

To the Chair and members of the  
Performance and Improvement Committee

Agenda item No  
Dated 16<sup>th</sup> October 2019

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1. Report Title

1.1 Estate Walks Policy and Recommendations

2. Executive Summary.

2.1 The Estate Walk Inspection Procedure-Draft (version 4) was introduced in April 2019, and due for review in February 2020. Following discussions by the TRIP Panel in January 2019, it was decided to look at the issue of Estate Walk, both from the Tenants perspective and the St Leger Homes Estate Staff.

2.2 The 2019 report has features missing, regarding personal safety, a strong enforcement procedure and a clear training element.

2.3 Three members of the TRIP panel attended the “walks”, and on each of these “walks” discussed issues with the estates staff, and at the end of each “walk”, those attending were asked to complete a questionnaire, provided by “survey-monkey” and a synopsis of the results are at Annex 1

2.4 The TRIP members were impressed at the dedication of the estates staff, how knowledgeable they were of their area, and how fearless they are walking the estates, at times alone. The staff were well prepared for each outing and were thoroughly engaging with any tenant who stopped to talk. The panel have no doubt that these features of the Estates Walks can be viewed as a necessary element for tenant engagement, safety and assurance.

2.5 However, the TRIP panel members attending the “walks” were concerned for some elements of personal safety for the staff.

2.6 This report features observations by the TRIP panel, and make recommendations, which are suggested in good faith, with the tenants and St leger Homes staff in mind.

3. Background

3.1 Following a forward planning review by the TRIP panel in January 2019, it was decided to review the Policy on Estate Walks (Tenancy & Estate management/Customer Involvement Team) The panel were aware that the policy was updated in February 2019 with a firm review date of February 2020.

- 3.2 In conjunction with this policy, the TRIP panel agreed a desk-top review of the Rechargeable Repairs Policy (due in December 2017-overdue) and the Customers Own Improvement Policy (due in September 2019) These policies, the panel thought, fitted well together and would form an overview of the Tenant's Rights & Responsibilities with regard to their Tenancy Agreement.
- 3.3 The TRIP panel agreed that to get a better sense of the Estate Walks, TRIP members would get permission to accompany the Estates Officers/Assistants on the "walks" as observers, and with any tenants from that area that wanted to attend.
- 3.4 A survey-monkey questionnaire was agreed for both the SLHD staff and the Tenants to complete after the "walk" with their thoughts and input highlighted in Annex 1 (with the actual responses on file)
- 3.5 From the list of "walks" on the SLHD website, the following areas of the Borough were agreed, and appointments made:
  - a) Tuesday August 6<sup>th</sup>-2pm Calm Estate/Maple Grove
  - b) Tuesday August 13<sup>th</sup> -10am Denaby main
  - c) Monday August 19<sup>th</sup>-10am Stainforth East
  - d) Thursday August 22<sup>nd</sup>-10:30pm Dunscroft East
  - e) Tuesday August 27<sup>th</sup> -2:30pm Braithwell South
  - f) Tuesday September 3<sup>rd</sup> -10am Denaby Lime Tree Grove
  - g) Wednesday September 4<sup>th</sup> 10am Wheatley Central
- 3.6 After each "walk" there was a debrief event, and any comments noted on the questionnaire. It should be noted that on none of the "walks" did any tenant attend, and the SLHD staff pressed TRIP not to break any confidence that was shared by the SLHD employees regarding their work.

#### 4. Observations

- 4.1 In the Estate Walk Inspection Procedure-Draft (page 2) there are no clear guidelines for the Tenants/Councillors whilst on the "walk" There should be a list of "do's and don'ts which can be listed (laminated for future use) and handed out at the start of each "walk". Clear written instructions would help the estates officers for clarity, and an ongoing format for future staff if there are replacements, rather than word of mouth, or a staff's interpretation of the instructions.  
In the Estate Policy Document (page 2 1.3) It states: "It is important that officers try and speak to tenants or residents regarding the issues identified during the walk, to try to resolve the issue as soon as possible and that they don't just collate the issues found during the walk and send a letter out".  
(Annex 7)
- 4.2 The TRIP members attending the "walks had some issues with this statement. We noticed that with three people walking together, one with a

clipboard, raises a few concerns, the curtains twitch, and on one occasion, two youths on bikes (youths about 12 year old) followed us all around the estate.

When our group stopped to take notes about an issue, or left a card (when there was no answer to knocking on the door) these youths wanted to know what was wrong, why were we taking notes on a specific house, had the ability to report back to their parents about who was being noted and maybe reported. Can this not be viewed as a breach of a Tenants Rights not be identified in breaching their tenancy?

Under the new GDPR, isn't a person's privacy and confidentiality being breached by this? It could lead in this instance, to breaches being "spread around the estate" and that could cause issue with SLHD inadvertently targeting a tenant. Therefore, should tenants not be "carded" but a letter sent in the first instance, which would then be confidential.

- 4.3 Following on from this, and in this day and age, with some tenants being volatile, the TRIP members were of the opinion that knocking on doors to tell the tenant there is a breach of their tenancy, is unsafe, because they do not know what is, or who is, behind the door, or what reception they will get. All the TRIP members felt uncomfortable about knocking on doors, not knowing what the outcome would be. Especially if the estates officers/assistants are on their own, which on a few of the "walks" they would have been. Personal safety to TRIP is paramount and feel the estates officer/assistants are in need of a personal safety review. All the estates officers were seen as fearless, but members feel the "walks" should ALWAYS be in pairs, and that should be a basic requirement. The companies Lone Working Policy should be reviewed and discussed with employees.
- 4.4 Underlining this observation for personal security, is the fact that some areas have very bad mobile reception (nil or one bar) and in the case of an emergency, would be unable to contact their office base/contact. This problem could be ameliorated if the officers/assistants were in pairs.
- 4.5 Personal Security name tags with features to raise an alarm should be made available, as back up to limited mobile phone access. The TRIP panel are of the opinion that a full risk assessment is carried for the staff, following the company's duty of care for each employee.
- 4.6 Name tags. Some of the Estates Officers/Assistants have their full name on their ID. Many organisations are resorting to first names only with a surname initial. In this day and age, and social media, a person can be researched on various platforms, and targeted. This isn't meant to cause concern, but during conversations with the estates team, this was a feature of concern.

- 4.7 Two incidents of harassment were mentioned to the TRIP members, where one estates officer had parked her car away from the listed “walk,” only to find when she returned to it, that it had been vandalised. She now uses a “banger” for work, and that is a shame. It was thought this was in retaliation for a notice of a breach in the tenancy. There are few incidents like this, but a tenant, intent on finding an officer, who in their mind has caused them grief, only needs to get the Officers full name and information. It’s a personal security issue again.
- 4.8 The Estates Policy Document, does not have any mention of Enforcement. In discussion with the staff whilst on the “walk,” the question was asked about how they viewed the Enforcement procedure, and what they thought the process was. They provided a few variations on the current theme, of 28 days notice, a further 14 days notice, and finally a 7 day notice before various actions would be taken. From a tenant’s point of view, they should be able to review an established policy, laying out the enforcement procedure, and not what an estates officer thinks it is. The enforcement letters are on the Civica system, and they too need updating with a bolder format, and stronger wording than at present, where key words are lost in a tangle at the bottom. (Annex 4)
- 4.9 Enforcement. The 28 day, 14 day 7 day current form of enforcement may need updating. In conversation on the “walks” some Estates staff, and the TRIP members felt that an initial 28 days notice is too lenient. Quite often the tenancy breaches are untidy gardens, long grass, overhanging privet hedges, and on occasion household rubbish in the garden. Does it take 28 days to action these issues? Does the 28 day notice, give the impression of a relaxed attitude, and the company not being serious? A 14 day notice for the first infringement concentrates the mind, and gives little latitude for delay. A further 14 day notice with stronger words, gives the tenant two warnings in a month, and emphasises the urgency for action. The last 7 day notice could underline the need for action with the knowledge that failure WILL result in further enforcement. (Annex 5)
- 4.10 Regarding the Enforcement letters, during our conversations with the Estates Officers, they explained that they sign and give contact details, which too could make them a focus for disgruntled tenants, when returning to view work being asked to complete in the enforcement letter. Could not a higher manager sign the letter, with contact details, which gives the estates officer a degree of cover, they could be less at risk, citing higher management?
- 4.11 It was noticeable on all the “walks” that some tenants were breaching the Tenancy Agreement by removing walls and privet hedges to facilitate a hard standing or car port. There were no drop kerbs, and cars were driving over the pavement to access these hard standings, contrary to the Highway regulations and section 2.4(d) of the tenancy agreement. It is

obvious by the condition of the hard standings that there had been no permission, for under the Own Improvement Policy, works would have been checked as safe, constructed properly, and fit for purpose. Other tenants had complied with the requirements.

- 4.12 TRIP did check the DMBC website on how to apply for a drop kerb facility. It is a nightmare to understand and navigate, with confusing questions and detailed requirements. This would put off any “would be drop kerb applicant” A simplification of that procedure could help the Tenants & Residents of Doncaster, and with “blue sky thinking” support a joint venture for a Community Enterprise. A fully trained workforce, to provide this service, which could be revenue neutral, providing an affordable service.
- 4.13 On one of the “walks” the TRIP members were joined by two officers from the Stronger Communities (DMBC) who also were knowledgeable about their area, and are well received by the tenants. They concentrated on issues that were not St Leger Homes responsibility, but as a team, it made the “walk” enjoyable and presented a united front to tenants.

## 5. Recommendations

- a. Changes to the Estate Walks Policy (page 2. 1.1 Procedure) it is suggested that the frequency of the walks, are scrutinised in a more pro-active way. Looking at the table that indicates PRIORITY FREQUENCY- WHO- NUMBER OF STAFF REQUIRED (INCLUDING LEAD OFFICER) If this was adhered to, no area would have less than two staff on a walk at a time. However, this listed procedure is not enforced. Could some areas listed as medium priority, be in fact low priority. Could ad-hoc be never? (Annex 6)
- b. Comprehensive Risk Assessment for the staff working and carrying out Estate Walks. To protect the employees from personal harm and intimidation.
- c. Investigate the issue of movement tracking, to trace the position of an employee, whilst on an Estate Walk, especially one who is working alone, to provide support and assistance should it be required. Especially in areas where the no phone signals are available.
- d. Upgrade and update the Enforcement letters. (Annex 4 & 5)
- e. Change the procedure for “carding” a tenant’s property, and/or knocking on the tenant’s door. Sending an unintended message to a casual observer that could be an issue with that tenant, and unwittingly breach the tenant’s confidentiality. Resort to letters in the first instance, keeping that breach confidential.

- f. Consider changing the Enforcement period from 28 days waiting for action to 14 days and 14 days and 7 days.
- g. ID badges and name tags to show first name only, with an optional initial for the employees last name.
- h. Ensure that ALL Estate Walks are carried out in PAIRS at least.
- i. Consider a laminated "Guidance for Estate Walks" for any Tenant/Councillor attending/joining the walks.
- j. Consider changing/reviewing the signatories on the Enforcement letter from the Estates Officers/Assistants to a Manager (retaining the Estates Officers contact details) so that the Estates Officers are not associated with the breach of tenancy letter, that could give the Estates Officers a degree of separation.
- k. Consider reviewing (with DMBC) the policy for non-actions taken against tenants who are breaching their tenancy regarding hard standings/car ports and drop kerbs. (Annex 8)
- l. Review the Lone Working Policy and its current "fit for purpose" issues.
- m. Consider the Assets Team being read into the Estates Officers report after a walk, with regard to any unauthorised changes to a tenant`s property (ie hard-standing/car ports and drop kerbs, removal of a wall or privet hedge)

#### Annex Listings:

- Annex 1...Survey-Monkey Questionnaires and synopsis of responses.
- Annex 2....SLHD card system sample.
- Annex 3....Sub group notes on changes to the Breach of Tenancy letters.
- Annex 4....Copies of three of the 13 letters on Civica for Tenancy breaches.
- Annex 5....Suggested changes to the format for letter to Tenancy Breaches
- Annex 6....Current suggested staffing levels for Estate Walks
- Annex 7....Section 1.3 Estate walk Policy on approaching a breach.
- Annex 8....Section 2.4(d) Tenancy Agreement (highlighting the need for permission to install a hardstand/car port and the need to apply for a drop kerb via the Highways Department)

## 6. Appreciation

- 6.1 As a collective, the TRIP panel were very appreciative of the responses to our questions from the staff. The Estates Staff provide an outstanding work ethic, at times on their own, and dedicated to providing an excellent service for the company. We appreciated their candour, and they in turn trusted the TRIP representatives to keep confidences.  
There is no doubt that the Estates Officers provide an outstanding service to the tenants and are great ambassadors for the company.  
This report is a genuine assessment of the work carried out on the Estates, with the hope that the recommendations are viewed as a sincere objective view from a tenant`s point of view, and an employee`s view for risk and personal security.

## 7. Report Authors

7.1 TRIP Panel: Betty Clayton (Chair) Rodger Haldenby (V Chair) Therese Kennedy, Harry Wood, Ron Rickwood, Brenda Lennon.