

SMHA

Tenancy Fraud

St Matthews Housing Association Ltd. registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 1969, No.IP 177.

Registered with the Department for Social Development, No.R18.

What is tenancy fraud?

Housing tenancy fraud is the use of social housing by someone who is not entitled to occupy that home. In 2013 the NI Audit Office (NIAO) identified the following categories of potential tenancy fraud:-

Giving false information on a housing application to obtain a home – were an individual may provide information on household make-up or factors relating to their current housing situation which can result in the award of more points thus enhancing their priority for rehousing on the waiting list.

Abandonment – were an individual abandons a property leaving it empty or passes on the keys for profit to another party thus depriving the landlord of the opportunity to re-allocate the property in a timely manner to an appropriate case in housing need.

Sub-letting for profit – were an individual effectively becomes landlord to another party who occupies the property and pays rent (sometimes larger than the rent charged by the Association) to them. In many of these cases the third party may not know the owner of the property and thus that the legitimate landlord may be a housing association or NIHE.

Succession fraud – were an individual succeeds a tenancy from a relative by falsely claiming to have resided at the property for an extended period of time e.g. where a young relative succeeds the tenancy of an older relative upon their death.

Right to buy fraud – were an individual may provide false information in the application process of purchasing their home under Right to Buy provisions.

Whilst there is less known about the scale of the problem in NI the Audit Commission in England identified that around as much as 2% of social housing was subject to tenancy fraud of some descript. SMHA is a small landlord and has just short of 200 properties. It is reasonable to state there may be some instances of tenancy fraud not yet detected among our populace. The scale of the problem may not be known to be high presently but increasing awareness and producing a strategy such as this may well lead to greater detection in the next few years.

Why is tackling tenancy fraud important?

When properties are used fraudulently or left empty the ability of the landlord to effectively manage the property is diminished. For example if a landlord is unaware who is residing at a property it could negatively impact on managing instances of anti-social behaviour involving the household or the household may not allow proper access for maintenance or servicing work for fear of being found out. There is also the cost to the public purse. Reducing the number of fraudulently occupied homes would reduce the amount of housing benefit fraud and the cost of the providing temporary accommodation to homeless families.

There is of course the social cost, where families in desperate housing need are delayed in getting social housing because a social tenancy may be used fraudulently or be empty when it could be relet. An analysis of the housing waiting list for the general housing area where Short Strand is situated showed there were 501 cases on the waiting list for the area with 316 deemed to be full duty applicants. Effectively dealing with tenancy fraud can bring social housing units back into management for re-letting quickly and in a more cost effective way than providing new additional units.

Policy Statement

The SMHA tenancy fraud strategy sets out the SMHA approach to the tackling tenancy fraud and provides a clear demonstration of how we see this process as a key priority and part of our day to day activities.

The strategy aims to detail a pro-active approach to tackling tenancy fraud and raise awareness amongst staff and residents of the issue and how we can tackle it more effectively.

The strategy aims to provide background on the key causes of tenancy fraud and our future strategic objectives. Our PIE (prevention, investigation and enforcement) action plan details how we currently approach the matter and how we can achieve medium to long term improvements in tackling the matter.

Aims

- Increase detection rates of tenancy fraud
- Provide tools for effective responses to tenancy fraud
- Improve communication on action taken to tackle tenancy fraud
- Reduce tenancy fraud through pro-active action
- Continuous improvement in how we fulfil our objective of tackling and reducing tenancy fraud including through technological advances and partnership working with others