

A day in the life of a housing manager

Varied, challenging and never a dull moment - just another day for Adrian Hall on the improving Barne Barton estate in Plymouth

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Wednesday 23 September 2009 00.01 BST

"People used to say that this place was like Beirut," says Adrian Hall, as he arrives for work on the Barne Barton estate in Plymouth. But the rows of clean, pastel-coloured blocks of flats don't appear to have much in common with that war-torn city today. Hall, 40, is acting area manager for housing association William Sutton Homes, part of the Affinity Sutton Group, one of the main social landlords on the estate.

Hall's morning is filled with an advice surgery for tenants held in a flat given over to the residents' association. Most have come to see William Sutton's rents specialist about arrears or benefits claims. One comes in to pick up a benefit form. Another, recently bereaved, pours her heart out to residents' association chair Melv Chislett, who is staffing the reception area, but the discussion eventually turns to rent.

"A lot of the time you start talking to people and other things come up," says Hall. A new resident, due to move in soon, has been letting a floor fitter into her new flat. She drops by to return an electronic door key to her block of flats, which is not working. The broken keys had been a hot topic at yesterday's residents' meeting and the housing association's surveyor was given a grilling.

Next it's time to visit tenants who need their gas boilers serviced, or post letters about servicing through their doors if they are not in. Landlords can be prosecuted if they don't maintain gas systems and there is an accident, explains Hall. In the stairwells of the blocks there are "no dogs" signs. Hall says the association no longer allows dogs because of fouling although tenants get about six months to find a new home for their pet. Right on cue, a woman comes downstairs with a Jack Russell tucked under her arm. "We're working on that," says Hall, wryly.

The estate, once the largest naval estate in Britain, is made up of 228 two-bedroom flats plus 33 houses. Most of the residents are young single mothers or young couples. "It is in the lowest 5% of the indices of deprivation," says Hall. "There is a lot of poverty, illiteracy, quite high unemployment." There are still problems with drugs in some areas - one former tenant of another association on the estate tells how she had to move away after being threatened with a gun, having her door kicked in and her children harassed. But other long-standing tenants comment on how much the place has improved since 2002 when the South West Regional Development Agency unveiled its vision for regenerating the area.

On his rounds, a woman calls down at Hall from her balcony asking to make an appointment. Hall usually gets stopped regularly to answer tenants' questions as he walks around the estate.

Hall, a former bank worker and car credit salesman, got started in housing five years ago after he left Croydon, south London, for a better quality of life in Plymouth where he had previously been on holiday. He got a temporary job dealing with rent arrears after seeing it in the Job

Centre and worked his way into a permanent job as a housing officer. "I like tenant participation and talking to people more than looking at figures on a computer," he says. Meeting people and getting out are the best parts of the job, while evictions are the worst, he says. He enjoys the job and can see himself carrying on in the role for the foreseeable future.

After a pub lunch with colleagues - a Friday tradition - it's time for some paperwork like tenancy agreements or going through diaries kept by residents suffering from the antisocial behaviour of others.

An hour later, Hall is back in his car for the short drive to the nearby St Budeaux office for a meeting of the estate management team, which includes Hall, fellow housing officer Deb Hersey and residents.

The topics of the meeting range from publicising a free football course for children on the estate to two teenagers who trample through residents' back gardens. Local police community support officer Carl Snell says he has confiscated a motorbike that a teenager was riding dangerously and is applying for funding to get a fenced-in play area in the local park. "We work closely with the housing association," he says. "We do joint visits because if you show people you are together it makes them think a bit more."

With the meeting at an end it is time to drive back to the office for more paperwork that needs to be finished ahead of the weekend.

The right hand man

Behind the reception desk of the community office is Melv Chislett. He is the chair of the residents' association and works closely with Adrian Hall to improve the estate. He says Hall's manner makes him good at his job. "He is firm when he needs to be but he can have a laugh with residents, which breaks down barriers," says Chislett. "His past experience dealing with the public in banking means he already has the skills to talk to people and they look forward to seeing him and talking about their issues."

Chislett was a prime mover in getting the community office premises opened in a flat on the estate in 2007, following the closure of the William Sutton estate office. The office hosts a range of services including advice sessions on returning to work, complimentary therapies, IT sessions, a children's gardening project, counselling, money advice and a credit union. There are plans for a shelter to give young people somewhere to meet, improvements to the playground and garden, and a cybercafe. William Sutton pays the running costs and foregoes about £12,000 in rent for the office.

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