



UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

DRAFT

Tenancy Sustainment Strategy

2016 - 2020

Sept 2016

Introduction

Uttlesford Council believes that its role as a landlord to nearly 2900 tenants is one of its most important. There is nothing more fundamental to a person's health and wellbeing than to have a safe and secure home, this is why working with tenants and their families to help them sustain their tenancies is so important to us and is set to become one of our core housing management functions.

The Council also recognises the important business case for sustaining tenancies and addressing the needs of vulnerable people. Many of the risks faced by those who are vulnerable get passed on to the council through increases in serious housing need and homelessness, rent arrears, poorer maintenance of properties, and increased tenancy turnover. It is therefore in the council's interest to help its tenants and prospective tenants meet their housing needs, sustain their tenancies, and maintain their homes.

The purpose of this strategy is to ensure that the council has the right tools in place and has the right approach to tenancy sustainment. By getting it right we can reduce tenancy failures, improve tenant satisfaction and ultimately maximize rental income, more importantly we can help tenants maintain a home for them and their family so they can enjoy a better quality of life and live in stable and strong communities.

Strategy Key Objectives

The Health and Wellbeing of residents is at the heart of Uttlesford Council's Corporate Plan. This tenancy sustainment strategy supports that plan and has three objectives to be delivered over the next four years, these are:

- To improve the Council's understanding of tenancy failure and its causes
- Be proactive in identifying vulnerability in tenants and prospective tenants
- To provide a holistic tenancy sustainment service to prevent vulnerable tenants from losing their tenancies

The council's Housing Options Team works with many people who are in need of housing for a variety of reasons and who may themselves have a variety of different personal issues that they are dealing with. Some of these people will be facing homelessness which in itself can make them vulnerable. Although homelessness can happen to anyone at any time, those who approach the council are often those least able to financially and emotionally cope with their situation, meaning that they are more likely to find sustaining settled housing in the future more difficult. This is

why it is important that prospective new council tenants who may be vulnerable and find it difficult to sustain their new tenancy are identified at the earliest opportunity.

It is not uncommon for new tenants to struggle to maintain their tenancies within the first year. This can be for many reasons. For some this will be their first independent home and they lack the experience or knowledge of how to run a home and be responsible for paying the bills. Others may simply lack the confidence or ability to regulate the behavior of other household members or visitors which may lead to complaints of anti-social behavior. For some this may be because they are vulnerable through physical or mental disability and are therefore more easily taken advantage of by others.

The council's Housing Management Team works with existing council tenants and are therefore in a position to identify at an early stage where a tenant may be having difficulties that might eventually result in the loss of their tenancy. It may be that the tenant's circumstances have changed because of a loss of income from a period of unemployment or reduction in benefits and rent arrears are accruing, or there have been complaints of anti-social behavior emanating from within their household.

Frontline officers come in to contact with tenants and potential tenants on a day to day basis, so the council needs to ensure that its officers are confident in identifying and reporting tenants who they may feel are vulnerable and not coping.

The council also has a number of housing operatives and contractors who regularly go into tenant's homes and it is important that these staff are equally confident in identifying and reporting vulnerability and know how to highlight issues that may require urgent action.

Key Objective 1 - To improve the Council's understanding of tenancy failure and its causes

By looking at the reasons for abandonment, termination and eviction we can better understand why tenancies fail and can then develop meaningful interventions to help our tenants create sustainable tenancies.

Risk factors associated with tenancy failure include:

- Young first time tenants
- Elderly tenants with support needs
- Living somewhere the tenant didn't really want to be
- Antisocial behavior and harassment
- Property in poor condition
- Poverty, low income, debt problems
- Mental Health problems
- Ill health and disability

- Offending behavior background
- Relationship breakdowns
- Lack of appropriate support when it is needed

To meet this objective the council will:

- Carry out analysis of the reasons for eviction and other tenancy terminations to use this information to shape our future tenancy sustainment services
- Consider the need to develop a pre-tenancy 'training programme' for all prospective new council tenants prior to the point of tenancy sign up

Key Objective 2 – Be proactive in identifying vulnerability in tenants and prospective tenants

To meet this objective the council will:

- Ensure all key staff are trained to identify vulnerable tenants or prospective tenants and know how to refer to them to the appropriate officers
- Ensure there are joined up procedures between the council's housing options and housing management teams for the seamless handover of vulnerable new tenants
- Develop a tenant profile database to help identify those with complex problems, how well they are coping with their tenancy and that they are receiving the appropriate level of support to sustain their tenancy
- Ensure that the appropriate staff within housing engage with housing benefits staff and the Benefits Agency particularly in relation to the role out of Universal Credit
- Use the existing 4 week new tenancy visit to identify tenants who may require further assistance in managing a successful tenancy
- Use the annual new tenancy inspection process to identify at an early stage tenants who may have had a change in circumstances that could put their tenancy at risk

Key Objective 3 – To provide a holistic tenancy sustainment service to prevent vulnerable tenants from losing their tenancies

To meet this objective the council will:

- Provide a dedicated tenancy sustainment officer to work across the council and with other agencies
- Provide a tenancy sustainment service that will:-
 - Assess the needs of tenants and prospective tenants and advise them on the support offered by organisations both statutory and voluntary
 - Help vulnerable tenants settle into their new homes.
 - Ensure that young people and new households who have little or no experience of living independently and who may struggle at first to manage their tenancy and money or utility services are supported until they are confident on how to sustain their tenancy
 - Refer vulnerable tenants to appropriate agencies so they can be given the support they require to help them sustain their tenancies successfully
 - Encourage tenants who are receiving support to continue their engagement with any agencies offering them assistance
 - Help tenants to maximize their income, and ensure they are in receipt of all benefits they are entitled to.
 - Help tenants to identify where they have problems with debt and make referrals to specialist debt advice services
 - Advise tenants and prospective tenants on how to look after their property and be good neighbours
 - Refer vulnerable tenants to other teams or services that can improve their independence, quality of life, health and well-being.
 - Ensure new tenants who have been homeless have the right support to adjust to living independently and managing their homes and money in place at the start of their tenancy.
 - Help tenants who have lost their job or who have had some other change in their financial circumstances to make sustainable arrangements to continue to pay their rent

Consultation and Engagement

We will consult with the Tenants Forum, the Housing Board and other interested parties on the general approach of this strategy and provide updates on the strategy action plan once implemented. We will carry out customer consultation via survey's and face to face interviews to ensure that the tenancy sustainment service develops to meet the needs vulnerable clients

Conclusion

This strategy has been written in times of continuing economic difficulty for many of the clients seen within the housing department and wider community, however, with the further changes to the benefit system and roll out of Universal Credit, we are hopeful that the actions contained in this strategy will have the positive effect of improving the wellbeing of vulnerable council's tenants and of sustaining tenancies.

Action Plan

Key Objective	Action	Outcome	Responsible Officer	Timescale
KO 1	Carry out analysis of the key reasons for tenancy loss			
	Investigate and consult on the benefits of having pre-tenancy training			
KO 2	Train key front line staff to enable them to identify vulnerable tenants			
	Ensure frontline staff know who to report concerns over vulnerable tenants to			
	Review procedures on how vulnerable clients are handed over from one team to another within the department			

	Develop a tenant profile data base			
	Ensure that channels of communication are open and working between housing and benefits staff			
	Ensure procedures for 4 week new tenancy visits are reviewed and revised where necessary			
	Ensure procedures for annual tenancy inspections are reviewed and revised where necessary			
KO 3	Have a dedicated tenancy sustainment officer within the housing department			
	Write procedures for a tenancy sustainment service – including appropriate referral forms and arrangements			