

Scrutiny Review Team: Task & Finish Group

Project: Standard Letters

Section 1: Introduction

- 1.1 This task and finish group looked at a portion of the standard letters that the housing department at South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) use when communicating with residents via post.
- 1.2 This topic was suggested following on from feedback from Housing Service Officers (HSOs) and a complaint that was received recently regarding one of the letters in particular. The HSOs had expressed that, due to the letters not being reviewed for some time, they had to edit many of the letters whenever they used them; due to either having to update out of date information or generally adjust the tone of the letter.
- 1.3 The overall aim of this project is to produce an updated batch of standard letters that can be implemented within SCDC's information management system. Some of the factors that the group considered when reviewing the letters include:
 - The language and wording that is used
 - Is it easy to understand?
 - Is the letter too long?
 - Does the letter contain all the information required?
 - What is the overall tone of the letter? How does it make the reader feel?

The feedback form that was provided to the members of the group and staff is attached to this report as appendix 01.

Start Date: 23/04/2018

Completion Date: 30/07/2018

Section 2: Task & finish group members

- 2.1 This task and finish group consisted of the following tenants and leaseholders:
 - Wendy Head
 - Angela Lewell
 - Dave Hammond
 - Glynis Goff
 - Joan Ball

- Patti Hall
 - Helen Ballantyne
 - Jim Watson
- 2.2 The group also included a member of staff that was there throughout the process to answer any questions and assist where required, which for this review was Martyn Hilliam (*Housing Policy Officer*).
- 2.3 Other staff members that were involved in providing feedback on some of the standard letters were:
- Lucy Savage (*Housing Services Officer*)
 - Lynne Roberts (*Housing Services Officer*)
 - Carly Freed (*Housing Services Officer*)
- 2.4 Samantha Goodwin from the Tenants Participation Advisory Service (*Tpas*) provided task and finish training prior to the exercise and was in attendance for the last group meeting to provide feedback and guidance on the work that had been completed and this collation of this report.

Section 3: Method

- 3.1 The eight members of the group were divided up into four groups of two.
- 3.2 In order to complete this scrutiny the group arranged three meetings at the SCDC offices and the proposed content of the meetings was as follows:

Meeting One

- To review some of the letters as a group
- Organise the team into pairs
- Distribute the letters to the relevant pairs
- Agree on other feedback opportunities, such as from staff and comparative letters from other organisations

Meeting Two

- Review some of the feedback provided by each pair
- Gain an understanding of any common themes and opinions that were shared by the group
- Understand what aspects were liked and disliked from the SCDC standard letters and those from other housing organisations

Meeting Three

- Assess and agree upon the updated standard letters that have been collated and begin to collate ideas for the report
- 3.3 In between the first and second meeting, the pairs arranged to meet up, discuss and note any changes that they would like to see made to the letters. Comparison letters from the two other housing organisations (*Cambridge City Council and Havebury Housing Partnership*) were also distributed during this process.
- 3.4 Staff would also be asked to provide their feedback between the first and second meeting, so that their opinions could be included within the collation of the new versions that would be drafted for the third meeting.
- 3.5 Appendix 02 contains a list of the letters and outlines which were re-written, withdrawn or if no changes were required.

Section 4: Findings

- 4.1 Overall the letters did not require large scale changes, with many only requiring small amendments.
- 4.2 Feedback from both members of the task and finish group and staff suggested that some of the letters were too long and at times contained wording that was not always easy to understand. Whilst it is recognised that some letters will need to contain references to legal terms etc., the group felt that language should be kept simple and easy to follow wherever possible.
- 4.3 There were two letters in particular that were very long, these being the 'Request to add someone to your tenancy' and the 'Pets permission request response'. We have drafted a form to accompany the joint tenancy letter and have removed the responsibilities from the pets letter, as a responsible pet ownership leaflet has now been drafted which can be included alongside the letter.
- 4.4 We felt that the tone of some of the letters could be a little too stern at times, so we decided to re-word some paragraphs to ensure that they still conveyed the message but in a more friendly manner.
- 4.5 We have also inserted a line at the end of most letters (*where it was appropriate*) that states: "If you have any questions, or would like some further information, please do not hesitate to contact me". We felt that this provided an approachable and personal touch to the letter that may help to give confidence to the recipient that support is available to them should they need it.
- 4.6 Following staff feedback and reviews, two of the letters were able to be withdrawn as it was deemed that they were no longer required. There were the 'Housing advice letter'

(now exists in a different form) and the 'Letter to take on repairs after a mutual exchange' (these are highlighted on a separate disclaimer and landlord reference).

- 4.7 Three letters (relating to rents and administered by the rents department) were noted as not requiring any changes.
- 4.8 The original letters and any updated versions will be provided alongside this report.

Section 5: Recommendations

5.1 Our recommendations to SCDC are as follows:

- Adopt the updated letters and put them into use by the 1st September 2018.
- For SCDC to review any other standard letters that are in use, the scrutiny team may consider supporting with these reviews in future projects.
- Consider developing more leaflets/forms that can be used to accompany some letters, which will assist in keeping the length of the letters down.
- To include the "If you have any questions, or would like some further information, please do not hesitate to contact me" at the end of other standard letters where it is appropriate.
- Consider adding a small reference number to the bottom corner of each standard letter to outline when it was last reviewed, for example 0718 for July 2018.

Section 6: Conclusions

- 6.1 Overall there were small changes required to most of the letters, but on the whole they were not large scale amendments.
- 6.2 We hope that the updating of these letters will benefit both residents and staff members alike. We believe the letters are now more streamlined, easier to understand and friendlier in tone.
- 6.3 We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the members of the scrutiny group for their hard work and dedication. We would also like to thank the staff at SCDC for being on hand to provide advice, feedback and answer any questions we had during the process.

Section 7: Action plan

Action	Responsible person(s)	Date	Commentary
Update the letters on SCDC information management system in line with the report		01/10/2018	Updated.
For SCDC to review any other standard letters that are in use		Ongoing	Intend to channel any further reviews of standard letters through the 'Tenant Approved Group'.
Create a review process and reference date for the letters going forward		Ongoing	Intend to channel any further reviews of standard letters through the 'Tenant Approved Group'.
Ensure any web links on letters are up to date		Ongoing	Currently working through.



**South
Cambridgeshire
District Council**

Standard Letters Review

Letter Title	
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Is the letter easy to understand?

Yes

No

Comments	
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What are your comments on the tone of the letter?

Comments	
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In your opinion, does the letter convey its message politely and fairly?

Comments	
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Do you feel that there is enough information provided?

Yes

No

Comments	
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Is the letter too long?

Yes

No

Comments	
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Task and Finish Group: Standard Letters

Group One	Group Two	Group Three	Group Four
Tenancy	Mutual Exchanges	Variety 01	Variety 02
6 Week Visit Letter	Request to Complete Mutual Exchange	Rent letter from HSO	Permission for works
Giving Notice	Application for Permission to Exchange Dwellings	Rent account welcome	Parking Issues General / Grass
Offer of Tenancy	Agreement for incoming tenant to carry out works	Change of rent amount	Housing Advice Letter
Garden Condition	Refusal	Rent account review	Pet Permission
Property condition	Refusal, Arrears	Leasehold Equity Share	Running a business from home
Communal Areas	Refusal due to condition of property	Non-Secure Temporary Tenancy	Gas servicing legal letter
Residential Care	Landlord Reference	Garage, landlord giving notice	Double Glazed Units
Joint tenancy	Permission Granted	Garage, No Keys	Assisted Gardens

Key

- Letter re-written
- No changes
- Withdrawn