

A report by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel following our scrutiny of the Sign-up Information Pack and Accompanied Viewing Checklist.

**Southampton City Council
Housing Services**

September 2023

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Acknowledgements.

We would like to thank all the Southampton City Council tenants and staff who took part in helping with this report.

Sadly, we lost a valued panel member in Frank Boulton before this report was finished. Frank was a highly active member of the panel, and his knowledge was invaluable to us. He will be missed by all of us.

Summary.

We are an independent group of tenants that scrutinise Southampton City Council (SCC) Housing services and make recommendations for improvements.

Our aim is to ensure that SCC delivers a good quality service which offers value for money. One of the ways we undertake this is by conducting inspections into a particular area, such as the sign-up information pack. We then scrutinise that service in detail before presenting a list of our recommendations to the Director of Housing and the Cabinet Member for Adults, Housing and Health.

We meet every fortnight via hybrid meetings, and this has enabled both working and non-working-tenants to participate in the work of the panel.

We are always looking for new members to join the Scrutiny Panel. We encourage tenants and leaseholders, particularly those who want to help to improve council services, to join our group and thereby make sure that your voice is heard.

This report details our recent inspection into the sign-up information pack for general needs and floating support properties. The panel did not to review the information pack for supported housing complexes as, whilst accompanied viewings do take place, no information packs are provided for the perspective tenants.

It should also be noted that, with this review, the panel decided to change the way in which our reports are presented. Our priority is for this report to be read and we are also mindful of environmental and economic factors. Therefore, this report does not contain any appendices, but we can provide this information if requested. We thank you for your understanding.

Moving In Standard
Information from Southampton City Council

A guide to moving into your home



southampton.gov.uk/housing

SOUTHAMPTON
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Introduction to the service.

What is the sign- up service?

Existing tenants who wish to move to an alternative property and prospective new tenants register their application with SCC. Provided that the application is successful, each applicant can bid on up to three void properties each week via Homebid. If the applicant is successful with a bid, they are contacted to arrange an appointment to view the property. A Neighbourhood Warden, who is based at the local housing office relevant to the property, will attend the viewing to give an overview of the property.

Should the property be accepted during the viewing appointment, a sign-up appointment is organised with the Local Housing Management Officer (HMO) prior to that appointment, a Housing Management Assistant (HMA) will prepare a sign-up information pack for use by the HMO during this appointment. The HMA does have some discretion on what to include in the pack and this is very much dependent on the individual circumstances and the property type. For example, a sure start information sheet would be relevant if the tenancy included children under the age of five. During the sign-up appointment, the information paperwork sheets from the pack are read to the tenant and then be given for their future use.



Methodology.

We used a variety of methods to conduct our inspection including:

- Sending a survey to new tenants after they had been in their property for 3 months. This enabled us to gauge their experiences and thoughts on the sign-up information paperwork used in the pack.
- Inviting all staff members involved in the viewing and the sign-up process to an informal interview, or to give feedback via a questionnaire. This included Neighbourhood Wardens (NW), Housing Management Assistants (HMA), Housing Management Officers (HMO), and District Housing Managers (DHM).
- Liaising with other Local Authority's and Housing Associations on their sign-up information paperwork.
- Reading and evaluating the sign-up information paperwork and procedure.
- Analysing previous moving in survey results.

Following our inspection, we concluded that overall, SCC is providing a good service. However, there are also opportunities to make savings and improve the customer current experience.

Findings.

New tenant moving in survey.

A survey was sent out to all new tenants in Q4 of 21-22 and the panel received thirteen responses.

Tenant Scrutiny Panel moving in questionnaire

Introduction

We are the Tenant Scrutiny Panel which means we are Southampton City Council tenants who volunteer our time to sit on this panel to scrutinise and suggest improvements to the Housing service that all tenants receive, and we would like your help to do this.....

We are currently researching the paperwork that you were given when you went to your signing up for your new property.

We would like to know your thoughts on the paperwork that you were given by answering the questions below.

1. Are you a new tenant OR a current SCC tenant (Please circle which is applicable to you)
2. When you attended the signing up of your property were you given any information sheets such as sure start info, how to use your heaters, asbestos information etc? Yes / No
If answered yes go to question 2.3
If answered no go to question 5
3. Please tick the relevant answer:
Was each information sheet explained in detail to you at the time of the signing up
OR
The information sheets were given to you in a pack for you to read at a later date
4. How many of the information sheets did you feel were relevant to you?
Please circle the relevant amount below:
None
1-5
5-10
10-15
15-20
5. If you had the option, would you have preferred the information sheets to be:
Please tick the relevant answer:
Emailed to you (if you have an email address) to read when required
OR
Printed and put into a pack to read when required
6. Are there any information sheets that you feel should have been given during the signing up appointment and weren't? Yes / No
If you have replied yes, please list here

Results from the survey showed that most tenants were given the sign-up information pack by the Housing Management Officer (HMO). The results show that slightly more tenants had the information paperwork from the pack given to them to read at their own convenience. We concluded that this could be for several reasons, time constraints for the tenants or the Housing Management Officer, or the tenant might have wished to read the information paperwork pack in their own time. We also noted that that the preferred choice was to receive 5-10 sheets of information paperwork and the second choice was to receive 15-20.

In conclusion, these results do show that the information paperwork sheets within the pack are desired but that most of the sheets are not considered useful.

A higher number of tenants would prefer to receive the information sheets via email. This would remove the cost of printing the sheets and save on staff time, to undertake printing.

Additional information sheets were suggested including block specific information such as the bin rules, the access code, intercom trade button times and storage heater instructions.

Neighbourhood Warden Survey.

A survey was distributed to all thirty-two neighbourhood wardens and four responses were received.

From the results, there was a 50/50 split between Neighbourhood Wardens (NW), in whether it was felt that training has been provided for accompanied viewings or not. This is further complicated by a lack of consistency and/or understanding in what is considered to be “formal” training as some NWs consider “on the job experience” to be a form of training and some do not.

Training does not have to have to cost, as it could be undertaken by other more knowledgeable, or experienced NW’s. This would also ensure that the information provided to prospective tenants is of a consistent nature.

The NW’s informed us that they are not placed on a time restriction for the accompanied viewing appointment and, given the fact that they are asking someone to decide on their home, they feel this is the best means of operating.



It is also felt that the current accompanied viewing checklist is working well and does not require any improvements. It was also noted that the introductory YouTube video link on the checklist appeared to serve no purpose as it had (at the time of this report) only been viewed 209 times over the last 7 years.

The NW’s raised the point that whilst it was not part of this review the decorating packs they distributed are quoted as a ‘workup’ and that it was felt most tenants would prefer to receive a B&Q voucher, as per the previous system. This is because the B&Q Vouchers gave the tenant far more flexibility and choice in what to purchase. It was also felt that, as the NW’s are currently being asked to deliver decorating packs to both general needs and supported housing schemes, the system could be made efficient if the Housing Support Workers were tasked with distributing the packs to the supported housing schemes instead.

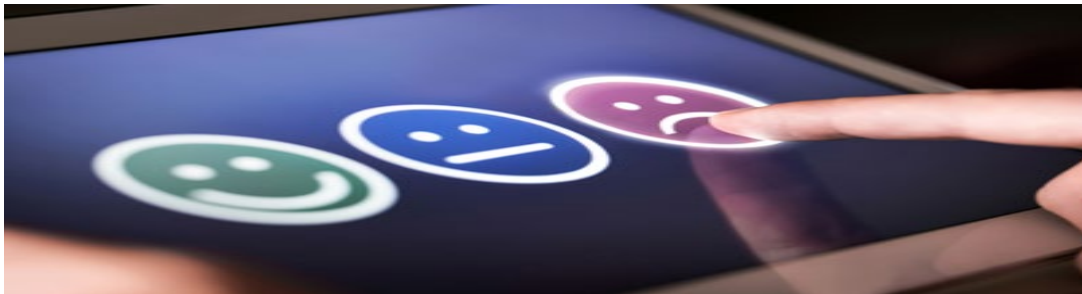
Housing Management Assistant (HMA) survey.

This survey was sent to ten HMA's covering the East, West, and Central local housing offices, three responses were received.

Two-thirds of the HMA's felt that the information pack is relevant but that the process could be streamlined by removing irrelevant information paperwork, removing the need for the tenant to sign multiple pieces of paper and moving everything to an online process. It was also felt that some key information about the properties, such as repairs, gaining consents and notification of sky tv installation could be included in the packs. Another key point which was raised was the fact that the HMA's felt that they should be able to program their own property fobs and cards for new tenancies.

Housing Management Officer (HMO) survey.

The Panel received ten responses from HMOs with some responses being given by interview and some being provided by an online questionnaire.



The HMO's stated that they do review the sign-up information within the packs prior to the sign-up appointment and remove any unnecessary information paperwork but the Panel did note the fact that most of the HMO's felt that tenants are only interested in getting the keys to their new property and that they expressed some scepticism as to whether or not the information are ever read. It was suggested that this issue could be addressed by sending as much information paperwork as possible to the tenant prior to the sign-up appointment. The Panel also noted that the fact that some of the information provided in the sign-up packs is now out of date and has not been updated by the local housing offices, and how some of the information provided is already available via the SCC website. The HMO's also expressed frustration at taking rent payments during the sign-up appointment as this should be completed by the HMA's prior to the sign-up appointment.

HMO's feel that a paperless/electronic process, in which they would be able to use tablets and other electronic devices, would be more beneficial to tenants and would provide a more streamlined process. This approach has been adopted by other Local Authorities and Housing Association and it is felt that SCC has been slow to embrace more efficient ways of working.

From the survey results, Housing Management Officers have a level of discretion in deciding-what-information to provide to tenants. Nevertheless, it

was acknowledged that tenants felt the information paperwork was excessive and of no relevance to them.

District Housing Managers and Assistant District Housing Managers' survey and responses.

The Survey was sent to each local housing office District and Assistant Housing Manager for the East, West and Central wards. The Panel received two collective responses with these covering all individual input from several staff.

Conclusions.

1. From the start of a applying to be added to the housing waiting list to the sign-up of a property, the panel has become aware of how the process involves several different departments and staff. Overall, we considered that the process worked well but also became aware of a small number of changes that could be implemented to ensure the process is slicker and less time consuming. These changes could be implemented with ease and would not incur any additional costs.
2. From interviewing the relevant staff involved in the sign-up process, there is a clear consensus that the process would benefit by the council moving, where possible, to a paperless system and providing the sign-up pack to tenants via e-mail/ text link or the SCC website. However, the panel are also aware that not every tenant, either by choice or otherwise, has access to the internet and it is important to ensure that the process is accessible for all.
3. In terms of efficiency and adaptability, SCC is behind other local authorities and housing associations in its way of working.
4. An option could be given to the prospective tenant upon confirmation at the accompanied viewing that the property is to be accepted on how they would like to receive their information paperwork prior to the sign-up appointment. The options would include a hard copy, via email or a text link.
5. The process could be further streamlined by creating a 'sign-up page' on the SCC website adding all the information paperwork to that page and removing the duplication of the paperwork which are contained in the 'moving into your new house' pack.
6. HMA's could send a prospective tenant prior to the viewing appointment a copy of the sign-up information pack via email, text link or hard copy if required. This would enable time for the tenant to read the paperwork and tenancy agreement and prepare any questions to ask the HMO during the sign-up appointment.

Our recommendations are:

Recommendations		SCC Response	Staff responsible
1	Ensure when a tenant applies for a property, an e-mail address or a contact telephone number must be included as part of that application. This would reduce the amount of time looking for contact info to book a viewing appointment.	This should be standard practice, but will remind Nick Bryant, Allocations Manager	Allocations team Nick Bryant
2	Neighbourhood Wardens should undertake shadowing with more experienced wardens as this would ensure that a consistent service is given to tenants during the accompanied viewing meeting.	Will review this and investigate training.	Helen Prohett-District Housing Manager
3	The YouTube link on the accompanied viewing checklist form should be removed.	Agree for this to be removed.	Helen Prohett-District Housing Manager
4	We recommend that, when a property has been accepted during the viewing appointment, the tenant should be given the option of how they would like to receive the sign-up information pack and draft tenancy agreement, via a hard copy, email, or a text link. This can be easily achieved by adding this question to the accompanied viewing checklist, HMA's would send the prospective tenant information via their preferred choice, allowing potential tenants an opportunity to read the paperwork, the tenancy agreement and prepare any questions to ask the HMO during the sign-up meeting.	Agreed to trial this in one district area, and review, if achievable will roll out to all district areas.	Helen Prohett-District Housing Manager
5	Remove duplicate and out-of-date information paperwork from the sign-up information packs.	Agree as there shouldn't be out of date information and duplicates. Will also implement review dates for the information packs.	Helen Prohett-District Housing Manager
6	Add the suggested information paperwork to the sign-up packs. These being home Insurance info, the pet permission guide, complaint information, pull cord instructions and any other S/H relevant info and a link to the tenant's handbook. We also note that the inclusion of the complaint policy within a sign-up pack is a requirement of SCC Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Self-assessment.	Agree, this can be linked into the review date as above.	Helen Prohett-District Housing Manager

Recommendations		SCC Response	Staff responsible
7	We recommend that an online sign-up page should be added to the Southampton City Council website, which would include the sign-up information pack, this would enable easy access and remove the need to print the information paperwork to insert in the pack which would create a cost saving.	Agree, will start this work Jan 2024.	Helen Prophet-District Housing Manager
8	We suggest that, instead of requiring a single signature on multiple forms, it would be more efficient to produce a checklist for all forms that would require a single signature.	Although agree this would be easier than signing in multiple places, this would need to be checked that it is not a legal requirement to have separate signatures	Helen Prophet-District Housing Manager
9	We recommend that staff should use their SCC laptops/ tablets for sign-ups instead of using paper. If it is required, a Wi-Fi dongle should be provided to enable this process.	There would be a cost implication for the electronic signature software due to the current SCC money situation this will be parked.	N/A
10	We recommend that the Tenancy agreement should be available in languages other than English when published online.	There is currently available a polish translated Tenancy agreement online but as there will be a cost implication to translate other languages, agreed to continue translating as and when required.	N/A
11	Explore the option of HMA's rather than Balfour Beatty being able to program the fobs and cards for new tenancies.	There would be a cost implication for the software so due to the current SCC money situation this will be parked.	N/A
12	We recommend that the Tenant Engagement information should be provided at the settling in visit, rather than during the sign-up meeting.	Agreed	Helen Prophet-District Housing Manager