tenancy, such as:

- rent arrears – typically, where the customer has not responded adequately (or at all) to standard income recovery procedures;
- anti-social behaviour, where the issue has not been resolved through the organisation’s Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) management procedures;
- hoarding or other threat to the condition of the property; and
- unmet personal support needs.

Some but not all CASE organisations have dedicated Tenancy Sustainment, or Tenancy Support, posts which provide this type of ‘crisis support’. These posts may also act as a source of advice for other housing management staff.

Beyond specific interventions

However, some organisations, including Guinness, use ‘tenancy sustainment’ as an umbrella term to refer not only to ‘crisis support’ but also to the support they provide to customers more widely to help them to be in a better position to sustain their tenancy, for example through learning how better to budget or by gaining employment.

Other CASE organisations also provide this type of support, but some label it as ‘Community Investment’ (or similar) rather than as ‘Tenancy Sustainment’.

Whether or not they have dedicated tenancy sustainment posts or categorise certain activities as being primarily about tenancy sustainment, all CASE organisations recognise that tenancy sustainment goes beyond specific interventions and even beyond the overall approach to tenancy management.

Decisions about rent levels, tenure types and mix and the availability of local services and infrastructure are all crucial to sustainable tenancies.

What works in sustaining tenancies?

CASE associations talk about 'moving upstream' – focusing more strongly on preventative, rather than reactive, measures:

- allocating the right property for the customer;
- helping to prepare customers to take on and establish their tenancy;
- delivering the right messages from the outset, for example with regard to rent payment, and focusing on the best ways of getting messages across to tenants during the sign-up process;
- providing practical help to prevent debt from accumulating – offering advice on benefits, budgeting and utilities costs; offering low cost loans; providing access to furniture and equipment; helping to access charitable funds;
- assessing the risks to tenancy sustainment and taking action to manage the risks, for example by providing practical help in claiming benefits or referral to (and support in engaging with) a debt management advice charity;
- acting quickly when rent payments fall behind – not waiting until arrears have reached an unmanageable level.

The importance of the organisation's overall approach to tenancy management also emerged as a strong theme from the research:

- the nature of the relationship that the organisation seeks to establish with its customers – promoting an 'adult to adult' relationship, working in ways that encourage customers to take responsibility for their tenancy obligations, recognising the interdependence between landlord and tenant;
- the ways in which it communicates with customers – including ensuring that they are aware of the support the organisation can provide. Tenants surveyed as part of the research reported that they had had no idea how much help the association could provide;
- the ways in which it encourages engagement with customers and 'nudges' changes in behaviour, for example through a tenancy management model based on tiered service levels.

Taking a 'whole system' approach was another key theme:

- taking tenancy sustainment into account in developing strategy, processes and performance measures – recognising, for example, that an organisational focus on minimising the time taken to let a void property can reduce the opportunity for pre-tenancy work;
- ensuring that all customer facing staff are alert to tenancy sustainment issues and are equipped to respond effectively;
- bringing expertise from across the organisation to bear on tenancy sustainment issues;
- effectively marrying the organisation's two roles of tenancy 'enforcer' and support provider – ensuring, for example, a co-ordinated approach between staff taking action to recover arrears and those seeking to support the tenancy.

A successful approach was also seen to involve:

- collecting, maintaining and making use of good quality tenant profiling and contact data to identify where tenancies may be at risk of failure. Incomplete tenant data was seen as a significant challenge for most CASE organisations in seeking to identify and respond early to issues that may threaten a tenancy;
- staff with the right personal qualities and skill set – qualities and skills that may more usually be required in providing supported housing. Both staff and customers stress the importance of the personal relationship that the individual officer establishes with the tenant;
- good communication with nominating local authorities and previous landlords to help to ensure appropriate allocations and that the association receives good quality information about new tenants;
- nurturing effective partnerships with external agencies that can help to support tenants, such as: advice and grant giving charities; community enterprises providing, for example, job seeking support; utilities and utility switching companies;
- leveraging in other resources, such as by making better use of the supply chain to provide training or employment opportunities or by partnering with the Welfare to Work sector;
- clarity of objective – being clear about what a particular approach is aimed at achieving;
- evaluating the impact and cost of different types of approach and intervention.

Evaluating success and value for money

Tenancy sustainment work does not lend itself easily to evaluation:

- an outcome can be the result of a number of different interventions or initiatives, making it difficult both to capture all the inputs and to identify the factor(s) that ‘made a difference’;
- some of the intended outcomes, such as improvements in individual or community wellbeing, can be very difficult to assess;
- the success of tenancy sustainment work needs to be measured in the long term, not just the immediate outcome of an eviction avoided but whether the tenancy is sustained six or 18 months after the intervention;

- although complex, tenancy sustainment work represents only a small part of an association’s work and the resource spent on evaluation must be proportionate to the value it delivers.

Nevertheless, CASE organisations acknowledge the need to assess whether, and at what cost, their tenancy sustainment work is achieving the organisation’s business and social objectives.

The research found that for some elements of tenancy sustainment work – such as providing financial and employment advice and support – some CASE organisations have a well-developed framework within which to assess the effectiveness and, to a lesser extent, the value

for money of the work. Even for newer aspects of tenancy sustainment work such as ‘crisis support’, we found that much was being done to capture the outcomes and calculate the inputs.



Measuring impact

Inputs and outcomes are not, however, the only things worth measuring. Especially at this stage, when new approaches are being introduced, it can be useful to measure whatever can be measured that may indicate the potential value of an approach or help to understand whether, and how, different approaches are working. This can include measuring intermediate outputs (such as expressions of interest), outputs (such as the number of training courses delivered) and activity (such as the number of visits made).

And, of course, counting is not the only way of evaluating whether and how approaches and interventions are working. Surveying beneficiaries can be an important part of evaluating tenancy sustainment work, but may need specialist expertise in constructing appropriate survey materials and techniques. Although surveying tenants is not a new activity for CASE organisations, the particular type of survey – aimed, for example, at evaluating a change in wellbeing – makes it new territory for some.

Evaluation also needs to take into account the views of staff and other agencies delivering the services. Analysing closed cases is also likely to provide useful information about the types of intervention that have been more or less effective in different circumstances. Reporting on individual cases – ‘storytelling’ – can be an effective way of communicating the complexity and impact of tenancy sustainment.

Alongside evaluating the success of specific tenancy sustainment activities, some CASE organisations are considering how to measure tenancy sustainment overall. A recent approach of one CASE organisation is to develop a corporate tenancy sustainment measure which aggregates a range of measures – including the number of evictions, the number of tenants supported into employment and the increase in neighbourhood wellbeing – into a single score.

The approach of another CASE association – also in its early stages – is to measure the extent to which individual tenancies are ‘thriving’ or ‘failing’ (based on the amount of accrued arrears and

the cost to the organisation of arrears recovery action) and to assess the impact of particular interventions or approaches in moving tenancies from failing to thriving.

During the course of the project, Guinness began work on developing an evaluative framework which defines the inputs and outcomes for each type of activity that Guinness groups under the heading of ‘tenancy sustainment’ with the aim of making an overall assessment of value for money. That framework, or elements of it, may be of use to other organisations.

Responding to related strategic issues

Although the research found broad agreement about strategy and the types of approach that were seen to be effective in sustaining tenancies, it also found some points of difference between CASE associations.

There are differences in the way CASE organisations view their role in the context of reducing sources of support for tenants; and differences on the question of whether associations should be selective in whom they house.

Housing associations have long considered the question of the extent to which their role should be about more than bricks and mortar. Different associations have come to different conclusions – conclusions which some are now reconsidering.

In the context of local authority funding cuts, some associations which, until now, have supported general needs tenants by helping them to access support from statutory agencies, are now contemplating the prospect of providing the support themselves. Some consider that they have no choice but to do so. Others remain clear that their mission does not extend to filling the gaps in support provision left by the withdrawal of services provided by statutory agencies.

Calculating the costs to the organisation of a failed or failing tenancy has focused associations' attention on the business risk of new tenants whose financial circumstances

and/or social support needs are such that they will struggle to sustain their tenancy.

While all CASE organisations seek to identify a new tenant's support needs – financial or otherwise – and to put in place arrangements to meet them, they face a difficult set of decisions about how best to provide that support, how to make sure that it is available to those who need it, and how to balance the costs of that support against the benefits it provides to those associations and to their tenants.

Conclusion

The participating associations started with different perspectives, different approaches and different priorities, although with common problems and challenges in supporting their tenants.

Although this was not the original intention, the network that this project established has its own benefits. The group will continue to engage and, meet periodically to compare ideas and approaches. This will start in 2015 with a further opportunity to review and test ideas for evaluation frameworks, including the further progress that The Guinness Partnership have made in developing their framework.

On the final page, you will find reflections from each of the participating CASE members. One of the benefits of this project it has been to provide an opportunity for organisations to adopt a structured approach to analyse and compare their approaches to tenancy sustainment and the value for money that it provides.



Comments

“We’d like to continue our involvement with this work... The report will help us to develop our future tenancy sustainment offer and resources”

**Charles Glover-Short,
AmicusHorizon**

“Working with Guinness and others on this report has been incredibly valuable for Moat in both testing our thinking and challenging us to do more. I have personally found the debate with peers across the sector particularly useful and the report will be act as a powerful learning tool for all those who choose to use it.”

**Eusebio Barata,
Moat**

“From Paradigm’s perspective we feel we should continue engaging and taking part in collaborative sharing of good practice and ideas.”

**Wendy Smith, Paradigm
Housing**

“The research was valuable for us – it highlighted the distinctive roles of tenancy enforcement and support, and has lead us to review how we deliver tenancy sustainment”

**Diana MacLean,
Radian**

“We are currently in the process of reviewing our Tenancy Support Advisor service. We will use the findings of the research to understand what others are doing in terms of tenancy support and different approaches to monitoring its effectiveness.”

**Natalie Pearton,
Sovereign Housing
Association**

“The report was helpful for Thames Valley in identifying tenancy sustainment as a broad area touching on a lot of what we do. The different approaches across the sector highlighted this fact and helped us with thinking through how we capture outcomes as opposed to how we organise or structure delivery. As a result we will be taking a closer look at failed tenancies and the impact of the various interventions we have in place.”

**John Baldwin,
Thames Valley Housing**

“Our involvement in this piece of work has allowed us to have a wider debate about what we mean by tenancy sustainment and the challenges we all face in effectively measuring the impact of interventions that come within this broad header.”

**Karen Birch,
The Hyde Group**

We undertook this project with our partners in CASE because we were all facing the challenge of understanding the difference that we make with tenancy sustainment. We picked up some great practical ideas in the process, participants have made connections with their peers which they can continue to use to share ideas and challenges, and we are more able to account for the impact that our work has for our tenants.”

**Andrew Dench,
The Guinness Partnership**

“The research was valuable for us it highlighted the distinctive roles of tenancy enforcement and support, and has lead us to review how we deliver tenancy sustainment.”

**Craig Reynolds,
West Kent Housing
Association**

“The research findings have provided a valuable insight into the approaches available to sustain tenancies and will help inform L&Q in developing and providing these services.”

**Michael Liu,
L&Q**

The Guinness Partnership
17 Mendy Street, High Wycombe,
Buckinghamshire HP11 2NZ
Email: info@guinness.org.uk
www.guinnesspartnership.com



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