

## **Greatwell Homes Customer Scrutiny Supporting Communities**

This review is part of the Scrutiny Programme for 2020 as consulted on with involved customers in September 2020

Sharon Medlin, John Hook, Des Desai,  
Davica Charles, Anita Andre, Raymond Wilson

### **Objective**

This review will explore how Greatwell Homes, supports customers and communities, especially within the current climate of COVID-19 restrictions, to better understand if the customer facing staff know the communities we work in and understand the local issues, investigate effective methods of providing support that the customers requires, ensure we provide 'Value for Money' and are 'Working with Customers and Communities' as set out by our customer charter.

### **Determining questions**

1. What does Greatwell Homes currently do to support communities?
2. Do key staff know the communities we work in and understand the local issues?
3. What other ways could we be providing support that customers want and need?
4. Does the time spent on tasks by staff match up to the priorities customers have?
5. Should the new 'COVID' way of working be extended beyond the end of the lockdown restrictions?

### **Methods of Operating**

The Scrutiny Group divided up into smaller teams to carry out a variety of research tasks. These tasks are:

- Sending out customers questionnaires
- Looking at the corporate customer communication preferences survey
- Staff group interview
- Looking at some of the policies and standards
- Looking at what other housing groups have done
- Looking at performance information, including OPIs and KPIs

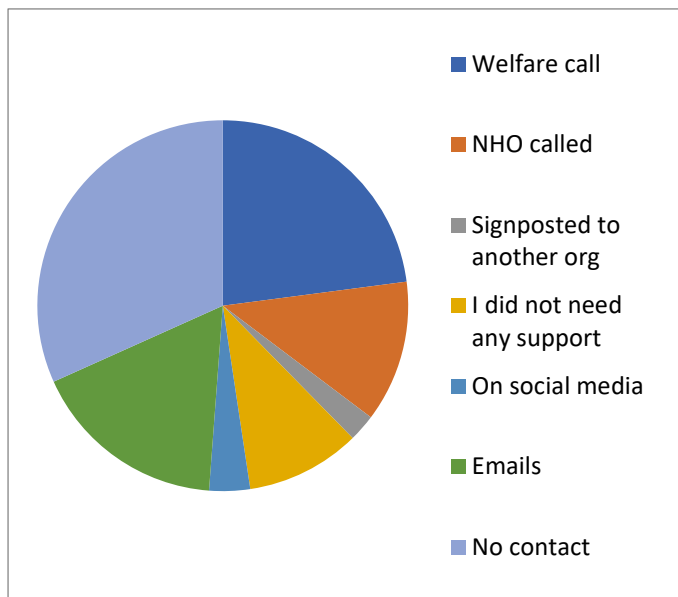
### **Sending out customer questionnaires**

Questionnaires were sent out to customers, in hard copy through the letter boxes for Independent Living customers, and by email to those that had supplied their email addresses.

We found that some of our tenants, who believed that they were vulnerable, reported that they did not receive any phone calls, whilst other customers that got the phone calls did not want any help.

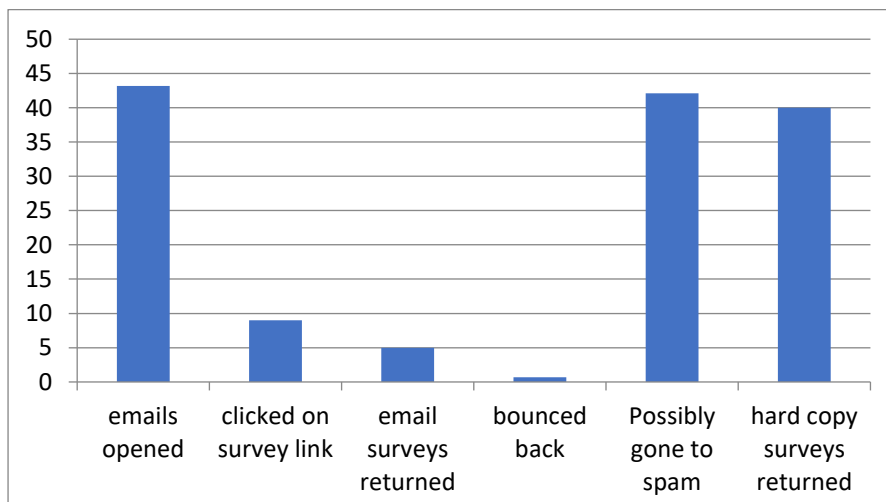
### How did Greatwell Homes support you throughout lockdown?

	Email	Hard copy
Welfare call	28	11
NHO call	13	8
Signposted to another organisation	2	2
I did not need any support	14	3
On social media	5	1
Emails	28	1
No contact	52	0



Of the 2371 emails sent to tenants for this survey, 1024 tenants opened the email, with just 212 tenants clicking on the link to the survey. The number of surveys completed by email was 121.

30 surveys were delivered to Independent Living customers in Knights Court and Barringers Court through letter boxes. 12 surveys were posted back.



Email surveys got a 5% response rate. Hard copy surveys got a 40% response rate. To get better a response rate it might be worth looking at SMS text messages which could be sent out to customers, for any future surveys.

Work is needed to identify our definition of vulnerability, to then apply that to the tenants that match our definition of vulnerable.

Some customers did not specify that they were vulnerable but still said Greatwell Homes should still have called them.

Some customers wanted help with things like rent free weeks for customers on furlough or food boxes.

Customers perceive non-emergency repairs as a type of support.

The scrutiny group asked how Greatwell Homes decided which customers got a welfare call, and how they decided what type of support they would provide. The Support Services manager reported that the county council provided the guidelines on who would get support and what type of support would be provided.

Greatwell Homes database gave the names of tenants over the age of 70 or tenants that had a disability.

Some Independent Living tenants were receiving calls from their Independent Living Officer as normal in addition to a welfare from their Housing Officer.

In the staff group interview, we heard that tenants were able to opt out of these welfare calls.

**What else could Greatwell Homes have done to support you, your family and community during lockdown?**

	Email	Hard copy
Could have phoned	22	
N/A	21	
Rent free week	4	
Do repairs	17	
Food boxes	2	1 (help with shopping)
Better signage in communal areas	1	
Allow into garden and big rooms	1	1
Respond to messages	3	
Call more often	1	
Understand issues	3	
Social media post	1	
Happy with service		2

Many people have not increased their use of online services, mostly because they have not had a need. Some do not have knowledge or skills or internet access.

A high proportion of customers prefer communicating by phone.

Considering the data tells us that many tenants would have appreciated a phone call from Greatwell Homes to show support, should the only time tenants hear from their Housing Officer is when there is a problem? Should the Housing Officer be performing more of a support function?

The research data is available on request.

## **Corporate Customer Communication Preferences Survey**

This survey was created by Greatwell Homes. The Scrutiny group were given some headline information about the outcomes. The survey data could not be shared because Greatwell Homes were not able to finish using this data for themselves before the scrutiny group deadlines.

The following observations are based on the main points provided by a member of staff at Greatwell Homes. These main points are available on request.

WhatsApp (or similar) should be included as a communication preference and staff should be able to provide this service.

Customers want an office to attend, but don't want local community based venue for appointments. This survey was done before the closure of Sheep Street was announced. We suspect this closure will affect customers' preference for community based appointments. We advise more investigation into this.

Customers like phone calls but don't like emails. Some have said emails aren't responded to. The Customer Service Standard give specific timelines on responding to emails. This survey data tells us this Standard is not being adhered to. We advise you look into a system whereby all staff, including managers, are monitored and held accountable for responding to messages.

Customers want staff to visit their homes after the COVID restrictions have ended, but the scrutiny group have concerns about staff having enough time, especially where some appointments might be urgent. We advise more investigation into this.

## **Staff Group Interview**

Staff that took part in teams' meetings were:-

Sam Ambrose – Voids and Lettings Coordinator (soon to be Neighbourhood Housing Officer)

Michael Downing – Senior Income Recovery Officer

Sue Edwards – Customer Services Team Leader

Bilal Patel – Income Recovery Officer

Liberty Lloyd-Ashford – Communications Assistant

Louisa Campbell – Customer Experience Manager

Sean Jackson – Support Services Manager

Gemma Ager – Community Involvement Officer

Talking to the managers, all were incredibly pleased with the way staff had coped with the transition from office to home working. However, some staff were showing signs of missing their work family. Everyone needs support sometimes and meetings on Microsoft Teams just don't help all the time, we are social beings by our very nature. We would like to see somewhere for the staff to meet now and then because it is essential for their health and wellbeing.

Some staff also found it hard to know how and when to stop and would continue to work until the job is finished. For example, we heard how some staff were working on a Sunday to get a head start on Monday because they knew there would be a heavy workload.

We also found that staff that do not live in our neighbourhoods may have a problem with understanding the issues and problems that our communities face. Staff know some from reports of fly tipping and Anti-Social Behaviour that come to Customer Services; but are missing some of the insights normally gained through the walkabouts.

## **Policies and Standards**

These are the policies and standards that we reviewed:

- Customer Concerns and Complaints Policy
- Anti-Social Behaviour Policy
- Safe Neighbourhoods Policy
- Neighbourhood Management Policy
- Lone working Policy
- Customer Service Standard

We looked at the policies stated and found that none had been updated to take into account the pandemic or disaster scenarios especially ascertaining to the managers who take responsibility for making sure staff have the right tools.

Greatwell Homes need to future-proof policies to cover pandemics / disaster scenarios and staff working from home / flexible working.

We found that many of the policies are due for review in the next 18 months, so there is no need to rush into updating policies and procedures that are due for renewal within the next 18 months, but update as and when the review date is scheduled.

## **Looking at what other housing groups have done**

We found that there was not much difference between Greatwell Homes and other Housing groups' practices. Although Greatwell Homes carried out welfare calls to vulnerable tenants where other Housing groups did not.

We got our information from looking at how these Housing groups communicated to their tenants. This was by email or on their websites.

Our information sources were TPAS Workplace forum, the Chartered Institute of Housing, Hull City, Sovereign, Kettering council, CIH and the National Housing Federation.

Hull City put up posters in their blocks of flats.

Sovereign produced an online newsletter to their tenants.

We would like to have found how more Housing providers communicated their advice to their tenants.

## **Performance Information**

The performance information task was difficult to complete.

The involved customers assigned to this task had to resign from the group for various reasons, and there was not enough time for the remaining involved customers to complete the task.

The KPI and OPI information was not very relevant, and we found that it wasn't helpful.

Information about the number of Anti-social Behaviour reports received by the Neighbourhood Services team was not available. We wanted to know if the number of complaints received and the type of complaints received were different to previous years.

## **Evaluation**

Overall we are happy with how this scrutiny project has gone. The project has been completed on time; and the involved customers worked well together. We are particularly pleased with how involved customers new to scrutiny have fitted in.

The scrutiny customer survey gave a lot of really good insights which produced several recommendations.

Staff engaged really well in the staff group interview, being very open about what they found difficult, and what they felt has worked well or not so well during COVID restrictions.

The areas of this project that were not as successful as we would have liked are that no involved customers did research about other Housing groups. This information would have been provided by a member of the Involvement Team.

We also were not able to use much of the performance information for several reasons.

For future scrutiny projects, we advise more regular catch ups to identify delays in work and to share progress with the whole group.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

ASB not provided because drop out and timing and staff not responding

Info was provided by member of Housing team.

Regular meet ups

	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Management Response</b>	<b>date</b>
1	Update your policies to future proof them, to cover pandemics, and staff working from home. This can be done as and when the policies come up for review	This will enable new staff and old to know what is going to happen when this happens again	Caroline wants to know how relevant – covered in continuity plan. Policies not relevant to location of work being delivered. Do not accept recommendation.	

2	<p>Do work on defining what a vulnerable tenant is and on effective ways to keep the Improved information up to date on tenants, Explain to tenants why this information is needed and how it will be used for their benefit</p>	<p>This will enable staff to give the support to the tenants, that want and need assistance most, saving time and money on wasted calls and visits</p>	<p>We already do this. FYT scrutiny showed we do a report about who is at risk of tenancy failure. Tenancy sustainment policy going to Board this morning.</p> <p>Health and loneliness makes people vulnerable for covid. Not tenancy failure risk. Customer definition of vulnerable is different to Greatwell Homes' definition.</p> <p>Be clear about context.</p> <p>Not practical to ask customers if they have a support network to help out if our services our reduced.</p> <p>Define vulnerable based on the situation at the time ie if the next pandemic affects only males.</p> <p>Also, rank order of vulnerability.</p> <p>Survey results show who says they weren't supported.</p> <p>Sophie identifies single mums losing jo weren't contacted.</p> <p>Do we need to promote more what we do to support?</p> <p>Use SMS instead of email to get better response rate.</p> <p>Some customers got a call but said they didn't need. How we identify who is vulnerable is off.</p> <p>Do we audit sign up info?</p>	
3	<p>All tenants are visited once a year. Ask if they need support during a lockdown and what kind of support we can provide.</p>	<p>We hope this will mean that all the tenants get the support they require</p>	<p>Not possible.</p> <p>Raised in a previous scrutiny that staff will raise concerns if staff attending suspect the tenant isn't coping. Gas servicing once a year.</p>	

			Are concerns actually being raised by gas service engineers? Can we encourage this more?	
4	Look at how staff divided their time and evaluate whether this matches customers priorities. Review our approach to carrying out day to day repairs safely (within government guidelines)	Help you to become more efficient and meet your tenant's expectations	Find out customer priorities, then see how effectively staff are dealing with those priorities – do they need to spend more time or better systems in place.	
5	Look at ways to help your staff achieve a good work /life balance, and that you use a small office where staff can meet when needed	Happy, healthy staff means you will retain staff for longer and less time lost on sick days	Resolved – Dennington Rd office.	
6	That trades people make recording off our 'communities' and 'neighbourhoods' so they can be posted on to the hive system so staff will know what is happening in our neighbourhoods	This will help the staff to keep in touch with our communities and neighbourhoods.	New normal will allow more visits and job shadowing.  Actively promote good and bad stories from communities.	
7	Promote responsible way to dispose of household furniture and white goods also advise of penalties for fly tipping in preparation for land transfer, investigate finding out about giving staff legal powers to enforce fly tipping penalties	Reduced cost of clean up	Our staff cannot enforce, but we are working with operation revive through the police.	
8	That you do a consultation to find out what sort of office, tenants want and how they will use it	So, you do not waste money on the wrong sort of office space	Survey already done.  Reword rec to highlight loss of sheep street office.	
9	Evaluate your response to lockdown and the government's advice and learn how you can continue to deliver services, to a high standard throughout lockdown and manage tenants' expectations, specifically relating to repairs.	Letting tenants know what they can and cannot be expect in a lockdown, will hopefully make for happier tenants.		
10	That when you give KPI and OPI out to tenants (CA) you use real numbers summation and not percentages.	This will give your tenants a better understanding of what is happening.		



It would be to Greatwell Homes' advantage to investigate the affect that staff home working has to the organisation's carbon footprint.

Your staff have done a fantastic job and you should be immensely proud of all your hard work and dedication, think most of your tenants think this too, Well done and thank you for all your assistance.