

Bield Improvement Group

Scrutiny Report

'Ending your Tenancy'

March 2017



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Foreword

Welcome to Bield Improvement Group's (BIG) first scrutiny report. Over the last eight months the group has been reviewing the Ending Your Tenancy process operated by Bield Housing.

BIG was launched in 2016 and has been working with Bield Housing to make a difference to our housing services. We would like to take the opportunity to thank the staff of BH for participating in this worthwhile scrutiny review. Particular thanks are due to Chris McShane, Carol McSkimming, Tracey Howatt, Suzanne Gilbride and Jayne McShane. Thanks also, to the large number of staff who took the time to respond to our survey. Last but not least we would like to thank the BIG members for their voluntary time and commitment they have dedicated to this exercise.

Introducing the Bield Improvement Group

In planning for the Scottish Social Housing Charter Bield Housing, in discussion with tenants, agreed to develop a body which would have a role in scrutinising the services provided by Bield. Bield Housing carried out a recruitment exercise early in 2016 and held the first session in March 2016.

The group undertook a training programme provided by the Tenants Information Service which covered the following key areas:

- The Scottish Social Housing Charter and the new regulatory requirements
- The role of tenants in the self-assessment process
- The role and remit of a tenant scrutiny group
- Practice examples of how tenants are involved in scrutiny across Scotland
- How to develop a terms of reference and code of conduct
- The range of scrutiny activities that can be used to assess services.

At the end of the training programme spanning two sessions BIG was developed. There are twelve members of BIG, and a list is included in Appendix 1.

The main role of BIG is:

- To work on behalf of Bield Housing tenants and service users to ensure that housing services are delivered to a high standard
- To ensure that tenants and service users are at the heart of the business of Bield Housing
- To work with Bield Housing to continually review and improve housing services

- To make recommendations to the Senior Management Team and the Management Board on how housing services can be improved
- To independently review the performance and delivery of housing services by Bield Housing
- To take account of tenant satisfaction, and value for money for tenants and service users.

Our work is based on the following core standards:

- Being accountable to tenants and service users
- Being transparent
- Reflecting the needs and aspirations of tenants and service users
- Respecting the decision making role of the board
- Making recommendations based on robust evidence.

Once the group was formally established we received further training and support from the Tenants Information Service throughout the scrutiny activity. Training sessions were delivered on:

- Understanding the Charter
- The Annual Return on the Charter
- How to understand performance data and benchmarking.

As part of our initial training programme we were grateful to tenants from East Ayrshire Tenants and Residents Federation who came to speak to us, and talk us through their tenant scrutiny journey.

Throughout the process Chris McShane was on hand to respond to queries from the group, and to organise appropriate speakers.

Selecting our first scrutiny activity

BIG were keen to get started on scrutinising housing services and were advised by TIS that there are several issues to consider when selecting an area for scrutiny. These are:

- Personal views of tenants
- Performance information
- Views of the landlord
- Complaints information
- Any regulatory concerns

After considering the above, and following a detailed presentation on performance across Bield Housing, the group agreed that they would like to review the service area of Ending Your Tenancy. The group agreed that this would focus on the

process in this area, but would not look at void processes as such, as we were aware Bield was making changes in how this service operated.

Ending Your Tenancy Inspection Process

Once we had agreed our topic, we worked with the Tenants Information Service to develop an action plan which would guide us through our first scrutiny activity. This action plan included the following scrutiny activities:

- Review of relevant legislation
- Review of publicity material and communications from Bield relating to the service area
- Review of policies and procedures used by Bield Housing
- Review of policies and procedures used by other landlords
- Review of performance information presented by Bield Housing
- Review of complaints received in relation to the service area
- Review of financial performance impacting on the service area
- Interview with relevant service managers
- Survey to be sent to staff who are closely involved with the policy area (see Appendix 3)
- Survey of tenants to find out what they think about the service currently provided (see Appendix 4).

Over the course of eight months we met monthly to carry out the tasks listed above, and learned a great deal about how the service operates. We are grateful to the staff who took the time to speak to us, and to prepare information for us.

Following consideration of the above information, and discussions amongst the group we noted the following recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

Recommendation

Bield should review procedures for sending the bereavement card to the next of kin where a tenant has died. This should only be done where the Scheme Manager had a personal relationship with the deceased, and if sent, should not include the 'Ending Your Tenancy Following Bereavement' information and advice leaflet, which should be sent separately. The card should only be about expressing sympathy at this initial stage, and should not include information about the processes to be followed.

Reasoning

Group members felt that sending the card containing instructions and information does not demonstrate that Bield are sympathetic or empathetic. They felt that further information could be sent out in due course.

Recommendation

Bield should adapt the letters sent to tenants who are ending a tenancy and to the next of kin where a tenant has died. BIG has prepared template letters which could be used at Appendix 2. BIG are happy to discuss the content of these letters further.

Reasoning

BIG members felt that the letters prepared by one of their group, gave the same information, but was provided in much more compassionate language. This would help to demonstrate that Bield is an empathetic organisation.

Recommendation

Bield should prepare a list of appropriate agencies that could support tenants and their families empty their property. This would apply for those who were ending their tenancy, or where a tenant has died. This list would vary depending on the local authority area. This list should contain charities that collect goods which are almost new, and are offered to others in a position of need.

Reasoning

Particularly in relation to the next of kin this is already a difficult time, any support that Bield can provide would be welcome. This may also result in properties being emptied more efficiently. It would also mean that items which were in a good condition were not going to waste.

Recommendation

Bield should prepare a leaflet for the next of kin of existing tenants, which details the steps that are taken when a Bield tenants dies. This should provide information about the processes that would be followed, and provide information about who the next of kin can speak to for help, support and advice. The group acknowledge that there needs to be a discussion about when and how often this is distributed, as the next of kin can change. We would be happy to discuss this further.

A further leaflet should be prepared encouraging or requiring tenants to identify a next of kin, and to keep Bield updated should this change.

Reasoning

Based on feedback from staff, and particularly tenants, it is clear that tenants and their next of kin do not know about the policies in this area, despite the information contained in the handbook. To prevent issues arising at this stressful time, Bield should be proactive in providing this information. Comments were received from staff that this should be an area focused on, when a new tenancy begins.

Recommendation

Bield should review the process by which staff set out how they inform the organisation that an existing tenant has died.

Reasoning

Several members of staff in the survey indicated that they had to fill in several forms with the same information. To do this only once saves staff time to focus on other areas of work.

Recommendation

Bield should remove the key charge that is currently applied from the moment the tenancy ends until they key is returned. A two week free period should be offered to the next of kin to clear a property, after which a charge should apply.

Reasoning

Group members feel that this is a stressful time for the next of kin of a deceased tenant, and they will not be focusing on emptying a property as a priority. Giving two weeks free, gives time to grieve and then time to organise affairs. The group are aware that there are different approaches adopted by other similar landlords, but feel that having the free period would demonstrate that Bield do care.

The group are aware that this will have a financial impact on the organisation, and would propose that Bield consider a pilot process so that BIG and Bield can monitor the impact this has.

It should also be noted that a majority of Bield staff who responded to the survey indicated that they would be keen for the key charge to be removed.

Miscellaneous

The group noted the improvements that Bield have made in reducing their average void time, and further noted the challenges faced in some developments that were harder to let. The group feel that this should remain a focus for Bield going forward, and that they would like to have a further discussion about longer term planning for harder to let properties.

The group notes that accepting some of the recommendations will require Bield to amend standard letters and leaflets. The group are happy to support Bield with this in due course.

Next Steps

This report will be shared with the Senior Management Team, and the Board at Bield Housing. We will also produce a summary version which we will make available for tenants and other customers of Bield Housing. We would welcome the opportunity to prepare an article for inclusion in the Bield tenants newsletter.

We will expect Bield Housing to prepare an action plan which will outline how they will implement our recommendations where they are accepted, providing clear timescales. Where recommendations are not accepted, we expect Bield to provide clear reasons why not, and explain how they will address the concerns we have expressed.

We will undertake a review of this, our first scrutiny activity, so that we can apply lessons learned to our future work.

We will be looking to identify future service areas for scrutiny, and look forward to continuing in our role.

Appendix 1 – BIG membership

Peter Hanson Paton
Rosemary Ann Clarke
John Kinsman
Andrew Armitage
Alastair Kerr
Moyra Blackie
Catherine Nicol
Alice Bayne
Alexander Fraser
Bill Hunt
Edith Chesney
John Thompson

Appendix 2 – draft letters

Ending Your Tenancy – Template Letters for Staff

(As proposed by BIG)

1 – Letter following bereavement (sent to family member or next of kin)

Dear (insert name),

Please accept my sympathy, and that of Bield as a whole, at this difficult and stressful time. Personal loss is so hard to accept and until it strikes us, we cannot appreciate just how we may react.

Thank you for letting us know that you are dealing with the affairs of the late (insert tenant name).

To help you with some of the formalities, I have enclosed an 'Ending your Tenancy' leaflet. This will give you information on what steps need to be taken.

It is better for you and for us, that the property is cleared out and the keys returned with the minimum of delay. We appreciate that the time for this is determined by circumstances.

If you have difficulty in clearing the property, please let us know and we will give you as much help and advice as we can.

We will advise you as soon as possible of any charges or credits due on the rent account.

The Councils Housing Benefit Service give us a final balance for any tenants who had housing benefit paid directly to Bield on their behalf, but this can take up to six months with some Councils. For those affected by this, we regret that there may well be a long delay before we contact you again. If you have any questions about this, please contact (insert relevant officer name).

In sympathy,

Yours sincerely,

(insert officer name)

2 – Letter following notification of end of a tenancy

Dear (insert name),

Thank you for notifying us at Bield of your wish to give up the above tenancy.

Your tenancy end date is (insert end of tenancy date).

If you need extra time to clear the property, please discuss this with your Scheme Manager (insert name) to agree an extension date, by which time the property must be cleared. I enclose an 'Ending your Tenancy' leaflet to remind you of the steps you are required to take.

You will be liable for the rent due until the keys have been handed in on the tenancy end date, or if you have an extension, the extension period ends.

We will advise you as soon as we can of any charges or credits due on your rent account.

If you were in receipt of Housing benefit paid directly to Bield on your behalf, we will require a final balance from the Councils Housing benefit Service. Since some Councils can take up to six months to respond to us, it may be some time before we at Bield contact you again. We regret this possibility.

If you have any questions, or want any help over this, please do contact us as soon as you can.

Yours ...

(insert name of officer)

Appendix 3 – staff survey questions

What is your understanding of your role in the ending a tenancy process, especially in relation to where the tenant has passed away?

What changes would you make to the Ending Your Tenancy processes and procedures that would make your job easier, and deliver better outcomes for tenants?

What is your view of the understanding that tenants have of the Ending your Tenancy policies and procedures?

What can be done to improve this understanding?

What is your view on the 'key charge' applied by Bield following the death of a tenant?

Appendix 4 – tenant survey questions

Group members agreed, where they felt comfortable to do so, to ask fellow residents within their developments the following questions:

Did you know that following the passing of a tenant, Bield apply a rental charge until such time as the keys are returned to them?

Do you think it is appropriate for Bield to apply this charge?