



TENANT ENGAGEMENT EXPERTS

**tpas**

**Tpas National Scrutiny Review**

# **Covid-19 & Housing**

**Ten Recommendations  
for Social Housing Providers**



# Welcome

We know that many Social Housing providers have undertaken their own internal review into their response to the Covid 19 crisis, and we very much welcome this. However, whilst these reports were interesting and insightful, they were unable to provide a national picture, or an independent tenant perspective on the crisis, and this is why we commissioned Dr Dave Mckenna to coordinate our first ever national scrutiny review.



The review was launched during our national scrutiny week in July, when we invited customers, tenants and residents from across the country to share their experiences, views and stories with us, and also become part of a scrutiny review panel, who would sift through the evidence and identify key recommendations

I am therefore delighted that we are now able to share the findings with the publication of this report, and particularly the ten recommendations for improvement, which set out clear and attainable actions for social housing providers to consider and will also help tenants move the agenda for improvement forward too.

What is also interesting is that the report recommendations also reflect some of the themes that have emerged in the recently published Social Housing White Paper. So, the need to treat tenants with the “human touch,” helping to keep people safe, as well as providing good quality information, are all issues that are relevant when considering the response to the Covid crisis too.

Finally, we would like to thank all those who contributed to this report whether through the survey, or as part of the review panel. Your input is much appreciated, and it will, I am sure, contribute to service improvements both during and after the Covid crisis.

**Louise Thompson**  
Head of Business Services



## Recommendations

We have summarised the findings of our inquiry into 10 recommendations that provide a tenant perspective on how social housing landlords can improve their services following the experience of Covid-19:

- 1 **Build on what's worked well during 2020**
- 2 **Communicate in a way that's right for everyone**
- 3 **Keep keeping in touch with the vulnerable**
- 4 **Get out and have conversations with residents**
- 5 **Provide customer services with a human touch**
- 6 **Help people to feel safe**
- 7 **Recognise the importance of affordability**
- 8 **Improve the response to anti-social behaviour**
- 9 **Ensure that mutual exchanges are safe**
- 10 **Combine digital and face to face for tenant engagement and scrutiny**

# How to use this report

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We hope that this report will be helpful for landlords and tenants, working together, as they make sense of the dramatic events of 2020. We have summarised the findings from our survey and panel meeting into 10 recommendations that reflect a tenant perspective. While every situation will be different, these recommendations should provide a starting point for conversations as well as a useful source of evidence.

For landlords, we hope that the recommendations are helpful when reviewing responses to the pandemic and what happened during lockdown. We also hope that you will use this report when working on your recovery plans and planning forward. All while talking to residents of course.

For tenants, we hope that you will feed the recommendations through your tenant engagement structures and scrutiny panels in order to provide constructive challenge and added weight to the issues that you might want to raise locally.

## About the inquiry

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The inquiry aimed to answer the following question:

**How can social housing landlords improve their services following the experience of Covid-19?**

The evidence was collected in two ways; an online survey and an online panel including tenants and staff.

The survey was conducted by Tpas between July and October 2020. Responses were collected online. The survey received 81 valid responses of which 67 were from housing association tenants.

Respondents answering the 'about you' questions (55) identified themselves as 60% female, 95% over 35 years old and 96% of white ethnic origin.

The panel meeting took place virtually on Zoom on 26th November 2020 and included 5 tenants and 4 staff members, between them representing 7 different landlords. Before the meeting participants were provided with a briefing for panel members and the findings report from the survey. The focus was on the views of the tenant panel members with staff panel members adding questions, ideas and a 'reality check'.



# Ten recommendations for social housing providers

Here are the ten recommendations that provide a summary of the findings from our inquiry.



## **Build on what worked well during the lockdowns.**

Overall, we found that landlords had responded well during lockdown. There are many things Landlords should be pleased with and that they will be able to build on. In our survey, respondents rated the response of their landlord to the Covid-19 crisis positively with 52% scoring their landlord as either an 8, 9 or 10 out of 10. According to survey respondents, positive things that landlords did during the lockdown included keeping tenants informed and up to date through a range of different methods, including via letters, contacting tenants to see if they were OK and supporting vulnerable tenants. Repairs services were also seen favourably by the majority of survey respondents. Our panel agreed with the findings of the survey saying that ‘everything ran well during lockdown’, ‘keep on working, it’s working already’ and ‘a lot of organisations get a lot of stuff right’.

There is, however, still room for improvement. Not every survey respondent was happy with their landlord’s response during the lockdown with a small number giving a score of 0 out of 10. Survey respondents pointed to some of the things that landlords could have done differently. These included information and communication, support for the vulnerable and self-isolating, customer care, and health and safety measures. Those experiencing problems of anti-social behaviour issues were also generally unhappy with the response from their landlord.

Our panel is keen to see landlords taking steps to plan effectively for future similar emergencies. This includes looking at disaster recovery plans where these have not covered pandemics, building lessons from the first two lockdowns into any recovery plans and working with tenants to work out the obligations of both landlords and tenants; this might be in the form of a tenants charter. Overall, the idea is make sure that, while many things worked well, the things that were neglected during the lockdowns do not get missed again.



## 2

### **Communicate in a way that's right for everyone.**

Our panel highlighted communication as perhaps the number one issue for landlords to be thinking about. While, on balance, communication worked well, there are areas that can be improved and good practice that can be retained and built on.

Of the 60 survey responses we received on communications, around two thirds said that their expectation when it came to communications were either met or exceeded. Important issues for respondents were providing communications through a mix of different media, contacting tenants individually and being polite, sensitive and compassionate. During a lockdown, residents need to know what services are being provided but also which are not. Grass cutting was given by one panel member as an example of something that had stopped but without an obvious explanation.

For communications to be effective they need to be provided through a range of methods. Letters, social media, email, websites and the press were all mentioned as ways to reach different groups of tenants. The telephone remains a very important communications tool. Digital will become increasingly important as will the use of social media and online video. However, it is still important to find out what tenant expectations are around communications and our panel hoped that landlords would take extra steps to find out how people want to be communicated with.

Landlords need to be listening as well as telling and the panel was keen to emphasise that communications need to be two way. Social media are a good means of communication and engagement and landlords should be going to where people are, for example, Facebook. This should not just be about monitoring but an opportunity to talk to people online. Complaints can also be picked up this way. People don't always want it to be a personal complaint, but they do want to see the landlord has picked it up and is doing something with it.



### 3

## Keep keeping in touch with the vulnerable and self-isolating.

Contacting vulnerable and self-isolating tenants to check that they were ok, as well as providing support where needed, stood out as an important part of landlords' responses during the lockdowns. Phone calls and knocking on doors were particularly appreciated, partly for the human contact they provided and partly because not everyone was comfortable with using social media or having video calls. Checking on the vulnerable should be a part of what landlords do as a matter of course in future. Our panel also highlighted the importance of having the data systems needed to ensure that vulnerable tenants can be identified, contacted and supported.



### 4

## Get out and start having conversations with your residents.

When we asked in our survey; 'what is the most important thing for landlords to focus on over the next 12 months?', the top answer was 'listening to and involving tenants'. For our panel this was an important theme particularly the idea that 'organisations need to get back out there as soon as possible and start making contact again, re-start conversations'. Tenant engagement should continue during lockdowns and be restarted quickly where it hasn't been happening.

This also means going beyond the formal tenant engagement methods, however, and ensuring that everyone working for the landlord has a role to play in talking to residents and feeding back. As one panel member put it; 'Every member of staff is a tenant engagement ambassador'. Staff also have a role to play in providing reassurance in the way that they provide services. Every contact counts and, as one panel member said; 'the cleaners were cheerful and this really helps'. These everyday contacts can happen during lockdown and can be stepped up afterwards. Keeping in touch through the people providing services is a good way to supplement the usual channels of tenant engagement particularly as a way to engage those who are less comfortable with digital communications.



## **Provide customer services with a human touch.**

For many residents, the landlord was one of the few sources of human contact during lockdown and afterwards. In our survey, staff being ‘polite, sensitive and compassionate’ was highlighted as something that people really valued and rude, rushed and ‘robotic’ responses to requests, particularly over the phone, particularly stood out for people.

Landlords, therefore, should take extra steps to ensure that all staff in contact with tenants are able to show empathy and care for residents, many of whom will be particularly anxious. It may help to have extra training for staff, and this will be of benefit longer term to provide communications. The value of phone calls and everyday face to face contact with staff came to the fore during the lockdown and these are perhaps the best opportunities to show a human touch.



## **Help people to feel safe.**

Everyone has had to adjust to new safety measures during the pandemic whether hand washing, physical distancing or wearing a mask. Landlords have done their best to keep up with government advice and, more generally, everyone recognises that the safety of both tenants and staff is paramount. While recognising that this is not always easy, the survey picked up some examples where people were unhappy with safety measures and would like to see a stronger approach in future, for example, insisting that all workers and carers wear gloves and masks and providing hand sanitizers in communal areas where open. Reinforcing this, when asked about ‘how your landlord provides services in future, after Covid-19 restrictions have ended’, respondents were generally more likely to want to ‘have staff wearing personal protective equipment when in my home’.

One further point raised by the panel was the importance of open space. Landlords should review what they can do to help provide access to areas that people can use safely for exercise and to get outdoors, particularly for those without gardens. This is an important aspect of physical and mental health that should not be overlooked.



## 7

### Recognise the importance of affordability.

As well as health and safety challenges, the pandemic has created serious financial issues for many tenants. While some have been furloughed, others have lost their jobs or had their hours reduced. Landlords should be sensitive to these issues when planning future increases in rents and service charges through, for example, debt and welfare advice. Particularly as many financial problems may be 'hidden' and only become apparent in the future.

Although we only had a small number of responses in our survey from those who had contacted their landlord about a rent issue, these respondents reported that, broadly speaking, the service had met their expectations. Staff being understanding, supportive and helpful were all highlighted as important.

## 8

### Improve the response to anti-social behaviour.

One clear area for improvement suggested by our survey is the response to anti-social behaviour. While the pandemic has created new pressure, for example people being 'locked down' next to noisy neighbours, the evidence from our survey suggests that the landlord response has not been very good and needs to be better. Of the 15 respondents saying that they had reported an anti-social behaviour issue, 9 said the landlord's response did not meet their expectations and 5 said they did not like anything about the landlord's response or that there was no response at all.

The view of our panel is that landlords need to be more proactive in future and have clear methods to use during lockdown and beyond.





# 9

## Ensure that mutual exchanges are safe.

One issue picked up by our panel was that of mutual exchanges. While some landlords suspended mutual exchanges during the first lockdown, there are still concerns going forward that properties will be safe for people to move into. The panel suggests that landlords need to take account of this in their planning and to have a clear set of procedures.

# 10

## Combine digital and face to face for tenant engagement and scrutiny.

Overall, our survey suggested that landlords, broadly speaking, had the appropriate level of tenant engagement and scrutiny. Of the 42 respondents involved in tenant engagement, 28 felt that their landlord had got engagement about right. Of the 28 also involved in scrutiny, 17 felt that their landlord had got scrutiny about right.

The main issues for the survey and for the panel were around digital engagement. In terms of tenant engagement, respondents liked the use of video meetings and social media and that landlords kept tenants informed even when meetings weren't happening. Recognising that face-to-face meetings would be unlikely before the summer of 2021, respondents and panel members would like to see a mix of virtual and face to face meetings beyond then.



The panel also highlighted the importance of providing tenants with the digital tools they need to support effective engagement and scrutiny. This should mean equipping those tenants, who are working with the landlord, with the same equipment as staff if possible. One landlord is providing smart phones for example. At a minimum, equipment no longer being used by the organisation could be passed on. As one panel member said; 'if being pushed towards technology, involved tenants should be provided with the means to do so'.



# Thank you

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A big thanks to everyone who responded to our survey and to our brilliant panel members:

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