

Family Housing Association THE SCRUTINY **PANEL**

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The Scrutiny Panel can be contacted by email, scrutiny@familytenant.co.uk



WHAT IS THE SCRUTINY PANEL?

The Scrutiny Panel is a group of tenants who have been independently trained to examine and challenge Family Housing's decisions, procedures and policies. They report to Family's Board and make recommendations for improvements.

WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

The Scrutiny Panel decided that their first report would examine Family Housing's Applications and Allocations procedures and policies. In other words how Family deals with people looking to rent a property from the housing association.

SO WHAT DID THE PANEL DO?

They visited other social landlords in the area and did research online to understand what was "best practice" and how this differed from the way Family does things. The panel interviewed new and existing tenants about their experiences of finding a home with Family Housing. They also met with Family's Housing team to fully understand the existing procedures. The Panel then wrote a report for the Board and made recommendations in January 2016.

WHAT HAPPENED THEN?

The Scrutiny Panel made a total of nine recommendations in their report. The Panel met with Family Housing's Head of Housing and his team to discuss the recommendations and an action plan was agreed. Seven of the recommendations were accepted. These would be implemented either immediately (where possible) or over a period of up to 12 months. The panel has been monitoring the progress and the results are in this report.

OUTLINE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve telephone handling
- "Closed" lists
- Family Housing's website
- Ethnic minority applicants
- Area location maps
- Frequency of contact/Tenant self-help
- Paint-pack availability
- Acceptance of an offer
- Refusal procedure

Full details of the recommendations are on the following pages

THE RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS APPLICATIONS

IMPROVE TELEPHONE HANDLING

Scrutiny Panel comments

The Scrutiny Panel heard some evidence that potential tenants had problems with making telephone contact. This they believe is largely due to the telephone system currently in operation at Family Housing. The Scrutiny Panel would recommend that there should be a review of the call handling procedures at the Association.

Family Housing's response

We recognise that the telephone system is out dated and is currently being reviewed by FHA.

UPDATE: A new phone system was installed in October 2016. The panel will continue to monitor the performance of the new system.

"CLOSED" LISTS

Scrutiny Panel comments

The Scrutiny Panel did not like the use of the term "closed" and preferred that lists should be called "full". This generally is now the term used. The panel felt, however, that applicants should be allowed to be added to a full list if there was a possibility of them being housed in a reasonable

time. The panel recommended that a list of open lists should be published on Family's website.

The panel also believed that applicants should not have to keep phoning to check on the availability of housing. They recommended that Family Housing should have up to date information on their website that is updated automatically from their housing database. This should also show how long an applicant may have to wait for a home to become available.

Family Housing's response

Family agreed there are real benefits in getting prospective tenants to 'self-serve' by checking if lists are currently full and how long they may have to wait if on a particular list. They are currently exploring how this could be implemented.

UPDATE: Information is uploaded weekly on the website regarding open & full lists.

FAMILY HOUSING'S WEBSITE

Scrutiny Panel comments

The Scrutiny Panel recommends that there is a thorough review of the information currently available on Family Housing's website. As mentioned above, they believe that up to date information on the website would alleviate many of the problems experienced by potential applicants and would also save staff time. During the course of the investigation, Family Housing did add a listing of available properties on the website, but this is only updated on a weekly basis rather than being "live" information.

Family Housing's response

Family Housing acknowledged that the website needed to be updated.

They agree the position of the allocation policy will be looked at alongside this review.

Family Housing are currently reviewing the website to make major updates. Information will be more readily available and easier to find. The updates will be taking place during the spring of 2017. It is hoped that "live" information about the availability of homes will be included in this update.

ETHNIC MINORITY APPLICANTS

Scrutiny Panel comments

During the course of the Panel's time shadowing staff, whilst walk-in applicants were being interviewed, it was noted that there were sometimes communication difficulties with applicants for whom English was not their first language. Although Family Housing has the use of LanguageLine, the Panel did not see it being accessed when there were obvious language problems. It is recommended the increased use of LanguageLine where it is an apparent necessity. It is also recommended that the possibility of using an online translation app (such as Google Translate) be investigated as a more cost-effective alternative. The Panel would also suggest that some of the scripts used should be translated into the more commonly used non-English / Welsh languages of applicants. The Panel recommends that front line staff receive further training to use all the tools available to them to better effect.

Family Housing's response

Family Housing are now implementing these recommendations:

- Refresher training on identifying and using LanguageLine.
- Cross team training on Google translate as Community Housing Officers already use this as a tool.

- Community Housing Officers to share contacts they make using ethnic minority support services to assist with translation.

AREA LOCATION MAPS

Scrutiny Panel comments

On occasions it became apparent that some applicants were not familiar with the geography of the Swansea area. The applicant may specify a particular area and be told there were no properties available, without realising that adjacent areas would be equally accessible for their needs. On such an occasion during an interview, a Housing Services Advisor suggested that it would be valuable to have area maps of Swansea available to demonstrate close proximity of other areas to the area particularly requested. The Scrutiny Panel recommends that this be adopted as soon as possible.

Family Housing's response

Will incorporate the use of Google Maps during assessments to visually show applicants the location of their available homes.

ALLOCATIONS

FREQUENCY OF CONTACT/TENANT SELF-HELP

Scrutiny Panel comments

The Scrutiny Panel feels that the information available to applicants prior to their being allocated a property should be more readily available to the applicant. At present it is necessary for them to phone in to see how their application is progressing. Waiting List applicants are only updated by Family Housing every three months to enquire if they still wish to be on the waiting list, whilst transfer applicants are only updated every six months. The Panel recommends that Family Housing should investigate the feasibility of giving live information on the website with applicants logging in with a username and password.

Family Housing's response

We feel that contacting the applicants every 3 months is acceptable. Information provided at application and review stage is designed to eliminate the need to contact on a regular basis.

Unable to provide information for applicants to check progress of application.

UPDATE: Proposed tenants portal will be focused on self-help for current tenants. This will be available early 2017.

PAINT-PACK AVAILABILITY

Scrutiny Panel comments

When applicants were viewing a property they were frequently unaware of the availability of paint packs to help with redecoration and it is recommended that this information is given to every applicant when attending a viewing.

Family Housing's response

The paint packs are not available for every empty home. The team will determine if there will be a paint pack or not.

ACCEPTANCE OF AN OFFER

Scrutiny Panel comments

Applicants are not always informed of how long they have to make a decision whether to accept a property at the first viewing and the Panel would recommend that this is done as matter of course.

Family Housing's response

This will vary from property to property. There is no standard timescale at present. We acknowledge a reasonable timescale should be given to all applicants, ensuring this is doesn't have a negative impact on rent loss. We propose 3 days to be agreed by Scrutiny Panel.

UPDATE: This has now been agreed.

REFUSAL PROCEDURE

Scrutiny Panel comments

Applicants are not always informed of the refusal procedure and the number of offers they can refuse before being penalised at viewings. The Panel would recommend that this should be normal procedure.

Family Housing's response

Applicants are advised at application stage and offer stage of the two refusal procedure.

Family Housing had introduced 1 offer (rather than 2 offers) for Swansea and NPT vacancies since 29th February 2016 - assumption that positive impact on refusals rates & more people on the list who need to move rather than want to move.

The Scrutiny Panel feel that this is a step backwards and is not in the best interest of potential tenants. The Panel now understands that this is a pilot exercise which will be reviewed after six months (around September 2016).

UPDATE: This policy has been found to be ineffective, and Family Housing have now reverted to the 2 offer policy.