



Investigation into how Rotherham Council supports new tenants and if this is improving the sustainability of tenancies



Report March 2024

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1. Executive Summary

This report focusses on the findings from an investigation by the Rotherham Federation Tenant Scrutiny panel into the support offered by Rotherham Council to new tenants, with a view to improving the sustainability of tenancies. Benefits of improved sustainability include better stability for tenants along with a considerable financial saving to the Council. The panel has examined the new tenant support available for Rotherham Council tenants including affordability meetings, pre-tenancy training, and the furniture scheme.

The Tenant Scrutiny panel met regularly over a six-month period and carried out a survey of new tenants, interviewed officers, and benchmarked against other housing providers. It was found that most people were happy with the service that they had received as a new tenant and on the whole that Rotherham Council performed well against other housing providers.

Following the investigation, nine recommendations and four suggestions are being made to the Council for improvements that could be made to support new tenants, including providing further clarity and information, further consideration of viewings procedures, and further analysis of customer feedback and the duration of tenancies.

A full description of the work completed follows, and a shorter summary report is also available that details the evidence relating to each recommendation.

2. Background

Rotherham Federation Tenant Scrutiny was formed in April 2016. The Tenant Scrutiny panel provides an opportunity for tenants to scrutinise service delivery, identifying areas of concern, and opportunities for improvement. This process strengthens the involvement of Rotherham Council tenants and provides links with Rotherham Council governance.

Tenant Scrutiny creates opportunities to:

- ✓ Build an effective partnership between Rotherham Council and its tenants and residents in the spirit of co-production, resulting in a joint-win for all.
- ✓ Provide a means of challenging landlords' services, standards and performance in a professional, constructive, and collaborative manner.
- ✓ Help Rotherham Council to improve performance, value for money, and tenant satisfaction.
- ✓ Represent the views of Rotherham Council's residents and make a positive difference on their behalf.

Tenant Scrutiny activity works to the five TPAS Scrutiny key principles:

- Independent
- Inclusive
- Positive
- Constructive
- Purposeful

This is the eighth investigation by the Rotherham Federation Tenant Scrutiny panel. Previous reports have been submitted on the following topics:

1. Engaging Young Tenants in Rotherham (March 2017)
2. Responsive Repairs: Appointments, Communication Process and Customer Journey (February 2018)
3. Process of Dealing with Anti-social behaviour complaints (January 2019)
4. Home Aids and Adaptations for Tenants (November 2020)
5. Improving Tenant Satisfaction with the Repairs and Maintenance Service (June 2021)
6. How Rotherham Council could improve its communication with tenants (June/July 2022)
7. Whether the lettable standard used by Rotherham Council during the voids process is suitable and meets tenant expectations (August 2023)

Choice of topic

A review of the support offered to new tenants was chosen as a topic by the tenant scrutiny panel as part of their three-stage investigation into the voids processes used by Rotherham Council; the other two parts being the voids lettable standard, and the downsizing policy. The voids process had previously been highlighted by both tenants and council officers as an area where some improvements could potentially be made.

Tenancy sustainability

Tenancy sustainability is the prevention of tenancies ending prematurely. It is achieved by providing information, advice and support for tenants.

A failed tenancy is seen as one that ends due to:

- Eviction,
- Abandonment, or is
- Terminated within 12 months of commencing

Legislation

Social Housing Act 2023

Under the Social Housing Act 2023, the Regulator of Social Housing has introduced a set of tenant satisfaction measures that social housing landlords must report on. Some of these measures will be assessed by an annual Tenant Perception survey. Questions from the survey that relate to this investigation include how satisfied or dissatisfied tenants are with:

TP01 - The service provided by your landlord.

TP04 - The landlord providing a home that is well-maintained.

TP05 - The landlord providing a home that is safe.

TP06 - The landlord listening to their views and acting upon them.

TP07 - The landlord keeping them informed about things that matter to them.

TP08 – The landlord treating them fairly and with respect.

Home and Communities Tenancy Standard 2012

The standard requires registered providers to let their homes in a fair, transparent and efficient way, taking into account the housing needs and aspirations of tenants and potential tenants. They shall demonstrate how their lettings:

- make the best use of available housing
- are compatible with the purpose of the housing
- contribute to local authorities' strategic housing function and sustainable communities

Rotherham Council Housing Allocations Policy

The Rotherham Council Housing Allocation Policy refers to lettings that are '*appropriate and sustainable*'. The policy states that '*Tenancy sustainment and partnership working will continue to sit at the heart of the plan for 2023-25*'.

The plan in the policy includes that:

- The Tenancy Support Team will incorporate a holistic needs assessment that will allow staff to identify and support tenants to address any related issues, such as debt, substance misuse etc.
- Currently, the Council's Financial Inclusion Team can only offer tenancy support to Council tenants. A key part of the plan will be to strengthen and widen links with support provision internally, commissioned and from other organisations to widen the overall network of services on offer to both Council tenants and residents generally.
- There will be a tiered approach to support provision that will have clear guidelines for referrers on the roles, remits, and expectations of the different service providers involved.

Rotherham has historically been an area with high levels of deprivation which heightens the need for support to new tenancies to ensure that they are affordable and sustainable.

Savings from tenancy sustainability

There are around 30 void properties per week and the average cost for works in a void property is around £3,500. Add to this rent losses, the cost of advertising and new tenant processes, it is likely that each tenancy that ends costs the Council in excess of £4,500. The budget for this comes from the HRA budget (20-25% of the budget).

3. The panel and officers

The panel was made up of tenant and resident representatives from across Rotherham:

David Ramsden (Chair)	Winnie Billups	Ann Hitchens
Mary Jacques	Keith Stringer	Barry Dealey
Julie Sharp	Sam Sharp	Donna Draper
Wendy Birch	Jo Workman	Nora Hutchinson

Thank you to these representatives for their time and commitment and also to the new tenants who took the time to respond to the survey.

Officer support was provided by:

James Smith, RMBC Tenant Involvement Coordinator
Callie Lamb, RMBC Tenant Involvement Officer
Phil Hayes, Rotherham Federation Chief Executive Officer
Laura Swift, Rotherham Federation Administrative Officer
Sarah Fletcher, Rotherham Federation, Office Manager
Rebecca Morrison, Project Solutions

Valuable subject matter expertise was provided by five representatives of the Council:

Sandra Tolley, Service Manager (Housing Options).
Phil Hamilton, Furnished Homes and Temporary Accommodation Manager
Danielle Smith, Housing Information Co-ordinator (Housing Options)
Carol Wordsworth, Team Manager (Housing Options)
Nicola Birks, Senior Housing Officer (Housing and Estates Services)
Abigail Evans, Housing Occupational Therapist
Daniel Cowley, National Management Trainee (Housing and Estates Services)
Andy Lumb, Manager (Housing Property Services)
Dean Borrill, Partnering Manager (Housing Property Services)

4. Terms of Reference

Aim: To investigate how Rotherham Council supports new tenants and if this is improving the sustainability of tenancies

Objectives:

To:

- ✓ Review the target time for re-letting void properties.
- ✓ Consider whether the support provided for tenants during the re-let period is suitable and is leading to more sustainable tenancies, including:
 - tenancy ready workshops,
 - affordability,
 - virtual viewings,
 - furnish scheme and decoration allowances.
- ✓ Benchmark against other housing providers as regards their void policies and procedures.
- ✓ Review the communications around void policies and services.

Scope

- ☒ Phase Two of the voids investigation will avoid the areas to be covered by Phase One and Three i.e. lettable standard; downsizing.
- ☒ The voids investigation phases will also not consider the allocations policy.

Measures of Success

- ☒ The target time for re-letting void properties is realistic, achievable and suitable for tenants searching for a new home.
- ☒ The support given to new tenants moving into a new home meets the needs of all tenants and is equal or better than other housing providers.
- ☒ All void services that are relevant to tenants are well-publicised and accessible for all.

Benefits

For tenants:

- ✓ Increased awareness of void services and support.
- ✓ Improved support for new tenants if required.

For the Council:

- ✓ Tenant view of the performance target for re-letting void properties.
- ✓ Learning from other housing providers with suggestions for improvements that can be considered further.
- ✓ Increased sustainability of tenancies leading to financial benefit.

Risks

The panel acknowledged the following risks when embarking on this investigation. That:

- Staff are unable to attend/take part in tenant scrutiny meetings to share information.
- Insufficient responses to surveys are received to assess their satisfaction with existing processes and support.
- Other Councils will not be forthcoming with information on their voids processes.
- Rotherham Council teams' capacity means that recommendations made cannot be actioned.

5. Methodology

The investigation consisted of:

5.1 Surveys

As part of this investigation 350 surveys, both online and on paper, were circulated to people who had moved into their new home during the latter quarter of 2023. There was a response rate of 8%, with 29 surveys being completed. For 69% of the respondents it was their first home with Rotherham Council. The survey was anonymous to encourage more open and honest responses.

The survey asked for new tenant views on their new home, the process, the affordability interview, the pre-tenancy training, the furniture scheme, and how long they intended to stay in their new home.

Responses from the survey completed as part of the previous investigation into the lettable standard were also reviewed, in particular the question relating to how it could have been better for the new tenant when moving onto their new home (31 responses).

5.2 Benchmarking with other housing providers

Seven other council housing providers were contacted with a list of questions around the support that they provide for new tenants (see Appendix A). Three responses were received from:

- Berneslai
- St Leger
- Wolverhampton

Information on new tenant support by other housing providers was found by performing a web trawl. Information was found this way on processes used by:

- Dacorum Housing
- Kirklees Council
- Nottingham Council
- Sheffield Council
- Waverley Housing

5.3 Interviewing officers

Council officers were invited to attend the Tenant Scrutiny meeting on 9 October 2023, to answer questions concerning sustainability, the sign-up process, viewings, and the welcome visit. At the same meeting, the details of the furniture scheme were also discussed.

Further information on the affordability meetings and performance measures around sustainability was received and fed back to the 13 November meeting of the panel, with a discussion around sustainability with the officers in attendance.

5.4 Meetings

Meetings took place between September 2023 and March 2024 to consider and draw conclusions from the information received from Rotherham Council, new council tenants, and other benchmarked housing providers. A list of recommendation and suggestions arising from the investigation were agreed at the March 2024 meeting.

6. Summary of Evidence

6.1 New Homes process

The process for re-letting homes involves various Council and partner teams working together to ensure that there are as few time slippages as possible. The re-let target is 42 days with the team currently achieving a turn-round period of 38.61 days.

Key Choices

The home will start to be advertised on Key Choices during the voids period. As soon as the property has been brought up to the lettable standard and signed off, a video of the home is arranged and made available within 48 hours for sharing with prospective new tenants through virtual viewings. People on the housing register may apply and the Key Choices system allows for 'auto bidding' for people with specific wants. Applicants are 'scored' using the allocations banding system (band one being those who have the most urgent need).

Shortlisting

The computer system carries out the shortlisting and this is then forwarded to an officer. The officer will check whether the applicant is known to them, if they have rent arrears, or if their family circumstances have changed e.g., they've had another baby. Checks may be made with the applicant at this time to make sure that they have thought about:

- how to get to work,
- which schools are in the area,
- parking availability,
- if they have sufficient income,
- any reported anti-social behaviour in the area (if appropriate).

Allocation

An allocation meeting will take place with the selected tenant (usually over the phone) and they will have only 24/48 hours to make a decision on whether they want to accept the property. If they choose not to take the home, the reason is recorded on the system. They will be advised that they can move in as soon as they have completed:

- The financial inclusion (affordability) interview (see section 5.3)
- The online 'A Place of Your Own' modules (see section 5.4)

At this time they are also advised that gas uncapping may take up to two days.

An email is sent to the prospective new tenant with the tenancy agreement for their information.

New homes are discussed by a medical assessment panel (weekly) to ensure they meet the needs of the tenant. Work is ongoing currently to allow for a medical assessment form to be shared online. If the applicant is already a Council tenant whose condition has deteriorated, they will be added to band one in the allocations process. Tenants who are new to the Council and have a medical priority will be added to band two.

Sign-up

Once they have decided to accept, the new tenant is invited into Riverside House to meet with a housing officer, go through the tenancy agreement, and sign-up. They are told about the furniture scheme and a rent account is set up. Tenants pay one week in advance.

If an Occupational Therapist is working with the tenant, sign-up may take place in the home so that they can confirm suitability.

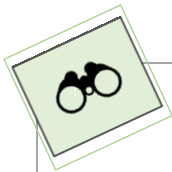
After sign up, an officer will visit the home and change the door locks, conduct a legionella check, and make a note of the meter readings.

Removal day

The new tenant again comes in to meet with council officers on their removal day to collect the keys, receive the meter readings, and confirm the arrangements for gas uncapping. The plastering disclaimer is also discussed (i.e. they are made aware that if they remove any wallpaper and the plaster comes away, the Council will then arrange to re-plaster).

The panel confirmed with officers that there is not an information pack at this time for new tenants moving in, giving further details of their new home and neighbourhood.

Timescales

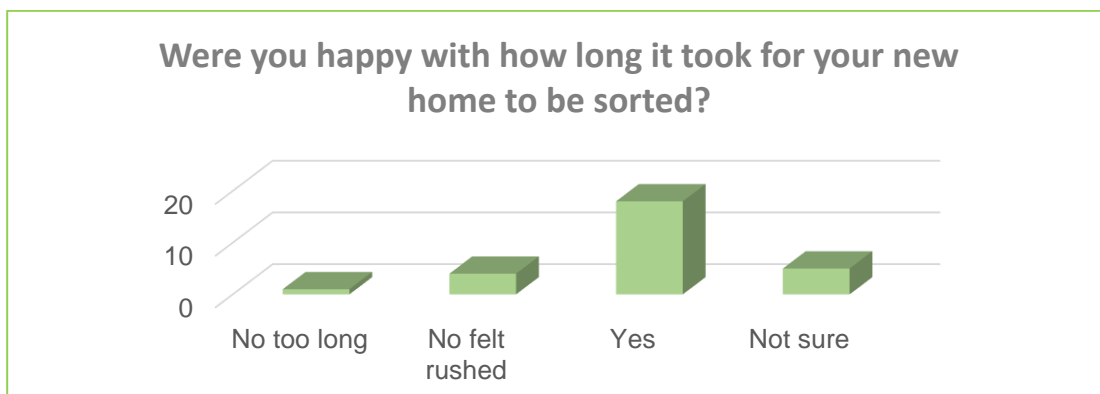


Benchmarking with other housing providers – timescales:

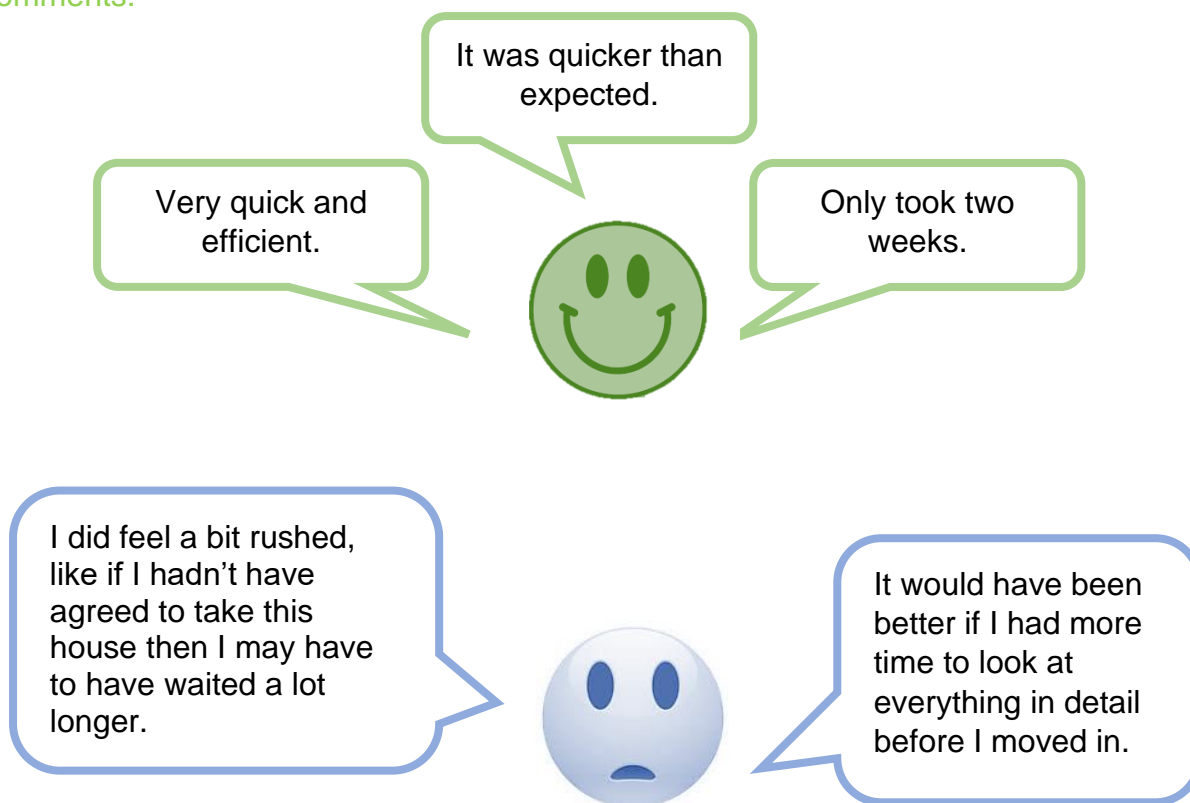
St Leger	3-4 days from void works completion to new tenant moving in
Berneslai	Target – less than 7 working days from completion of works.
Wolverhampton	24 days from void works completed to new tenant moving in

Although no target was mentioned by Rotherham officers for the new tenant to move in after completion of the works, most survey respondents said that the whole process took around two weeks.

64% of people were happy with how long it took for their house to be sorted:



Comments:



The survey for the previous investigation into the lettable standard also received two comments from new tenants who felt rushed and needed more time to be able to look at everything in detail and be able to decorate before moving in.

PANEL VIEWS:

- Panel members felt that the expectations of new tenants could be managed better if the state of decoration, the need for furniture, and the layout of rooms was also provided on the Key Choices description.
- The panel was pleased that the allocations and sign-up process worked swiftly following the void works. However they were concerned that this may feel rushed for some people.
- There was also a query around whether the potential tenant has the chance to request a support worker on the application form for a new home, to be able to factor the necessary support time into the process timeline if required.
- It was noted that other housing providers move new tenants into voids even faster than Rotherham. It was unclear how this could be achieved in such a short timescale, unless properties were advertised and allocated prior to completion of works.
- The panel also noted that 'Looking for a Council Home' on the website does not say anything about training and the affordability meeting, even though this is covered verbally during the allocations procedure.

✎ The panel discussed the things that would be important to know when moving into a new home and agreed that for safety they would like to know about damp and mould, how to work the boiler, and the location of the stop tap. They would also like to know other local information about bin collection days and neighbourhood community activities to help them to settle in better. Having some advice on how to report a repair would help new tenants to feel less stressed if they need to do so.

✎ It was thought that a welcome pack for new tenants would really help people to settle in more easily and potentially aid sustainability by encouraging involvement in their new community.

Recommendations

Key choices description

Manage new tenant expectations by providing additional information on the key choices website, including:

- That the property is unfurnished and is likely to need decoration
- A plan of the layout and room sizes (rather than a list of dimensions)

Welcome pack

Provide a welcome pack for new tenants that is handed out at sign up. The pack should include information such as neighbourhood / community activities, how to report a repair, and advice about damp and mould. It should also give details specific to that home such as how to work the boiler, location of the stop tap, and days for bin collections.

6.2 Viewings

It was reported that there are on average 30-40 council home viewings each week with 8-10 (approximately 20%) being carried out in person.

In-person viewings

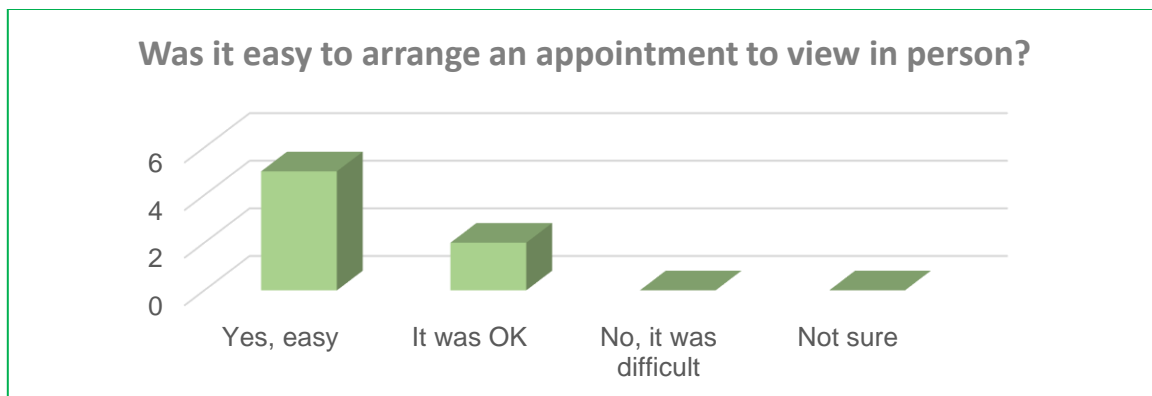
If people have a physical disability, mobility issues, or a visual impairment, they will be offered an in-person viewing. Officers reported that very few people request an in-person viewing, but also that this option is not advertised.

The Housing Application form includes a question about whether support is needed during the application process, including the viewing, and a section on 'any special requirements' where people can add any disabilities that they may have. If an applicant has disabilities, the Occupational Therapists (OTs) in the team will view the video and carry out a medical

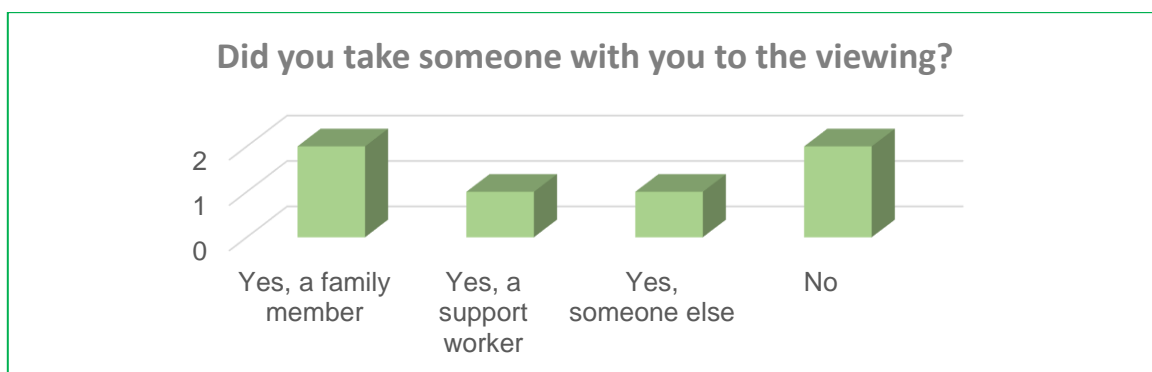
assessment to find out if the property is suitable for the applicant. They will also accompany people on in-person viewings to check out suitability of the home for that person's needs and advise on any necessary aids and adaptations.

It was reported by the panel that some younger people had requested in-person viewings but had been denied this.

For the survey, new tenants who had experienced an in-person viewing were asked:



All respondents found it easy or OK to arrange the appointment to view.



Most people took someone else with them to view the property, mainly family and support workers.

Video/ virtual viewings

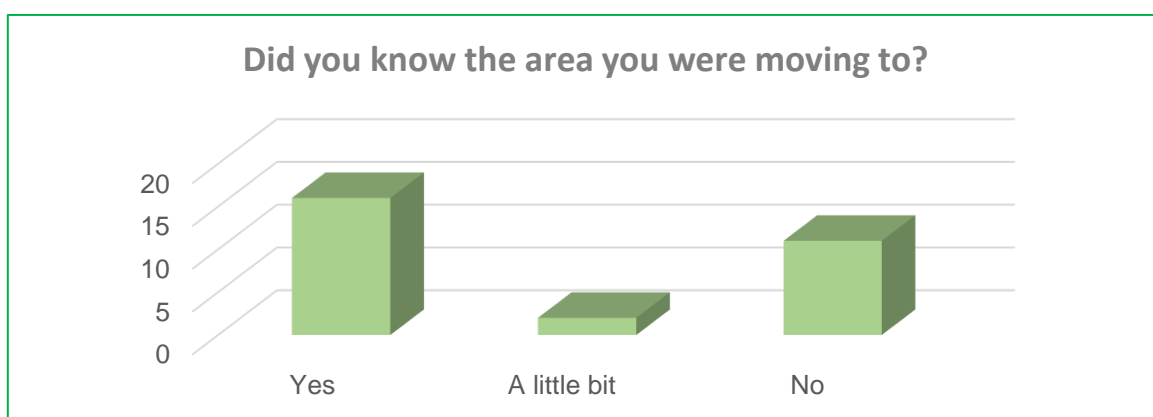
Video viewings were introduced in Rotherham during the Covid pandemic, to ensure that people could still move into void properties. The Council decided to continue this method for prospective tenants to view homes due to the efficiencies that it brings in officer time. The videos are produced by an external company and the contract for this arrangement was out to tender at the time of the investigation. For reasons of sensitivity, the Council were unable to share with the panel the cost of producing videos of their homes.

The videos start outside the property and then go inside to show each room. The videos include answers to questions that were previously asked during viewings. Officers reported that feedback on the virtual viewings has been very positive especially from people with autism, who have preferred to be able to share the viewing with the people who support them, such as family and friends.

During the previous tenant scrutiny investigation, which focussed on the lettable standard, the panel had watched a few of the videos that were used for virtual viewings. At this time the panel felt that the videos should include more information about the state of decoration (making it clear that decorating is the responsibility of the new tenant). Also they felt that room sizes and perhaps a floor plan should be included (although it was acknowledged that room dimensions are on the Key Choices property description).

Officers said that most people who are disappointed with their new home had found repairs that needed attention or had found that they did not like the area or that their neighbours were noisy. They also said that prospective new tenants would be advised to visit the area and the home prior to signing up.

The thoughts of new tenants were requested in the survey:



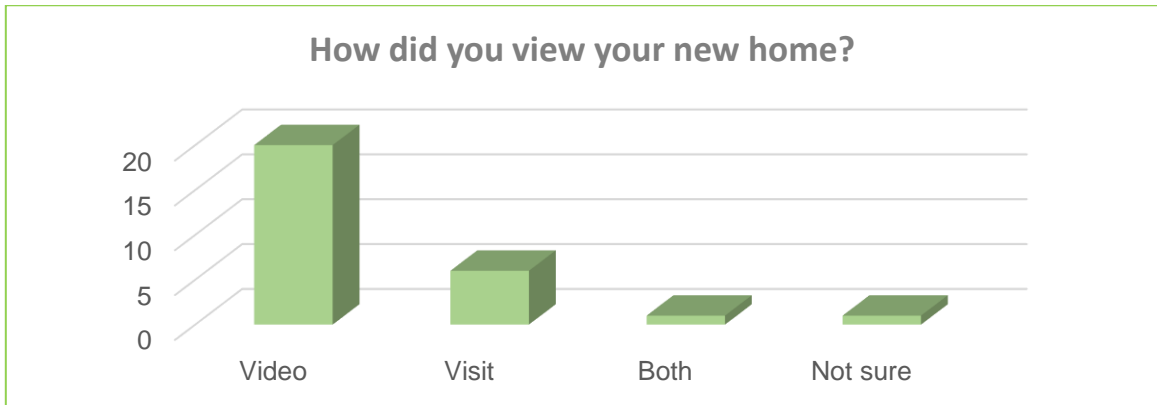
38% of respondents did not know the area that they were moving to and 7% felt that they didn't know it very well.

One person commented:

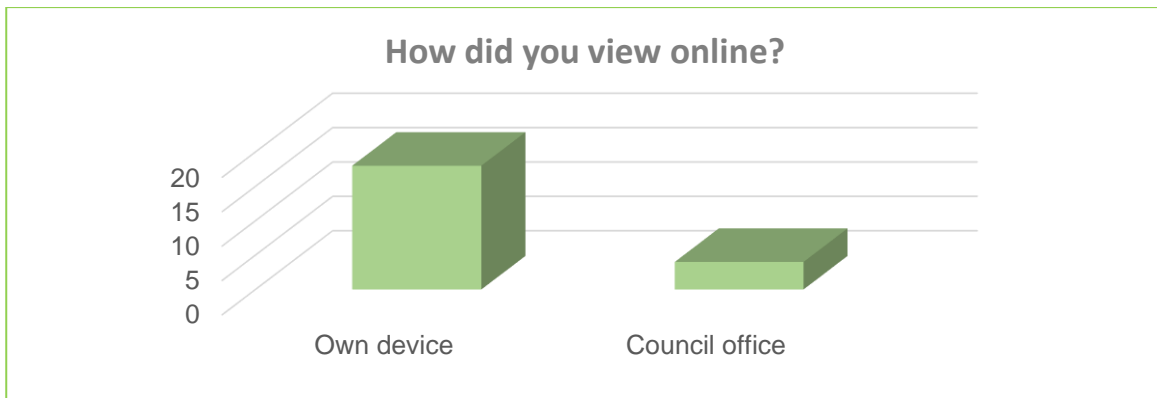
If the house hadn't been so far away from where I was living it would perhaps have been good to visit in person, not so much for the house but the area where it was. I wasn't that familiar with the area at all.



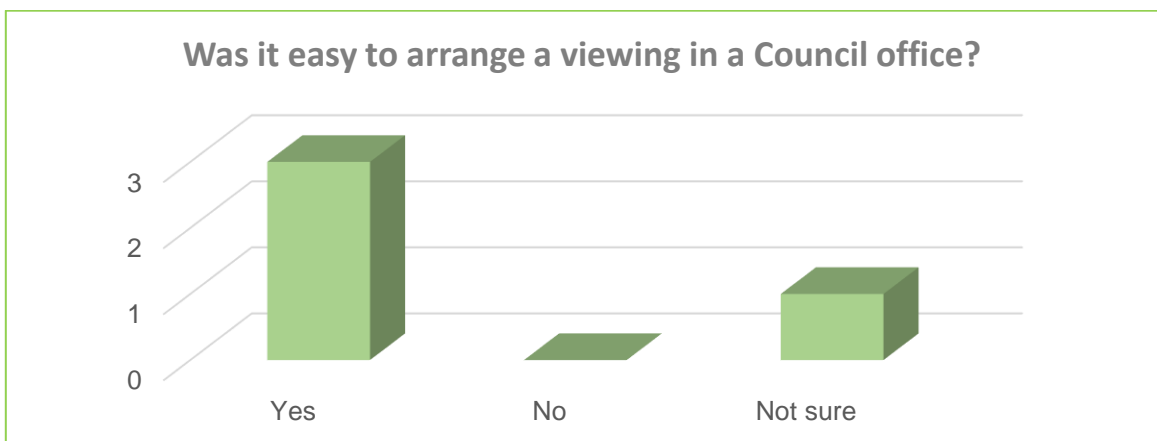
The survey of tenants moving to new homes found that 71% of all viewings took place via video:



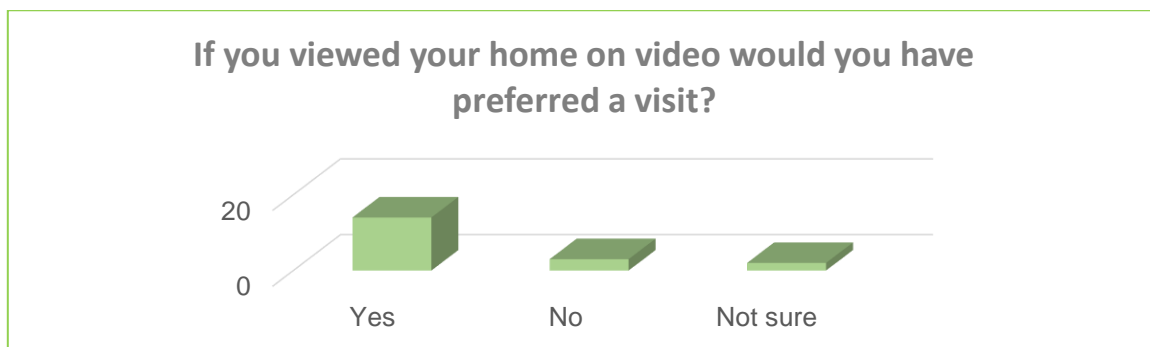
Just four people had viewed the video in a Council building with the other 17 viewing on their own device:



Those people that did view in a Council building were pleased with the service:

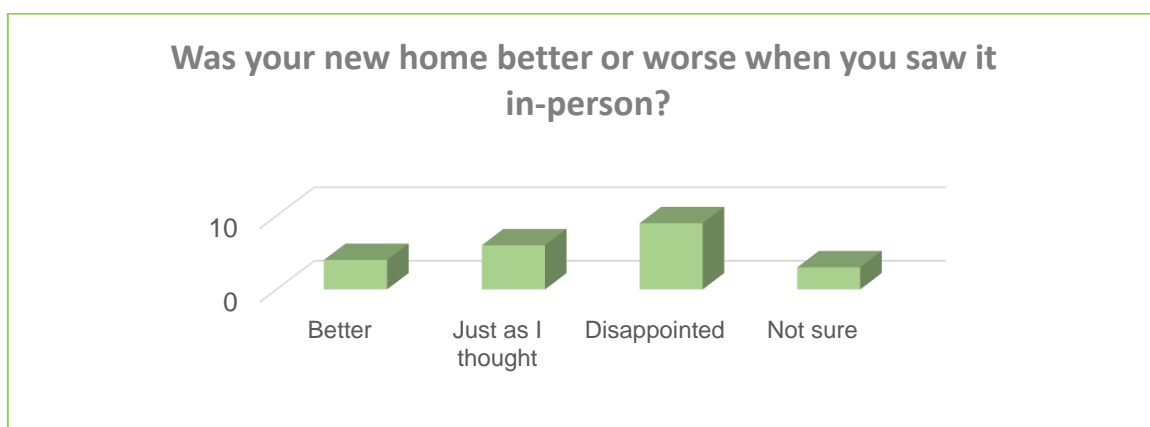


As part of the new tenant survey, a question was asked about the preference on viewing their new home:



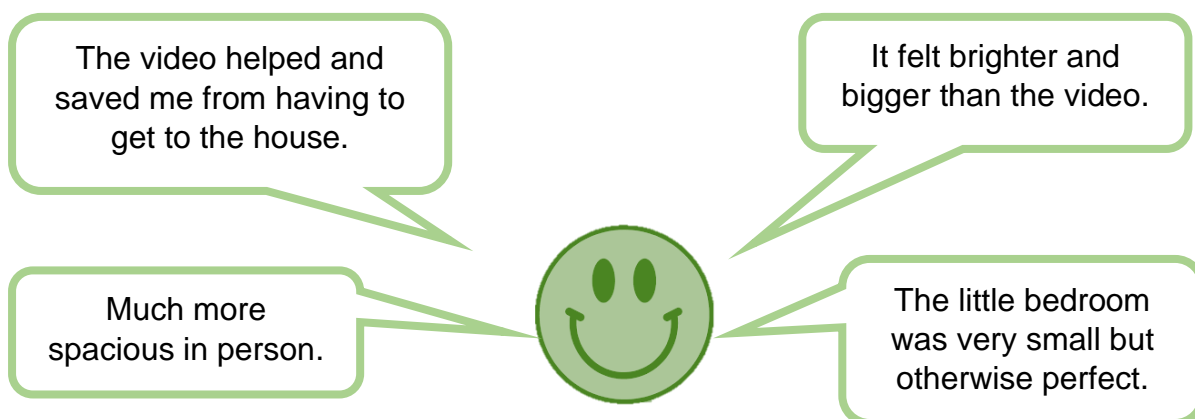
74% of people who had viewed online would have preferred an in-person viewing. This was also confirmed in the comments made by three of the respondents to the previous investigation survey, who said that a face-to-face viewing would have improved their experience of moving home.

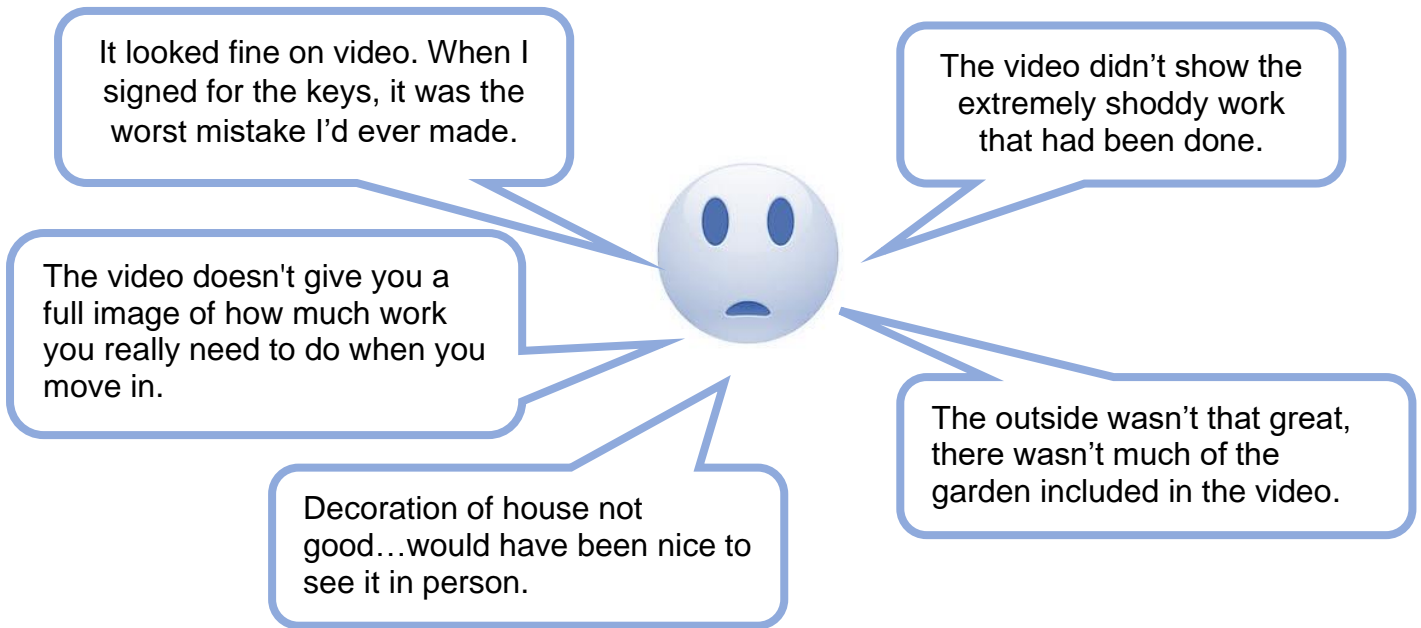
Those viewing on video were then asked how they felt about their new home when they saw it in person:



44% of respondents were disappointed with their new home.

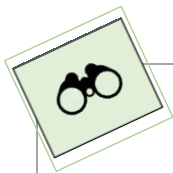
Comments made were:





The main reasons for people giving negative responses were the state of decoration and poor wall/floor surfaces.

However, when considering the satisfaction scores for new tenants, the survey found that the average score for people viewing on video was 8.5 out of 10, with people viewing in-person only scoring 5.3 out of 10.



Benchmarking with other housing providers – viewings:

St Leger	All of our viewings are in person. However, by exception we have offered video viewings for people unable to attend (i.e., in hospital/working etc). It is something we plan to introduce soon.
Berneslai	All viewings are done in person.
Wolverhampton	100% of property viewings are completed in person.

Rotherham Council is the only housing provider that is preferencing virtual viewings.

PANEL VIEWS:

- It was very positive that all relevant survey respondents found it easy to arrange an in-person viewing.
 - However, the panel felt disappointed that very few viewings took place in-person and that in-person viewings were not offered to more new tenants. It was noted that officers had said that very few people requested them, but the panel had received information from people who had tried and their request had been denied.
 - Panel members were of the opinion that the 'special requirements' part of the application form would not always make it clear to people that they could be offered an in-person viewing.
 - They also thought that some people with Mental Health needs may not have the confidence to ask for an in-person viewing.
 - It was interesting that all other housing providers who gave a response were themselves offering 100% of their viewings in person.
 - There was also some concern that officers were telling people that they should visit the area before deciding whether to sign, but that the time to visit was restricted by the sign-up deadline.
 - The panel was unable to consider the savings made by the service through restricting access to in-person viewings, as opposed to the cost of the video contract.
 - It was surprising that the satisfaction score for people having an in-person viewing though was lower than those having a virtual viewing. The panel was however aware that the survey cohort was quite small.
 - From previous viewing of the videos and the comments received from the surveys, the panel felt that the videos should make it clearer that decorating is the new tenant's responsibility and a floor plan would help people to picture the layout and size of the rooms in their prospective new home.
-

Virtual viewings re-evaluation

Following expiry of the current contract, plan to re-evaluate the policy of minimising in-person viewings and potentially offering them to ALL new tenants by:

- Carrying out a wider survey of tenants to ask if they would prefer virtual or in-person viewings.
- Costing out if virtual viewings make substantial savings when considering the cost of the video contract.

Viewings for vulnerable new tenants

- Improve the application form to provide more support to vulnerable new tenants by including questions such as to:
 - Whether the applicant needs to request an in-person viewing due to physical and /or mental health needs.
 - If the prospective new tenant needs their support worker to view the property with them.
- Allow more than 48 hours' notice for the viewing if needed to ensure that their support worker is available to attend.

Suggestions

Support workers - Make sure that vulnerable applicants can have involvement from the same support worker throughout the process.

Viewings analysis – Analyse whether there is a link between people staying longer in their new home when they have viewed in person as opposed to virtually, taking into account other factors.

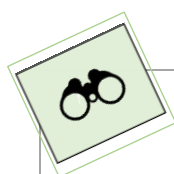
6.3 Affordability interviews

The Financial Inclusion Team was established in 2017 to improve the financial wellbeing of council tenants and residents. One of the four goals at this time and continuing into the refreshed the Financial Inclusion Plan 2023-25 is '*to work with tenants to develop an understanding of the financial responsibilities of sustaining a tenancy*'. The Financial Inclusion Team includes tenancy support staff, who provide holistic support to vulnerable tenants for as long as is required.

Every tenant who is new to Rotherham Council, or has previously had issues paying their rent, will have an affordability check interview with a member of the Financial Inclusion Team. They are also available for people who have recently had a family breakdown and need to assess what they can afford. The check includes considering:

- All essential incomes and outgoings, including utilities and food.
- Non-essential outgoings such as cigarettes, alcohol, betting, and takeaways.
- Bank statements for the past three months.
- Benefits claimed (to make sure all that they are entitled to are being claimed).

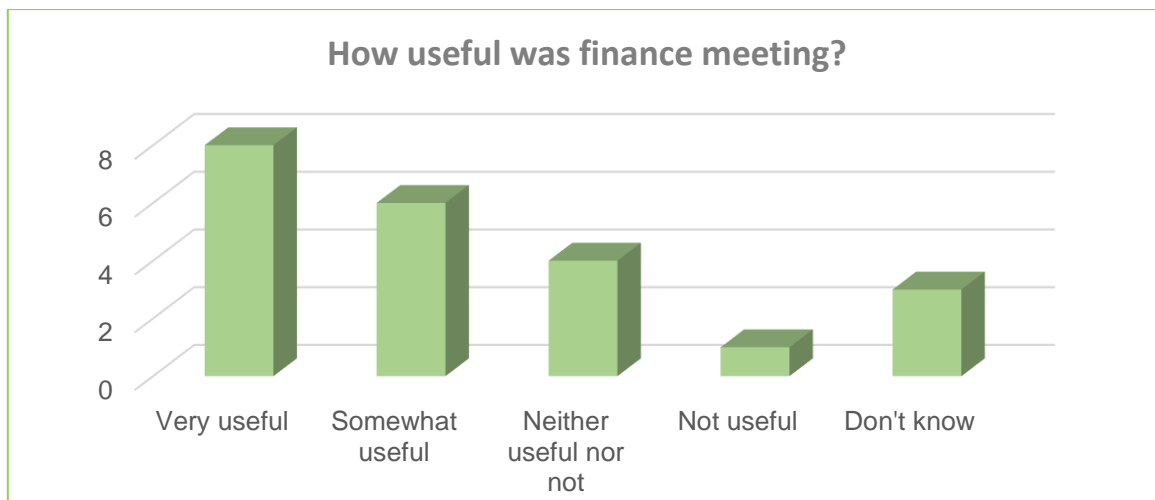
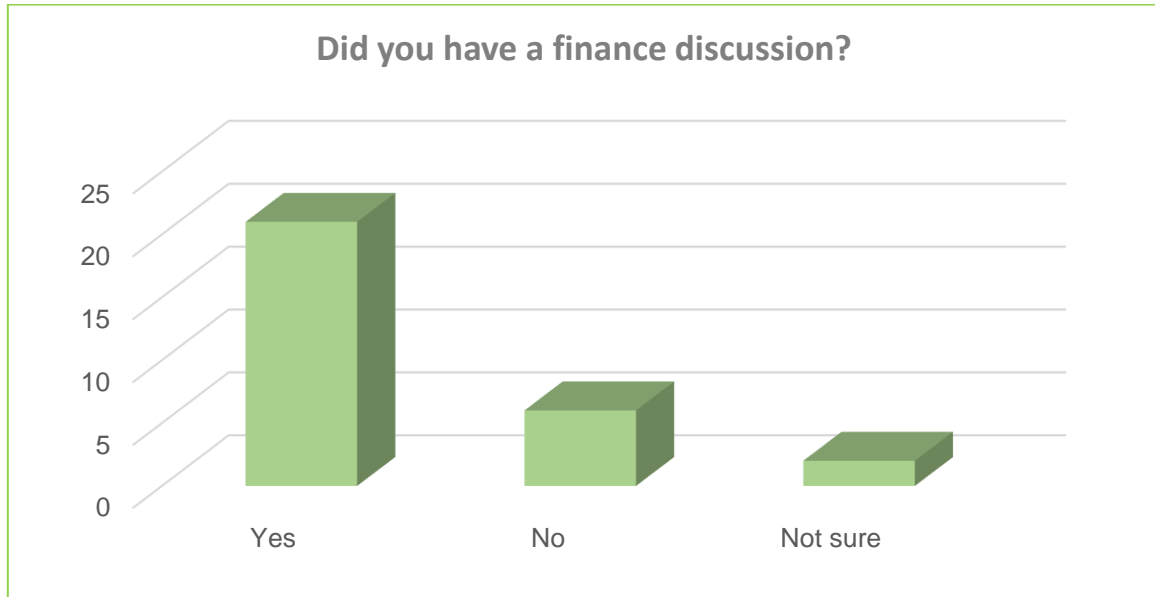
Following the interview, referrals are made to other relevant support services if required e.g. to give advice on eating well for less. More affordable tenancy options will be suggested if the property is thought to be too expensive for the applicant.



Benchmarking with other housing providers – affordability interviews:	
St Leger	Don't interview prospective tenants on affordability prior to offer, but it is part of the viewing and tenants will be supported to apply for benefits/report housing costs to Universal Credit.
Berneslai	This is on their roadmap to introduce. They would not be looking to say "no" to an applicant on the grounds of affordability but rather get a better understanding of their financial circumstances and, if necessary, put support in place to help them sustain their tenancy.
Wolverhampton	Undertakes a pre-tenancy interview with customers who are risk assessed as being the most likely to struggle to sustain their tenancies. Affordability is considered within this interview. An income and expenditure exercise is undertaken and the outcomes are discussed with the prospective tenant in order for them to make an informed decision as to whether they feel they can afford the tenancy they are in the process of being offered.

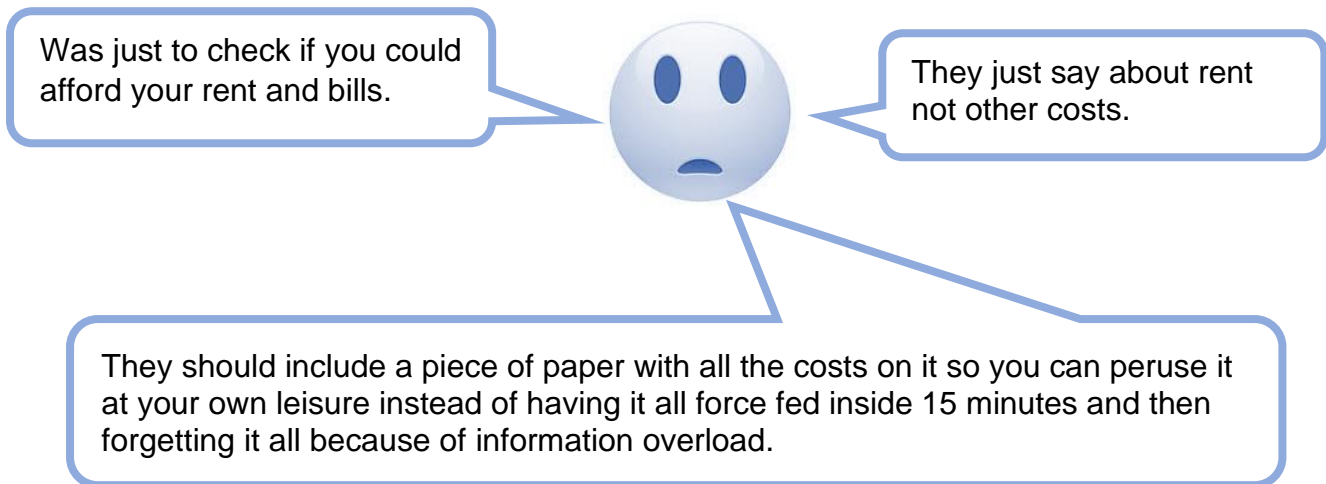
Rotherham is operating in line with Wolverhampton and on the whole has a better offer than St Leger and Berneslai for ensuring that tenancies do not fail.

From the survey:



72% of respondents said that they had a meeting with the finance team to talk about rent, bills and other costs. Of those who had attended 64% found this to be very useful. Just one person didn't find it useful and three people were unsure.

A difference was reported with the time taken for the interview with one respondent saying that their interview had only taken 15 minutes and another saying it was two hours long.



The previous survey included comments that they felt that things could have been explained better such as how to pay your rent and when it is due (three respondents). This was confirmed during this investigation with four survey respondents saying that they needed more information on how to pay their rent.

PANEL VIEWS:

- ✎ The panel was pleased that Rotherham is operating so well as compared to other housing providers, which should prevent many tenancies from failing due to affordability.
- ✎ It was also reassuring that 64% of the people attending the meeting with the Financial Inclusion Team found it to be useful.
- ✎ However, there was also some concern with the differences of opinion on the way the interview was conducted, with a variation in length from 15 minutes to two hours, and one person reporting that they only received information on their rent, not other costs.
- ✎ Panel members were also concerned that four survey respondents had said that they were still unsure how to physically pay their rent.

It was agreed that the suggestion made that there be a copy of the information discussed for people to peruse following the interview was a good idea. It was felt that the interview may sometimes be seen as 'information overload'.

Recommendation

Affordability meeting information

Provide a document after the affordability meeting with finance colleagues with all the calculations and key information, including how people can make arrangements to pay their rent.

6.4 A Place of Your Own workshop

The Council works in partnership with Rush House to provide a workshop around being ready for tenancy. This is used by both new and existing tenants to receive the information and guidance that they need to give them the best possible chance of sustaining their tenancy.

The course includes eight modules:

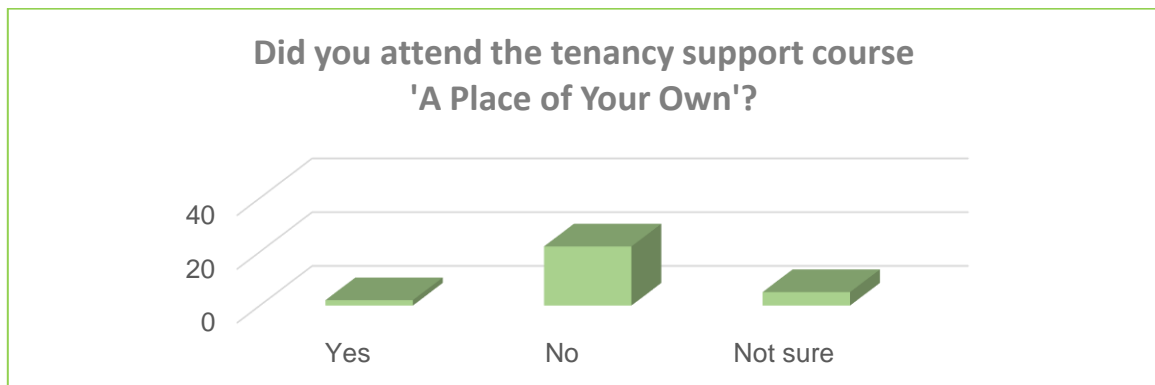
- Finding a place to live
- Tenancy rights – tenancy agreement, eviction, responsibilities, and being a good neighbour.
- Furnishing – sourcing furniture guidance and explanation of furniture package.
- Safety and security – windows, doors, contents insurance, and safety.
- Tenant – healthy eating, cooking on a budget.
- Budgeting – bills and support, under-occupancy, money advice, debt advice, employment solutions (offer from financial inclusion team)
- Financial Products
- Starting work

Once registered, the user can complete the course at their own pace; there is no time limit. It is estimated that the course will take between two and six hours. Each unit has to be completed (with some small tests) to progress further and there is an ability to contact the tutor with questions if needed. There are certificates for completion of the course.

If a tenant cannot access the course online at home, they can use the library at Riverside House.

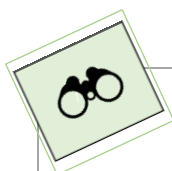
Officers reported that the training receives good feedback and is operating in line with tenant needs.

From the survey of new tenants, respondents were asked about A Place of Your Own:



Only two people said that they attended the course (10%) and 5 people weren't sure (25%). 22 (65%) people said that they hadn't attended the course.




The people who did remember attending, made the following comments:



Benchmarking with other housing providers – pre-tenancy training:

St Leger	No, we don't currently offer this.
Berneslai	No we have a Housing Coach service that engages with certain applicants prior to tenancy triggered by certain risk factors such as previous tenancy failures.
Wolverhampton	All customers are expected to view our suite of online pre-tenancy videos prior to making an application and prior to being offered a home. These include two modules on ' <i>money management</i> ' and on ' <i>managing your tenancy</i> ' (See Appendix A)

PANEL VIEWS:

-  The panel was pleased that Rotherham offered this pre-tenancy course and felt that it would be useful for the majority of new and existing tenants.
 -  Panel members wondered if there was confusion in the survey with only two people saying that they had taken part in A Place of Your Own. as the question says, 'did you attend' when it was an online course.
 -  Through reviewing the information on the Wolverhampton pre-tenancy course, it was thought that it would be useful to also include information on 'getting involved', Fire Safety' and 'Preventing Damp and Mould' in the Rotherham course.
-

Suggestion

A Place of Your Own training - Consider whether further information should be added to the 'A Place Of Your Own' modules such as fire safety, preventing damp and mould, and getting involved.

6.5 Furnished Homes Scheme

In Rotherham, the furnished homes scheme is offered to tenants who are new to a Council home. It can also be offered on a discretionary basis, to people who have previously struggled with rent payment. The scheme is in place to try to help people who are unable to furnish their new home without some assistance. Furniture packages are charged to the tenant's rent account as a lease scheme. Goods can be returned at any time e.g. if the tenant manages to find alternatives, or if they want to upgrade.

The furnished homes scheme supports the sustainable tenancies agenda by helping to reduce the number of people who end up in debt and subsequently have to hand their tenancies back.

Officers reported that the scheme is currently helping 606 new tenants and satisfaction with the scheme is improving each year.

There are four packages available:

- Bronze (up to 3 items)
- Silver (up to 5 items)
- Gold (up to 9 items)
- Platinum (up to 14 items)

Prices start at £9.96 per week for the bronze package.

Carpets and laminate can be purchased also as part of scheme at an additional cost of £10.74 per week. The cost of the scheme may be paid for through housing benefits.

Any furniture returned from the scheme is offered to second-hand shops or charity.



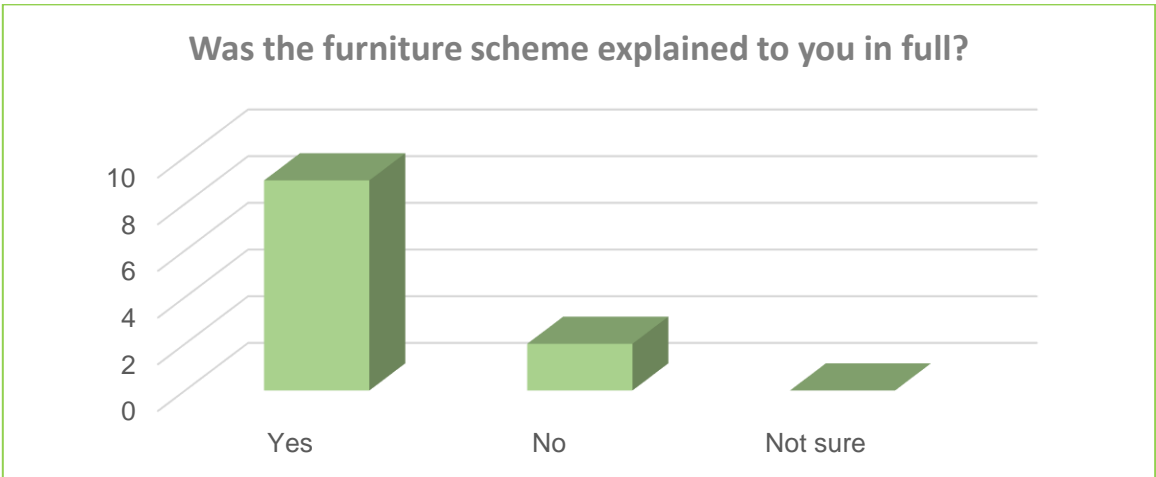
Benchmarking with other housing providers – furniture scheme:

St Leger	Offer a free scheme for tenants to take items for furniture and other small items which have been recycled from empty properties and stored locally. This includes PAT tested white goods. About to commence a pilot scheme of furnished tenancies with new tenants (from April 2024).
Berneslai	Through 'Your Homes Newcastle' – no details of prices or offer online.
Wolverhampton	No scheme.
Sheffield (from website)	Also offers iron and ironing board and vacuum cleaner as part of their scheme. The bronze package (4 – 8 items) costs £11 per week.
Nottingham (from website)	Have a substantial scheme, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White goods packages start from £6.75 per week (suitable for one-bedroomed home) • One bedroom furniture pack (5 items is £8 per week).

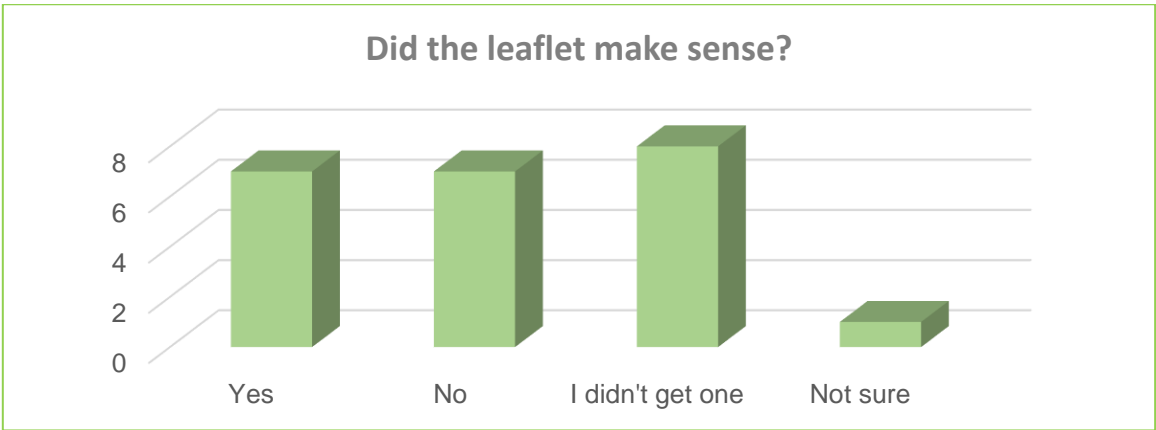
Survey responses:



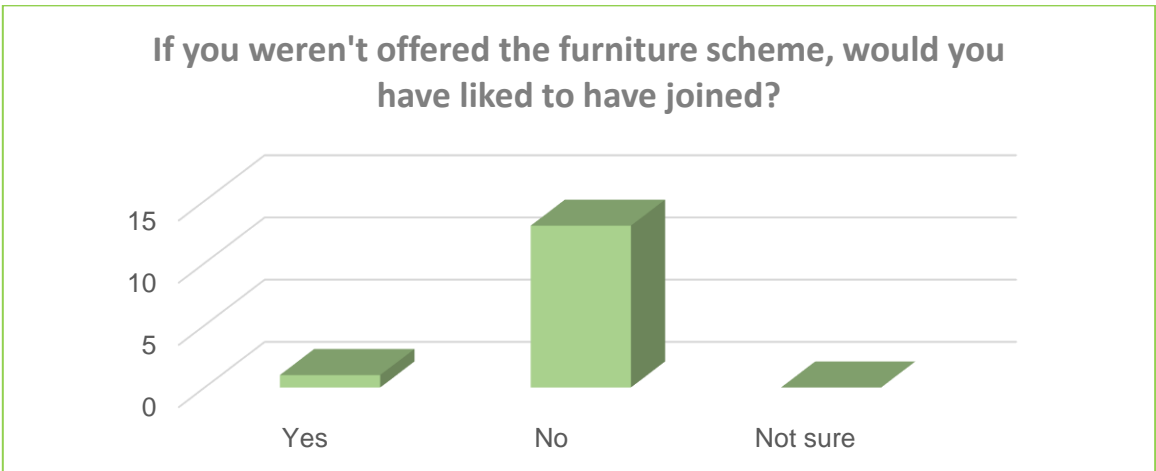
10 people from the 29 respondents (35%) had joined the furniture scheme. From the 20 tenants that were new to Rotherham Council housing, 7 had joined the scheme (also 35%).



From the 10 people joining the furniture scheme, 8 respondents (80%) felt that the scheme had been explained well to them.



For those people answering this question, 8 from 23 (35%) said that they didn't receive a leaflet. From those who did, only half of them thought that the leaflet made sense to them.



Only one person said that they would have liked to join the scheme, but that it wasn't offered to them.

One respondent said:



I don't feel that the scheme is good value for money as you are paying for the lifetime of the tenancy. It only benefits people on full benefits.

PANEL VIEWS:

- ✎ Panel members were pleased that Rotherham have a Furnished Homes scheme which helps new tenants and hopefully supports more sustainable tenancies.
- ✎ Not many panel members had heard about the furniture scheme prior to this investigation.
- ✎ One of the panel members had previously signed up for the furniture scheme and was very happy with the arrangements and explanation received.
- ✎ The panel was surprised that only 35% of new tenants that had not previously lived in a Rotherham Council home were taking advantage of the furniture scheme.
- ✎ It was concerning that only 35% of eligible tenants said that they had received the leaflet advertising the scheme. However the vast majority of people not receiving the information said that they wouldn't have joined the scheme.
- ✎ A panel discussion on the low take-up focussed on the timing of the information. It was concluded that this may be due to lack of clarity around the scheme, but may also be due to people not feeling ready to commit to a package until they had moved in and decided what furniture they wanted and could afford.
- ✎ It was also worrying that one person thought that the furniture scheme meant paying for a lifetime with no chance to 'opt-out' when circumstances changed.
- ✎ The survey also found that only half of those people receiving the leaflet thought that it made sense to them.
- ✎ The panel became aware that the furniture package can be paid for through housing benefits; however this is not advertised in the leaflet or explained fully in pre-tenancy discussions.
- ✎ There was also a view that the leaflet should contain more information on the carpets scheme and should include a separate insert or a link to the Council website to be able to see current prices.

- ✎ One panel member was aware that learning disability organisations are discouraging people from signing up to the furniture scheme and instead encouraging people to buy the items second-hand. Further information on the scheme may help these organisations to explain it to new tenants.
- ✎ There was also a view that, to sustain tenancies further down the line, the furniture package should be offered to long-standing tenants as well; personal circumstances may have changed or furniture/equipment may have broken leading to financial stress and a need for some support from this scheme.
- ✎ As compared to other similar housing providers, the Rotherham scheme was found to be more expensive than those in Sheffield and Nottingham.
- ✎ It was also noted by the panel that St Leger homes offer a free scheme for tenants to take items of furniture and other small items which have been recycled from empty properties and stored locally.

Recommendations

Clarity around the Furniture scheme

- Provide more clarity around the scheme by addition of up-to date information in the leaflets and on the website, including:
 - The current prices
 - Confirmation that the furniture package isn't a life-time commitment (participants can switch/ hand back at any time)
 - How the furniture package can be paid for from housing benefit.
- Work with learning disability organisations to let them know about the furniture scheme and the benefits.

Furniture scheme extension

Proactively extend and publicise the furniture scheme to other tenants (not just new tenants) including people who are struggling to buy new furniture and those who would like to move in first before deciding what they need/ can afford.

Suggestion

Furniture scheme - Consider extending the scheme to include vacuum cleaners, irons and ironing boards.

6.6 Other new tenant support work to improve sustainability

Welcome visit

Following the process for signing up and supporting new tenants, Council officers carry out a 'Welcome Visit' which takes place at 4-8 weeks after sign-up (90% of new tenants receive this). This can be used to identify any issues during the first few weeks of the tenancy.

Housing officers will check around the property and go through tenancy agreement again. The visit provides an opportunity to raise issues and concerns.

As part of the visit, the new tenant is asked:

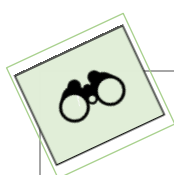
- Are you settled in your new home?
- Are there any issues with your property?
- Do you have a furnished package?
- How are you managing within your home e.g. slips and trips, floods etc.
- Is there anything you would like to achieve that you are not doing already e.g. local activities/ support?
- Do you feel safe?
- Are there any repairs that need to be reported?

If the visit identifies that the new tenant needs some support, their details will be passed to the Tenancy Support team or to other relevant agencies. The Tenancy Support team will contact the new tenant and work with them to try and find solutions to any issues that they may be raising.

The welcome visit may not take place when new tenants don't move in straight away e.g. if they want to decorate first. In these cases the welcome visit is not conducted and a check on the tenancy may be made anytime within the following 12 months.

The details from welcome visits are entered onto a database, but it was unclear how the service analyses this data for any recurring themes.

Other support



Benchmarking with other housing providers – other support work:

St Leger







Have a large Tenancy Sustainability team, which comprises of Tenancy Support, Financial Inclusion, Mental Health Navigators, and Income Management. Tenants are offered a range of help from across the team including support with benefits (applying and appealing), applying for grants, and other financial assistance in cases of hardship, credit union services, and foodbanks.

Have a 'Local Assistance Scheme' which gives assistance with daily living expenses, such as food

	<p>vouchers, energy vouchers, emergency travel costs, and clothing vouchers.</p> <p>Support with low level mental health issues is also provided as well as support to aid better sleep and coping strategies. If mental health problems have escalated, tenants are helped to navigate the support available to them.</p>
Berneslai	<p>Have Housing Coaches who will work with potential new tenants from the point they are awarded priority on the housing register to around 6 weeks after their tenancy starts. Housing coaches help to make sure that applicants are ready to hold a tenancy and help them search and apply for suitable properties. They then make sure they know how to care for their home, report repairs, pay bills etc.</p> <p>Online they have an 'Information for new tenants' section, which includes very clear advice on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • moving in what to expect; • moving checklist; • rent (including how to pay it); • insurance; • gas and electricity; • repairs; • safety; • your estate; • bins etc.
Wolverhampton	<p>Tenants are supported in the early months of their tenancy by their Tenancy and Leasehold Officers in conjunction with any external support agencies who they are already working with or have been referred to during the offer process.</p>
Waverley Housing (from website)	<p>Identify and help people who may be struggling with their tenancies through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletters including information on welfare benefit changes, furniture schemes. • Providing energy advice • Receiving feedback from trades people or other organisations visiting homes to highlight any issues/ obvious difficulties • Offering the use of computers in the housing office for people to use to submit welfare benefit claims etc.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operating a Tenant Reward Scheme which rewards positive behaviours.
	Dacorum Housing (from website)	Use the 'Tenant Academy' as a way of building life skills for tenants and exploring their aspirations beyond their home e.g. budgeting, DIY, and decorating.
	Kirklees (from website)	Have clear guidance online for new tenants to refer to.

PANEL VIEWS:

-  The panel were happy with support provided for new tenants by the Rotherham Tenancy Support team and Financial Inclusion Team on the whole. The information from other housing providers included some other good ideas but the panel felt that most of these were also offered by Rotherham Council.
 -  Panel members noted that there was no way of measuring new tenant satisfaction or registering any issues for them until the welcome visit. They were keen to ensure that information on how to contact the Council with any problems before the welcome visit was made clear to new tenants.
 -  It was a concern for the panel that 10% of people do not receive a welcome visit and are not given the opportunity to feedback on the process, how they are settling in, and other issues.
 -  Panel members liked the idea from Waverley Housing about having a feedback scheme from trades people or other visiting organisations to be able to highlight and issues and difficulties for tenants in between housing officer visits.
 -  The details from welcome visits are entered onto a database, but it was unclear how the service analyses this data for any recurring themes including any issues with new tenant support.
 -  The panel felt that it was important that welcome visit feedback is used to highlight trends in new tenant concerns that may lead to tenancies failing e.g. not accessing local community support.
-

Recommendation

Welcome visit feedback

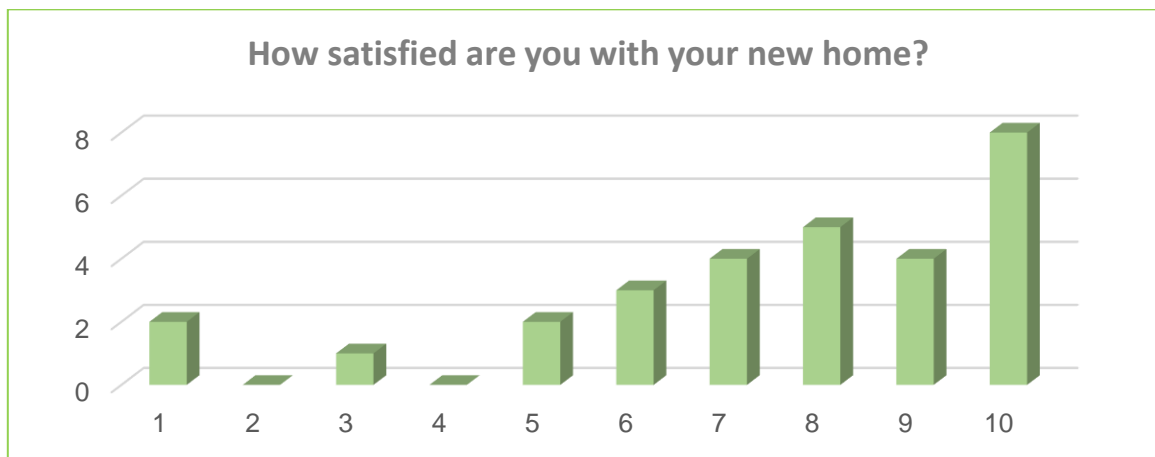
Make sure that feedback from the welcome visits on what could have been better for the tenant is collated and shared with the voids team on a regular basis.

6.7 Measuring new tenant satisfaction

Rotherham Council do not routinely conduct surveys of their new tenants, to measure satisfaction, and to raise any issues around how they could be supported better to make their tenancy more sustainable. This information is usually gathered during the welcome visit.

However, a one-off survey is due to be conducted in the near future across all council tenants, which may include questions on new tenancies.

The tenant scrutiny panel's survey of new tenants found that 21 people scored their new home at or above 7 out of 10. This represents 72% of new tenants:



Further breakdown found that:

- For people who said that this was their first home, the average satisfaction score was 7.9 out of 10.
- For people where it wasn't their first home, the average score dropped to 6.6 out of 10.

Some of the positive comments received were:

Peaceful area. Love it. Best decision I've ever made

Very happy with house and grateful to RMBC.



Very happy as close to family too. Also the Neighbourhood Centre has helped me settle into the area and make new friendships.'

There were 12 negative comments and the majority related to decorating (3), repairs (6), and bins (3). Here are some examples:

Left without a toilet downstairs. Half a kitchen, no cooker with 3 children, 1 being disabled.... kitchen ceiling coming down, leaking taps....no hot water tap working in kitchen.... absolutely disgusted.

I'm still waiting, 3 months into living here, for my bin to be delivered, even though 3 different people have said they're sorting it

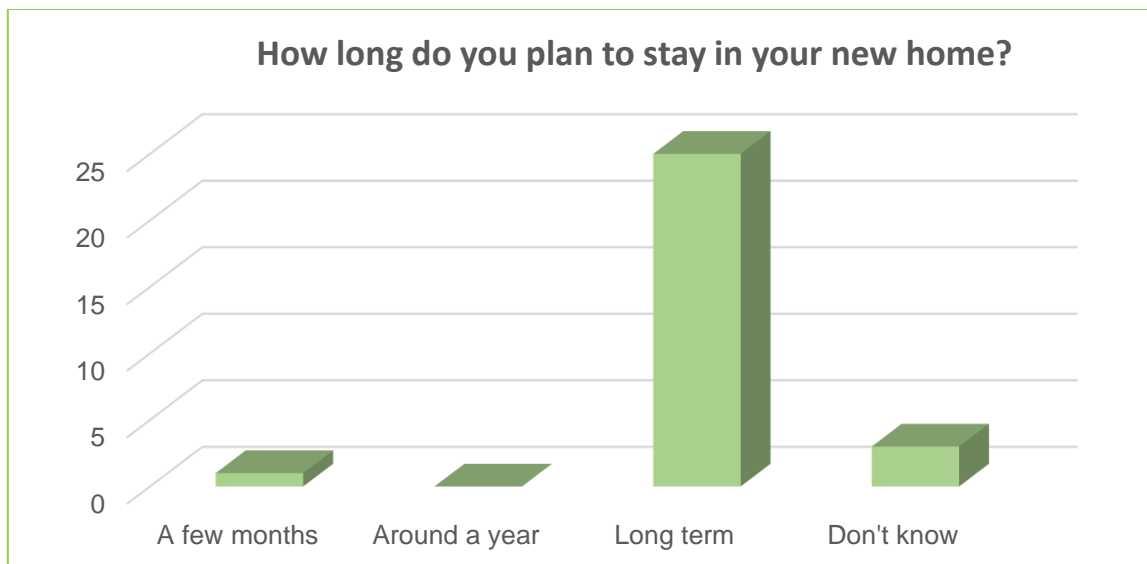
Garden is a complete mess with glass and lots of other debris all over the place it's unsafe the fence is all broken and missing panels I feel the council should at least make it safe before a tenant moves in.



I love the house etc. however the state of the walls and garden has been left in is shocking.

There really should be a grace period to allow for decorating, had to pay rent up front even though the house was not habitable until 20 days later when it was finally decorated due to full time work commitments.

The panel compared the satisfaction levels to the likelihood of the tenant staying for a substantial time in their new home:



The vast majority of people wanted to make their new home their 'forever home'. The one person who said that they would only stay a few months, did not feel that the property was safe and gave a satisfaction rating of 5 out of 10.

Surprisingly:

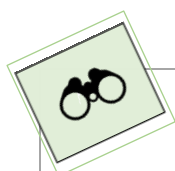
- The three people who said that they were dissatisfied with their new home still said that they intended to stay in the property long-term.
- Knowing the area did not make people happier with their new home. The three people who knew the area gave an average score of 2/10 for satisfaction.

PANEL VIEWS:

- ✍ It was concluded from the survey responses that people could see past short-term issues such as the need for repairs and better decoration, and knew that they would love their home once these issues were remedied.
 - ✍ The panel was surprised that knowing the area did not make people happier about their new home and that people where it was not their first home expressed more disappointment.
 - ✍ It was clear from the survey responses that poor decoration, repairs, and bins were the biggest issues to be tackled when people were moving into their new homes and that improved communication around these matters may help with increasing new tenant satisfaction.
 - ✍ The panel was disappointed that more regular surveys are not conducted with new tenants to use the results to review the service offered and make improvements to the support offered to new tenants.
-

6.8 Measuring sustainability



It wasn't clear how Rotherham Council measures the sustainability of tenancies. Monitoring was in place for tenancies ended by the council i.e. evictions. This was reported as 13 in 2021/22 as compared to 97 in 2018/19, which was a great improvement. It was understood that there may be a measure for the number of tenancies sustained at six months after intervention, following the threat of eviction, but this data was not made available to the panel.



Benchmarking with other housing providers – measuring sustainability of tenancies:	
St Leger	Monitor what proportion of tenancies are still sustained 6 months after their support has ended. Target is 97.3% (currently at 99.04%).

	Berneslai	Do have a report for this however it is not currently being monitored; it is something they are looking to utilise in the near future.
	Wolverhampton	Do not monitor average length of tenancy.
	Waverley Homes (from website)	Have been measuring the length of tenancies since 2019 by recording the percentage of new tenancies lasting for more than 12 months. However they recognise that there are a lot of external factors and that longer tenancies are not always attributable to their support and interventions.

PANEL VIEWS:

-  It was unclear whether Rotherham Council did measure the length of tenancies or not, but panel members liked the approach of both St Leger and Waverley Housing in measuring how long their tenancies last to help them to review sustainability support.
 -  The panel appreciated that there are a variety of reasons for failed tenancies and that it is difficult to offer sufficient support to prevent them from failing in some situations. However, it would be useful to measure the length of new tenancies to allow for review and ideas for enhancing new tenant support further.
-

Recommendation

Measuring sustainability

Ensure that the length and sustainability of tenancies is monitored and reported such as measuring how many tenants remain in their new homes for 12 months.

7. Recommendations

Recommendations (in order of priority):

Priority ranking	Recommendation	Page Number
A	<p>Affordability meeting information</p> <p>Provide a document after the affordability meeting with finance colleagues with all the calculations and key information, including how people can make arrangements to pay their rent.</p>	27
B	<p>Key choices description</p> <p>Manage new tenant expectations by providing additional information on the key choices website, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ That the property is unfurnished and is likely to need decoration. ○ A plan of the layout and room sizes (rather than a list of dimensions). 	16
C	<p>Virtual viewings re-evaluation</p> <p>Following expiry of the current contract, plan to re-evaluate the policy of minimising in-person viewings and potentially offering them to ALL new tenants by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Carrying out a wider survey of tenants to ask if they would prefer virtual or in-person viewings. ○ Costing out if virtual viewings make substantial savings when considering the cost of the video contract. 	23
D	<p>Viewings for vulnerable new tenants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Improve the application form to provide more support to vulnerable new tenants by including questions such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Whether the applicant needs to request an in-person viewing due to physical and /or mental health needs. ○ If the prospective new tenant needs their support worker to view the property with them. ➤ Allow more than 48 hours' notice for the viewing if needed to ensure that their support worker is available to attend. 	23

E	<p>Welcome pack</p> <p>Provide a welcome pack for new tenants that is handed out at sign up. The pack should include information such as neighbourhood / community activities, how to report a repair, and advice about damp and mould. It should also give details specific to that home such as how to work the boiler, location of the stop tap, and days for bin collections.</p>	16
F	<p>Welcome visit feedback</p> <p>Make sure that feedback from the welcome visits on what could have been better for the tenant is collated and shared with the voids team on a regular basis.</p>	36
G	<p>Clarity around the Furniture scheme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provide more clarity around the scheme by addition of up-to date information in the leaflets and on the website, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The current prices. ○ Confirmation that the furniture package isn't a life-time commitment (participants can switch/ hand back at any time). ○ How the furniture package can be paid for from housing benefit. ➤ Work with learning disability organisations to let them know about the furniture scheme and the benefits. 	33
H	<p>Furniture scheme extension</p> <p>Proactively extend and publicise the furniture scheme to other tenants (not just new tenants) including people who are struggling to buy new furniture and those who would like to move in first before deciding what they need/ can afford.</p>	33
I	<p>Measuring sustainability</p> <p>Ensure that the length and sustainability of tenancies is monitored and reported such as measuring how many tenants remain in their new homes for 12 months.</p>	40

Suggestions

1.	Support workers Make sure that vulnerable applicants can have involvement from the same support worker throughout the process.	23
2.	Viewings analysis Analyse whether there is a link between people staying longer in their new home when they have viewed in—person as opposed to virtually, taking into account other factors.	23
3.	A Place of Your Own training Consider whether further information should be added to the 'A Place Of Your Own' modules such as fire safety, preventing damp and mould, and getting involved.	29
4.	Furniture scheme Consider extending the scheme to include vacuum cleaners, irons and ironing boards.	33

8. Appendices

A – Benchmarking questions to other housing providers

B – Wolverhampton ‘Are You Ready’ modules

Benchmarking questions – Support to New Tenants**Preparation for new tenancies**

1. Do you interview prospective new tenants to check on affordability? If yes, please could you tell us the content of the interview.
2. Do new tenants have to attend any tenancy support training prior to applying for/ occupying their new home? If so, please give details/ programme?

Viewings

3. Approximately how many of your viewings are in person (%age)?
4. Do you also have 'virtual viewings (video)'? If so, does this prove a cheaper option? Are new tenants happy with this approach?
5. If you have both in person and virtual viewings, how do you decide who gets which viewing?

Furniture scheme

6. Do you run a furniture scheme or similar? If so, please could you provide details?

Timescales

7. How long does it usually take from the void works being completed to a new tenant moving in?

Sustainability

8. How sustainable are your tenancies? Do you monitor the average length of tenancies? If so, please could you tell us what the average is and if there is a target.
9. Do you do any other work on improving sustainability of tenancies? Is there any other support you offer to new tenants?

Wolverhampton 'Are you ready' modules

Module One - Money management:

- Video One 'Planning – have you thought about what you need and how much it will cost you?'
- Video Two 'The costs of running a home'
- Video Three 'Paying your rent'
- Video Four 'Supporting you'

Module Two – Housing and Managing your tenancy:

- Video One 'Your tenancy agreement'
- Video Two 'Your responsibilities as a Tenant'
- Video Three 'Our responsibilities to you'
- Video Four 'Getting involved'
- Video Five 'Fire Safety'
- Video Six 'Preventing damp and mould'

Declaration that they have watched all the videos and understood them.

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