

Headlines for Housing Plus Academy Workshop

Housing Management: Back to its Roots

Wednesday 30th September 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique set of challenges for housing management: staff were forced to work from home; face to face home visits were limited; and tenants were often facing increasing financial difficulty; isolation became a bigger problem and landlords were forced to rethink how they should relate to their tenants. Housing associations and councils have transformed the way they work to ensure they can protect their staff and continue to support tenants.

1. What landlords are doing to help tenants

Social landlords have carried out thousands of welfare phone calls to check in on tenants, with many organisations contacting all their tenants. Tenants have been happy to receive phone calls from their landlords to check in with them and see how they were, rather than for any specific reason such as chasing arrears. Not all tenants have access to phones, and staff had to find alternative ways to reach them, often through their relatives or neighbours.

To help provide all the support that is needed for tenants, staff who don't normally have direct contact with tenants have been redeployed to help with contacting tenants, staff have been glad to have this opportunity. There has also been a lot of volunteering by staff. For example, the CEO of L&Q regularly helps with cleaning the communal areas in blocks of flats and at another organisation their CEO took shifts at the food bank. Social landlords have provided extra support for their most vulnerable tenants such as providing food parcels, delivering medicines, setting up a COVID hotline, and making regular phone calls to tenants who live alone and may become isolated.

Landlords have found that the phone calls and extra support have changed customers' perceptions of the landlord and tenants now see them much more positively. Curo, for example, have seen a 10% increase in customer satisfaction compared to this time last year. Harrow Council tenants have developed a more positive relationship with their landlord as a result of the Council transforming its procedures for chasing arrears from mainly notices seeking possession to a far more positive "*how can we help you with any financial difficulties*" approach.

As well as practical support for tenants, landlords have organised activities to help tenants who may feel isolated. For example, Curo sent round a VE Day pack and a newsletter to all the tenants in their sheltered housing scheme which included tea, coffee, scones, and quizzes. They also organised a sunflower growing competition by distributing seeds, pots and compost; and the support worker then shared the photos of all the sunflowers.

The pandemic has brought many communities closer together, tenants who had previously not know each other have reached out and offered support to more vulnerable tenants, helping with tasks such as food shopping.

2. The increasing reliance on IT highlights its limitations

The first lockdown forced housing associations and local authorities to require almost all their office-based staff to work from home. This hugely increased the reliance on technology such as desktop computers, laptops and mobile phones. Organisations had to prioritise giving staff the right equipment to enable them to work from home. In many cases staff were working from home for the first time; and therefore the

pandemic has accelerated the conversion to IT based communication. They were able to make quick changes that would normally take years. Staff have frequently held virtual meetings. In larger organisations which are spread across different regions this has saved time and money as a result of people not having to travel, but it has weakened social contact and has been particularly challenging for more junior and newer staff, who do not know colleagues.

The pandemic has also driven greater reliance on digital communication between tenants and staff and forced landlords to try out new ways of communicating with tenants, relying heavily on more remote communication. Meetings that would normally be held face to face are now happening over the phone or on Zoom. Social landlords have seen an increase in residents using their online portals, which were previously underused, to pay rent and request repairs. Some tenant board meetings have been held online; but many tenants need a lot of support to enable them to take part and in some cases, tenant boards have not met as a result.

People are willing to engage with IT but it needs to be designed and presented in an accessible way. Tenants often need in person support in order to develop IT skills and to make use of online services. Landlords find it is important to tailor IT support to different tenants' needs. Many organisations have found that digital training has to be done face-to-face for tenants who are unfamiliar with it to grasp basic ideas and it can be very resource and time intensive. Harrow Council is exploring the idea of using special technology to support tenants in their sheltered schemes as residents may struggle with standard IT equipment due to mobility or motor problems. Hearing difficulties and sight loss make it even more difficult.

3. The importance of face to face contact

Despite the increase in digital and phone communication for staff and tenants, face-to-face contact remains vitally important, especially in dealing with tenants with mental health problems and providing sensitive advice, for example on financial matters. In spite of this being a general view, some landlords find that tenants share financial problems and receive financial advice over the phone more readily as they find it less embarrassing to discuss sensitive and personal issues this way.

Many tenants say they prefer in-person contact and for this reason some organisations have continued face-to-face support for their most vulnerable tenants. This involves ensuring that staff have proper protective equipment in order to visit tenants safely. Sometimes the worker calls the tenant before an in-person appointment to check that the tenant does not have any COVID symptoms. Wirral Methodist Housing Association claims that maintaining a physical presence in communities makes a real difference and their staff have been doing regular estate walkabouts while the office is closed.

4. Communication and information

Tenants need to be up to date with any changes in their tenancy or services and aware of who to talk to if they are concerned about anything. Landlords have put in a lot of effort into communicating with residents, sending regular emails, letters and newsletters in order to give tenants the right information. By far the most important form of communication and information sharing has come from phone calls by staff to all tenants where possible.

Larger housing associations are often spread over several geographical areas, some over more than 100 local authorities. These associations have the added challenge of keeping up to date on rules and ways of doing things in different areas, including details of local Covid-19 related restrictions, adjusting what they offer tenants in different local authorities. They also face a major challenge in how they can hold their staff teams together and keep them informed and in touch. Several said that they struggled with the sheer scale of their operations leading to less contact. This problem can have major consequences for tenants.

The more intense communication resulting from the lockdown has helped landlords update their tenant records based on information collected through the phone calls. Staff have also had more time to record

data as a result of increased home working, and not being in physical meetings or doing tenant visits. Landlords are considering how best to use this new data.

5. The role of caretakers

Unlike most other frontline staff, caretakers need to have a physical presence on estates in order to meet the needs of landlords and tenants. They act as the guardians and carers and it is a big responsibility. Caretakers play the role of being the landlords “eyes and ears” on the ground reporting any problems, picking up communal repairs, providing a form of security to tenants and looking out for vulnerable tenants and anyone who may be struggling to manage. Keeping up the appearance of the area is also important in improving tenants’ sense of wellbeing in their homes. Many caretakers were forced to shield which reduced the capacity of some teams. One organisation is planning to bring in a floating caretaker team, to step in for people having to self-isolate and ensure a presence on estates. There is strong consensus that caretakers must be recognised and given full credit for the vital role they play on behalf of landlords. They need regular high quality training, formal recognition, and an appropriate level of pay.

6. Working with other organisations

To help protect tenants, housing providers have worked closely with other organisations. For example, Poplar Harca has worked with the local police to help tenants who may be suffering from domestic abuse. Several landlords have collaborated with local food banks to provide food parcels for families suffering extreme poverty; local charities have coordinated with housing associations to provide tablets for tenants so that they can access online landlord information and talk to friends and family online with video calls. Housing associations and councils have been working more closely together to support communities in their areas. Landlords hope that this partnership working with councils will continue, with a focus on supporting and strengthening community resilience.

7. Increasing unemployment and economic hardship

Social housing tenants are among the lowest income groups in the country. The impact of the pandemic on jobs and work conditions for the low paid has been very damaging. There are fears that the economic hardships of the COVID pandemic will be felt even more harshly in winter, with rising unemployment, an increase in infections and further restrictions. Organisations are developing ways to protect tenants in winter when they may be more vulnerable. Heating bills are a major issue. Social landlords want to prioritise employment training and job access.

8. Anti-social behaviour

Some landlords reported an increase in anti-social behaviour complaints due to residents spending more time at home and spending more time on their estates. Some tenants are reporting other tenants for breaking the rules established to control the pandemic. Landlords are finding these complaints difficult to deal with because of limited face-to-face contact. In extreme cases of neighbourhood nuisance, landlords find the tight restrictions on eviction difficult. But some landlords have changed their approach to a more supportive one, urging tenants to get in touch so they can help resolve the problem.

9. Supporting staff

As well as supporting tenants, landlords realise that they must support staff who may be struggling with working from home and dealing with challenging circumstances. Frontline staff need training to deal with new challenges and new ways of working. Most importantly they need recognition for all the challenges they are facing and overcoming. South Yorkshire Housing Association does regular “shout outs” in the monthly management meetings for work that deserves special recognition. Harrow Council organised a virtual award ceremony for work done in lockdown.

10. Housing management rediscovering its roots

Social landlords are starting to adjust to new ways of working and are planning for a different kind of future. Some organisations have reopened offices again, but with limited staff presence and more occasional face to face meetings. This has involved careful planning to ensure offices are safe, for example; staff become part of a bubble and only work on certain days of the week in the office; new hand sanitiser stations are in place; and one-way routes around the building to reduce contact. Staff in one organisation where they had been back at the office for some time suggested it was possible to become a little complacent about the new rules. This underlines how important it is to maintain constant communication and messaging about the rules and controls that are considered unnecessary.

Organisations are being forced to think about a new approach to frontline management, much closer to tenants and more responsive to their direct needs. The pandemic has forced housing management 'back to its roots' and shown the value of direct communications with tenants and direct help where required. It has taught social landlords how digital communication can play an important role but that it does not replace the need for face-to-face contact. Most landlords are developing a hybrid approach, focusing on reaching tenants and providing essential services with a mixture of direct contact via telephone, supportive, open communication by post and newsletters, on the ground services for essential maintenance and "familiar face" liaison such as caretaking, and online access for those who can master technology.

The pandemic has bought home the realisation that housing management is vital to landlords and tenants, and that it can and must constantly build the landlord-tenant relationships.