



TOWER SCRUTINY PANEL BCH Rents and Financial Inclusion Plan February Report 2024

Tenant Scrutiny Panel Members

7 TOWER members undertook this scrutiny.

Introduction

We would like to take this opportunity to introduce ourselves; we are TOWER Scrutiny Panel and are made up of BCH customers who volunteer our time to help develop and improve the Rents and Financial Inclusion Plan which BCH provides to their customers.

The Impact of COVID-19 and Energy Price Increases on Low-Income Households in the UK: Including Government Responses

The Dual Crisis: COVID-19 and Energy Prices

The simultaneous crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the surge in energy prices have disproportionately impacted low-income households in the UK.

COVID-19 Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on people's health, employment, and overall well-being. Low-income families, often with less savings and security, have been especially hard hit. Job losses and reduced hours have been commonplace, disproportionately affecting low-income individuals, employed or not.

Energy Price Surge

Energy prices have skyrocketed, primarily due to global supply chain disruptions and increased demand as the world began to emerge from lockdowns. In the UK, this has meant significant increases in household energy bills, placing an additional financial strain on those already struggling. For low-income households, this has often meant having to choose between heating their homes and other essential expenses like food and heating.

Government Responses: Energy and Cost of Living Payments

In response to these challenges, the UK government implemented several measures to support affected families:

1. Energy Bill Support:

Initiatives like the Winter Fuel Payment and the Cold Weather Payment have been introduced to help cover the increased costs of heating for eligible low-income households. Additionally, the government has offered grants to support energy efficiency improvements in homes.

2. Cost of Living Payments:

Recognizing the broader impact of these crises, the government has provided cost of living payments to support low-income families. These payments aim to alleviate the overall financial burden, helping to cover essentials beyond energy costs, such as food and rent.

However, the aftermath of COVID-19 and high energy costs has created a significant challenge for low-income households in the UK. Government interventions, such as energy and cost of living payments, have been crucial in mitigating some of these impacts. However, these are now coming to an end.

There's a need for ongoing support and assistance to ensure the long-term well-being and security of the most vulnerable tenants. Awareness of, and access to benefits are key to helping affected individuals navigate these challenging times.

We were invited in August 2023 to carry out a review of the Blackpool Coastal Housing (BCH) Rents and Financial Inclusion Plan and undertake a scrutiny exercise to investigate and look for any areas that could be improved.

To help the scrutiny team complete this review of the Rents and Financial Inclusion Plan we undertook the following:

Benchmarking other housing provider websites:

- Six Town Housing
- Town and Country
- Barnet Homes
- Cheltenham Homes
- Walsall Housing Group
- Newcastle Homes
- Wyre Borough Council
- Northeast Lincolnshire Council

We interviewed the following members of BCH staff and took accompanying notes:

- BCH Head of Housing Services
- BCH Housing Officer
- BCH Housing Services Manager
- BCH Housing Service Advisor
- BCH Financial Support Officer
- BCH Rents team Leader
- BCH Director of Resources

- Telephone follow up with surveyed tenants.

As expected, BCH have put together a well thought out and multifaceted approach to helping tenants and were in the process of taking another member of staff on board.

Help offered to tenants came from Rent Sense which split the properties into patches. Each patch had between 2 and 3 BCH housing staff working together visiting tenants in financial difficulties. BCH's approach was to work with the tenant to bring the situation under control and only as a very last resort to look at eviction.

This is a monumental task for BCH and their staff as they have no formal benefits training, and tenants may not be willing to fully disclose their finances. BCH felt that it was outside their remit but that Universal Credit would help them obtain the correct benefits.

The team with only minor suggestions thought that BCH's approach was thorough.

Change of Viewpoint

Having looked at the system from BCH down to the tenant, the scrutiny team changed tack and started to look at things from the tenant's point of view. With low income and families on benefits being the focus.

A Survey to ask the tenants if they felt able to check that they were receiving all the benefits that they were entitled to was carried out with 10 willing tenants. At first glance the results appeared to be in line with BCH's thinking. One of the questions answered was "are you sure that you're on the correct benefits?" Several came back with yes, because Universal Credit have told them what benefits they are entitled to.

An off the record meeting was held with one of the Universal Credit Customer Support workers.

She has been with UC since its inception and currently has 2,400 clients.

- They receive no benefits training other than the basic UC, including rent payments etc.
- If a client believes that they may be entitled to additional benefits, it's up to the client to find out and apply. Only if an additional benefit is granted and UC is notified, will they get involved and make payment.
- For payment of rent direct to BCH, it's an agreement between UC and BCH. It must be that way as the most common call to UC is someone asking them to stop paying the rent, due to a leaky tap or something. If they did as the tenant asked and just stopped paying, the housing association would have a hard time keeping track of everything.

1. Key Observations

- From the Website benchmarking it appears that most housing associations provide more comprehensive information for tenants about debt and benefits. These are easy to fix.
- NEWCASTLE has an excellent website with lots of documentation and guides for tenants.
 - BCH should look to offering a more diverse array of links on its website in areas such as benefits, health and domestic abuse support to aid tenants in managing their tenancies more effectively. (Recommendation #8)
 - Explore use of a “Caretaker” to aid tenant support and property maintenance. (Recommendation #10)
- WALSALL Housing Group has an excellent video on its website showing a Housing Support Officer making a tenant visit and how the tenant benefited. (Recommendation #9)
- BCH has almost definitely exceeded their responsibilities to the tenants but in looking at the big picture have chosen to be proactive in helping.
- There’s a gap between what help BCH and the tenant believe is and what is available to check benefits.
- We have produced a benefits self-check sheet (enclosed) with QR codes for mobile devices and URL’s for normal laptops etc. These link to free online benefits checkers: “Turn To Us”, “Entitled To”, “Citizens Advice Bureau Benefits Checker”, “Step Change”, “Money Savings”, “10 Minute Benefit Checker”.

These can be handed out, printed in A4 or A3 for use in community centers etc.

2. Recommendations

Recommendations are based on a priority scale of 1-3, with 1 being the highest.

1. Priority 1: Spread rent payments over 52/53 weeks across all payment types.
2. Priority 1: More attention to be paid to monthly overpayment report to issue refunds quicker where possible.
3. Priority 2: BCH to fund positions of FSO's and have an FSO per patch. When done have FSO information more accessible for self-referral including details in new tenant packs and staff email signatures.
4. Priority 2: Request Blackpool Council to amend Bulky Matters to BCH donation.
5. Priority 2: Add UC information to new tenant packs.
6. Priority 2: Add posters to community centres to include QR codes to link to info website.
7. Priority 1: Recharges to be added sooner and more emphasis on chasing these charges.
8. Priority 2: Add additional information to website including;
9. a link to a reputable benefit checker and a video showing how to use the checker
10. Newcastle Homes have a very good site to look and get some information.
11. Priority 3: Produce video showing FSO tenancy visit, and showing how the support benefitted the tenant as done by Walsall Housing Group
12. Priority 2: Look into employing a Caretaker role person.

3. Conclusions

TOWER scrutiny would like to thank all parties for their help with this report. TOWER would ask the Senior Management Team and Board to consider the Recommendations in this report and feedback by the end of October 2024. Should any other information be required please contact TOWER.