

Income Management Focus Group Minutes

Held at Southgate House on 10th February 2009

Customer Attendees

There were five attendees: 2 male and 3 female; middle aged and older age groups; white and black ethnic groups; and from a variety of areas including Kingsholm, Tuffley and Saintbridge.

Gloucester City Homes Attendees

Name	Company Position	Telephone	Email
Samantha Chambers	Income Services Manager	01452 396544	sam.chambers@gloscityhomes.co.uk
Philip Amos	Resident Involvement Officer	01452 396080	philip.amos@gloscityhomes.co.uk

Background

Sam and Philip explained that the reason for holding the focus group was to identify areas where the income management service provided to tenants by Gloucester City Homes can be improved. Five areas in particular were reviewed with the attendees.

Discussion feedback

1. Eviction Appeals Panel (EPA)

- Sam explained that the EPA is currently under review. One proposal is that Gloucester City Homes takes on this duty from Gloucester City Council. Attendees were provided with information detailing the possible impact upon GCH if this should happen. They were then asked for their feedback on this proposal. Comments include:
- If the EPA is transferred to GCH, there should be a balance on the Panel between 'tenant friendliness' and good business practice.
- In addition to above, there should be independent people on the panel, including a tenant from outside the area of the tenant up for eviction plus an independent board member.
- After consideration of the potential impact upon the GCH Income Management Team, the group agreed that any appeals process should be made more efficient and should not be run by the Income Management Team due to the increased workload.

2. Incentives for rent payers

- Sam asked the group for suggestions on how GCH can encourage tenants who pay their rent on time to continue to pay regularly, in addition to encouraging those in arrears to clear their accounts. Suggestions include:

- Send thank you letters or cards to tenants who maintain a clear rent account.
- When sending out generic rent reminder letters, screen out those in credit to avoid aggravating those who are careful to pay their rent on time.
- Increase the number of prizes for the rent prize draw e.g. instead of one £500 prize, have five £100 prizes.
- Introduce a 'gold repairs service' whereby tenants with clear rent accounts receive a faster response repairs service.

3. Credit Crunch support

- Sam pointed out that the Income Management team presently distributes financial help and advice via Tenant Times e.g. help to reduce energy costs. Is there anything else GCH could be doing to help people reduce their expenditure/increase their income? Feedback included:
- There is already enough agencies providing information on "surviving the credit crunch" – GCH does not need to do any more than it is already (e.g. regular Tenant Times articles).
- GCH should continue to hammer home the message that tenants who find themselves in difficulty paying their rent should contact us straight away.

4. Worklessness

- Sam outlined to the group how GCH is working in partnership with a variety of agencies to help long-term unemployed people into work. This is important for GCH to be involved with due to government guidelines. Sam asked the group how GCH should publicise such initiatives. Answers included:
- Regular Tenant Times articles.
- Insert with rent statements – but NOT with other inserts in order to maximise attention.

5. Service standards

- Sam asked the group if they were happy with a selection of service standards.
- **Standard: We will always give you at least 4 weeks notice of any change to your rent or other charges.** Comments: the group agreed this should be a minimum of 6 weeks to provide more notice especially for tenants who work.
- **Standard: Methods of payment (8 methods).** Comments: one attendee suggested PayPal should be included as a means to pay.
- **Standard: We will send you a statement of your account every 3 months.** Comments: could these be sent electronically to those tenants able to access email? This would save significant costs in postage. For those in arrears, could statements be sent monthly to remind them to clear their account?
- **Standard: We will do our best to ensure debt-counselling partner agencies contact you within 3 working days (1 working day if urgent) to agree a time to meet.** Comments: agreed.

Philip Amos
Resident Involvement Officer
11/02/2009