

Subject:	Response to Tenant Scrutiny Panel report on standard letters		
Date of meeting:	5 March 2014		
Report of:	Executive Director – Environment, Development & Housing		
Contact officer:	Name:	Ododo Dafé	Tel: 293201
	Email:	ododo.dafe@brighton-hove.gov.uk	
Ward(s) affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE**1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:**

- 1.1 This report sets out the Housing response to the recommendations of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel in their report on standard letters. That report can be found at Appendix 1.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the committee notes the evidence, findings and recommendations of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel relating to standard letters used in Housing.
- 2.2 That the committee agrees the actions proposed in this report in response to the Tenant Scrutiny Panel's recommendations.

3. RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION/CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS:

- 3.1 The Tenant Scrutiny Panel was set up in April 2013 following an externally supported and facilitated recruitment exercise. It was agreed that as part of the panel members' training and development, they would split into two groups, each undertaking a pilot scrutiny review so that in this way involvement and hands on learning could be most effective.
- 3.2 As its first review, one of the groups looked into and reviewed a sample of standard letters used within Housing. The purpose of this review was to establish whether our letters are:-
- Clearly written
 - Consistent in style and tone
 - Properly pitched at their target audience
 - Free of jargon
 - Communicating the right information
 - Encouraging residents to respond to housing services and/or resolve the issue
 - Presenting a positive impression of the housing service
 - Getting results.

3.3 Managers within the service would like to extend their gratitude to members of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel for their vigilance, insight and analysis to the work they have undertaken in this pilot review, and express appreciation for the helpful suggestions and recommendations contained in their report. Housing response to those recommendations is set out below.

4. RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Recommendation 1

Recommendation 1: The panel believe that all council Housing staff who are involved in writing letters to residents need to communicate in plain English. The panel would like the Housing Service to inform them what steps the service will take to make this happen.

4.1.1 This recommendation is agreed in full.

4.1.2 Several years ago, all staff in the then Housing Management service were trained in letter and report writing skills, and in the use of plain language. It is now timely, given the passage of time and the range of new staff, to again carry out a large-scale training programme. This training can be effectively carried out in-house, using the skills of managers and other colleagues who have recently attended similar training led by service users and staff of the Learning Disability Team.

4.1.3 As part of this training, we will also ensure that all teams have access to the plain language guide 'The A – Z of alternative words', produced by the Plain English Campaign.

4.2 Recommendation 2

Recommendation 2: The panel would like the Housing Service to find ways to make sure all their standard letters are of the same quality. The aim would be to make these letters consistent in:

- ***How to address tenants when writing letters***
- ***How to encourage tenants to contact the council or other organisations who can help them resolve the issue***
- ***Using plain English***
- ***Giving examples of useful sentences, including how to sign off letters.***

The panel would like the Housing Service to find ways to obtain residents' views on the key standard letters used by the service. It would be particularly useful if the service could get the views of residents who have difficulties with literacy and numeracy.

4.2.1 This recommendation is agreed in full.

4.2.2 Service managers will work with colleagues in our Performance & Improvement Team, along with residents on the Business and Value for Money Service Improvement Group, and additional residents known to experience literacy difficulties, to review all remaining standard letters.

The Head of Income, Involvement & Improvement will also put in place measures to ensure the consistency of quality and tone in the letters, eg by having each template letter accessed from shared computer files once they have been agreed. This will also address the concern raised by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel about version control. In addition letters will be reviewed to ensure consistency in style, font, and font size, removing inappropriate use of underscore, italics or bold font.

4.3 Recommendation 3

Recommendation 3: The panel recommend that all teams in the Housing Service should send out a letter to the resident(s) after every home visit detailing what was discussed, and agreed, at the visit. The panel also feels that it may be good practice to write to tenants where appointments made have been missed. The letter should also encourage the resident to reply to the service with any concerns. This recommendation should be piloted for six months and then feedback on the results be given to the Tenant & Resident Scrutiny Panel.

4.3.1 This recommendation is welcome, and is partially agreed.

4.3.2 Housing regularly sends letters to confirm discussions that have taken place at a home visit or on the telephone. Where this is not done as a matter of course, Housing will look at whether confirmation letters should be routinely introduced.

4.3.3 There might be some occasions where sending a letter following a home visit will not make good use of staff time, and will involve unnecessary postage costs. Examples of such occasions are where a Neighbourhood Officer has visited to gather information or provide an update on a matter, or where we have undertaken almost 900 visits to residents following an initial letter to ensure people had as much information as they needed on the changes to welfare benefits. We will ensure that communications that need to be confirmed in writing is done, and will ask those tenants who use the internet whether an email, or letter attached to an email, would be their preferred method of confirming discussions of a visit. This would not only save time in them receiving the confirmation, but will be more environmentally sustainable, reducing the use of paper and envelopes. It will also save on ever increasing postage costs.

4.3.4 The issue of missed appointments (whether by the resident, or by council staff) is an important one because of the disappointment and inconvenience this can cause to residents, and the inefficient use of staff and operatives time for the council. It is more cost effective for the council to leave a card at the property when the tenant misses an appointment. Where an appointment is missed by staff, the usual practice is to telephone the tenant at the earliest possible time to inform them of the need to reschedule the appointment – perhaps because a member of staff has been ill. A letter of apology stating the rescheduled time can be sent in some cases, however a commitment to do this in every case might mean that excessive extra work is required of staff at a time that they are already experiencing additional work through not having a team member at work. For many residents the telephone call is likely to suffice.

Housing will monitor the cases where it will, and where it is likely it will not, routinely send confirmation letters, and provide further information on this to the Tenant Scrutiny Panel in the update it has requested after a six month period.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION:

- 5.1 The Tenant Scrutiny Panel has highlighted in its report how residents and local organisations were involved in their work. With regard to the recommendations, residents on the Service Improvement Group, those on the involvement database, and residents who have learning disabilities or literacy difficulties will be involved in the review of remaining letters.

6. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 6.1 The actions proposed in this report can be met from within the existing HRA employees and staff training budgets.

Finance Officer Consulted: Susie Allen

Date: 24.2.14

Legal Implications:

- 6.2 The approved ways of working for the Tenant Scrutiny Panel provide for the Panel's recommendations to be presented to the Housing Committee. That Committee has to agree a response to the report/recommendations. The report of the Panel and the Housing Committee's response will then be presented to the Housing Management Consultative Sub-Committee. A summary of the report, recommendations and any agreed actions will also be reported back to the Tenant Scrutiny Panel and published on the council's website.

Lawyer Consulted: Liz Woodley

Date: 20.2.14

Equalities Implications:

- 6.3 Housing is very mindful of the need to communicate with residents in a variety of ways in order to meet their needs. For example, a much simplified version of the Tenants' Handbook was co-produced with colleagues from the council's Learning Disabilities Team, and involved users of that service in ensuring the content was understandable. In addition, we provide Housing Update and other communications in a variety of formats. We will need to do some further work to ensure that we gather and use tenants preferred communication methods when sending standard letters.

Sustainability Implications:

- 6.4 While we will continue to send letters as a major form of communication, we are also mindful to think about the use of paper. For example many residents have commented to us that they would prefer to receive Homing In electronically in

order to minimise wasting paper, and we will be considering whether and how we can extend this to standard letters, giving residents the preference.

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 6.5 There are no direct crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 6.6 There are no direct risk and opportunity implications arising from this report.

Public Health Implications:

- 6.7 There are no direct public health implications arising from this report.

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 6.8 There are no direct corporate or citywide implications arising from this report. However, the quality of our communications lies at the foundation of ensuring that residents have the information they need, and are therefore able to fulfil their service needs or meet their obligations.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

1. None

Documents in Members' Rooms:

1. None

Background Documents:

1. None