



Ongo Homes Resident Scrutiny Panel

Investigation into

Property Permissions

3rd December 2020

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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 system to allow tenants to make alterations to their homes - Permissions.
- b. The RSP started their investigation on the 27th July 2020
- 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 Management Team (EMT)
 - 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 Permissions 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)
Jill Milner
Keith Riley
Kath Tuck

Supported By

Karen Cowen
Wendy Wolfe

2.0 Scope of the investigation

Only the following aspects were considered in the investigation:

- A focus on properties and gardens
- Desk top review of all policies, procedures and processes in relation to the topic
- What kind of things require Ongo's permission (criteria and examples of the types of permission tenants require)

- What information do we provide to tenants advising of when they need to seek Ongo permission / how do we publicise
- The process from the customer applying to the end result (does Ongo need to do any checks before making a decision, or after, do they require qualified people to carry out any works or do they allow anyone to do it, do they carry out any checks following works ...)
- Total number of permission requests submitted over a year, including type
- How many permissions are approved and how many are rejected
- Reasons for refusing permissions
- Consistency in decision making
- What happens if someone makes alterations without seeking prior approval
- What do other housing organisations do differently to us in terms of tenant permissions and the process

3.0 Background

As a Housing Association, Ongo has a remit to provide a mechanism by which tenants can make certain alterations and changes to their homes and gardens etc.

The starting point is the completion of a form which is sent to Ongo for consideration. The form requires details of what is to be done, how it will be done and by whom. Drawings are required in certain cases such as fencing, garden alterations, shed erection etc.

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:

- Alteration Permission Applications
- Guidance for adding additional or removal of kitchen units
- Ongo Homes Property Alteration Guide
- Property Alteration Procedure
- Property Alteration Leaflet
- List of permissions granted
- List of permissions refused

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.

Richard Clarke
Manny Ali
Andrea Tinker

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

5.0 Findings

- 5.1 Prior to June 2016 the process was very piecemeal with no real co-ordination between departments.
- 5.2 Once under the control of Richard Clarke, a procedure was drawn up giving detail of how to respond and address a customer request to make an alteration to their home. Also guidance documents became available on the website.
- 5.3 There is no formal policy in place.
- 5.4 The application form is not necessarily user friendly and could cause issues for some tenants.
- 5.5 There is quite a lot of onus put on Housing Officers to monitor and assist tenants who have an application in for an alteration.
- 5.6 There is no data to show how often putting right an unauthorized permission is re-charged to the tenant.
- 5.7 There is no appeals procedure. If a tenant is unhappy with the decision yet again it's the Housing Officer (or the Alteration Officer) who looks at it.
- 5.8 No satisfaction surveys have been carried out so far.
- 5.9 No complaints have been received to date about the process.
- 5.10 There is no simple flow-chart showing the process.
- 5.11 Where an alteration is found, for example decking, and permission has not been granted, the phrase 'as it looks decent' is used and it is allowed to stand with no enforcement action taken. There should be a formal process in place to quantify 'looks decent'.
- 5,12 There is no formal process in place to ensure that when the Gardening Competition takes place for example, structures have been checked to make sure permission was granted.

6.0 Conclusions

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

	High
	Medium
	Low

7.	Recommendations	Anticipated outcome / comments	Priority
1	There should be a formal policy in place.	This will bring Permissions in line with all other Ongo services and ensure that the correct procedures are followed.	
2	Guidance information relating to the full process for property permissions to be reviewed and updated. All staff who deal with requests from tenants to have access to this information.	This will enable a more consistent approach and ensure that any new areas for permissions are included in the guidance.	
3	The application form needs to be reviewed.	The present version may put some tenants off as it requires quite a lot of detail which could lead to alterations taking place without consent. It needs to be more user friendly which would, in turn, mean less work for the HO. Understandably some alterations require a contractor (electrics for example) but where the tenant is capable of undertaking the work, further details should be gathered prior to the work commencing.	
4	Alterations granted or refused need to be monitored.	At the moment this falls to the HO on an ad hoc basis (if they happen to know an application has gone in or they come across it whilst in the area). Some form of monitoring, perhaps by issuing a monthly list of those granted/refused to the HO so they can manage	

		this along with their other duties might work.	
5	Data to show how often putting right an unauthorized permission is re-charged to the tenant needs to be collated and action taken if appropriate.	At present any costs involved are currently added to the void total when the property becomes vacant as this is often when an unauthorized alterations is discovered.	
6	There should be an independent 3 rd party Appeals Procedure in place.	Currently the tenant can only register their discontent via Customer Services. It may be advantageous to utilize the Complaints Panel in some way as this would mean tenants would be involved in the process alongside Ongo employees.	