

Stirling Tenants Assembly

Tenant Led Inspection Report On Cyclical Maintenance Service

Final

Introduction

This report has been compiled for Stirling Council Housing Services by a Tenant Led Inspection Team. The report provides feedback and makes recommendations to improve Cyclical Maintenance. The inspection was supported by Stirling Tenants Assembly (STA) and the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS)'s Stirling Tenants Project. Stirling Council gave permission for and provided funding for the inspection.

Background

This is the fifth inspection of services Stirling Council tenants have carried out.

The Stirling Tenants Assembly advertises for tenant inspectors in their newsletter, at STA events and on their Website. The position of tenant inspector is open to any Stirling Council tenant.

The purpose of the inspection is to see whether the service is running as it is intended to. Inspections aim to identify whether practice reflects policy and also to identify where aspects of the service could be improved. Findings are fed back to Housing Service managers as part of the formal consultation process.

Tenant inspectors have embarked on a TLI of the entire repairs and maintenance service and had been interested in looking at the Cyclical Maintenance Service as the focus for one of their inspections.

The Regulation and Inspection team from Communities Scotland had inspected Stirling Council's services in September 2009. The inspection grade achieved was a **C** grade for asset management and repairs and the report commented that "The Council is good at planning investment works, both planned and cyclical."

See:

http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/s_hr_stirlingcouncilinspectionr.pdf

It was agreed that a Tenant Led Inspection would be undertaken on the Cyclical Maintenance service as:

- The Council had re-focused the service on external works
- It led on from the previous inspection of the Responsive Repairs Service
- Tenants felt they knew relatively little about how this service operates.

This inspection process was extended due to change of the Stirling Tenants Project worker and weather conditions that caused the postponing of the second set of site inspections and Inspectors meetings.

The inspection once again demonstrates Stirling Council's commitment to tenant participation. It shows that the Council is open and transparent and prepared to offer tenants meaningful methods of improving their communities and Council services.

Structure of the report

This report outlines the inspection methods used by the tenant inspection team and sets out their findings. The report seeks to establish if practice reflects policy within Stirling Council Cyclical Maintenance services. Recommendations are made on areas that could be improved and areas of good practice will be highlighted too.

Methods

The methods used in this tenant inspection consist of:

- Presentations by staff
- Examination of budgets and programme
- Visits to properties being inspected and after work is undertaken
- Analysis of satisfaction responses
- Interviews with individual tenants who have experienced cyclical maintenance service, using a short questionnaire

Selecting a tenant inspection team

All Stirling Council Tenants were invited to become a tenant inspector. Adverts were placed in Stirling Council's Open Door newsletter, the Stirling Tenants Assembly (STA) newsletter and at STA conferences.

All tenants that volunteered to take part in the inspections complete an application form. The form was used to find out a bit more about tenants, their reasons for becoming Tenant Inspectors, their existing skills and the times they are available for training and carrying out inspections.

No new volunteers came forward between the last inspection and this one. Therefore all tenant inspectors taking part in this inspection had previous experience of Tenant Led Inspections. This meant that training was not required as part of this particular inspection.

Tenant inspectors complied with the agreed Code of Conduct. It had been stressed since Tenant Led Inspections first began that tenant inspectors would behave professionally and focus on the agreed area of inspection.

Tenant Inspectors expressed concerns that there were no new inspectors coming forward. Stirling Tenants Assembly, Stirling Tenants Project and Stirling Council will coordinate an advertising campaign, highlighting the changes TLI had secured for the service and encourage others to get involved.

The Inspection

The Inspection team were: Maria Balfour (Raploch), Dolina Gemmell (Dunblane), Michael Griffiths (Cambusbarron), Cathy Traynor (Top of the Town), Alexander Munro Wallace (Bannockburn), Alexander Lamb (Riverside), Philomena McClung (Braehead), Mary Rainey (Raploch) and Cecilia Walker (Cambusbarron).

The inspectors were support by: Catriona Rowley, Emma Meldrum and Tony Kelly from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS)

Stirling Council staff directly involved with this inspection were: John MacMillan (Technical Services Manager), Tom Howden (Repairs and Maintenance Manager), Edward Flynn (Technical Supervisor), Kerray Dawson (Admin Team Leader), Gregor Wightman (Private Sector Housing Manager), Alan Morrison (Property Management Co-ordinator) and Alexa Brown (Service Improvement Officer).

How the service operates

There is a 5 year Cyclical Maintenance programme covering all Council tenanted properties. Each year there are twelve Cyclical Maintenance areas. Before undertaking site inspections, Responsive Repairs records are assessed and Capital Programme plans consulted. All properties are inspected by one officer using a standard inspection format. When inspections identify repairs / upgrades beyond the scope of the budget they are referred to Response Repairs and the Capital Programme. The inspection seeks to target and support the Council's obligation to achieve and maintain the Scottish Housing Quality Standard. It is hoped that as cycles are repeated smaller / less vital elements will be addressed. When deciding on works priority is given to items that frequently recurred.

By letter, tenants are advised, that the inspection will be undertaken and that, due to the external nature of the service's priorities they needn't be at home during the inspection.

Tenant Inspectors considered the inspections to be comprehensive and were pleased to report the willingness of the inspector to engage with tenants and answer questions.

At the end of each area inspection a comprehensive spreadsheet are prepared showing all identified works. This spreadsheet records the inspection's finding, enables decision making and is used to monitor progress.

Decisions on what to include and exclude in a specific phase is taken by John MacMillan and Tom Howden based on the inspection reports and in consultation with Edward Flynn, the inspector. Tenant Inspectors were advised that these decisions were directed by:

- the aim of achieving the Scottish Housing Quality Standard
- available budgets.

It is anticipated that each property will have the rhones cleaned when they are visited in the five-year cycle. If properties require their rhones cleared more often, this is undertaken as a Response Repair.

The inspector allocates the work to internal or external contracts and supervises the contracts while on site. External contractors must be in the Council's "approved" contractors list and they can be removed from this list if their performance isn't satisfactory. To date no contractors has been removed due to poor performance.

Tenant Inspectors believe that the practice of one officer carrying out the inspection, letting contracts and supervising the work on site was good practice, as it allowed

continuity.

Tenant Inspectors were concerned that so much of the Cyclical Maintenance work is carried out by external contracts but appreciated the manager's explanation that external works were often affected by bad weather, which didn't affect contractor's costs but could increase costs and make managing work flows for directly employed workers difficult.

The Tenant Inspectors were keen to ensure that tenants weren't disadvantaged because of owners' inability or lack of willingness to participate. The Tenant Inspectors were advised that some Cyclical Maintenance work could be considered improvements and couldn't be forced on owners, but that the Council could force necessary repairs as long as they owned at least one property in the block concerned.

Tenant Inspectors were pleased to discover that:

- The Council had recently improved their information and advice to owners
- Owners were encouraged and supported to participate
- The Council had a flexible but clear approach to recovering costs from owners

The notional Cyclical Maintenance budget for each phase is calculated as a sum per property multiplied by the number of properties in the phase. Inspectors saw a potential for individual tenants to expect repairs costing up to the notional phase budget in their home / phase. Tenant Inspectors believed that the Council should seek to ensure tenants understand that the actual spending on specific houses and areas will depend on what is found across all phases and the priorities being used by officers to guide decisions.

Tenant Inspectors were satisfied that the managers making decisions on which repairs / improvements were progressed were making these decisions in a fair, equitable and professional manner that sought to maximise the benefits of the spending. However the lack of agreed or public priorities made it hard to assess how decisions are reached. Tenant Inspectors believe it would improve tenants' understanding and assist in making decision transparent, if agreed priorities were made public.

Tenant Inspectors were advised that the inspection and repair of void properties sought to achieve the Lettable Standard and the Void Inspection and the Cyclical Inspection standard weren't the same. Tenant Inspectors indicated a desire to inspect Void Repairs services in the near future and that they would seek to address the issue of two standards when they knew more about the Lettable Standard.

Presentations

The Tenant Inspectors twice met with John MacMillan and Tom Howden, Stirling Council's Housing Services managers. At the first meeting, John and Tom provided the inspection team with a background to the service, budgets and developing the work programme and at the second they discussed how Cyclical Maintenance related to Response Repairs and Capital Programme and answered questions raised by the Tenants Inspectors.

Cyclical Maintenance Inspection Visits

In June 2010, Tenant Inspectors visited a number of properties with the inspector, Eddie Flynn, to see the recording of repairs and discussions with tenants

In March 2011, Tenant Inspectors, with Eddie Flynn, visited properties in Braehead and Bannockburn to see work that had been undertaken, through Cyclical Maintenance. In addition, Tenant Inspectors visited Bannockburn properties where Cyclical Maintenance had identified the need for full roof replacement and Housing Services workers had carried out the work themselves (the first time it had carried out a full roof replacement).

Dealing with owners

Tenant Inspectors met with Gregor Wightman and Alan Thompson, from the Council's private sector team to:

- Identify the range of issues arising from Cyclical Maintenance in mutli-tenure properties
- Examine the assistance given to owners

Customer Service

Tenant inspectors met with Kerray Dawson who supervises the Customer Support staff to examine:

- The process of notifying tenants of inspections and the outcomes from inspections
- How work is programmed and undertaken
- How tenants concerns are dealt with

Normally Tenant Inspectors would have spoken with the staff dealing with this task not their supervisor but due to the loss of five posts and the introduction on a new computer software system it was felt appropriate to speak with Kerray, who has a hands on role, as well as supervisory responsibilities for the team.

Interviews with tenants:

Tenant Inspectors sought the views of tenants who had recently experienced Cyclical Maintenance though a door step survey in June 2011. This was not a scientific survey and sought to include tenants, identify common experiences and gather tenants' impressions of the service.

The Council provided contact details to 55 tenants from 3 Cyclical Maintenance areas (one rural and two urban). An introductory letter was sent to all and Tenant Inspectors visited the homes. Twenty three tenants completed the questionnaire, which was a 42% response rate.

Although a questionnaire (See Appendix 1 for the questions and tenants' responses) was provided Tenant Inspectors were allowed to follow up tenants' statements to gain a full impression of the tenant's experience.

The interviewees responses are reflected in the recommendations made in this report.

The interviews showed:

- A lack of knowledge and confusion among tenants about Cyclical Maintenance
- Discussions with tenants showed a gap between tenants' expectation and what is delivered.
- Tenants' focused on what hadn't been done and the general perception of the Cyclical Maintenance service was poor, which helped create negative views of repairs services and the Housing Services generally.

Customer Care and Information

There is a lack of information on Cyclical Maintenance. Tenants are generally unaware of the Cyclical Maintenance service and how it differs from Responsive Repairs and Capital Programme. While the majority of tenants may not be interested in which budget pays for which work it is important that:

- Impacts on Responsive Repairs are understood (Does Cyclical Maintenance reduce demands on Responsive Repairs?)
- What is and isn't included in Cyclical Maintenance is clear
- The process, including how to challenge the Council's decisions, is understood
- Outcomes / benefits from the Cyclical Maintenance service are recorded

As tenants are not told what is identified in the inspection and what work will or will not be carried out they aren't able to judge the service they are paying for.

Notification of survey letters

Tenant Inspectors consider that:

- The letters to tenants don't explain what Cyclical Maintenance is and an explanatory leaflet would improve tenants' understanding
- Offering an opportunity to meet inspector would be positive. (Tenant Inspectors thought this would only be of interest to a small number of tenants and routine appointments weren't required)
- The letters to tenants requires plainer language i.e. "The survey will be conducted for works identified to be considered for action"
- The free phone number is positive

During the Inspection

Tenant Inspectors saw that the Cyclical Maintenance inspector is happy to discuss his findings with tenants while on site and often gathered information from tenants. However as many tenants aren't involved during the inspections there is no arranged way of informing tenants of the inspections findings and therefore tenants have no:

- Agreed way to comment or challenge the Council's decisions
- Knowledge of issues being referred to the Capital Programme

While providing this routinely to all tenants (some of which wouldn't wish this information) may not be a good use of resources it would be positive if all tenants knew that they could request a report on their home's Cyclical Maintenance Inspection, including:

- What will be carried out and by when, as part of Cyclical Maintenance
- How / if findings not able to be undertaken via Cyclical Maintenance would be responded to

Notification of Work letter

Tenant Inspectors consider:

- That the letter fails to say what work is planned, how that refers to what was found by the inspector or if work will be undertaken by other means i.e. Capital Programme.
- As there could be a gap of several months between the inspection and the work, tenants should be advised of the position if the gap between inspection and work is longer than an agreed period.
- If no work is to be carried out, no notification of work letter will be issued and tenants will never be aware of the inspection's outcomes Tenant Inspectors would like tenants to be told the outcome of the inspection.

Satisfaction Surveys

The TLI inspectors were given copies of the Satisfaction Card and recent results.

The Inspectors thought:

- The cards needed questions that related to Cyclical Maintenance as the current card was too general
- The response rate 45 out of 1000 (a.4.5% response rate) meant little or no weight could be given to the results

The Tenant Inspectors recommend:

- A sample telephone survey (aiming to achieve a 20% response rate of those involved in each phase) be established
- Participation should be incentivised
- Questions should relate to tenants' experience / knowledge of Cyclical Maintenance not only customer care
- Results should be made available annually and show results for each phase as well as overall

Analysis and Reflection

On completion of the inspection, the inspection team met to discuss findings and recommendations. The Tenant Inspectors considered that:

- Staff are focused on delivering high quality services and customer care
- Cyclical Maintenance represents good value for money
- Links with and support for owners involved in work (not just relating to Cyclical Maintenance) has made significant improvements and supported continuing work to strengthen this
- Tenants (and owners) need more information at all stages
- Links with Responsive Repairs, Void Repairs and Capital Programme need clarified
- Levels of satisfaction with the work carried out needs assessed

Conclusions

Cyclical Maintenance is beneficial to the housing stock and provides value for money. However it isn't understood by tenants and the benefits to individual tenants and to the overall delivery of repair services is not made clear. The result is poor perception of the service by tenants and a negative knock on affect to tenants' view of Housing Services.

To improve the service the Council should:

- Review communications with tenants
- Seek greater transparency in decision making

Recommendations

Tenant inspectors would like the findings and recommendations of this report to be taken into consideration by Stirling Council and reflected in policy when it is next reviewed.

Recommendation 1: Agree and make public the priorities for the Cyclical Maintenance service

Recommendation 2: Letters to be revised to give more information

Recommendation 3: On requests, tenants should be able to meet inspector and inspect their home with the inspector.

Recommendation 4: Make available, on request, the results of a tenant's home's inspection to the tenant, including referrals to Response Repairs and Capital Programme.

Recommendation 5: Provide information identifying the outcomes of the Cyclical Maintenance service.

Recommendation 6: End the current survey card system and replace with a sample telephone survey (with incentives for those participating) which included questions developed with tenants on the experience and knowledge of Cyclical Maintenance and customer care.

Review

Once recommendations have been agreed by the Housing Service a work plan will be established and a review of the Cyclical Maintenance will be undertaken by the TLI Inspectors within 18 months.

Thanks

The Tenant Inspectors would like to record their thanks to all tenants and staff that gave their time and were open and welcoming for assisted with this the inspection, to Stirling Tenants Assembly, to the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) and to Stirling Council.

Appendix 1
Tenant Led Inspection survey on Cyclical Maintenance
June 2011 Results

1. Do you remember a letter about your home being inspected by the Council for Cyclical Maintenance?

Yes - 15	No - 7
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2. Did you know what they were inspecting for?

Yes - 9	No - 14
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3. Do you remember a second letter, about work identified by the inspection starting?

Yes - 1	No - 22
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4. Were you happy with the information that was included in the second letter?

Yes - 0	No - 24
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5. Can you tell me, what information you think you should have been told in letters?

<p>Should have got letter</p> <p>Letter should have said what was getting done</p> <p>Quite happy with contents</p> <p>What was getting carried out</p> <p>Should have been notified when work was getting done</p> <p>When inspector coming and when work being done</p> <p>Not detailed enough</p>
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6. Do you know if work was identified?

Yes - 5	No - 18
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7. Has the work been carried out?

Yes - 4	No - 10	Don't know - 9
	Go to Q9	Go to Q10

8. Were you happy with the work?

Happy with work	3
Not happy with work	1
Why unhappy with work:	No responses

9. If no work was identified / carried out

Do you agree no work is needed?	6
Do you disagree and think work is needed?	12
Don't know	5
What work do you think needs done? Gutters Rhones Pointing of Chimney Paths Front hand rail Rough casting Painting of external doors and windows Roof work Slates Burst External pipe	

10. How can the Cyclical Maintenance Service be improved?

Better contact before and after works carried out Lack of continuity Don't know what is being done Works need to be followed up and satisfaction survey done Get it right first time Where are the Clerk of Works- work needs checked Want notification when Inspectors are coming Prefer CM to be every 3 years Better communication throughout the whole process Inspections more often Council not carrying out what they have said they would be doing Inspection findings should be given to the tenants
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