



## **POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 14TH JULY 2015**

**SUBJECT: PROPOSED INSPECTION PROGRAMME FOR COUNCIL PROPERTIES**

**REPORT BY: INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

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### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To consider the introduction of regular property and tenancy inspections for Caerphilly Homes.
- 1.2 This report is being presented to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for consideration and thereafter submitted to Caerphilly Homes Task Group.

### **2. SUMMARY**

- 2.1 The report outlines the existing inspection arrangements and considers the option of introducing more formal arrangements for regular property and tenancy inspections for Caerphilly Homes.
- 2.2 The report highlights the potential benefits of a regular inspection programme to both tenants and Caerphilly Homes.

### **3. LINKS TO STRATEGY**

- 3.1 The Welsh Housing Quality Standard is intended to ensure that all local authority and housing association homes are improved and maintained to achieve specified standards.
- 3.2 The Single Integrated Plan 2013-2017 has a priority to “Improve standards of housing and communities, giving appropriate access to services across the County Borough.
- 3.3 The Council’s Local Housing Strategy “People, Property, and Places” has the following aim:  
  
“To provide good quality, well managed houses in communities where people want to live, and offer people housing choices which meet their needs and aspirations.”

### **4. THE REPORT**

- 4.1 At a recent Policy & Resources meeting Members requested Housing Management pursue the option for introducing regular tenancy inspections to improve the general management of properties, identify support for tenants and to monitor conditions.

## 4.2 Existing Arrangements

- 4.2.1 The Caerphilly Homes tenancy agreement states that the tenant is responsible for keeping the property, including garages and outbuildings, in a good state of interior decoration, repair and cleanliness. There is also a requirement to keep any garden, yard or forecourt, including hedges, which form part of the property in a cultivated and tidy condition.
- 4.2.2 Detailed property inspections are currently undertaken by Estate Management Officers (EMO's)/Surveyors when tenants notify of their intention to terminate their tenancy, as properties become vacant or when tenants request a mutual exchange or a housing transfer. This equates to detailed inspections being carried out to approximately 15% of the housing stock per annum.
- 4.2.3 EMO's/Surveyors also carry out general visits for other tenancy management purposes, for example when tenants request landlords consent to undertake alterations at the property, chasing outstanding debt, garden inspections or following up on complaints and will identify and report any issues or concerns relating to the property or tenancy during these visits. These issues may be dealt with as a breach of Conditions of Tenancy, or depending on the circumstances for referral to support agencies.
- 4.2.4 Repair Surveyors visit when necessary to inspect for repairs when they are reported by tenants. This could result in visits to approximately 30% (3,500) of the housing stock and again will result in the Surveyors identifying and reporting back to the EMO's any issues or concerns relating to the properties.
- 4.2.5 Tenant Support Officers visit to offer financial guidance and support for tenants who are in rent arrears, impacted by Welfare Reform or to assist those who request financial advice in order to prevent financial hardship. They report back any concerns identified with property conditions to EMO's. Visits are conducted to approximately 2500 properties per annum, which equates to 23% of the stock.
- 4.2.6 Garden inspections are currently undertaken by EMO's during the summer months. This is undertaken proactively whereby tenants receive prior notification of an inspection by letter. Any gardens identified as being unsatisfactory will be recorded and the garden procedure will be implemented. Gardens can also be identified whilst visiting an area for other reasons, or to follow up on complaints.
- 4.2.7 New tenants are visited one month after their tenancy start date by the EMO to ensure they are occupying the property and to provide detailed advice and guidance in relation to their Tenancy Agreement and their responsibility for tenancy conditions and requirements.
- 4.2.8 Annual gas servicing inspections are undertaken as a legal requirement. Although this service is carried out by external contractors, they may provide information to the Housing office if there are any particular concerns in relation to property or tenancy issues, but there is no contractual requirement for them to do so.
- 4.2.9 Currently internal property surveys are carried out in line with the investment programme for the purpose of WHQS improvement works. It is anticipated that Surveyors will visit approximately 3,500 properties per annum to undertake internal and external surveys. This provides a further opportunity for staff to report back to the relevant Housing office if any concerns are identified with property conditions, tenants or members of the household.
- 4.2.10 Estate walkabouts have been held in two neighbourhood housing areas to date. Tenants are invited to join housing officers on a walk to identify any issues with the general environment rather than with individual properties. However, there is potential to identify any problems with garden conditions, or unreported repairs. Further walkabouts are to be arranged.
- 4.2.11 Ad hoc inspections and visits are undertaken by various officers as and when any need is identified or on request as matters arise. This would include Tenancy Enforcement Officers

who attend properties for a variety of reasons often linked to Anti-Social Behaviour, breaches of tenancy or complaints. This would entail officers visiting approximately 1200 properties per annum with any tenancy/property concerns being reported back to the relevant EMO.

#### 4.3 Structured approach

- 4.3.1 Although it is clear from the above information that regular property inspections are undertaken, these tend to be on an ad-hoc basis by different officers and could include repeat visits to some properties although some properties may not be visited at all. It is proposed that a more structured approach is adopted to tenancy inspections for the long term benefit of tenants and Caerphilly Homes and a consistent process introduced to record and monitor any issues raised.
- 4.3.2 A more structured approach of regular tenancy inspections in all properties will enable Caerphilly Homes to encourage the development of better relationships with tenants, support tenancy sustainment, promote tenant involvement and raise tenants' awareness as to their obligations.
- 4.3.3 The inspections will provide data and records of conditions internally and externally at the properties and identify any other tenancy related issues to enable tenant information to be updated on the housing database.
- 4.3.4 Visiting personnel will be able to identify any unreported repair concerns, enquire as to the welfare of the tenant, make referrals or signpost the tenant for any necessary support services or assistance they may need.
- 4.3.5 There will be opportunities for housing staff to work positively with tenants for addressing rechargeable repairs and unauthorised tenant alterations.
- 4.3.6 The inspections will assist the housing staff in getting to know their tenants and confirm who is occupying the properties. There would also be the opportunity for identifying non-occupation, subletting and tenancy fraud concerns.
- 4.3.7 The housing staff will be able to build stronger relationships with tenants and provide potential opportunities for obtaining information for future tenant profiling.
- 4.3.8 As WHQS improvements progress, the inspections will assist in monitoring that these standards are maintained by the tenant and Caerphilly Homes.
- 4.3.9 The inspections will provide an opportunity to further develop the Authority's Accessible Housing Register by ascertaining the level of accessibility of the property for disabled tenants, thereby assisting in the future allocation of properties.
- 4.3.10 There will be a requirement for Caerphilly Homes to notify the tenant giving appropriate notice of its intention to carry out an inspection of the property.
- 4.3.11 A formal procedure and agreed record keeping arrangements will need to be introduced to complement this work so it is consistently applied across the borough.

#### 4.4 Proposed Procedure

- 4.4.1 Due to the number of properties in Council ownership, it is not considered practical to undertake annual inspections to every property utilising existing resources. However, as explained previously, inspections are already being undertaken for a large percentage of our stock on a regular basis and it is therefore proposed that such inspections are carried out in a more co-ordinated way with any issues recorded and actions monitored.
- 4.4.2 The procedure will involve sending out letters to advise tenants that an inspection will be taking place or by making appointments with tenants at the point of contact. However there

are concerns that there may be a number of instances where no access is provided to officers. This will require a follow up procedure which will add delays to the inspection and impact further on staff resources.

- 4.4.3 Continued no access may also have legal implications which again will incur costs and additional delays, but it is considered important that access to such properties is gained and the current Tenancy Agreement makes provision for this.
- 4.4.4 A revised procedure will provide a more co-ordinated approach with all relevant information gathered from inspections being recorded and held on a centralised database within each area office and on the individual property file. Any actions deemed necessary will be progressed and monitored by the relevant Housing Manager.
- 4.4.5 Where any issues are identified, these will be the responsibility of the EMO to address in conjunction with the appropriate service area or support agency. In relation to tenancy or property condition issues, it may be necessary for a further visit to be made by the relevant EMO, who will then be responsible for following the issues through to a satisfactory conclusion.
- 4.4.6 A new procedure is in the process of being developed for dealing with garden related issues to improve the process currently explained under item 4.2.5 which will include improved reporting mechanisms. The condition of gardens may also raise concerns in relation to internal property conditions and where poor gardens are identified, even if there is no answer at the property, a follow up inspection will be arranged to check on other property conditions. A monthly report is also being developed which will be made available to the Cabinet Member for Housing and relevant officers.
- 4.4.7 There will be a need to review our I.T. systems to ensure that any information gathered is accessible and highlights key information to system users to assist them in the way services are delivered.

## **5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 Following on from 4.4.7 above, any review of I.T. systems must, under Equalities and Welsh Language legislation, be able to record the full range of protected characteristics and language requirements of all tenants. This is in order to be able to deal with any specific physical requirements regarding the tenancy and any inspection visit, and also around the way we communicate with tenants who have language or format requirements.
- 5.2 This ensures that the proposed inspection programme complies with specific Disability and Language duties under UK and Welsh legislation and the Council's own Strategic Equality Objectives 2 and 4, Physical Access and Communication Access.

## **6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report.

## **7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 There will be a requirement for existing staff within Caerphilly Homes to be made aware of these changes and their responsibilities to consider the issues contained with this report as part of their normal day to day duties.
- 7.2 The additional workload may have an impact on the performance of other routine housing management tasks and this will be monitored.

7.3 These inspections will be regarded as part of the existing roles and responsibilities of the officers concerned.

## **8. CONSULTATIONS**

8.1 There are no consultation responses that have not been reflected in this report.

## **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

9.1 That consideration is given to pursue the introduction of regular property inspections for all Caerphilly Homes tenants as under item 4.4.

9.2 That implementation of the proposal be reviewed and further annual reports be submitted to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group in order to monitor progress and evaluate the success of the procedure.

## **10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

10.1 To improve tenant/landlord relationships and ensure properties are maintained to an acceptable standard.

10.2 To raise tenant awareness and promote full compliance with their conditions of tenancy.

10.3 To identify where tenant support is needed and to promote tenancy sustainability.

## **11. STATUTORY POWER**

11.1 There are no Statutory Powers associated with this report.

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