

<b>Report to:</b>	Ladywood District Committee
<b>Report of:</b>	Tracey Radford – Head of Landlord Services

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Landlord Services Annual Visits</b>
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<b>1</b>	<b>Purpose of report</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To provide an update on the outcomes of Phase 1 of the Annual Tenancy Visit programme including the number of completed visits.</li> <li>To outline the details for Phase 2 of the programme.</li> </ul>	

<b>2</b>	<b>Decision(s) recommended</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To approve the implementation of Phase 2 of the programme, re-named as 'Tenancy Visits' with a focus on three key areas of business: Tenancy and Estate Management, Street Scene and Welfare Reform.</li> </ul>	

<b>3</b>	<b>Background</b>
<p>The Annual Tenancy Visits were the first time that we have carried out a visiting programme of this type and on this scale, attempting to visit each of our 63,000+ properties. We currently house approximately 100,000 tenants in these properties and, as a social landlord, a significant number of these will have additional needs including vulnerabilities due to age and/or ethnicity, mental health issues, ASB including domestic violence and health issues. In addition to this, our tenants are not static and will move between tenancies, along with a number of tenants who leave our properties with new tenants joining.</p> <p>Therefore management of social housing cannot be just about the management of our stock, but also understanding our tenants, their needs and how we respond to these. Annual Tenancy Visits do not <i>create</i> demand, they <i>uncover</i> existing demands; if left these will only result in further, more challenging demands for Landlord Services and Birmingham City Council. This programme allows us to be proactive, engaging in meaningful interactions and demonstrating to our tenants that we are invested in providing an efficient landlord service, at the same time reinforcing our tenancy conditions. The impacts of not continuing with a visiting programme are:</p> <p><b><u>Reputational</u></b></p> <p>Whilst we currently visit our tenants for a number of different reasons, this programme is the first time that we have attempted to visit our tenants with the sole purpose of understanding them better, to gather information to improve services, to support our vulnerable tenants and enforce our tenancy conditions.</p> <p>Through our daily business, we will likely visit 10% of our tenants, 100% of the time, leaving a significant number of our tenants managing their tenancies with little interaction with us, their landlord. It is those tenancies which we have limited understanding of what their needs truly are and limit us to delivering a reactive rather than a more effective proactive service. Our reputation is that as we are an arm's length landlord with limited interaction with them. Without question this results in some resentment, disillusionment from our tenants at the same time that it presents the image that we have no further interest in them or their tenancies. For a number of our tenants, this causes no issues as they are managing their tenancies properly and are able to reach out to us; however it is</p>	

those tenants who take this to mean that they feel less responsibility to abide by their tenancy conditions which could ultimately result in properties falling into disrepair, increased ASB and Tenancy and Estate Management problems and rent arrears.

### **Financial**

One of the main responsibilities as tenants is to maintain their properties by taking suitable care of them and reporting repairs where necessary. However, we also have a responsibility as a landlord to provide safe and secure homes to our tenants and carry out inspections and repairs when they are reported to us. There is a cost to the council in disrepair litigation.

We provide our tenants with our most valuable asset; their property. The first that we often become aware of tenancy breaches are when they are at the stage of expensive enforcement. By being pro-active and visiting our tenants in their homes we are able to identify and respond to these types of issues directly.

### **Customer**

These visits also have a social value. It is a changing landscape of social housing where our tenants will be given more choice, freedom and responsibility therefore it is important that we are building better relationships with them at a time when we are both facing challenges. This programme of visits means that we are able to gather valuable information to help us shape our services, which in turn will provide better services for our customers, which as informed phase 2 of the visits and also the current service improvement approach in Landlord Services.

## **Phase 1 Completed visits**

We have now completed approximately **52,269** successful annual tenancy visits during Phase 1 (this figure continues to increase as further successful visits are carried out); this is approximately **82%** of our current eligible tenancies. A 'successful' visit is classed as a visit where we have gained access and completed the script of questions with the tenant. Any visit which had to be prematurely ended had a further visit re-booked and is not classed as a successful visit.

Phase 1 of our programme formally commenced in October 2014. Visits had begun prior to this however these were limited due to a smaller workforce which had not been released from their service area, no mobile solution so visits were being carried out as a paper exercise and delays in formalising the visiting script as a result of the demand from other service areas to have questions included.

### **Benchmarking**

Leeds City Council are also carrying out their own programme of Annual Tenancy Visits and are a Local Authority with a similar number of housing stock to Birmingham (54,817 properties with 50,629 classed as general need). In the financial year of 2013/14 they successfully completed 73% of their visits. In March 2015 Leeds carried out their own review, highlighting a number of recommendations around the scope and purpose of the programme moving forward including moving the focus of their visits to understanding their tenant's needs and not as a tool to detect housing fraud.

## **Phase 1 Trends**

### **1. Safeguarding/ Vulnerable Tenants**

Phase 1 has identified approximately **3,768** tenants where a form of vulnerability has been identified. These have ranged from low-level additional support needs (emotional support requested) through

to more serious and complex safeguarding concerns (hoarding, ASB). All of these have resulted in either a referral to external support agencies or emergency action being taken to prevent further vulnerability.

**Example 1: Vulnerable tenant living in a property with no utilities.**

Visit to a tenant where no issues identified from preliminary checks of Northgate (no safeguarding or notes suggesting there were any concerns). During the visit it was noted that the property was in a poor state of repair, very dark and cold. When challenged, the tenant stated that the gas meter had been capped and that he had had no electricity or gas at the property in 14 years. The tenant was visiting local bookmakers and takeaways for food and warmth as he was also isolated with no family. The Visiting Officer immediately completed a referral to the Adult Safeguarding Panel to identify support for the tenant and arranged for the gas meter to be un-capped and utilities to be re-supplied as a matter of urgency. *Had this action not been taken: Our tenant would have been increasingly vulnerable*

**Example 2: Vulnerable tenant due to hoarding**

Tenant was highlighted by repairs contractor who had refused to carry out work in the property. Annual Visit took place with immediate concerns identified by the Officer (see photo's below). The Officer noted that in the event of a fire, the tenants would not have been able to easily escape the property due to the build-up of belongings in the main hallway. The property also did not have working smoke alarms fitted. The tenant stated that they were resolving this issue themselves; however it became clear that additional support would be required. The Visiting Officer made a referral to West Midlands Fire Service and the Tenancy Estate Management team who identified and referred the tenant to a hoarding specialist to ensure that a home fire safety assessment was carried out and the tenant was supported to safely remove the collection of items. *Had this action not been taken: The tenant would continue to live in a property which was known to be unsafe, endangering both theirs and their neighbour's lives by posing a significant fire risk.*



**Example 3: Tenant experiencing Domestic Violence**

During the visit, the tenant has disclosed to the Visiting Officer that they are experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her partner. Their children had witnessed this and the Police had previously been involved but the tenant was too frightened to take any action. During the visit, the Officer informed the tenant of what support could be offered and details of Women's Aid were discretely shared with them. An immediate referral was made to the Ward team who supported the tenant to seek alternative accommodation, away from her partner. *Had this action not been taken: The tenant chose to make this disclosure because they felt safe with the Officer and at that moment; had the visit not taken place, the alleged DV had not been reported to us, we are unlikely to have become aware of this until a serious incident had occurred. We were able to support the tenant to seek their own accommodation away from this risk.*

## 2. Social Housing Fraud

**634** visits were completed where a potential/suspected fraud was identified by the Officer. These will have resulted in referrals being made to Birmingham Audit for investigation. In some cases, where the suspected fraud was of a low level i.e the Officer believed that this could have been a genuine error on behalf of the tenant which has resulted in an issue being identified, this has resulted in them communicating with the local team to attempt to resolve this. At this time, no recorded enforcement action has been taken by Birmingham Audit as a result of these referrals. In addition to these referrals, a significant proportion of these were referred back to the local Tenancy Estate Management teams to investigate possible sub-letting, abandonments or other discrepancies identified during the visit. These were as result of Birmingham Audit identifying that there was insufficient evidence for further investigation.

As our housing stock becomes more valuable due to RTB and Welfare Reform, it is vital that as a landlord we actively engage with our tenants. This is a means of ensuring that our assets are managed but also that our tenants are in the correct properties and are not engaged in social housing fraud. All Visiting Officers were given training in supporting them to identify potential Social Housing Fraud which was delivered by Birmingham Audit.

The visits completed during Phase 1 brought a much lower number of referrals to Birmingham Audit than was anticipated. This is attributed to the fact that, despite a general viewpoint that a high number of our tenants are engaged in social housing fraud, it is in now our position that they are a minority. It is also acknowledged that the outstanding visits where we have not successfully gained access, a higher number of referrals are likely once these are targeted.

### ***Example 1: Tenant not using their property as their main and principal home***

Visit to a property (1 bed bungalow); identified that the tenant may not actually be living in the property and had not for 2 years prior to the visit. Rent arrears had also accrued. The Visiting Officer has referred to Social Housing Fraud who conducted investigations and identified that the property was not being lived in. Tenant was met with who confirmed this and subsequently signed a Notice To Quit. *Had this action not been taken:* The tenant would have continued to hold on to a property which they were not using, limiting opportunities for an applicant on a waiting list to live in, property would have likely fallen into a state of poor repair/upkeep (the gas meter was capped in Oct 2014), rent arrears would have continued to be accrued on the property.

### ***Example 2: Tenant attempting to complete RTB whilst sub-letting***

Tenant applied for RTB which initiated an Annual Tenancy Visit. When the Visiting Officer completed the visit, the tenant advised them that they had a job at a school and as a result they were now living in the school house and unintentionally sub-letting their council property. This was referred to Birmingham Audit at the same time as the Tenancy and Estate Management Team who carried out their own investigations resulting in the tenant completing a Notice To Quit and returning their keys. As a result of this, the RTB application was refused. *Had this action not been take:* The tenant would have continued to sub-let our property, making a profit, before purchasing it and further reducing our available housing stock.

## 3. ASB

Asking this question is key to understanding whether our tenants are reporting issues of ASB if they are experiencing it, or if tenants are concerned about reporting ASB and therefore, don't.

Where ASB was identified during the visit (loud music, aggressive or abusive tenants) the officer conducting the visit will attempt to address this directly with the tenant responsible. These are reported back to the local teams to ensure that this behaviour is recorded. If appropriate a risk

indicator marker is placed on the tenancy file to ensure that colleagues are aware of any risk. This type of action will reinforce that we will work to address ASB and resolve these issues, improving confidence in tenants to report.

Where a tenant reports that they are currently experiencing ASB, further information will be taken to understand whether this does constitute ASB and understand how best to respond. Where it is identified that it is not ASB, advice and signposting will take place. Where an ASB case is identified, if the officer believes the tenant is able to, they are provided with the relevant information and signposted to our customer service hubs to formally report this. Where they may be vulnerable and unable to carry this out themselves, the officer will assist by reporting this on their behalf (at the same time providing the customer with the details of how to carry this out themselves).

This ensures that customers are also made aware of the correct processes for reporting tenancy issues and works alongside the approach to channel shift. In the medium to long term this improves how our tenants can communicate with us and access our services.

***Example 1: Tenant engaging in ASB at the time of visit.***

Visit to a property where no issues were flagged in advance. As the Officer approached the address they became aware of very loud music – based on the volume they perceived that this was not an isolated incident. A male has answered the door and stated the tenant was not available; the Officer has reminded the male about the Conditions of Tenancy and the volume of the music. The male and a friend have become abusive so the Officer has reported the incident and left. A risk marker has been identified and put in place and the tenant issued with a warning letter about the noise and conduct of their friend. An investigation has also commenced to identify any further enforcement action to address this behaviour. *Had this action not been taken:* The tenant would have continued to behave in this way unless it had been reported to us (there is no recorded ASB at the location) and potential risk to staff and neighbours would have been undocumented.

#### **4. Tenancy Breaches**

**2,019** tenancy breaches were identified during these visits. Ranging from the tenant not requesting permission for a satellite dish to serious breaches where gardens have not been maintained, unauthorised alterations have been carried out to the home or the tenant has abandoned the property.

It is vital that we are able to visit our tenants in addition to when they request a visit, or when one is required due to a reported issue. This reduces the number of RTB applications that successfully go through where they could have been prevented or transfers to our BMHT properties where there has been ASB or TEM breaches.

There remain approximately 10,000 visits left to be completed. Of these remaining visits, as with the Social Housing Fraud, we are likely to encounter a higher number of tenancy breaches from these visits as we are able to identify those tenants who are refusing access.

***Example 1: Tenant of a 4 bed property but was not using this as main and principal home***

During an attempted visit, there has been no answer and neighbours have commented that the tenant hadn't been living there for a considerable amount of time and had not been seen there recently. The property also looked run down. Referral was made to Birmingham audit who confirmed that the HB claim had been cancelled a number of months prior to the visit and the tenant did not respond to any letters. Abandonment process was also started by the local team with the tenant ultimately evicted due to substantial rent arrears. Whilst this created a void property, this is a valuable 4 bed home that the tenant was not living in.

## 5. Customer Satisfaction/ Involvement

The successful visits have re-enforced that the significant majority of our tenants found these visits to be a valuable opportunity to engage with Landlord Services. One Officer was greeted by the tenant with "At Last!" having lived in the property for 46 years and never being visited by us in this way. **26,509** rated the visits as 'Good', **1,089** 'Average' with only **71** finding them to be 'Poor'. The remaining **24,600** did not to answer this question.

It has also been a valuable opportunity to collect customer feedback in relation to their homes, where they live and the services they receive. **14,374** rated the home they lived in as 'Very' or 'Fairly Good', **1,985** as 'Neither Good nor Poor', **2,855** as 'Fairly' or 'Very Poor' with the remaining **24,033** having 'no opinion' or not answering the question.

Of the neighbourhood they lived in, **3,806** rated this as 'Very' or 'Fairly Good', **531** as 'Neither Good nor Poor', **505** as 'Fairly' or 'Very Poor' with the remaining **47,427** having 'no opinion' or not answering the question.

Of the road, block or grove they lived in **3,694** rated this as 'Very' or 'Fairly Good', **531** as 'Neither Good nor Poor', **647** as 'Fairly' or 'Very Poor' with the remaining **47,397** having 'no opinion' or not answering the question.

We were also able to identify tenants who were interested in becoming more involved in where they live. **458** showed an interest in their HLB, **255** in Estate Walkabouts/Assessments and **1,151** in becoming involved as a Block or Neighbourhood Champion. These tenants' details are referred to their local Tenant Participation Officer or TEM team to make contact with the tenant.

This information is also feeding into the Street Scene Review to look at ways to improve on these ratings and identifying the trends. There have also been opportunities to identify specific neighbourhood issues which have resulted in tenants being dissatisfied with services, taking appropriate action to resolve these.

### ***Example 1: Tenants reporting longstanding dumped rubbish on communal area***

During a visit, tenant highlighted an area of communal land that had been used to dump a large amount of rubbish, making the quiet area look untidy. It had been reported but had not been cleared up. Visiting Officer followed this issue up resulting in the area being completely cleared a short time later which they confirmed with the residents. *Had this action not been taken: The area would have remained an eyesore and potentially attracted further dumped rubbish*



## 6. Gardens

**2,185** of the visits highlighted 'poor' or 'average' front and rear gardens. Each officer has taken a 'common sense' approach to how they assess gardens for example, where the grass or hedge appear to have been cut recently but are just starting to become untidy as opposed to a garden that has clearly not been maintained at all. The officer will approach the tenant about to understand why they have not been maintained, reminding them of their responsibilities and where appropriate

identify support or signposting to assist them in maintaining their gardens.

There are a number of reasons for poorly maintained gardens; tenants that can't due to vulnerability, age, disability and cost, and the tenants that won't.

Whilst a very small number rated as 'poor', a high number were rated as 'average' – it is these gardens which are likely to deteriorate further if not addressed. These have been referred back to the TEM team to investigate and to support the Street Scene review.

We have strict Conditions of Tenancy to enforce tenancy breaches with gardens and need to make sure that this message is clearly shared with our tenants. However we also need to incorporate this with support for those that aren't able to manage their gardens (through the Vulnerable Tenants Gardening Scheme and the Trainee Programme) or by identifying more suitable accommodation.

Learning from Phase 1 of visits has identified the need for Landlord Services to identify an example of what we expect a garden to look like, and how they should be maintained. This is a piece of work currently being carried out through the Street Scene review and will support a clear and measurable approach to our tenant's gardens that will assist us and our tenants.

#### ***Example 1: Overgrown garden***

During a visit, the Officer has inspected the property and identified that the garden is extremely overgrown. The tenant is unable to tackle such a large garden as they are suffering from some mental health issues and had allowed the garden to become progressively more overgrown, making it now unmanageable. The tenant has previously been warned about the state of the garden but support is being identified to bring the garden to a manageable state and more suitable accommodation is being sought for the tenant, releasing a valuable family home.



### **7. Rent**

**18,171** visits covered the financial implications of welfare reform with a further **965** requiring welfare or debt advice. This information was used by the Welfare Reform Team to identify the data sets of those affected, supporting the approach to identify high-risk tenancies and the approach to engaging with these tenants.

Initial data suggests that 80% of our tenants had a Direct Debit facility but only 13% were using this to pay rent. Welfare Reform is putting the responsibility back in the hands of the tenants, many of whom have never had to budget for this. The result is likely to be an increase in rent arrears (**13,333** required advice regarding arrears arrangements) unless we can support the programme to educate our tenants around the consequences of Welfare Reform

## 8. Repairs

**3,684** visits highlighted where a tenant has reported to the officer that there are overdue repairs at the property. This will often be the tenant's perception that their repair is overdue. It is not always possible for the officer to verify this information whilst out on the visit; however the officer will endeavour to understand whether the repair is overdue, is simply outstanding or if it has been reported correctly through our contact centre. Where the latter is identified, the tenant will be reminded of the process for reporting repairs and, where necessary, supported to do this during the visit. Upon further investigation, if a genuine overdue repair is identified, the officer will carry out follow-up enquiries to attempt to resolve this.

Based upon the extent of the repairs work being reported, or the potentially health and safety consequences, tenants were signposted or the Visiting Officer took immediate action to attempt to address the blockage. The visits also provided us with an opportunity to remind customers how to correctly report a repair and what they could and should not be reporting. This ultimately will reduce demand on the Repairs service by limiting incorrectly reported repairs.

The learning from Phase 1 is the need to improve and maintain how we update and communicate with our tenants in relation to their reported repairs. This should seek to reduce the demand on our contact centres and improve customer satisfaction.

### ***Example 1: Tenant experiencing difficulty as a result of overdue repairs***

Tenant visited in February 2015; it was identified that they were not able to use their living room due to a lack of suitable heating in the room. The tenant was vulnerable as they had health needs which were impacted by the lack of suitable heating. There were also a number of issues where the tenant had been attempting to get this resolved but due to some blockages (tenant had a form of heating in place although it was not suitable for them) and confusion over previous attempts to resolve it. The visiting officer followed this through with our repairs team who agreed to carry out an inspection and the property was fitted with a larger radiator which has enable them to again use their living room. *Had this action not been taken:* The tenant would have continued to not be able to use their living room, impacting further on their health needs, which could have resulted in a compensation claim.

## 9. Health and Safety

**513** Health and Safety issues were identified during visits, with **5,302** requesting a Fire Safety Check (this will have resulted in a referral being made to West Midlands Fire Service). This is closely linked to the identification of vulnerability as a number of the health and safety issues are as a result of tenant's inability to maintain their property.

Smoke alarms are the responsibility of the tenant, unless there are mains operate alarms that we have installed in the property. This is a major health and safety risk to those tenants who choose not to maintain or install a smoke alarm – and also to surrounding properties.

The referrals made to WMFS allow us to identify vulnerability (age, mobility), request a Home Fire Safety Assessment and have working smoke alarms fitted. The feedback from WMFS is that those tenants referred have engaged positively- we have identified further improvements to this process which will enable us to track individual referrals in Phase 2, improving the partnership arrangement.

Any health and safety issues are recorded and reported to the teams responsible for maintenance or to the Tenancy Estate Management team.

### ***Example 1: Health and Safety issues highlighted due to the state of the property***

Visit completed September 2015 and the property was in extremely poor condition as a result of the tenant's mental health issues and failure to maintain property. The tenant has never reported any repairs. Immediate referral has been made to the Tenancy Estate Management team to investigate, identify work to bring the property back into suitable condition and engage with support workers to support the tenant in finding more suitable accommodation. If the tenant does not engage then enforcement action will be taken as this is a 3 bed home.



### ***Example 2: Tenant has raised H&S issue with their toilet being accessed through the kitchen***

During the visit the tenant has raised that their child suffers from Type 1 Diabetes and has been told by their health worker that the toilet being accessed from the kitchen is unsanitary and could impact on her child's health. This was referred to the Contracts Work Officer who carried out an assessment and identified that this could be moved. This has been agreed and placed on the programme for the Kitchen and Bathroom refurbishment programme. *Had this action not been taken:* The health of the child could have been further affected and potentially resulted in an unnecessary Void property (as the tenant will have looked to move to another, more suitable property)

## **10. Channel Shift**

The tenants were asked 'Are you aware of the BCC Self Service Web Site?'. **21,130** of the completed visits highlighted that these tenants were aware of the BCC Self Service Website and were able to access Council services online. **24,115** did not answer this question, however **7,024** informed us that they were not aware. This gave us the opportunity to discuss this with them and actively promote the channel shift to accessing Council services online. It also reinforces the

importance of getting out to our customers in their homes to ensure that we do not miss those tenants with less access to/ knowledge of the internet.

The learning from Phase 1 is that this is an important area of our business that will lead to better connected tenants and also reduce demand through channel shift. In Phase 2, the focus will be on directing tenants to use the online repairs service and the BCC 'One Account' for the management and payment of their rent accounts. It remains a focus that we are ensuring that our tenants understand their responsibility in managing key areas of their tenancies.

## **Phase 2 – A Targeted approach**

Phase 1 has provided us with a solid foundation to look to move the focus from an 'annual' visit to targeted visits. Whilst the goal of one visit to our tenants every 12 months is desirable, the pressures faced by Landlord Services and the impact of welfare reform on our tenants mean that the programme has had to adapt for Phase 2. However, this does not move away from the ethos of visiting our most vulnerable tenants or tenancies which will create demand for us. A more focused approach will allow us to target these tenancies with a greater understanding of what we want to achieve from these visits. We do, however, want to ensure that those properties that we have yet to successfully complete a visit are also addressed. In the North quadrant we have sent second stage appointment letters to all remaining visits, and are preparing for the third and final letter before enforcement action is considered. In the South, East and West quadrant we are currently in the process of sending the second letter and third letters out to the outstanding visits.

It is important to note that these 'unsuccessful' visits are not solely the tenants' refusal to allow us access but a combination of the tenants availability (difficulty in co-ordinating a visit with work, school, other commitments), some teams taking a ward based approach (looking to complete visits in one ward before moving on to another) and also a lack of engagement (due to language barriers, misunderstanding the purpose of the visit, abandonment, tenancy breaches). It is the latter group which we will be aiming to target through enforcement as a priority once we are able to clearly identify them.

How we approach the timing of these visits will also be more flexible, taking into consideration our tenant's circumstances. This will enable us to further drill down to those tenants who are flatly refusing to allow us to visit and who we will pursue through a Conditions of Tenancy breach.

## **Mobile Solution/ Kirona Scripts**

Phase 2 will also deliver an upgraded mobile IT solution alongside 'Task Manager' which will allow us to track the work generated by these visits more effectively from visit to local teams through to completion. A series of working groups will be programmed with colleagues in the Rent and Repairs service to understand the links with their service areas and promoting the concept of 'one visit for 10 reasons'. The implementation of Opti-Time will further support this by enabling us to co-ordinate a cross service approach, maximising resource availability and managing Officers time.

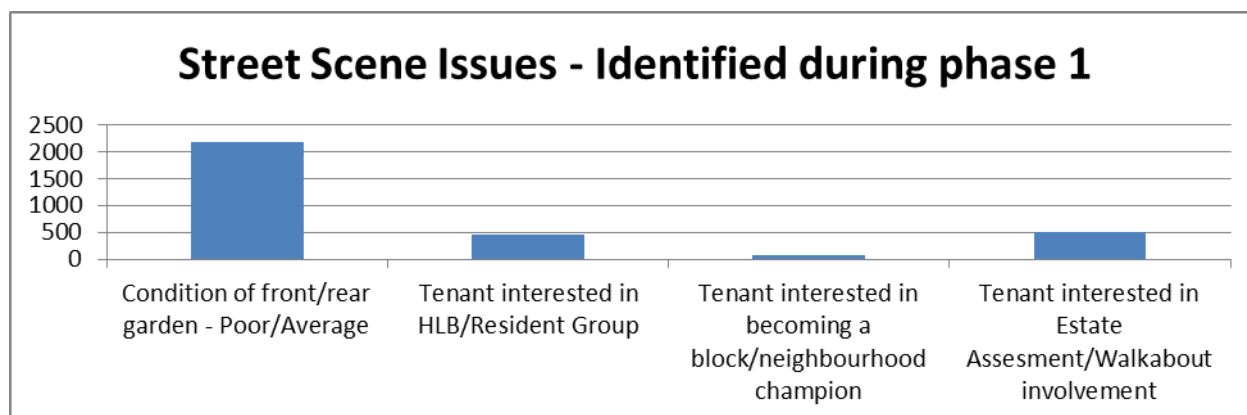
The scripts for these visits have also been updated, following evaluation of the Phase 1 script.

Whilst Phase 1 asked a number of important questions, none of these were mandatory.

The new script contains **48** mandatory questions covering tenant details, rent account details including if the tenant has a Direct Debit, ASB, suspected Social Housing Fraud and also includes additional safeguarding questions. This will ensure that Officers are asking all of these important questions and that there is improved consistency across the visits. There is an understanding that, initially, this may result in an increase in demand (number of abandoned properties, tenancy breaches being identified) however these issues already exist and need to be addressed.

The key focus during Phase 2 will be in three, key business areas for Landlord Services; Street Scene, Tenancy and Estate Management and Welfare Reform. It is envisaged that this approach will run until approximately March 2015 in preparation for another series of programmed tenancy visits.

## 1. Street Scene

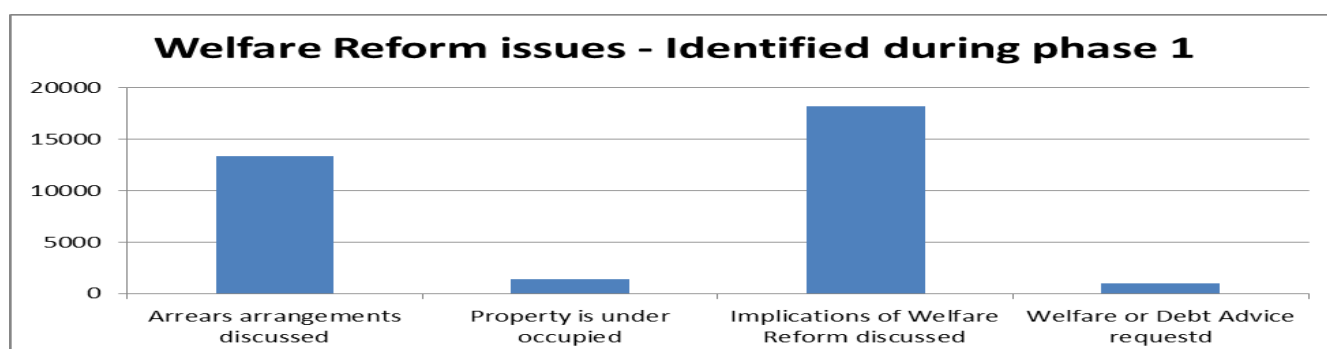


Building upon the work carried out through the Environmental Quality Surveys, this approach will compliment Place Based Management and focus on the tenancies where enforcement action may be required if issues are not addressed (Gardens and or/communal areas). During Phase 1, **4,787** of the successful visits involved the tenant being reminded of their responsibility to maintain their gardens and trees with **2,185** rating the front/rear gardens as 'average' or 'poor' with a further **4,787** advised about their responsibility to maintain gardens/tress . We will be able to actively target those addresses where gardens are not being maintained or the general appearance of the area is being brought down due to a tenant's property. This will involve face to face engagement with these tenants and tackle these concerns at the earliest opportunities, before expensive legal action is required and seeking to improve how our estates look.

This will work alongside the Vulnerable Tenant Garden Scheme (**564** of the visits identified a tenant who qualified) and the Trainee Programme to support those tenants who aren't able to maintain their gardens.

**How will this be measured:** Environmental Quality Survey scores improved, reduced demand on the local housing teams, expensive litigation prevented (number of tenancy breaches resolved within the team), numbers of tenants referred to the Vulnerable Tenants Garden Scheme.

## 2. Welfare Reform



Welfare reform will impact on a significant number of our tenants, and us as a landlord. We

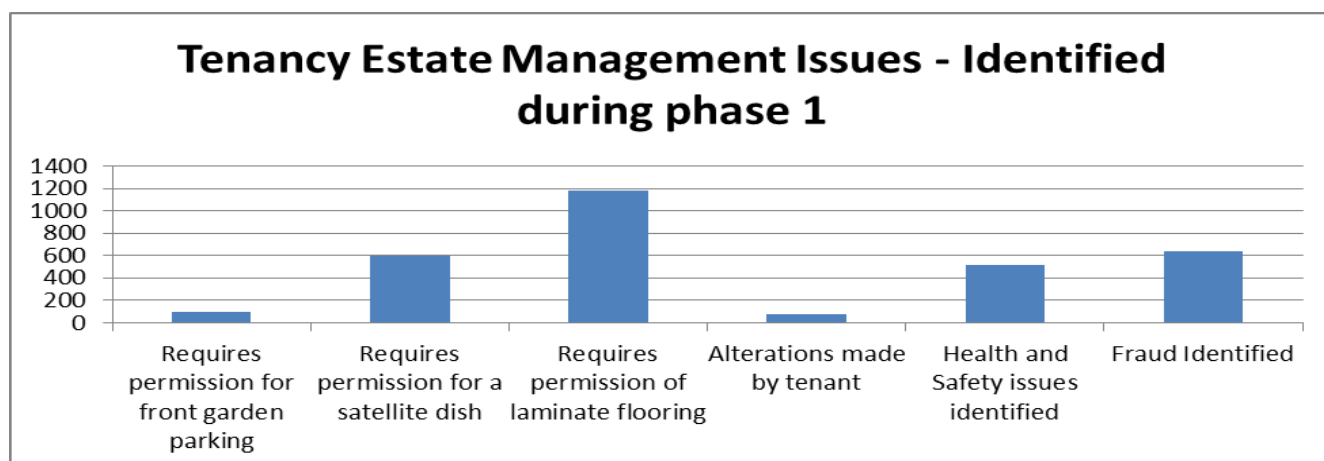
know that **6,348** of our tenants are currently affected by under-occupation, **13,279** council tax support, **40%** of all referrals for Universal Credit support from the DWP are from our tenants, and a further **7,441** are impacted by the Summer Budget (benefit cap and changes to tax credits). Reinforcing these numbers, **33,259** of the successful visits highlighted arrears, under-occupancy and the implications of Welfare Reform being raised by the tenants.

For the first time tenants will be responsible for making their rent payments, will experience multiple reductions in the amount of benefit they can claim and reduction in Housing Benefit claims. Current learning suggests that 58% of our tenants have no experience of maintaining clear rent account. Each of these will have significant impact on BCC unless we are pro-active in supporting our tenants. Impacts will be felt by increased rent arrears, increase the number of void properties where tenants are not able to or don't pay their rent and are evicted and further impacts on our already vulnerable tenants.

Tenants will also have more choice and freedom to access the private rented sector or buy their homes. If we are not supporting our tenants, they will simply seek housing elsewhere leaving us with a situation where we are housing only the most vulnerable tenants in properties which are not fit for their purpose. Unlike Phase 1 of the programme, we are able to highlight those households most affected by welfare reform and target them directly to carry out assessments, identify support and triage.

**How will this be measured:** reduction in number of rent arrears enforcement action (legal actions, evictions), increased number of tenants signing up to pay rent by Direct Debit.

### 3. Tenancy Estate Management



Our stock is our most valuable asset and is a limited resource. We therefore need to ensure that our tenants are maintaining them and we are actively managing their tenancy agreements. During Phase 1, **2,463** of the successful visits highlighted where the tenant had not obtained permission for satellite dishes, parking on a front garden, laminate flooring or other health and safety issues relating to the property. The majority of these issues would not come to our attention until expensive remedial works are required at void stage or when a tenant applies to transfer.

This approach will allow us to actively target those tenancies where a change is being requested, a transfer application is made, there is reported ASB or other services are requested by the tenant (we have analysed the remaining visits of which **1,610** of those we have not yet successfully visited, are also on the transfer waiting list.). This gives us the earliest opportunity to identify under-occupancy, lodgers in occupation, Social Housing Fraud

or other tenancy breaches. We will also be in a position to potentially stop a transfer application being made until the tenant resolves any tenancy breaches – something we are currently unable to do resulting in properties often being left in a poor state of repair and leaving BCC with the cost of making the property habitable.

**How will this be measured:** Number of Transfer Applications stopped due to identified tenancy breaches, expensive litigation prevented (number of tenancy breaches resolved within the team).

Contact Officer(s)
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