

**Minutes from the Rent and Debt Prevention Panel Meeting held on  
Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> May, 10am at Horsebridge Community Centre**

**Attendees**

David Shakespeare (DS)  
Elaine Christian (EC)  
Maurice Christian (MC)  
Sheila Friar (SF)  
Alun Jones (AJ)  
Colin Porter (CP)  
Patricia Robinson (PR)  
Mark Tugwood (MT)  
Andrew Walker (AW) – Area Manager for Queens Park Estate Office and the Rents Team  
Sharron Moulton (SM) – Housing Officer for the Rents Team  
Jenni Ellis (JE) – Customer Involvement and Projects Officer

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

AW welcomed attendees to the meeting and introduced SM, Housing Officer for the Rents Team

**2. Minutes of the last meeting/matters arising**

The minutes of the last meeting were read through and agreed as a true record. The following points were updated and additional items were raised:

- **Customer First** – attendees stated that the posters were still yet to be displayed within the Customer First Centre. AW explained that a meeting is due to take place with Staff from Customer First where this matter would be raised and asked attendees if there were any further queries/issues. Attendees stated that an issue had been raised at a previous meeting regarding not being able to use the machines if they did not have their rent card/account number. It had been advised that staff could look up the account number to solve this problem. However, attendees explained that they have to queue which often takes a long time due to staff shortages. AW is to bring this up at the meeting. A suggestion was made to advertise and promote the different payment methods within the Customer First Centre. Attendees also stated that the balance figures on their account have been incorrect for approximately one month – AW is to raise this at the meeting. AW asked attendees to contact him or JE with any further comments/issues on this matter in order for these to be raised at the meeting.
- **Incentive Scheme** – AW explained that 6 staff members had recently completed overtime to target low level arrears prior to the prize draw incentive. Over £200 was taken on the day and a number of payment arrangements were also made.

Attendees agreed the incentive scheme was beneficial and a discussion took place into future schemes. It was decided that an incentive should take place at Christmas and near Easter next year. Prize amounts are yet to be decided, AW is to check whether direct debit payers would be disadvantaged at the Christmas scheme.

- **Buddy Service** – AW stated that this would be piloted and run in a similar way to the Anti-social Behaviour (ASB) Buddy Service where a telephone number for the Buddy is provided to people who are difficult to engage by way of a referral process. AW stated that this would be trialled with one buddy and it would be beneficial for someone already on the ASB Service to be involved as they would be privy to the process. Once the trial has taken place, an update will be provided and more Buddy volunteers would most probably be required. Further information on the Service is to be sent to members.
- **Payzone details** – AW is to speak with Payzone regarding the out-of-date information on outlets for the FY2 area.

- **Text Messaging** – It was explained that a suggestion to implement a text messaging service where tenants could text and the Rents Team would call the tenant had been agreed at another meeting – this number is currently being advertised in arrears letters/rent statements, the website and in newsletters. The aim is for the system to generate text messages once a tenant is at a certain level of arrears – this will be part of the second phase of the new Housing Management System.

### 3. Agenda for Panel

AW explained that this was the first meeting of the 'Rent and Debt Prevention Panel' - attendees suggested that the name be altered to the 'Rents Improvement Panel' which was agreed. As the Panel will take on a more strategic role in monitoring performance and service standards etc, it was explained that a standard agenda would be adopted and used for future meetings – this is also to remain consistent with other service areas. Attendees agreed that the following items should be included:

- **Key Performance Indicators** – to include a quarterly report on performance including arrears and comparisons with other organisations.
- **Service Standards** – to review these and receive involvement from the Panel in choosing measurable and challenging service standards and scrutinising these.
- **Customer Satisfaction** – to provide feedback from customers, reporting on comments/compliments or complaints and updates on involvement which reviews the service such as mystery shopping etc.
- **Service Improvements** – to include items such as the Buddy Service, Inspection Updates, Rents Newsletter etc
- **Benchmarking** – to report on areas of good practice, comparisons with other organisations etc. A brief discussion took place into the recent benchmarking visit to Poole and AW explained that many areas of good practice were identified. As a result of the visit, the Tenancy Support Service was reviewed and Officers within the service now work centrally in one location.

### 4. Performance

Arrears year end figure: £334 000

Target: £350 000

AW explained that the figure includes rent on properties, garages and the hostels and was below target. A Summary Report on Current Tenant Arrears which demonstrated the different arrears areas was handed out and discussed. Information on the key performance indicators was also discussed and it was agreed that this will be sent to members along with the minutes.

### 5. Update on Housing Management System

AW explained that Sara Brabin (Rents Team Leader) will be working full time on this project until October and so AW will remain at Queens Park and manage the Team. Updates will be provided at future meetings on this, it is important that the system is as efficient as possible and meets requirements.

### 6. Inspection Update

AW stated that an indicative inspection had recently taken place where it had been requested that the inspectors focus on areas of weakness. Feedback received included that the Team were working extremely well and completing everything that the Audit Commission would expect, if not more. Areas for improvement included:

- Computer system is outdated and needs improving – this is currently being revised (point 5 above)
- Payment arrangements – the current system does not indicate when an arrangement has been broken. However the new system will be able to do so and performance should therefore improve.
- Equality and diversity information on tenants is currently kept - however, there is no evidence to suggest what this is used for. AW stated that an Equality Impact Assessment will possibly be

included in the Satisfaction Survey which will assist in ensuring that the service does not discriminate against tenants and that there are no barriers to the service.

- Former Tenant Arrears – this is to be discussed further at a future meeting.
- A seasonal approach to rent collection should be taken into account with the possibility of reminder letters to be sent to tenants once the season has finished.

## 7. Rents Newsletter

The last edition of the newsletter was discussed briefly with attendees agreeing that relevant information was included. Attendees were asked what they would like to feature in the next edition and agreed the following:

- Results of the recent Incentive Scheme
- Information on rent patches and individual Housing Officers contact details
- Did you know/frequently asked questions
- What's new section should remain as a standard item and include an update on the Housing Management System and the Buddy Service
- Text instead – this should be included with the contact details

A draft is to be sent to members once produced before publication. Members also agreed that it would be a good idea to include information and a photograph of the Rents Panel in a future newsletter.

## 8. Satisfaction Surveys

The satisfaction survey is currently being developed further to suggestions from the inspectors. A draft is to be sent to members once produced.

## 9. Any Other Business

- **Advice Link Value for Money Review** – AW stated that this is due to take place to ensure that the service is beneficial and value for money. Feedback is to be provided at a future meeting. AW explained that it would be beneficial for members to be involved with reviews in the future once their knowledge of the service had increased.
- **Mystery Shopping** – due to take place in the next financial year as a way of measuring satisfaction and the levels of service provided. Once this is completed, the results will be brought to the next meeting and discussed.
- **Tenant Conference** is due to take place on Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> September at the Winter Gardens. It was suggested that the members of this Panel assist on the Rents Stall to promote the Team and the Panel.

## 12. Date and Time of Next Meeting

- Friday 27<sup>th</sup> August, 10am at Ibbison Community Centre.
- Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> November, 10am at Aysgarth Community Centre