

Lettings and voids special

Letting homes is one of a landlords core activities – a ‘bread and butter’ element of housing management. Over recent years though, it has gained increasing significance as challenges like welfare reform and under occupation, growing demand (or, in some areas, shifting demand), rising aspirations, private sector competition and increased levels of homelessness have all had an impact on levels of turnover and sustainability.

It is interesting that with so much happening, that nationally, there has been little change in average re-let time with only a slight fall in 2014/2015. However, when it comes to the rate of tenancy turnover there are some considerable differences – with the median rate in the North (over 10%) more than double that of London (just over 4%) in 2014/15.

With such a complex picture nationally, we wanted to develop an accreditation scheme that would recognise the way in which social landlords are responding to the challenges that they face in the areas that they work in and, with the help of *New Charter Group* (RSL) and *Blackpool Coastal Homes* (ALMO) we were able to develop and launch our new lettings accreditation scheme. The focus of this new assessment is much broader than a simple review of a waiting list system and instead, incorporates a really wide range of issues such as sustainable lettings and efficient void management, as well as looking at how a landlord develops its service to respond to a changing local landscape.

Both *New Charter* and *Blackpool Coastal Homes* were the first to apply for the new scheme - and both were successful, achieving the award in 2015. It was great to see how two very different landlords were developing new approaches to so many different aspects of their lettings services. But even though the approaches are different both organisations had some things in common, like:

- A commitment to working with partners
- An emphasis upon ‘getting the let right’ to manage future turnover, and a move away from that narrow focus on relet times
- Linking employment opportunities
- Understanding the impact of welfare reform and reshaping approaches to minimise the impact.

To try and give you a flavour of their work, both *New Charter* and *BCH* agreed to write a short article, to outline just one good practice element of their approach.

New Charter Group: varying tenancy start dates



New Charter Group is a social landlord with 19,500 homes. We have a turnover of £100 million and a workforce of around 1,000 people. The Group consists of *New Charter Homes*, based in the Greater Manchester area, *Gedling Homes* in Nottingham and *Aksa Homes* in Oldham. We have our own New Charter Building Company, and one of our most recent partnerships is with Threshold, based in Oldham. We are proud to sponsor the New Charter Academy, in Ashton-under-Lyne, and we have recently sponsored the Silver Springs Primary Academy and Copley Academy in Stalybridge.

New Charter is a Sunday Times Best 100 Company, achieving eighth place in the Not-for-Profit list in 2015. Our mission is to provide GREAT Homes, GREAT Neighbourhoods and GREAT People.

We were pleased to be invited to submit a bid to become one of the first landlords to be considered for HQN accreditation of our lettings service and incredibly proud that, following a robust assessment of our processes, HQN presented us with the award.

Each year, we prepare and let approximately 1500 homes to new customers and at *New Charter*, we are always keen to explore ways to minimise the time our homes stand empty between customers.

Vacant homes blight neighbourhoods and are at risk of vandalism or other damage and may also incur costs to the landlord in keeping them secure. No rental income is generated during the time they stand empty. More importantly, the customer is missing the opportunity to move into their new home.

We found it particularly frustrating when all repair and preparation work had been completed mid-week, but we were required to hold the home vacant until the following Monday which was the day when traditional processes dictated that new tenancies would always start.

We worked with colleagues in the local authority Housing Benefit team and identified that Housing Benefit and Universal Credit claims could be paid for tenancy start dates on any weekday.

We considered the implications of starting weekly periodic tenancies on days other than a Monday but identified potential complications around the day of the week notices should be served and tenancies ending. Instead, we opted to offer fixed period assured shorthold tenancies to cover the period from the tenancy start until the following Monday. The tenancy then converts to a weekly periodic tenancy from that day. A charge is calculated based on a proportion of the weekly rent for the tenancy to cover this period. In order to accommodate this new way of working, amendments were needed to our tenancy sign up procedures and documents and adjustments made to our IT systems.



To test our processes, systems and the arrangements that we had put in place with the Housing Benefit department at the local authority, we arranged a small scale trial based on tenancies offered in one small geographic area, commencing in January 2015. The learning outcome from this enabled us to refine our processes, including addressing some practical issues around arranging for gas and electric supplies to be uncapped and commissioned at short notice.

We used the trial period to survey both the customers who were offered homes under the new arrangements and those offered traditional Monday start dates during the same period. We were keen to gain insight into their views of the new process and to ensure that the new arrangements did not create any additional financial hardship, in particular we were concerned about situations where there was an overlap in tenancies for customers moving to a *New Charter* tenancy directly from one with another landlord.

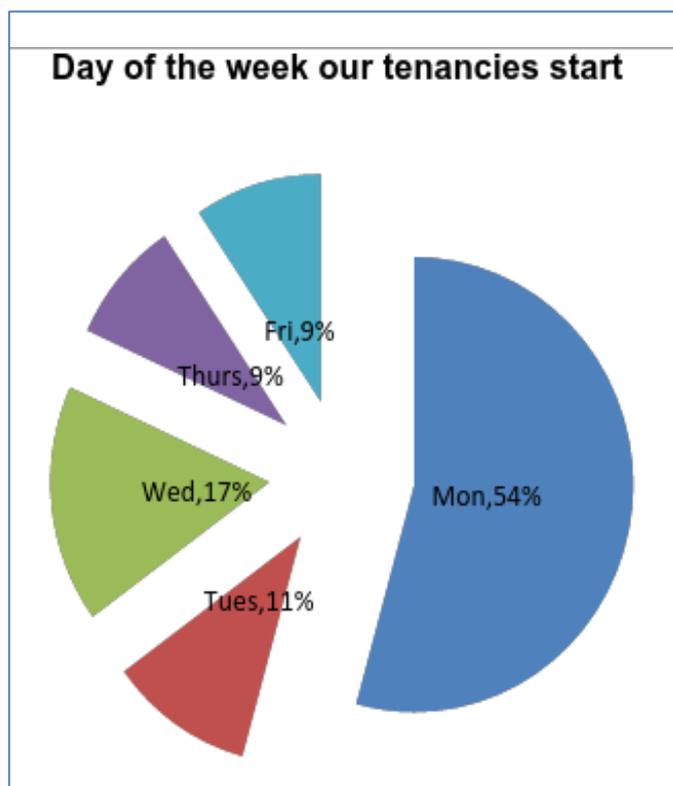
Feedback from customers involved in the pilot was positive. We saw that customers accepting homes directly from tenancies with other landlords were no more likely to be subject to problems resulting from overlapping tenancies than when tenancies began on a Monday.

The learning from the pilot scheme has enabled us to expand daily our tenancy arrangements to all new tenancies we created (with the exception of internal transfers) from August 2015.

We aim to offer homes to new customers during the notice period of the outgoing tenancy, ensuring that once repair work is complete, arrangements are in place for the next customer to move in. This new tenancy can now start on any weekday.

Since August, almost half of all new tenancies have started on days other than Monday. We are expecting this to increase further as the early weeks included homes where offers had been made under previous arrangements, but the tenancies did not start until after the new scheme began.

So far this year we have saved 649 days by using variable tenancy start dates making a saving of £8,336. Customers are happier to be in their new homes earlier and we are able to make more efficient use of our housing assets.



Blackpool Coastal Homes: void property clearances

Blackpool Coastal Housing (BCH) manages Blackpool Council's housing stock, whilst working in a variety of communities amongst one of the most deprived areas in the country. Over the past two years, BCH has worked closely with the Blackpool Boys and Girls Club which is a local youth club and registered charity.

A recent BCH STAR survey identified the following key issues about our customers:

- 5% are in full-time work
- 5% are in part-time work
- Only 5% of customers say they don't claim some form of benefit
- 47% claim Council Tax Benefit
- Over 80% claim Housing Benefit.



BCH has a strong and proven track record in recruiting local labour but in many cases our customers still remain a long way from the labour market. The need to provide a bridge to offer more opportunity led us to think critically about how to spend our resources - not just to deliver VFM but to make a lasting impact on tenant's lives.

The information above gives an indication of the scale and depth of the deprivation we were seeking to tackle - and given this, both *BCH* and the Club were in agreement that their priorities would focus on maximising opportunities to support young people from within our communities into training and employment. With this in mind, the main aims of the partnership are to:

- Reduce ASB and criminal activity
- Create employment and training opportunities for young people
- Raise aspirations
- Impact upon wider issues - educational attainment, social isolation, etc
- Recycle our "BCH £" to invest what *BCH* would have to spend anyway to increase economic activity within our estates.

So *BCH* formally contracted with the Club to provide a 'Void Property Clearance' service. They positively recruit young people from BCH referrals – ensuring we work together in supporting our tenants into employment.

To date the Club has recruited ten apprentices. These young people are individuals who other employers would be reluctant to take on due to their poor educational attainment, poor social skills, and in some cases backgrounds of anti-social behaviour and/or criminal activity.

The Club provide training in key aspects including manual handling, 'sharps' awareness, and health and safety and has also recruited specialist Youth Workers to work alongside the apprentices with the aim of providing added value such as supporting CV development, increasing communications skills through one to one sessions on interview skills and mentoring young people to help them develop future aspiration. This work is often undertaken in a subtle way though constant communication whilst undertaking work related activities. The Club have developed a partnership with Myerscough College to provide a bespoke training course to support the apprenticeships.

Since commencing the project:

- One young person has found permanent employment with an alternative employer
- 20 young people have approached the Club wanting to join, demonstrating increasing employment aspirations on the Mereside estate
- All participants have signed a social contract to contribute to the household that they live in. Current minimum contribution is £15 a week per apprentice
- Anecdotally the local police indicate they are overwhelmed by the impact of the project in reducing youth nuisance
- Calculation of the amount of the impact directly within the Blackpool economy:
 - Four local employees x £20,000.00 pa
 - Nine apprentices recruited from *BCH* estates paid £129.99 per week
 - Training for all staff has cost £5,000 to date
 - £1,000 has been spent to 'logo up' a project vehicle.

In terms of longer term opportunities, negotiations are already underway to see if the project can extend to cleaning of void properties, garden clearances and minor works such as property decorations.



New accreditation awards

A huge congratulations to *Midland Heart* who achieved accreditation for its in house repairs service and *AmicusHorizon*, the first London based association to achieve estates management accreditation.

One Vision Housing have also achieved accreditation for their income management service for the second time, demonstrating a commitment to delivering a high quality service to their customers.

Midland Heart



Carl Larter, *Midland Heart's* Director of Assets pictured with HQN's Lead Associate Kevin Bentley commented:

Achieving the accreditation is a fantastic endorsement and celebration of the great work Property Care's workforce and management has done over the last 18 months in providing an innovative and efficient repairs service to our customers. The process involved five days of on site inspections, focus meetings with staff and customers and assessing key areas of our systems and procedures. The accreditation has proved that we delivering VfM services to the highest quality within the sector.

Kevin Bentley, Lead Assessor had this to say about working with the team:

We were extremely impressed by the way in which Property Care developed and grown as business in a relatively short period time to deliver a sustained high quality service and top quartile value for money. There is a clear and ambitious business plan in place against which they organisation tracks its development and performance. We saw practical examples of innovation and one of the best integrated IT systems we have seen. We were particularly impressed by Property Care's engagement with the community, adding real social value to the service. The enthusiasm of the staff and workforce wanting to deliver a high-quality service to their customers was outstanding.

AmicusHorizon



Jill Kent, Partnership Development Manager explained why accreditation was important to them:

More than anything else, we wanted to gain recognition for the hard work and commitment demonstrated on a day to day basis by the team.

Our corporate goal for the past four years has been to become the UK's No 1 large Landlord by March 2016. Our homes, the physical neighbourhoods, and the communities they are part of, are vitally important to our residents' satisfaction so within the Asset Management directorate, estate services accreditation seemed the obvious choice.



We've worked with HQN before in other areas so we knew going for accreditation would be challenging; but we also knew it would motivate everyone to perform at their best. We wanted to test our approach to providing increasing value, consulting our residents, collaborating with our partners and maximising the benefits of new technologies. It certainly did that. Being awarded the HQN Trophy felt hard won and much deserved; a chance for real celebration every member of the team. And HQN's recommendations have already fed into our 2016/17 Team Plan so it's helped us shape our future successes.

Gill Stead, Lead Assessor had this to say about working with Jill and the team:

HQN is delighted to be able to accredit the estates management service provided by *AmicusHorizon*. There were so many things that impressed us about the teams, but probably one of the most striking aspects of the service is the way in which customers and communities are involved in shaping and driving the service - from contract procurement and management through to inspections and neighbourhood/partnership projects. I'm delighted that HQN Accreditation can provide a way to make sure that great work in the sector can be publicly recognised.

One Vision Housing

Neil Kenwright, Income Manager explained why accreditation was so important to them.

We found the accreditation incredible useful. It provided us a framework that confirms that we are operating as we should be to achieve our objectives and safe guarding ourselves against future risks brought about by welfare reform. It was not easy to pull together all the information but that makes achieving the accreditation all the more rewarding.



Tony Newman, Lead Assessor said:

We congratulate *One Vision Housing*, who have been re-accredited by HQN for their income management service. During a challenging time for housing providers, OVH continues to balance income maximisation with supporting the financial wellbeing of its customers and communities. Well done to all involved!

Finding peer organisations

Remember the details of all accredited organisations are provided on our website [here](#). If you're looking for new ideas, or best practice partners, get in touch and we'll help you to find them. And if you're doing anything new that you'd like to share with others, then get in touch with us too.

Our accreditation schemes

Accredit: DLO

Accredit: Repairs and Maintenance

Accredit: Gas

Accredit: Asset management

Accredit: Lettings

Accredit: Income management

Accredit: Estate management

Accredit: Leasehold management

Accredit: Co-regulation

