

# HAT Update

August 2008



## Starter tenancies

We get many queries on the use of starter tenancies because there can be the perception that they lead to more failed tenancies so people are looking for guidance on how to manage starter tenancies to give the best opportunity for tenancies to succeed. In many cases we have found that starter tenancies have been successful because landlords have applied intensive housing management and the use of advice and support services early in the tenancy.

We have recently produced one of our topic briefings on this subject to generate further discussion. The topic briefing can be found at [www.housingcorp.gov.uk/hat](http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/hat) but here's a few of our tips on developing a policy on the use of starter tenancies. In our view, you need to be clear on:

- Why a starter tenancy policy is being considered. You should be able to evidence the need for the policy through data analysis and resident consultation. The aims should be clearly stated so their impact can be measured.
- The consultation with your residents and local authority partners - to discuss the wider strategic drive behind their introduction and the principles of the scheme to get their input. Ensure your Regulation Account Manager at the Housing Corporation is informed.
- The legal and regulatory framework – so your policy and procedure comply.
- Where starter tenancies will be used – for smaller geographical areas, a specific housing development or across the whole stock – and for all types of tenancy breach or will rent arrears be excluded?
- The support that can be offered to tenants and when this will be available – both internal and external support/signposting. The responsibility / expectation around tenants' access to services.
- Who has responsibility for delivering this service within the organisation – are they are properly trained and skilled. What other resources could be called upon? Who will manage this process? How will its operation be fed into the management structures?
- The visit patterns and visit milestones – setting out clearly the nature and scope of the visit. You will need to agree standard documentation.
- How you will effectively communicate the requirements around the conditions of tenancy to all new tenants.
- What constitutes a breach of tenancy and what should be the appropriate action taken.
- On the process for action where a continuing breach occurs.

- The process for making the decision not to confirm a tenancy and the sign off required.
- The legal process and steps required to take back possession of property.
- The review / appeals process.
- Links to the local authority at the earliest stage where a tenancy is being questioned so that joint support and future planning can be undertaken.
- How you plan to monitor and record actions and progress at an operational and management level especially around impact on tenancy sustainment.
- How you will review the starter tenancy policy. A review of the impact of policies should be reported at least every three years to the association's Board to decide whether they should continue.

### Drafting starter tenancy agreements

- Don't include rights that are not required to be given.
- Consider whether to terminate on the basis of arrears.
- Use plain English.
- Check the robustness of your agreement.
- Follow the style of your existing tenancy agreements (unless they are out of date).

### Drafting starter tenancy procedures

- Keep it short and simple.
- Always keep in mind the 12 month time limit when fixing timetables and next actions.
- Build in early and late stage starter tenancy visits which look at the full range of "support" services that are available both in the locality but also through national schemes.
- Include a standard s21 notice / Notice Requiring Possession.
- Explain the rules for the service of s21 notice carefully.
- Set out general criteria for termination.

### Creating an appeals / review process

- Build on what you already have in place.
- Decide your appeal structure - Senior Officers, Board members, etc.
- Consider if tenant board members want to sit on appeals.
- Provide training to prospective panel members; run a mock panel.
- Create standard paperwork and decision letters, with the ability to tailor where necessary.

These are our views but please have a look at the topic briefing and come back to us with your views, comments and examples of how you use starter tenancies.

## Regional housing association homelessness champions

The Housing Corporation and Communities and Local Government will shortly be seeking housing associations to play the role of regional champions to further progress the dissemination of good practice on approaches to homelessness. To give you some idea about what we may be looking for, a housing association regional champion should:

- Have demonstrated a commitment to homelessness prevention across the organisation;
- Have in place a Homelessness Action Plan and a Homelessness Champion;
- Be able to evidence positive relationships with local authorities and active engagement in their homeless strategy reviews and other homelessness prevention activities;
- Be involved in sub regional / regional activity where in place; and
- Demonstrate innovation / good practice / initiative in the prevention of homelessness.

There will be some funding available to help Regional Champions to offer support and guidance to other housing associations in order to assist them (and their partners) improve their work in prevention and administration of homelessness.

Each Regional Champion will work with the Homelessness Action Team to draw up a work programme with a minimum commitment of 10 days, including a showcase event.

We know that there's much good work going on so we hope that many of you will want to showcase your successes and help others further develop their approaches. We'll let you know as soon as we are ready to invite expressions of interest in being Champions.

## Engaging with housing associations

This update is really aimed at Homelessness Champions in housing associations. However, we know that it is read by many others, including people working for local authorities. We attend many meetings organised by local authorities trying to engage their local associations in work on homelessness. We see some very mixed success in these meetings.

Think about how events are organised. It is best to avoid the events where it looks as if the associations are being 'called in to be told by the local authority'. You want to achieve genuine partnership working with real buy in from those attending. The meetings or events, therefore, need to be useful to those attending rather than being seen as half a day out of the diary to keep the local authority happy. Some practical tips:

- Try to get someone from an association to chair the event;
- Ask a local housing association to host the event;
- Some time spent analysing the available data can prove to be very valuable. Often housing associations will not fully understand the homelessness pressures facing a local authority. Some basic information about the number of people approaching the authority for assistance together with a breakdown by age, household type and reasons for

homelessness can be a good start. If this information is well presented housing associations can start to think how they can contribute.

- Ask associations to talk about their existing good practice and what they identify as issues for the future;
- An outside speaker can help to give an alternative view. The Homelessness Action Team can give a good overview of the issues for associations. An example of good practice in another area can help to get people thinking.
- Give lots of notice of meetings and suggest the key topics to be discussed, possibly asking people to do some preparation for the meeting by looking at their own data and asking round their staff. This helps to get people thinking about the issues before the meeting.
- You shouldn't aim to have your meetings too often. Most associations will probably have a number of these meetings to attend so they will just not turn up if they are too often.
- Send around minutes and any follow up papers quickly after a meeting. If you have agreed actions at a meeting you need to maintain that impetus by quickly following it up.

These are our views but we are keen to hear what has worked well around the country. Please contact us with your comments and examples.

## Events

These are some of the events being organised that may be of interest to those working around homelessness. If you know of future events please let us know so we can include them.

<b>CIH: Young people and sustainable tenancies</b> London, 16 <sup>th</sup> September 2008 Leeds, 25 <sup>th</sup> September 2008
<b>Lime Legal's Choice Based Lettings Conference: the New Statutory Guidance</b> London, 19 <sup>th</sup> September 2008
<b>Northern Housing Consortium: Preventing Homelessness for the long term</b> York, 1 <sup>st</sup> October 2008
<b>NHF Tackling Homelessness: Prevention and Partnerships Conference</b> London, 2 <sup>nd</sup> October 2008
<b>Lime Legal: Mortgage possession conference</b> London, 3 <sup>rd</sup> October 2008
<b>CIH Lettings and Homelessness Conference</b> Alton Towers Resort, 18 <sup>th</sup> - 20 <sup>th</sup> November 2008

## Contact us

We are out and about most of the time so it is best to catch us on our mobiles or by email.

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You can also find some of our information, including our homelessness toolkit, action plan template and topic briefings at [www.housingcorp.gov.uk/hat](http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/hat).