

Response to the HCN “Local Office of the Future” Review

1.0 Introduction

1.1 A review of the role of the Local Office of the future commenced in January this year involving presentations from local managers at 5 Area seminars. A key element of this review has been to gauge the views of the Housing Community Network as representatives of the customer.

1.2 A consultation exercise was facilitated by Supporting Communities N.I. and was primarily targeted at the Central and Area levels of the Network.

1.3 The HCN reviewed the 5 main themes as presented to the NIHE Board in the Autumn of 2008:

- Working with the community
- Protecting the asset
- Understanding the local housing market
- Providing housing options
- Sustaining tenancies

1.4 Each Area considered a single theme and a comprehensive response was presented at the March 2010 Central Network meeting.

2.0 Purpose

2.1 This paper is a first step in responding to the issues raised by the community and does so by:

- Summarizing the main issues raised by HCN members on theme by theme basis (See appendices);

- Highlights existing essential services and good practice, and,
- Identifies potential areas for future development in conjunction with the Housing Community Network.

3.0 Response to HCN recommendations

3.1 Community representatives raised a number of key issues during this consultation exercise:

- The value of the existing Community Participation Compacts in encouraging and developing resident involvement in the local service;
- The importance of close linkages between Local Offices, the community they serve and Area services;
- The important role the HCN perform in terms of monitoring local services, the potential for increasing involvement in spending decisions (e.g. Lpcal Area Priorities/estate inspections) and the potential to develop a greater scrutiny role.
- The broad consensus on the proposed enhancements to Local Office housing advice services and the approach adopted to building safer communities and promoting shared neighbourhoods.
- The need to work with other housing providers, particularly Housing Associations;
- The potential for communities to deliver local services through community services agreements.

3.2 A summary of the issues raised and the NIHE response is attached to this document on a theme by theme basis.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 Central community representatives are asked to note the contents of this paper.

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“Working With The Community” - Belfast Area HCN

a) Addressing Community Issues through Participation Compacts

The HCN stressed the value of the compact, the need to involve more groups and the need for compacts to address specific community needs.

In the current year we will be exploring options to increase resident involvement with particular reference to developments on the mainland with regard to the Tenant Services Authority standards. Ultimately we would like to be in a position to offer community groups or District Housing Community Networks more options for involvement by enhancing the existing compacts.

b) Role of the HCN

The HCN stressed the value of monitoring Local Office performance and influencing decisions and agreeing standards.

This is an Area that we could jointly explore increasing the emphasis on “Scrutiny” rather than monitoring and establishing a form of “Co-regulation”. Scrutiny would imply improved training for HCN representatives to ensure they are able to participate fully in any scrutiny role.

c) Linking Communities with Health, Education, Employment etc.

There is consensus on the need for Local Offices to continue to provide this function.

d) Promoting Shared Neighbourhoods

There is consensus on the need for Local Offices to continue to provide this function.

e) Ensuring Safer Communities

The HCN emphasised the importance of close working with communities and the need for effective communication channels

This is a function which could be further developed with regard increased community scrutiny either through Tenant Led Inspections or local management agreements.

f) Promoting Financial Inclusion

The HCN have emphasised the need for the importance of an Accounts and Housing Benefit service at the Local Office.

Housing Benefit accounts for approximately 40% of callers to Local Offices and a local benefits advice service will continue in the future. Housing Benefit Managers are required to report on the quality of their service provision with particular emphasis on accessibility to the Housing Benefit service. We can foresee an important role for the Area HCN in monitoring and scrutinising the Area Services such as Housing Benefit, Arrears management and telephone services such as repair reporting and grounds enquiries. This service review should include Housing Benefit uptake campaigns, "Money Weeks", effectiveness in preventing debt, effectiveness of debt advice service, accessibility of service, quality of telephone contact and quality of local office counter services. In addition, we are introducing telephone applications for public sector tenancies in advance of sign up to ensure prospective new tenants are aware of rental charges.

g) Monitoring and Evaluation

The HCN have emphasised their role in the monitoring of Local Office performance, their continued involvement in Mystery Shopping exercises, Tenant Led Inspections and their contribution to District housing Plans.

As previously stated, there is potential to enhance the HCN role from monitoring to scrutiny and co-regulation. In addition Repairs and Homelessness have been identified for the next phase of Tenant Led Inspections. A revised approach to telephone mystery shopping through the District HCN is currently being piloted and service reviews will continue to be undertaken using the above mentioned tools.

Protecting the Assets - North East Area HCN

a) Ensuring stock is fit for purpose

The HCN recognized the financial constraints facing the organisation and stressed the importance of local consultation and communication and the value of estate inspections. A number of initiatives were suggested including addressing unkept gardens and charging tenants, the introduction of deposits and guarantors and the establishment of a tenant reward scheme.

It is proposed to introduce an Estate Inspection service as part of the Participation Compact next year and the “Local Area Priorities” initiative, providing communities with a voice in the programme management process, will be introduced in the next financial year. Further discussion is required with regard the latter initiatives.

b) Neighbourhood Renewal

The HCN main concerns relate to the continuation of funding

c) Ensuring well maintained homes

The HCN see merit in establishing budgets for individual estates

If the HCNs is to adopt a greater scrutiny role then the provision of improved management information on expenditure should be examined.

d) Void management

The HCN highlighted a number of initiatives that could be employed in this function. Initiatives included the introduction of alarms, community service agreements to protect void properties, the use of shuttering and enhancements to the new tenancy process.

All the initiatives identified should be reviewed and implemented as appropriate by the Local Offices. The HCN could have a challenge and scrutiny role in this important function and community representative training may be required to maximize the benefits of this approach.

“Understanding The Local Housing Market” - SE Area HCN

a) Exploiting Local Knowledge

The HCN emphasized the importance of collating information from a range of local sources and the potential contribution the HCN could make.

There is consensus on the need for Local Offices to have a good knowledge of local housing issues.

b) Proactive with Housing Providers

The HCN emphasised the need to engage other housing providers and the key role the Local Office could play in this area. In addition, the need to engage Housing Associations at a local level and the provision of housing advice to private sector tenancies was emphasized.

There is consensus on the need for Local Offices to engage with other providers. The engagement of Housing Associations is an area for further development given the increasing proportion of social housing stock managed by this sector. Given the dispersed nature of their stock it may be impractical for Associations to provide a local presence – however this may be addressed through participation in local fora.

c) Understanding the Dynamics of the Local Housing Market

The HCN emphasised the important role that the Local Office can play in collating information regarding other housing providers and the need to provide informed advice to applicants on all housing opportunities.

There is consensus on the need for Local Offices to perform this role.

d) Monitoring and Evaluation

The HCN emphasized the role of the HCN to monitor the quality of this service at community and district level. The service could be monitored and evaluated through mystery shopping and tenant led inspections.

There is consensus that the HCN should continue to monitor performance in this function. Consideration should be given to increased scrutiny of this service.

Providing Housing Options – West Area HCN

a) New applications

The HCN highlighted the new application process emphasizing the need to provide clear and realistic information to new applicants.

b) Tenants seeking transfer

The HCN emphasised the need to explore all housing options with transfer applicants and endorsed the case management approach for the most vulnerable clients.

c) Private Housing Options

The HCN endorsed the proposed approach to Personal Housing Plans with emphasis on providing information on providers and benefit entitlement. The need to advise applicants of their rights (e.g. tenancy agreements) was also stressed.

The Partner Landlord website contains considerable information on a private tenant's rights with, for example, information on tenancy agreements and the fitness standard.

d) Monitoring and Evaluation

HCN members endorsed the value of mystery shopping and tenant led inspections and emphasized the potential role for the network at all levels in the monitoring and evaluation of the advisory service.

There is consensus on the potential role of the HCN in the monitoring and evaluation of the "Housing Options" service.

“Sustaining Tenancies” - South Area HCN

a) Targeting Floating Support

It was suggested that communities could become more involved in providing support to vulnerable tenants, perhaps after hours, and this could be included in the compacts.

There would be a significant role for the HCN in identifying clients requiring additional support and consideration could be given to a more formal arrangement in terms of delivery of support which could be monitored through the local compact.

b) Adaptations Service

The importance of face to face contact and the delivery of a local tailored service in this function was emphasized.

Providing accommodation to meet the specific needs of tenants is important in ensuring tenants are able to enjoy and sustain their tenancies. Face to face contact and providing a tailored service to address the needs of tenants, particularly those with a disability is important in sustaining tenancies..

c) Linking customers to community facilities

This was seen as a major attribute of the Local Office service achieved through newsletters, welcome packs, and local knowledge of staff and the community.

The HCN has an important role in advising and signposting tenants to a range of community facilities in their local areas. This will ensure that new tenants quickly settle into their homes and are given the opportunity to contribute to their communities. This will enable stable and sustainable communities to become established.

d) Tenancy Management

The HCN see an increased role for the HCN in linking new tenants to the local community, stressed the need for follow up visits to new tenants and advocate more cooperation with Housing Associations.

The Housing Executive in conjunction with the HCN has an important role in establishing strong resilient and more inclusive communities which will have positive outcomes for residents. This can be achieved by increasing community participation and involvement. The need for more structured follow up visits to new tenants is important to ensure that tenants receive the necessary support to ensure they make a success of their tenancy. As many estates have increased numbers of Housing Association properties there are opportunities for greater cooperation and collaboration between the Hosuing Executive and Housing Associations.