

**Tenant Scrutiny Panel Report**  
**East Devon District Council**  
**Mobile Support Officers (MSOs)**  
**Lines of Communication and Boundaries**  
**September 2019**

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## **Who we are**

We are the Tenant Scrutiny Panel made up of 4 tenants. The aim of this Panel is to give the members the formal opportunity to take part in strategic performance monitoring and service reviews.

The Panel will constantly demonstrate East Devon District Council's commitment to tenant involvement.

## **What we do**

We investigate selected topics and report recommendations to the Housing Review Board on our findings. Whilst we are independent of the Council, we liaise with officers and tenants to gather information. This enables us to offer a balanced perspective in supporting the Housing Service to regulate and improve its performance.

## **Why we chose to scrutinise Mobile Support Officers (MSO's). Their lines of communication and boundaries.**

As tenants in supported housing we were aware that the role of MSO's meant very different things to different people, so we felt that clarification was needed.

## **How we did our investigations**

We prepared a plan:

During a meeting of the scrutiny panel we developed an action plan with the following objectives:

- ☐ To scrutinise the function and performance of the Mobile Support Officer (MSO).
- ☐ To focus on the lines of communication
- ☐ The effectiveness or otherwise of the support provided by the MSO to the tenants
- ☐ To understand the boundaries of the role of MSO and the restrictions applied.

## **In order to achieve these objectives we did the following:**

- ☐ Had face to face meetings with MSO's
- ☐ Sent a questionnaire to those MSOs who could not attend our meeting
- ☐ Face to face meetings with: Senior Housing Support Officer, Support Services Manager, Landlord Services Manager
- ☐ Discussed boundaries identified and defined parameters
- ☐ Discussed whether support services were able to make best use of MSOs knowledge of tenants
- ☐ We looked at available policies
  - o Landlord disabled adaptation policy
  - o EDDC Allocations policy

- ☐ Process and procedure for offering supported accommodation (Feb 2019)
- ☐ Homelessness – Combined Eastern and Southern Hub-Assessment Form (Oct 2017)
- ☐ Interviewed tenants
- ☐ Performance information – numbers of bank and part time staff
  - o Performance information was also derived from the interviews
- ☐ Available training opportunities for staff
- ☐ Investigations based on personal experience on the part of the scrutiny panel
- ☐ Job descriptions for MSOs, MSO supervisor, Home Safeguard Manager, Senior Housing Support Officer, Allocations Manager, Team Leader, Landlord Services Manager

### **Desired outcomes**

- ☐ To obtain a complete picture of the effectiveness of MSOs.
- ☐ To identify whether any improvements should be made
- ☐ Whether communications need to be improved
- ☐ To ensure that nebulous boundaries are better defined

### **Helps:**

All interviewees at first were apprehensive about the scrutiny process but very soon realised that the scrutiny panel was able to help and support.

### **Hindrances:**

It was apparent from the start that there was a wide and varied interpretation of the role of MSOs both on the part of the MSOs and tenants.

### **What we found**

Following our plan we organised face to face interviews with:

#### **1: MSOs – There are 21 MSOs in total,**

- ☐ Number of MSOs we directly interviewed 8
- ☐ Number of replies we received from those who were not present at the interview 7

### **We gathered the following information from their responses:**

The three month rotation was controversial. All agreed that the hand-over from one MSO to another should be well managed and all relevant information passed on. This was not always happening. There was concern about the constant changes made which they were not made aware of. This led to confusion especially when they had to deal with professional bodies on behalf of the tenants in their care.

(For example the Process and Procedure for offering supported accommodation document. Feb 2019).

They all agreed that at the hand over at the end of 3 months there must be a sharing of information. This must be an important part of the system if it were going to be successful. They felt that there was a need for access to a central information system that they could refer to in order to do their work efficiently. They were frustrated with management.

They found their Job description was not clear and therefore open to misinterpretation

Most of their time was taken up with „chasing “i.e. repair, adaptations etc.

They thought that there was an expectation for them to do things outside of their training. The biggest problem was that they were not trained to deal with mental health issues.

They expressed the view that Allocations worked in isolation and not with MSOs. This problem manifested itself when MSOs had to deal with issues caused by tenants being placed in inappropriate accommodation.

They had very good communication with their teams but not with Line Management. They accepted that their daily routine was diverse but felt that, in some cases, performance was inconsistent due to misinterpretation of roles.

When asked how things could be improved, they suggested that a list of their responsibilities should be issued to tenants in order to clarify misunderstandings.

In conclusion: we were very impressed by their enthusiasm, their willingness to give us their time and for expressing their views so openly.

## **2. MSOs Line Manager. Senior Housing Support Officer**

Her response to the pre-prepared questions (see appendix 2)

She was very concerned that her area of responsibility was too wide for her to cover effectively. There was little time to make meaningful personal contact with her team of MSOs so she mostly used email.

She met her team only once a month. This barely seems sufficient

- a) to act in a supervisory role or
- b) to evaluate the performance of each MSO.

She felt that there was not enough contact with the rest of the Housing Department particularly Allocations. Inappropriately housed tenants gave the MSOs many time consuming problems to solve.

She realised that the MSOs were unhappy about their lack of training for mental health issues and spent a lot of time trying to find appropriate courses. She found adequate funding and time her main problem.

She felt that she was well supported by her team whereas they, on the other hand, felt they could support each other better and more easily.

Though we are aware that this position is un-manned, the above issues should be considered when the next person is appointed.

## **3. Support Services Manager**

Pre-prepared questions (appendix 2)

We reviewed the Job Description for this post and were made aware that MSOs are a very small part of this management role. However, tenants in supported housing are probably the most vulnerable and need the services of Home Safeguard more than most.

Communication with MSOs Her first comment was that it was not always easy to contact MSOs. There is a very good system in operation which ensures that information on tenants is kept up to date. Though confidentiality is important, the MSOs have a reliable source should they need it.

Every year the data of sheltered residents is checked. This is done in co-ordination with MSOs.

This was a very impressive interview where all questions were answered in detail and she came very well prepared. She was most helpful.

#### **4. Landlord Services Manager (LSM)**

Just one of the Landlord Services Manager's responsibilities is Support Services which includes MSOs. The width of the responsibility is vast.

Feedback indicates that a chain of command needs to be put in place and made accountable because without it the pressure on staff is immense. (Even for part timers). The issues, faced because there is no chain of command, were not being taken seriously which resulted in unnecessary stress and pressure on staff. Too much is being asked of too few people.

We appreciated the time spent with the Panel considering all her other responsibilities. She was very accommodating and supplied all the reference material we required.

#### **5. Allocations**

We asked to meet Allocations because the MSOs thought that this was an area where they felt they had no input. A misplaced tenant gave them a lot of extra work. It caused unnecessary unrest, ructions, unsettled people and conflict/argument amongst established residents. This resulted in MSOs trying to resolve these conflicts in addition to their normal jobs and responsibilities.

#### **What we hoped to establish**

Whether enough consideration was given to the community in which a tenant was to be accommodated.

In responding to our questions he presented us with a document Process Procedures for Supported Accommodation. We were surprised to be presented with this document as it had not been mentioned by any MSO. Had this not been in existence it would have been one of our recommendations.

This document (written in Feb 2019) needs to be better circulated. (This document is available for inspection upon request).

A second document Eastern and Southern Hub Assessment Form was also presented and an Equal Opportunities document.

This was a very detailed form which assessed a tenant who was homeless. If an application is from a person who is not a Council tenant, then an MSO would not be able to supply any relevant information. However, their knowledge of the community into which the tenant was going to be placed is vitally important and they should be consulted.

With the current situation of lack of suitable housing the Allocations team have a very responsible and difficult job.

They conscientiously „vet“ incoming applications and apply the rules fairly.

## **6. Tenants Interviews:**

We interviewed as many tenants as we could. Some formally, others informally.

Key points raised:

We discovered that MSO mean different things to different people. A small number (3) thought they spent most of their time sitting in the office drinking tea. We have included 3 statements written by tenants who have had experience of working with MSOs (see Appendix 1)

There was a general feeling that those who were not in sheltered housing or were but did not require a visit from an MSO, had no idea what they did.

A happy tenant in supported housing needs to know that there is a sympathetic ear nearby. The small daily problems of life can take on gargantuan proportions if there is no one readily available to guide, help and advise.

We would like to thank everyone for their valued contribution to this review.

Our recommendations

### **Recommendation 1**

The Job Description needs to be more specific leaving less open to interpretation

Further details/Evidence Evidence Priority 1 Priority 2 Priority 3

1.1 The MSOs have commented on the variable efficiencies of their colleagues because of the different interpretations of the job description

Evidence Source: Questionnaire, Interviews, Review of Job Description

### **Recommendation 2**

MSOs should be better informed of changes which affect their role.

2.1 Complaints from MSOs that constant changes led to confusion especially when dealing with professional bodies

Evidence Source: Questionnaires, Interview and discussions

### **Recommendation 3**

A mechanism needs to be devised where MSOs could talk directly to their line manager at times of urgency or emergency.

3.1 As above MSOs declared lack of confidence in Line Management.

**Recommendation 4:**

**A representative MSO should be invited to attend any Housing meeting where decisions are made which directly affect supported housing tenants.**

4.1 They felt that their input should be recognised and acted upon wherever their tenants were involved. Many examples were given where a decision had been made without taking Supported Housing tenants' needs into consideration

Evidence Source: Interviews, Observations

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**Recommendation 5:**

5.1 Though there is a system in place to inform MSOs when one of their tenants is hospitalised, the information does not always filter through. This system should be reviewed. MSOs expressed disappointment/concern when one of their tenants was inexplicably not at home. They felt helpless.

**Recommendation 6:**

6.1 Tenants should be made more aware of the responsibilities of MSOs. This could be included in the Tenant Handbook and perhaps reiterated in the magazine. MSOs were often surprised by what they were asked to do and found themselves in an invidious position.

**Recommendation 7:**

7.1 Because the MSOs rotate every 3 months, there should be a record of visits and matters of importance kept in the tenants' home (in a care book, with records of importance) to ensure a smooth and trouble-free takeover. There was a general feeling that take overs were not well managed.

**Recommendation 8:**

8.1 That "shadowing" opportunities are provided.

Senior and Line Managers shadow operational staff and vice versa. Throughout the process MSOs felt that their opinions were undervalued. All the evidence collected points to this.

**Conclusion:**

Once again a lot of work was involved in this scrutiny review. The skills and experience in the scrutiny techniques needed and used, continue to grow.

We learned a lot about the challenges facing MSOs, Managers and tenants and sincerely hope that our recommendations will help and go a long way to addressing some of these challenges.

We were pleased to find that there was a lot of good work and positive practices to balance out our recommendations.

We are pleased to recommend this report to the Housing Review Board and look forward to a response to our recommendations in due course.