

Review of Tenancy Support Services by the Customer Scrutiny Panel

March 2022

Contents

1. Executive summary	2
2. Methodology	3
3. Key findings	3
4. Shaping the Future – ready for the challenges ahead	16
5. Case studies	16
6. Recommendations	18
7. Conclusion	20

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) are pleased to present their scrutiny review of mhs Tenancy Support Services (TSS). The review has provided excellent insight into both officer and customer understanding and expectations of TSS. This includes the range and level of TSS provided by mhs as a landlord. Overall, findings indicate that now is a perfect time to reflect on the many positives but also have a fresh look at what has been achieved, impact and opportunities to enhance the wider tenancy support offer to customers.
- 1.2 This review has focused on those delivering front line services and the customer experience. Through this review we have heard about internal working processes and experiences by officers. We have made the decision to include these views as part of this review as it adds context but also reflects the unique times for the business, employers, and customers.
- 1.3 The CSP acknowledge that the Executive Team (ET) and the Board are planning for the hard times ahead and have put the customer first by keeping rents affordable and limiting rent increases but also ensuring that the business can continue to deliver quality services. Messaging to employees and customers needs to share the plan and approach going forward because there is concern expressed that they do not think there is any planning being considered or in place. Now is the time for strong working partnerships and being open to considering all suggestions to help sustain confidence that times will be difficult, but mhs and customers are resilient.
- 1.4 The key recommendations include:
- a. Sharing the new Tenancy Support offer for feedback across the business before signing off as complete.
 - b. Consideration of having welfare and benefits officers (x2).
 - c. Sharing with customers the Customer Services Function structure, roles, and responsibilities so that they understand that key support officers are part of the structure - understanding the reason for not having a dedicated housing officer unless needing specific and timed support.
 - d. Promotion to officers of the new hardship fund.
 - e. Review training, workflows, and operational practices.
 - f. Management to review and develop communication and information sharing opportunities and provide time to engage face to face- assurance.
 - g. Review tool kits for Customer Services Call Centre to help manage calls and develop procedures and diagnostic manual.
 - h. Embed across the business the wider definition of Tenancy Support.
 - i. Ensure that Tenancy support includes all customers including homeowners.
 - j. Continue with digital transformation but be aware of the elderly, vulnerable and those facing digital poverty.
 - k. Update and use the website to provide regular updates on Tenancy Support Services.
 - l. Seek customer feedback on customer support services so that the way services and support is delivered can be tailored to meet individual needs where required.

m. Seek financial support by accessing funding provided by Central Government.

1.5 This report needs to be read in conjunction with the TSS customer survey results completed by the CSP.

2. Methodology

2.1 The CSP agreed with the Leadership Team to complete a review into Tenancy Support Services in January 2022.

2.2 The review has included:

- a. Development and carrying out of a **Tenancy Support Service survey** with customers- to understand customer experience regarding effectiveness of support services provided, perception of range and types of services required including the role of mhs and partners to meet customer needs and aspirations. Total of x customers responded to the survey.
- b. Four on-line customer **Focus Groups** and one face-to-face Focus Group total 25.
- c. Bespoke **interviews with 20 staff** from across a range of functions - using bespoke interview questions to meet job role and responsibility for service delivery.
- d. **Document review and benchmarking** exercise with 2 housing association providers.
- e. **Mystery shopping** – Customer Services- accessing the business through My Account and Customer Service Call Centre.

2.3 The CSP would like to acknowledge and thank the following for their help and support to complete this review:

- a. **Andrew Bircher**- providing a Support Service overview briefing and helping to shape the scope of the review to support the needs of developing a mhs Tenancy Support Offer.
- b. **Louise Humphrey**- for her planning support and facilitating additional support to set up staff interviews facilitated by **Zoe Marden** and sending Focus Group invitations by **Angela Palmer**
- c. **Communications Team**- setting up and facilitating the customer Tenancy Support Services survey.
- d. **Staff** – all that participated with interviews and supporting evidence

2.4 This review has been led by **June Patey (Chair)** and **Kate Roberts (Vice Chair)** supported by CSP panel members.

3. Key findings

3.1. What is Tenancy Support?

- 3.1.1 This question was asked of all participants who contributed to this review. The overall view is that all services provided by mhs that support customers to live in their home and sustain their tenancy agreement is tenancy support. Whether working on the front line or in a support role all contribute to ensure that landlord services deliver tenancy support either internally or through partnerships with

specialist local charities. The ET and Board through the corporate strategy, agreed service standards and response to imminent regulatory changes aimed at strengthening the accountability of landlords regards safe homes, quality services and treating residents with respect and encouraging residents to have a voice demonstrates a commitment to all mhs customers to listen to what matters most to them.

3.1.2 Tenancy support has been described by mhs officers as including:

- a. Every aspect of support- all that we do.
- b. All work that is delivered for a customer.
- c. Helping with ASB.
- d. Resolving an issue.
- e. Looking at individual circumstances and what needs to be done to sustain the tenancy.
- f. Wellbeing.
- g. Explaining what agreements mean.
- h. Signposting the customer.
- i. Dealing with requests for services.
- j. Day to day repairs.
- k. Everything to do with repairs.
- l. Collecting rent.
- m. Giving advice on benefits.
- n. Want to give and what mhs thinks we should do.
- o. Not part of my job.
- p. Way services are put together to support for the long term and prevent evictions.
- q. Proactive helping tenants to help solve problems.

3.1.3 Customers through Focus Groups and the CSP survey have described tenancy support as:

- a. Being pro-active helping tenants with problems and solving them.
- b. Helping us to support our tenancy.
- c. Completing repairs to maintain homes.
- d. All services being delivered as promised.
- e. Treating us as individuals and listening to our needs.
- f. Making sure we know how to access support and that it happens.
- g. Advocacy support and welfare.
- h. Help with sorting out ASB.
- i. Responding to emails and calls.
- j. Telling me what is happening to my home.
- k. Listening and being seen out on my estate.
- l. I don't know who my housing officer is.

3.1.4 mhs is by nature of size and structure able to be flexible in how customers are supported to live happy lives in their homes. The CSP heard many moving stories from residents about how their lives have been saved, improved and they are externally grateful for the security of having an mhs home. We know that mhs understands that customers are all individuals, and that staff are passionate about the organisation and treating their customers with respect and

compassion. There is recognition that high numbers of customers are vulnerable and have multi-faceted issues that may require additional support at time of crisis and there must be support accessible to help through these difficult times. The question being raised is can this be enhanced/ sustained during the current economic climate of high inflation, increasing rents, utility bills and basic living essentials such as food. There is a genuine concern by staff that the resources delivering front line services are working at capacity and will collapse if the predicted demands become a reality. Developing a new TSS policy demonstrates forward thinking and planning to meet the expected demands to support customers and give staff a range of opportunities to guide and support their customers to sustain their tenancy and home.

3.1.5 The New Deal that was introduced in 2019 was about creating through increasing digital access and the on-line My Account portal greater capacity to support those that need additional help by driving customers to adopt a self-serve approach to managing their tenancy and accessing services. In addition, the housing management service was restructured to create a customer service support function that was generic and not delivering additional welfare/benefit advice services or offering a dedicated housing officer covering a particular area/estate. The take up of My Account has been successful with take up above levels achieved comparable with other well performing housing providers but there are still refinements required to make it the one stop shop for customers- however, the number of calls to mhs averaging 280 a day is still higher than expected. Listening to feedback regarding reasons for calls this demonstrates that tenancy support is considerably wider than paying rent and reporting repairs, which is highlighted in this report.

3.1.6 Recommendation

- a. **The CSP recommend that the definition of Tenancy Support needs to be clearly defined and broadened to embrace all landlord services. Tenancy support is the activity/response that is involved to deliver services.**

3.2. Operating procedures

- 3.3.1 There are concerns that many in the business are still hiding behind Covid and that customer satisfaction will not improve until all staff return to the office and productivity matches standards achieved pre Covid. However, it was noted that officers considered that working from home periodically was helpful to complete specific tasks but not as a full-time working model. The benefits of having staff across the business back on site were listed as being:
 - a. Ability to contact colleagues for information with many reporting having difficulties contacting others by phone or email. This has particularly affected those receiving calls from customers chasing information and increasing call-backs because responses have not been provided for customers.
 - b. Building working relationships and knowing new members of staff. Many felt that they had lost the feeling of being part of the mhs family and feeling isolated and just a spoke in the wheel.

- c. Removing the perception of an invisible landlord, because customers want to have face- to- face meetings and to see officers out in their communities.

- 3.2.3 The Customer Services function is key to customers accessing support by telephone, email, and social media handling on average 280 calls a day and 100 emails. The L1 advisors have experienced a high turnover of colleagues in their team and feel that their workload is relentless, and that success is only measured by how quickly they answer the phone and number of abandoned calls rather than quality of the service provided and issues resolved at the first point of contact, although 50% of calls do need to be escalated to other services/departments. The team is self- training by their peers without any operating manual providing diagnostic instructions. This means that consistency in approach and standard of service is not maintained, as there are no formal procedures/guidelines to follow. The team gets additional support from L2 and L3 advisors during busy times. However, the L3 advisors report not having the knowledge and expertise to handle the diverse range of calls and operate technology especially around repair reporting so their contribution is limited. There is no doubt that there has been an investment and commitment to provide a positive and quality service but L1 advisors feel that their role is more about working in a Call Centre than a service support function.
- 3.2.4 With the new structure mhs has moved away from having a customer support service to being called a function. There are three levels of Customer Support Advisors L1, L2 and L3 and customers are very confused what it all means. For instance, 100% of customers attending Focus Groups expressed their concern that there is no longer a patch based named housing officer as their point of contact. There is definitely a need to explain to tenants what and how the new function works because many felt that when they have spoken to support advisors that they do not get the right information or answers always and assume all advisors are of an admin level and not professional housing specialists and that this is a money saving exercise as in their minds there are no housing officers. This confusion may be contributing to lower tenant satisfaction results because we know that perception plays a key role as to how tenants will score their landlords performance. There was feedback from L2 and L3 advisors that they preferred being called an income officer etc. rather than Customer Support Advisor. Overall, both customers and officers would like to have dedicated housing officers, a named contact/s.
- 3.2.5 The CSP understands the new Tenancy Support function is not the traditional housing management model that many customers were used to having at mhs. However, if a person needs support with rent arrears, they are at that time allocated a named officer (L2) for their area to provide support for a time period of 12 weeks. L3 deal with the more complex cases that may have a number of issues to resolve to support the tenancy. In the CSP survey and at Focus Groups this issue about having a housing officer and knowing where to go for support was the key issue affecting customer satisfaction. We have looked at other housing providers and many have adopted a similar model but have either reverted back to having traditional roles for income, advice, housing officer because of the feedback from customers. With new tenancies and approximately 30% being allocated to those that are vulnerable or previously homeless it is likely that there will be an increase in support required and having job titles that are clear and specific is important.

Officers from across the business at interview agreed that having job titles that made clear their role was helpful to other officers in the business and most important of all customers.

- 3.2.6 Growing the business with new homes is understood to be important to the viability of the business and helping to address the increasing need for affordable housing. There was concern raised that increases in new homes has not been reflected with additional officer resources on the frontline to support the additional customers. As some new developments are in more rural locations and some distance from the office officers feel that they are spending considerable time travelling for home visits and may not be making visits as often as they should. At Focus Groups we heard that new tenants especially those moving into assisted living homes felt well supported and had a designated person for contact. Whereas those moving into general needs reported not having their 2 monthly tenancy meeting face to face but by telephone since Covid. Some stated that as there had been issues with their property they would have welcomed a face-to-face meeting. It is likely that waiting 9 months for the next tenancy check visit face to face was too long and this was supported by officers who felt that often problems have become entrenched that could have been identified and support put in place earlier at the 2-month visit. Perhaps offering the tenants a choice on meeting face to face or by telephone would be a good way forward. Often issues are picked up by a visual meet rather than by telephone that could prevent other issues escalating to a stage where more time will be required to remedy. There is a feeling that work loads are high and officers described the approach of working as crisis management and that maybe a result of a reactive and not a proactive approach being adopted, customers only get support when in arrears and then they get a named officer assigned. The CSP learnt that there is considerable concern about the potential future demands on their service over the next twelve to eighteen months. All staff stated that they do not have the capacity to take on any more work and that physical burnout is a likely outcome and absences related to stress and anxiety will increase. The CSP assured officers that they would feedback concerns because they are aware that the Board and ET are considering the impact on customers, employees, and the business.
- 3.2.7 There has been a move away from in house delivery of specialist services and signposting customers to access external specialist support from partners in the community. Interesting the officers and customers all felt that having an internal welfare and benefits service with ability to include debt management was very important and that it would pay for itself by cutting down arrears etc. Currently these services are accessed externally but there is evidence that organisations like the CAB are not able to offer timely appointments and they too are concerned about the increasing demand for their services. It was suggested that an in-house temporary welfare and money management service open to all mhs customers would be a good way forward to strengthen the tenancy support offer to customers. The Homeownership team confirmed that their customers' will be struggling and needing support especially the shared owners who have to pay a mortgage and rent payment and having an internal resource would be very valuable. In supported housing the CSP were advised that scheme managers often provide benefit advice to residents but stressed that they have not had current training and have not

always given correct advice. There was 100% support for having an internal wellbeing and benefits team from officers and customers that participated with the review.

3.2.8 Recommendation

- a. **Monthly feedback needs to be sought from Customer Support Advisors (L1) regarding accessing colleagues and response issues so that regardless of where officers work they are accountable to responding by phone and email and shared with ET so that feedback can be cascaded as required and monitored. This may address the concern of L1 advisors about having a hybrid model of officers working from home and work.**
- b. **Develop clear operating procedures and diagnostic manual so that L1 Advisors receive the right training, and the customer will receive a consistent service. A complete workflow and customer journey mapping may help highlight the gaps in service delivery and the impact on customer experience.**
- c. **The CSP would like to suggest that at the new tenancy sign up stage that a vulnerability impact assessment is included. Those that are deemed vulnerable based on the agreed vulnerability criteria to be given a named contact, so that this may address the potential anxiety caused by making contact with someone they don't know and causing tenancy issues to escalate.**
- d. **The CSP would like to propose that further consideration and consultation be given to simplifying job titles and roles and that there is publicity around this shared with your customers.**
- e. **Pilot for 12 months offering 2 month new tenancy home visits to those that are considered vulnerable and monitor impact to determine that benefits exceed travel cost/time. Focus should be on smart working not working harder!**
- f. **The CSP would like to propose that a business case is completed to understand if having a welfare/benefits team (2 officers) would represent value for money and increased customer satisfaction and deflect cases from the L2 and L3 officers.**

3.3 Training and support

3.3.1 Training is key to developing officers, capacity building for the future and providing effective and professional services. The CSP learnt that training opportunities have reduced and that is no doubt a result of the pandemic. A number of officers stated that they felt that as part of the planning for providing increased support to customers that appropriate support awareness training needs to be provided especially around dealing with people that are stressed, angry and vulnerable and open to those outside the tenancy support function. The CSP has identified that there are a number of excellent on-line training courses that could be used to raise knowledge around welfare and benefits that can help with successful signposting and engagement with external services.

3.3.2 Recommendations

- a. **Develop a training programme to prepare L1, L2, L3 advisors ready for customers seeking support on benefits advice, rent arrears etc.**
- b. **L1 advisors to have a formal training programme reducing reliance on peer training**
- c. **Introduce train the trainer approach so that those attending external training can pass on the knowledge.**

3.4 Management and staff-

- 3.4.1 It has been informative to have the opportunity to meet 20+ officers from across the business. The key points noted by the CSP include:
- a. L1 advisors shared that they feel that they are not respected and are looked down by others as being of a low level of expertise and importance/value in the business. This was disappointing to hear because the L1 advisors provide an important role as the face and voice of mhs through their handling of calls and reception duties in particular.
 - b. There is concern that staff turnover has increased and was a particular concern by L1 advisors. Others felt that having interim or short-term contracts increases turnover and reduces loyalty to mhs and customers
 - c. Across all functions (excluding repairs) there was a strong view that staff resources are inadequate and that this is preventing them from having the time to deliver services and support customers, as they would like.
 - d. The Homeownership team is reported as having one team member that never responds to messages from L1 advisors although they have read the message but still no response. There was a request that managers need to be monitoring and ensuring that internal customers and external customers are treated with the same level of urgency.
 - e. There has been no consultation or opportunity for frontline officers or other support services to get involved in helping to shape the new Tenancy Support Offer. This is a missed opportunity and has been reliant on feedback from 4 officers only.
 - f. Silo working is reported as being an issue across functions and teams. Cascading and sharing information is not happening and so many are unaware of the many key projects happening. There was comment that updates from the CEO are very helpful for a strategic overview but having a function dedicated news update would be very welcome.
 - g. There was comment from the L1 advisors that they never see or are visited by their Head of Service to see how they are doing and recognizing the work that they do. This was not just related to the Customer services team but also covered other services, so maybe having an office walkabout by Executives may be helpful to build better working relationships. The CSP feel this may be a result of the hybrid working arrangements and can easily be remedied.
 - h. Being proactive with Tenancy Support is perceived as not being a priority. The CSP think this could be addressed by the 2 bullet points above and advised that from this review it is clear that the ELT and Board are looking at putting in place new options and ways to support customers and the new mhs hardship fund is an excellent example. This was welcomed by officers and

once this is shared will help build confidence that there will be tools to support customers.

- i. The CSP questioned the use of complaints feedback and learning outcomes to help inform the new Tenancy Support Offer. It was mentioned at senior management level that feedback from complaints is not shared and that there is no learning log used to support service improvement. This was perhaps a missed opportunity.
- j. There is a feeling that mhs is good at discussion but slow at delivery. This perception may be accountable to not sharing team/function action plans and the fact that policies and action plans are created but are not living documents. Of those officers that were interviewed only 2 knew that there was a Tenancy Sustainment Policy and action plan dating back to 2018-20. It was evident from reviewing the action plan that it had not been updated and it was confirmed that it had not been used. It is very important that the New Tenancy Support Offer does not get treated in the same way - must be a living document to drive the customer support service alongside the implementation action plan.
- k. There is a view that mhs has a very flat management structure and that heads of service and senior managers suggested that having a cross service/function Senior Management team that would help support ET and be responsible for making sure that policies, action plans and projects are visible and completed as they would have joint responsibility and accountability. Perhaps if this had been in place that the Tenancy Support Offer would have had a wider input and help generate the wider acceptance that everyone and every service delivers tenancy support.
- l. Development is recognized as key to the business, but many felt that it is given a greater priority than getting the basics correct. Also, development is reported as not engaging with the customer services function and homeownership to know what is really needed.
- m. Staff is anxious about the crisis that they see coming to support customers and that there is no training happening or planned to up skill staff to help.
- n. Strong view that there is a need for specialist benefit and welfare team, as mentioned previously. Without this staff felt that they would be firefighting within the Tenancy Support function.
- o. Rent Sense a new system to support rent collection and identification of those needing support to deal with arrears has been highly welcomed and reported as already adding value to the way that support is targeted at those most in need.

3.4.2 Recommendations

- a. **There needs to be weekly communication between managers and their teams including providing a monthly newsletter highlighting work and projects undertaken in their functions.**
- b. **Ensuring that exit interviews understand the reasons for staff leaving to improve the experience of employees.**
- c. **30%-35% complaints received by mhs are from customers contacting mhs and not getting a response. Where this has been identified, management need to address these issues.**

- d. **There needs to be sharing of the new draft tenancy support offer across all services to get feedback prior to sign off.**
- e. **Look to remove silo working between functions and within services.**
- f. **Ensuring learning outcomes from complaints are shared across the business so service failures can be remedied.**
- g. **Consideration of a senior management team across services to support ELT so that projects are completed.**
- h. **Consider the opportunity to develop a benefits and welfare team.**

3.5 Communication

3.5.1 Communication and having the right information in a way and time to suit the customer is essential. Key points highlighted include:

- a. Open Housing is designed to log calls and customer information. The L1 advisors have highlighted that other users do not update the customer information and so that considerable time is spent chasing up what if anything has happened which extends the time taken to give responses to customers that call. This supports the need for working smarter rather than harder by following the procedure in place so that information on Open Housing is always current.
- b. The L1 advisors manage the mhs mailbox. There are about 100 emails waiting for responses and it is very difficult to meet the 3-day service standard for responses.
- c. Those calling Customer Services have no facility to leave a message and request a call back to help reduce dropped calls and reduce the waiting time. This facility has been introduced in other Call Centres and has significantly improved customer satisfaction and performance.
- d. It was noted that a number of customers need help with reading letters sent by mhs and completing forms. The L1 Advisors will help by inviting customers into reception to receive support. The CSP would suggest that where this happens that the customer file is updated so that they can receive support maybe by telephoning to read a letter they are due to receive or add a message on letters with forms to complete an invitation to come and get help or direct to an external service provider. We understand that literacy levels in the area are lower and that we need to think more about how communications are written and offer support.
- e. My Account has been a very positive part of the mhs digital transformation. Those that are technical able praise and welcome the ability to have a 24/7 service to pay their rent and report repairs. It is important that the elderly and vulnerable and those facing digital poverty are not excluded. The CSP would like to see in the new Tenancy Support Offer guidance and bespoke support for those affected.
- f. When letters are being sent out to all customers it would be helpful to inform and share a copy in advance with the L1 advisors as they are the ones that will receive the calls to deal with queries. An example given was the recent Protect Tenancy letters, as they were not prepared to handle the volume of calls and the Q&A information provided after did not cover the questions that customers had. Perhaps a briefing in person may have been helpful or offer a dedicated number to deal with complex issues.

- g. Proof reading of letters is very important because the L1 advisors reported that the Homeownership Team recently sent out service charge letters with 3 end digits of the reference number missing and they received a high number of calls because customers could not make payments. At this stage a message could have gone on the website, or my account or an email sent to leaseholders to alert.
- h. The website contains very little information regarding tenancy support and appears to not be updated in a timely manner. For example, cancellation of the assisted support for gardening and decorating is still in place and maybe needs updating because customers at Focus Groups stated that these services are so valuable, especially the gardening service that used to start in March. An update on these services on the website would be very helpful.
- i. The reception has a hearing loop facility but L1 advisors feel that having a trained sign language advisor would be very helpful. It was stated that currently there is no trained employee able to assist.
- j. Welcome new draft sign up agreement but would like to see an inclusion for assessing the vulnerability of the customer

3.5.2 Recommendations

- a. **There needs to be a leaflet that explains to residents the new tenancy support offer and the CSP suggest that this sent to every customer when the rent statements are sent so not to incur additional costs and put up on the website.**
- b. **Ensure that Open Housing is properly updated by all users and regular sample checking between calls received and updating of Open Housing to identify the system is being used correctly.**
- c. **Communications going out that L1 are notified in advance when there are specific mailshots going out to customers and have the knowledge to answer customer queries.**
- d. **Ensure the website is reviewed and updated on a regular basis.**

3.6 New Tenancy Support proposed policy

3.6.1 The CSP welcomed the opportunity to complete the Tenancy Support review to help inform the new Tenancy Support Offer. The engagement with the authors of the policy was really helpful and it is clear that they are committed to having a more focused offer that brings together a broader scope of support into one policy, as for example the Fuel Poverty Plan had got lost along the way. This reflects the need to be more proactive rather than reactive- promoting and using the opportunities to deliver or signpost to specific support. This policy is about really understanding the needs of the customer rather than an outdated approach, what we want to deliver. It was confirmed that the policy has been developed on the basis that there is access to no new resources.

3.6.2 It is pleasing to note that the feedback received through the CSP survey has helped shape the priorities for the new offer. It is worth noting that the survey was completed prior to the recent announcements regards inflation and the economic impact of the conflict in Ukraine. These changes if current at the time of the

survey would definitely have been reflected in higher priority for benefit and welfare support and access to other support services. The CSP has recognized the high priority of ASB and will review this in March 2022.

- 3.6.3 Although the CSP recognises the learning being used from the survey the policy language and emphasis is business and officer led and based on internal intelligence. It is very much written about what the business wants and not the customer. If the policy was read alongside the commitment to residents promoted by the regulator Customer Satisfaction Measures and the commitments in the White Paper to service delivery and the customer being central there is definitely a gap in approach.
- 3.6.4 Reading the policy reinforces a comment received through the review that, "Until we are better at working with people who are vulnerable we shy away from it." The context of this statement was around the reducing of face- to- face conversations, reduced home visits and really understanding and impact assessing the vulnerability of our customers and providing the right support. There is concern that the Tenancy Support Offer is excluding those living in supported or assisted living because one the learning outcomes from the review is that there is a genuine wish to be considered as part of the business and access to support from TSS.
- 3.6.5 Currently there is no formal directory of external partnerships and formal service level agreements to access services for mhs customers. There was considerable praise for those small charities supporting customers facing domestic violence and drug and alcohol dependency.
- 3.6.6 There needs to consideration of benefits and welfare support being an internal service for the next 18 months as this was supported 100% by staff and 100% by customers at Focus Groups. We also found that access to this service was needed by supported housing and assisted living staff and customers. You have some staff that have previously had benefit/welfare training and work experience, but their knowledge is not current, and you need specialist skills. Failure to get it right is detrimental to the customer and the business. There appears to be a conflict to what the business wants to achieve.
- 3.6.7 When times are hard customers even more want to have a contact that knows about them, their home and neighbourhood. It is essential that the income and neighbourhood team work closely together. Would be good in both the policy and the Welcome document to encourage self- referral posting to external services and how to access internal support- what are the stages and route to access- practical advice. In the Welcome document it may be helpful to have some customer quotes about their experience of using services etc. Bring it alive.
- 3.6.8 Investing £500k in energy efficiency is excellent and in the Tenancy support offer there is an opportunity to say how mhs will support you deal with leaks and mould - if mhs is visited by the regulator making sure you have included their regulator led projects may be helpful. Hence the need to make sure there is information in

the policy promoting opportunities to feedback and make a complaint. We acknowledge and support the Fuel Poverty policy.

- 3.6.9 There is nothing included to meet the expectation about officers being out and about and accessible. Hence, in the Welcome document include where to find out about your local estate inspection, how to get involved with mhs, and reminding people that if their circumstances change and they may become ill or have disability needs that they need to let mhs know so that their changing needs can be accommodated. Also, at the bottom of the welcome document provide a feedback questionnaire that can be returned either hard copied or email to know if they had all the information needed, if not what would help them and always ask if there was any missing information that could have been helpful.
- 3.6.10 Financial assessments for all new customers' needs to be included because it would be helpful information for the business but most important of all customers. It was noted that there were Customer Welcome Sessions and incentives that encouraged high attendance. It is stated that only 30% of tenants read their tenancy agreement and so offering a decorating voucher for attendance resulted in fewer tenancy breaches. With the new hybrid approach, it is important to offer even if on-line or in person for those that cannot access technology an opportunity for this pre tenancy session. Customers could do briefing sessions if trained and given a brief to follow. A tenant can tell another tenant how it is maybe in a style and approach that will allow open conversations. If it is a resource issue this is an approach to consider.
- 3.6.11 The tenancy support offer is based on the primary support such as rent arrears and budgeting support being provided in house, and external – debt and benefit advice, health and wellbeing, drug and alcohol etc. from external organisations including the police, food banks, DWG etc.
- 3.6.12 Timescale for support is required due to demand. The role of mhs remains tenancy sustainment rather than sustainment and support to the individual.

3.6.13 Recommendations

- a. **Currently the policy is not co-produced with customers or other employees across the business.**
- b. **Review the policy to ensure that it is customer led not officer led.**
- c. **Against the new offer you need to develop a key performance indicators to measure the impact and outcome of the new policy.**
- d. **To ensure that the final version of the offer to all customers.**

3.7 Performance monitoring

- 3.7.1 The CSP understands that the performance indicators reported for tenancy support include rent arrears and evictions. The CSP understands that additional measurements will be included for the new tenancy support offer. TSS is such an important function that it may be helpful to have lower level measurements across key activities to understand demand and service outputs that are currently

monitoring call handling. This will help when addressing and managing requests for additional resources etc. The CSP would like to suggest for consideration the following activities to record:

- a. Number of calls received by customer services Call Centre.
- b. Number of calls transferred to other services/functions.
- c. Number of customers seeking financial advice/support including rent/service charges.
- d. Number of customers receiving universal Credit/benefits.
- e. Number of customers in arrears receiving support.
- f. Number of arrears payment agreements.
- g. Number of Customers using My Account.
- h. Number of customers registered for My Account.
- i. Number of customers referred to external service providers.
- j. Number of Home Plan visits completed.

3.7.2 Recommendations

- a. Develop some high and low-level key performance indicators so that the business has a good understanding of the performance and outcomes of the tenancy support offer.**
- b. Develop a questionnaire for customers to complete following the implementation and completion of 12 weeks support from L2 and L3.**

3.8 Customer feedback and tenancy issues/ expectations

3.8.1 Summary of issues that customers shared at Focus Groups and face-to-face and through the CSP survey:

- a. Time it takes to make contact through the Call Centre.
- b. Not able to meet with officers.
- c. Slow repairs for leaks taking between 6-8 weeks- concerns that with increasing water bills that loss of water of the period has to be paid for by the customer- not affordable.
- d. Focus is away from what customers want to what officers want to do.
- e. I used to have my grass cut but they only ever used a trimmer and never a lawn mower so always looked dreadful, but grateful as I am disabled.
- f. Staff do not call back when they promise.
- g. You never speak to the same person and you have to go through everything yet again.
- h. Not sure what tenancy support means- all they want is their rent.
- i. No housing officer anymore.
- j. I know that they have to have rules but my garden faces onto an area where young people play football and I have a fence and asked for it to be higher to stop balls and youths climbing over. I live alone and feel vulnerable but was told no by the repairs team. Surely, they need to look at issues from an individual point of view - I have trouble sleeping.
- k. Those that are having major works completed have no offer of support or compensation when they miss appointments, and we have to do the cleaning up after each visit and take leave from work.
- l. Time it takes for adaptations even with occupational needs reports.

- m. I am a shared owner and struggling with service charges that I did not know I would have to pay - nothing was explained.
- n. When I signed up my tenancy, I had no help to understand what it was costing me in total - rent, council tax, water, electric and my debts - they should explain everything not just tell us the rent as I got into a mess.
- o. Had no idea that I could not have plant pots in the communal garden - they all got moved and that was my project during lockdown.
- p. No recognition of digital poverty and it is going to affect many more people.
- q. Asked to email but then it took ages to get a response.
- r. Do not understand the job titles- never know who I am talking to.
- s. I know mhs cannot do everything to help but it is very frightening having to go to places where they do not know you for help - they used to help us.

3.8.2 Recommendation

- a. **The Board and ET are requested to note the above issues raised by customers and develop an action plan to address key issues.**

4. Shaping the Future – ready for the challenges ahead

- 4.1. There are members on the CSP that are very worried about how they are going to manage to pay their rent with so many other essential bills increasing so much. Those that are in work fear that they will have to go to food banks and yet cannot get benefits.
- 4.2. The CSP is concerned for mhs as a business and their employees because there may be some hard choices to make in the near future about service delivery. The plea is to ask that support services are given the priority and support and that having benefit/welfare officers is considered.
- 4.3. mhs is having a hardship fund but needs to be seeking additional funding from the local Councils New Household Support Fund to help vulnerable families through the winter - as the aim is to support low earners helping to prevent homelessness.
- 4.4. There needs to be a directory of external support organisations detailing how they can help and how to make contact. Could consideration be given to inviting key services to hold mhs customer surgeries building on the drop in advice sessions being held in libraries etc.? Partnerships are going to be so important and being part of support networks.

5. Case studies

- 5.1. Through this review we have heard many wonderful stories about the way that mhs has and will support their customers. However, there were a couple of examples that have stood out and demonstrate why the CSP supports the wider definition of Tenancy Support.

5.2. Very important to the business and customers is the reputation of the organisation and that working in the right way and looking at things through the eyes of the customer is key.

5.2.1 **Living in a new assisted living scheme**

- a. Some CSP members had the opportunity to visit a new assisted living scheme. They were impressed with the design and furnishings and the quality of facilities on offer. These are some of the cases that the CSP would like to highlight because managers working in the schemes and customer may not have had the opportunity to share and ensure that measures can be put in place within the Tenancy Support Offer to widen the commitment to meet customers' needs, especially for those that are elderly and most vulnerable who need extra support and compassion.

5.2.2 **Repairs Service**

- a. An elderly resident fitted with a stoma bag was unable to have a shower for over 7 weeks whilst waiting for a repair to the shower to be completed. This could have caused the resident risk of infection. The use of the guest room or communal bathroom was not appropriate as the facilities are poor including baths that are very low and not accessible to a frail and unwell resident. The message is please can requests be based on a priority taking into account personal circumstances and looking to complete a temporary fix to the shower in this case until a part could be accessed. There was no feedback to the manager or the resident and no apology to the resident for the delay - a bunch of flowers may have been a goodwill gesture. There is sadly a feeling in Supported Housing overall that there is a perceived disconnect between mhs and the service lead and that the only focus is on the Customer Service team.
- b. One scheme had no hot water or heating for 4 days this winter. No portable heaters were provided so there were the elderly sitting in these conditions with no support. They were advised that they did not have enough portable heaters and did not go out an access any. The scheme managers clearly had to deal with a backlash of angry residents. No officers or head of service came to site at the time or after and there was no apology to the residents or goodwill gesture. This could have caused great embarrassment to the business if a resident had died, and the message is again about being visible and finding solutions.

5.2.3 **Responsive repairs**

- a. Residents were moved out of their home into the Travel Lodge (Dockside) whilst a soil stack/structural problems. During the 5 weeks of being out of their home they never saw any officer from mhs. They had to continually chase to get any update because originally the work was to be completed in 2 weeks but was in the end 5 weeks. The delay according to the Head

of repairs was put down to being understaffed. Once returned home no letter of apology or goodwill gesture. The residents still feel upset that they were moved, no communication, had to chase to get any updates and feel very let down.

- 5.3. These examples demonstrate that in the Tenancy Support Offer there needs more consideration around communication, support when there is no service, and consideration of goodwill gestures to show customers are valued. In all cases the key upset was the invisible management – these are all examples of where the reputation of mhs could have been adversely affected if the press had got to hear. We know that this is not reflective of the culture of mhs, but all these examples could have been handled in a better way - communicate and be visible and show empathy.

6. Recommendations

<p>3.2</p>	<p>Operating Procedures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Monthly feedback needs to be sought from Customer Support Advisors (L1) regarding accessing colleagues and response issues so that regardless of where officers work, they are accountable to responding by phone and email and shared with ET so that feedback can be cascaded as required and monitored. This may address the concern of L1 advisors about having a hybrid model of officers working from home and work. b. Develop clear operating procedures and diagnostic manual so that L1 Advisors receive the right training, and the customer will receive a consistent service. A complete workflow and customer journey mapping may help highlight the gaps in service delivery and the impact on customer experience. c. The CSP would like to suggest that at the new tenancy sign up stage that a vulnerability impact assessment is included. Those that are deemed vulnerable based on the agreed vulnerability criteria to be given a named contact, so that this may address the potential anxiety caused by making contact with someone they don't know and causing tenancy issues to escalate. d. The CSP would like to propose that further consideration and consultation be given to simplifying job titles and roles and that there is publicity around this shared with your customers. e. Pilot for 12 months offering 2 month new tenancy home visits to those that are considered vulnerable and monitor impact to determine that
-------------------	------------------------------------	--

		<p>benefits exceed travel cost/time. Focus should be on smart working not working harder!</p> <p>f. The CSP would like to propose that a business case is completed to understand if having a welfare/benefits team (2 officers) would represent value for money and increased customer satisfaction and deflect cases from the L2 and L3 officers.</p>
3.3	Training and Support	<p>a. Develop a training programme to prepare L1, L2, L3 advisors ready for customers seeking support on benefits advice, rent arrears etc.</p> <p>b. L1 advisors to have a formal training programme reducing reliance on peer training</p> <p>c. Introduce train the trainer approach so that those attending external training can pass on the knowledge.</p>
3.4	Management and Staff	<p>a. There needs to be weekly communication between managers and their teams including providing a monthly newsletter highlighting work and projects undertaken in their functions.</p> <p>b. Ensuring that exit interviews understand the reasons for staff leaving to improve the experience of employees.</p> <p>c. 30%-35% complaints received by mhs are from customers contacting mhs and not getting a response. Where this has been identified, management need to address these issues.</p> <p>d. There needs to be sharing of the new draft tenancy support offer across all services to get feedback prior to sign off.</p> <p>e. Look to remove silo working between functions and within services.</p> <p>f. Ensuring learning outcomes from complaints are shared across the business so service failures can be remedied.</p> <p>g. Consideration of a senior management team across services to support ELT so that projects are completed.</p> <p>h. Consider the opportunity to develop a benefits and welfare team.</p>
3.5	Communication	<p>a. There needs to be a leaflet that explains to residents the new tenancy support offer and the CSP suggest that this sent to every customer when the rent statements are sent so not to incur additional costs and put up on the website.</p>

		<p>b. Ensure that Open Housing is properly updated by all users and regular sample checking between calls received and updating of Open Housing to identify the systems is being used correctly.</p> <p>c. Communications going out that L1 are notified in advance when there are specific mailshots going out to customers and have the knowledge to answer customer queries.</p> <p>d. Ensure the website is reviewed and updated on a regular basis.</p>
3.6	New Tenancy Support proposed policy	<p>a. Currently the policy is not co-produced with customers or other employees across the business.</p> <p>b. Review the policy to ensure that it is customer led not officer led.</p> <p>c. Against the new offer you need to develop a key performance indicators to measure the impact and outcome of the new policy.</p> <p>d. To ensure that the final version of the offer to all customers.</p>
3.7	Performance Monitoring	<p>a. Develop some high and low-level key performance indicators so that the business has a good understanding of the performance and outcomes of the tenancy support offer.</p> <p>b. Develop a questionnaire for customers to complete following the implementation and completion of 12 weeks support from L2 and L3.</p>
3.8	Customer feedback and tenancy issues/ expectations	<p>a. The Board and ET are requested to note the above issues raised by customers and develop an action plan to address key issues.</p>

7. Conclusion

6.1 There is no doubting that mhs has a strong commitment to support and help protect their customers and employees whilst ensuring that a responsive and solid business is maintained- all interrelated.

6.2 The key message from this review is that co-production of policies especially the Tenancy Support Offer that determines how and when services are offered/delivered to the customer has missed the opportunity for wider involvement of employees across the business.

6.3 The Tenancy Support Offer is welcomed but could benefit from taking a more holistic view of what and how support services are offered and delivered because there needs to be a wider commitment and sign up from mhs. There is also the need to ensure that all employees feel valued and are supported to face what will be a challenging year as customers look to mhs as the paternal source of advice, empathy, support and kindness.

6.4 The CSP look forward to working with officers to help promote, monitor and provide customer insight to determine the success of the new Tenancy Support Offer.

Key

L1 – Level 1 Customer Liaison Advisor

L2 – Level 2 Customer Liaison Advisor

L3 – Level 3 Customer Liaison Advisor