

Meeting:	Tenants' Forum
Date:	23 January 2013
Item:	11
Status:	Confidential
Action required:	For Noting
Portfolio Holders	Vic Breach

ASB Scrutiny report

Purpose of Report

To update the Forum on the response to the Scrutiny report into anti-social behaviour (ASB).

Key Issues

The Scrutiny group in November presented a Report to Board on their findings in relation to Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB). This paper, requested by the Board is a staff response to the recommendations.

The majority of the findings are accepted and, where there were different perspectives, these were discussed in more detail in a meeting between staff and the scrutiny group to help understand the context.

We welcome the recognition of the strengths of the service in performance, partnership working and prevention of ASB that the previous tenant inspectors had requested.

Responses to Scrutiny recommendations

4.1 Attention should be given to the problems with TAGISH and training should be given to BCB staff in its use.

Accepted. The system when introduced in 2010 suffered from some under investment in training and post implementation support. These issues were addressed in the tenant inspectors' report. Because of these constraints on the Technical Support, the full potential has not been realised until recently. The IT department have since provided dedicated support on the remaining technical issues most of which are now resolved. This includes extending access to TAGISH to the Berinsfield Community Business TAGISH (now taken over by i-Casework) is relatively widely used by housing associations.

Over a third of HA Housemark participants use a purpose built ASB IT system to administer cases. The next largest proportion is users of adapted housing management systems. Compared to previous years' proportions, organisations using Excel, Access and paper-based systems are starting to dwindle – together they account for a quarter of all participants – down from a third in 2010. TAGISH has been a significant improvement on our previous recording systems.

4.2 Investigate funding streams to fill anticipated gaps following the cuts in funding for our partner agencies.

Accepted. Efficiency measure and budget cuts are affecting both statutory and voluntary agencies, and housing associations are also operating in a value for money environment. Historically there have been no funding streams for core ASB services. We have been successful in obtaining partnership funding to address partnership working but have not been subject to any reduction.

We have however since this report, achieved extended funding for a further year from our local district council as a result of the award winning Community Places project in Berinsfield. However we recognise that the opportunity to attract these funds will reduce as potential funders have fewer funds to distribute. We will actively seek funding but competition will be significant.

4.3 Introduce actions plan to be completed with complainants and signed by the complainant and Neighbourhood Officer.

Accepted. After discussion with the scrutiny group we agreed that not all cases (e.g. low level or one-off disagreements) warranted full action plans. In addition to prioritising high level and persistent ASB, we need a proportionate approach to recording low level ASB process, particularly with limited resources. The anecdotal cases uncovered in the body of the report have not been shared with us for reasons of confidentiality, so we are not able to investigate these. However, we accept that our letters setting out action plans can be improved. We recognise that the immediacy of forms being handed out at an incident can be reassuring, so we are exploring several new versions as a result.

4.4 Look at changes to the law firms used in eviction cases to provide value for money.

Not accepted. We have sought to advice from Social Landlords Crime and Nuisance group (SLCNG) on this point, as the report recommended using a local solicitor for purposes of cost based on the view of a stakeholder. Like most housing associations, we employ legal services from qualified solicitors experienced in housing law. A regional firm based in Oxford has handled 90% of our cases in the last 2 years.

We have also more recently been using a solicitor based in Southampton whose reputation is excellent and who has provided us previously with free training and advice. This also enables cost comparisons.

We do use local solicitors for arrears cases, but would not wish to do so for ASB where a failed case may set a precedent both locally and for the wider housing sector, and where each case has a significant impact in that particular community as in the case quoted in the scrutiny report that involved a barrister. The Section 21 hearing mentioned in the scrutiny report was adjourned because the judge (as is standard practice) wished to have more time to consider the case that had been opposed by tenant's solicitor. We were in the end successful in this particular case of drug related crime.

We sought the advice on this recommendation from the SLCNG group who confirmed that whilst they don't have any researched evidence on this particular

subject, they take the view that *'ASB litigation is a specialist area of legal practice so much so that landlords perhaps focus more on the quality/expertise of the solicitors they appoint rather than on where they are geographically located SLCNG doesn't endorse any particular firm(s) or products and.... there will be very good 'local' legal firms too.Many landlords contract with one or more legal firms over an extended period with the result that those firms build up local knowledge as well as a fairly detailed understanding of the landlord as an organisation as a result'*

However we understand the point and SLCNG have offered to contact other Housing Associations to find out their view and we will report the results via the Tenants' Forum ASB portfolio holder.

4.5 Soha to make changes to its cost codes to enable the costs associated with ASB issues to be easily produced.

Accepted. The cost of ASB includes staffing, legal activity and occasionally property damage. Property damage from police forcing entry accounts for a small proportion of expenditure - with 6 cases last year (2012/13) totalling £6,896 including VAT and 3 cases in the 9 months of this year (2013/14). The major cost to housing associations is staff costs and Soha is in the top quartile for cost effectiveness in relation to the ASB service.

We have met with the Thames Valley Police since this report and asked for clarification on their rules around reimbursement for door repairs on forced entry either on raids or welfare checks. The police also remove doors on forced entry for welfare checks. We do have a simple mechanism for repairing locks that staff and contractors can use. Police do not always wish to advise us in advance for reasons of confidentiality and urgency.

Some further rework is needed to allow us to code these costs to make the collation of the repairs costs more easily obtainable. This will be followed through with the finance dept.

4.6 We were very impressed with the handling and knowledge of ASB cases in the Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust and suggest that Soha might like to consider sharing good practice with VAHT. (They did indicate to us that they would like to forge links with Soha.)

Accepted. Soha's Neighbourhoods team has booked this visit and will be happy to have a mutual exchange of ideas and good practice.

4.7 Consider completion of HQN Respect toolkit to check Soha complies with best practice in its ASB delivery. This process should include the BCB staff.

Partly accepted. We regularly reviewing our approach against the Respect toolkit that we signed up to in 2010. We are reviewing our ASB policy and procedure currently and this will incorporate a review of our adherence to the Respect agenda. BCB will certainly be involved

The BCB are an independent locally based social business contracted by us to offer a housing management service within the Berinsfield community. The

agreement in place indicates that BCB are required to fund their own training but that we will involve them on Soha wide training as required. This year, Soha have provided intensive coaching in relation to ASB and involved BCB staff in legal training on managing casework. We have undertaken STAR survey comparisons that have indicated similar satisfaction with case handling. There have been localised concerns that have been addressed with the police, but complaints from Berinsfield tenants in relation to ASB are similar to those for Soha.

We insist that all BCB tenants can approach Soha for advice if they prefer and the Customer Services team are aware of the need to alert the Director to these cases for overall monitoring. We monitor ASB comprehensively by area. Berinsfield has a relatively manageable volume of incidents reported, but occasionally these are of a more serious nature and our established procedure is for Soha and BCB to work together on these cases or on the more intractable situations.

Resident Involvement

Portfolio Holders are involved in the work across the department.

Recommendation

The Tenant's Forum notes the performance in the first quarter of 2013/14

Appendix: Appendix N/A

References: Scrutiny Report into ASB 2014

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