

# **Ongo Homes Resident Scrutiny Panel**

**Investigation into**

## **Management of Tenancy Property Condition**

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## 1.0. Introduction

- a. This report is the outcome of a detailed Resident Scrutiny Panel (RSP) investigation into how Ongo Homes manages its tenancies in terms of property condition.
- b. The RSP started their investigation on the 6<sup>th</sup> September 2019
- c. Throughout the duration of the investigation, the RSP endeavoured to uphold the key principles relating to its scrutiny work, namely that the group would:
  - i. Work on behalf of Ongo Homes tenants ensuring that Ongo provides services to the highest standard
  - ii. Provide an independent check and critical challenge to drive up and influence improvements to standards, processes and performance
  - iii. Ensure that Ongo embeds the National Regulatory Framework on the delivery of both organisational and local offers by monitoring and challenging these standards
  - iv. Form an effective but independent part of the Governance structure within Ongo, together with Community Voice (CV), Ongo Homes Board and the Executive Leadership Team (ELT)
  - v. Ensure that Ongo is a well-managed, viable organisation which places tenants at the heart of its business delivering through tenant led scrutiny

The RSPs decision to investigate Tenancy Management of property condition was taken from a choice of topics and themes provided for consideration by Ongo staff and CV. The investigation was to ensure Value for Money (VFM) and customer satisfaction for tenants.

The following people were involved in carrying out this investigation

### Scrutiny Panel Members

Avril Bairstow (Chairperson)  
Col Cranidge  
Jill Milner  
Harry Mortimer

### Supported By

Karen Cowen  
Erica Sanderson

## 2.0 Scope of the investigation

Only the following aspects were considered in the investigation:

- Inside a tenanted home – not the garden
- Tenancy agreement and the tenants responsibility
- The property pre-leaving inspection process and immediately after a tenant has left it
- The trigger for an investigation to begin
- The condition of property process
- The procedure for when a problem is identified
- Checks to see if the procedures are being followed
- Condition of property – malicious, choice, vulnerability

- The support provided to tenants
- The support provided to other tenants affected
- After a closed down case, checks to see if follow up procedures were followed to see if the tenant had changed their behaviour (repeat cases / number of opportunities given)
- Data regarding the number of cases opened and closed
- Outcome of tenancy condition cases, including evictions
- If the property condition impacts neighbours, is this dealt with in the same way,
- Stats % of properties having condition of property issues
- Rating scales used
- Length of time taken, timelines, and were target timescales followed
- The legal actions that can be taken
- What realistically will the judge take into account
- The outcomes of court action cases (statistics how many go to court and outcomes)
- Standards other social housing providers work towards
- The regulatory standard

### **3.0 Background**

As a Housing Association, Ongo has a remit to provide properties to those entitled to social housing who bid successfully through Home Choice Lincs or is considered following a referral from another party such as North Lincs Council Social Services etc.

Unfortunately, for many different reasons, some of these tenants fail to keep their property in accordance with their Tenancy Agreement (contract) and the Tenancy Handbook.

Such cases are reported to Ongo via a variety of methods such as a complaint from a neighbour, the alarm being raised during a visit from the Housing Officer (HO) or a maintenance worker addressing a repair. In some cases it could also be from an estate inspection, a caretaker or gardener. In 2014/15 Ongo undertook to do a Homecheck visit to all tenants which also highlighted some issues. This service was then discontinued at the end of 2015.

The RSP decided to look into this area to see if any improvements could be made.

### **4.0 Methodology**

The RSP used the following fact finding methods in order to identify Ongo's approach to the Tenancy Management of Property, the implications, the variety of responses received and the outcome of the different approaches taken:

#### **4.1.1 Desktop consideration of:**

- Condition of Property and Garden Management
- Homeskills procedure V1
- Ongo Homes Infestation process
- Ongo Homes Lettings procedure – pre leaving to sign-up V4
- Ongo Homes pre Termination visit checklist
- Ongo Homes Tenancy Management Policy V2
- Ongo Homes Lettable Standard

- Ongo Homes Tenancy Standard
- Pre termination visit letter
- Pre termination form V1
- Starter Tenancy visit V2
- Tenancy Standard 2015
- Shelter – Tenancy Strategies
- CIOH – Developing Housing Policies
- Research carried out via the internet

The RSP team have prepared a list of 'Best Practice' recommendations which have been taken from some of the documents listed above (see **Appendix 1**)

4.1.2 Background presentations were given from the following Ongo staff:

- John Lawrence, Head of Customer Experience
- Claire Coyle, Housing Services Manager
- Kathy Cairns, Housing Officer

4.1.3 Various meetings were held by the RSP, minutes taken and distributed. Information and documents shared on Yammer and by email. A final meeting was held to discuss and agree the conclusions and formulate the recommendations.

## 5.0 Findings

5.1 Throughout the investigation, the RSP identified that a considerable amount of help and assistance was given both in advance, during and after to tenants living in an Ongo property.

5.1.1 In all cases where the tenancy conditions in relation to the property are breached it cannot be classed as Anti-Social Behavior (ASB).

5.1.2 Ongo staff such as maintenance workers, caretakers, housing officers etc. have all had training in recognizing the early signs of a property that is deteriorating due to neglect.

5.1.3 Poor property condition is one of the hardest issues to resolve and can take years of negotiation, support and action to achieve a result.

5.1.4 In all cases photographic evidence is taken from the start in order to build a case.

5.1.5 Here are some facts and figures presented to RSP during the investigation:

- Number of cases open/closed for condition of property in since April 2017 – September 2019: 446 Cases
- Successfully resolved/closed cases since April 2017 – September 2019: 315 cases
- Unresolved cases since April 2017 – September 2019: 32
- Cases passed to tenancy enforcement (Closed/current): 5
- New Build properties with condition of property issues since April 2017: 3
- Number of customers moved internally and done it again: 1

- Number of customers evicted solely for condition of property: 0

Length of time to resolve ASB cases that have been completed:

0 – 30 Days: 89 Cases  
 31 - 40 Days: 24 Cases  
 40 – 50 Days: 17 Cases  
 50 – 60 Days: 20 Cases  
 60 – 365 Days: 168 Cases  
 Over a year: 22 Cases

5.1.7 Once the tenant has signed for the property, this then triggers a series of housing officer visits to be made to (after 3 months of the tenancy and then again at 8 months). The visit at 8 months is the last opportunity to take action before the probationary tenancy period ends (Ongo have to give 2 months' notice and the tenancy converts to an assured tenancy at 12 months). Any action taken during the first 12 months has to be reasonable and proportionate for Ongo to stop the tenancy converting. Action can be taken after the conversion but it is much harder.

5.1.8 The following details how Ongo manages tenancy condition of property:

**Initial Inspection** – first visit, purpose of visit, discuss previous visits, establish reason property has deteriorated and discuss support available.

**3 Outcomes of visit** – fails standard, partially meets the standard, property meets standard.

**TAP** – Tenancy Action Plan – completed to identify what work needs to be done and in what timescales.

**Housing Officer** re-visit – photos taken, evidence gathered.

**No Access** – 2 attempts – letter sent to tenant plus calling card left.

3 failed attempts – breach letter.

4 failed attempts – Housing Officer reviews case with Team Leader

**Follow up action** - Option to visit in 3, 6 or 12 months

**Case audits** – open/closed cases – 2 audits carried out ahead of staff 1:1s – conducted by Team Leader.

5.1.9 If a neighbour complains about a property issue they are contacted to discuss and a timescale agreed using the 3 categories:

Within 24 hours - Racial and hate crimes

Within 5 days - Noise/alcohol/drugs

Within 10 days - Condition of property

5.1.10 Should the damaged property be adjacent to a privately owned or rented property, the neighbour is treated exactly the same as if it were an Ongo tenant.

- 5.1.11 Outside agencies are used to assist with clearances, for example Environmental Health and North Lincs Council rubbish collection.
- 5.1.12 Re-charging tenants for the costs of clearance and repair to damaged property is used, although it was pointed out that this is extremely difficult to do and in many cases the property is vacated at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour and no forwarding address can be found.
- 5.1.13 Housing Officers are issued with personal panic alarms on which they can also leave a recorded message. They also have an App on their mobile phones and if the risk assessment (RA) indicates as such, they will only visit a property in pairs.
- 5.1.14 Where the tenant has had previous property issues and on the tenancy sign up there are some concerns registered by the Housing Officer, a closer check is kept for several months.
- 5.1.15 Housing Officers attend a weekly meeting to discuss the ongoing cases. Below are the figures from 1/4/18 to 31/3/19:
- Tenancy Management cases reported - 187  
Actual cases opened - 88  
Cases open for over 90 days - 88  
Longest ongoing case in timescale - 1,447 days (nearly 4 years)  
Cost £14,742 (took 3 sessions to try and get an eviction) £16,000 in court fees, 144 pages of breaches of tenancy. Still ongoing with monthly inspections taking place.
- 5.1.16 It has been the opinion of some CV members that the reason Ongo has so many properties in crisis is because the Homecheck service was discontinued after 2 years in 2015. A total of 8714 surveys were completed by the Homecheck Team, resulting in 90% of the properties being checked. The missing 10% of property stock were excluded from the process where the visits were not needed such as those already having an open ASB case and starter tenancies within the first 12 months of their tenancy. Only 5% were rated as poor and 1% as very poor (484 properties).
- 5.1.17 RSP has tried to find out just how much has been spent putting right properties in crisis from 2012 through to 2017 i.e. 2 years before Homecheck and 2 years after. Unfortunately this data is not available.
- 5.1.18 Ongo now has property surveyors in post who are qualified to establish issues that could lead to major works being required in the future. The stock survey programme is a rolling 5-year programme. The advantage of this is that not only will they identify current and potential future issues, they will also be picking up issues in relation to tenants and the general cleanliness and condition of their properties. All Ongo properties will now have an inside and outside survey, including roof spaces.

## 6.0 Conclusions

RSP is confident that they have met the brief/scope for this investigation.

On the whole RSP felt that this area is covered well by policy and procedure. Housing Officers came across as being patient, considerate, sympathetic, and efficient and could often be found going the extra mile to help the all those tenants finding it difficult to manage their properties, inclusive of whether or not there were any extenuating circumstances. It is a very difficult area to manage and it appears to be done so with the highest regard for the tenant's safety and welfare.

The team feels that Ongo's expectation that contractors, and staff such as maintenance workers, caretakers etc. will come back to them to report properties that are in very poor repair and are being neglected is quite onerous, and this is probably why there is no high take up to do this. Also, the person may have only had access to one room or part of the property and a resident who is concerned their lifestyle may well be reported back to Ongo would potentially only give them limited access anyway.

Despite there being no data to prove or disprove that Homecheck made a difference when it came to identifying property deterioration, more effort should be made to identify the total expenditure on such properties rather than only recording the total cost of voids.

Data should be monitored once the surveyors begin the task of going to every property to do the stock survey.

When a neighbour adjacent to a potential property in crisis reports their suspicions to Ongo, someone needs to get back to them in less than the 10 days prescribed.

The criteria for not allowing a current tenant who has had previous property damage issues to move to a brand new property should be checked and changes made if necessary.

The RSP has assessed this service as being:

<b>Poor Service</b>	
<b>Fair Service</b>	√
<b>Good Service</b>	



## 7.0 Recommendations

	Action	Anticipated outcome / comments	Priority
1	A new approach should be looked at in order to identify properties in crisis	This would assist in taking the pressure off contractors, and staff such as maintenance workers, caretakers etc.	Medium
2	Detailed accounts should be kept of all the costs identified with putting right a property that has been badly damaged by a tenant	Not only will this assist in the re-charging process, but it should make budgeting more accurate in the future	High
3	If someone is willing to come forward and raise the alarm about an Ongo property, every effort should be made to get back to them sooner than the current 10 day standard	If someone takes the time and effort to tell Ongo they should at least be rewarded with a swift response	Medium
4	Tenants who have been subject to the tenancy management property condition process should not be considered for a brand new home	Given that this has happened in the past, it would be wise to check that it cannot happen again	Medium