

Cottsway Scrutiny Group

Review of Estate Inspections 2024

1. Background and scope

Cottsway neighbourhood management team offer a programme of scheduled estate inspections at intervals throughout the year. Following our in-depth review into the Damp & Mould service at the end of 2023 it was agreed that this review would be lighter touch. We decided to focus on procedures, how closely the neighbourhood management team follow those procedures (consistency) and how customers are kept informed of scheduled inspections and actions arising from them (communication). This review covers:

- a desktop review of other landlords' estate inspection offers, including promotion, customer participation and feedback.
- a review of Cottsway's estate inspection policy, procedure and associated documentation.
- observations from site visits with NHOs as part of their estate inspections.
- surveys of Cottsway's
 - Neighbourhood Housing Officers (NHOs)
 - Neighbourhood Manager (NM) and Neighbourhood Housing Team Leader (NHTL)
- recommendations to improve consistency and communication in estate inspections.

2. What other landlords do

With the help of the Customer Engagement Officer (CEO), we identified and reviewed how a number of other social landlords run their estate inspection programme. This included details of how they recorded and communicated findings from inspections and works undertaken as a result. Southern Housing have an informative website that sets out the standards customers can expect (ie grass cutting, hard surfaces etc) but the best website for estate inspections was Sanctuary's. This includes the standards, an explanation of the red, amber, green (RAG) rating system used and reports on each inspection. They also include a summary of how many inspections were carried out and where, along with the number of red, amber and green ratings achieved and an overview of actions taken. However, this is only up to the end of Q3 2023/24. The full list of landlords and our observations can be found at Appendix A.

3. Cottsway estate inspection programme - policy, procedure and associated documents

A copy of Cottsway's Estate Management Policy (NH003) was provided by the Neighbourhood Manager. Although not a specific Estate Inspection Policy this document sets out how Cottsway manages its estates and maintains its land, trees and common areas. The section of the Estate Management Policy that refers to estate inspections says:

Communal Areas Inspections

"Area inspections are sometimes called visual audits or walkabouts. They are a good way to help monitor the condition of our estates and ensure that our residents see us in their communities.

Neighbourhood Housing officers are responsible for organising a programme of area inspections, and publishing them on our website so that residents, other members of staff and stakeholders have the opportunity to participate. They will record unreported repairs in communal areas and follow-up to completion. All estates subject to fire risk assessments are inspected quarterly by the Neighbourhood Housing Officer, and other estates are inspected at least annually."

It was noted that the Estate Management Policy uses a number of different phrases to refer to the estate inspection process including:

- Communal area inspections
- Area inspections
- Estate inspections
- Visual audits or walkabouts.

In addition, the Clear Communal Areas Policy refers to Estate management inspections.

3.1. Estate Management Policy

When reviewing the Estate Management Policy, it was also noted that estates subject to fire risk assessments are inspected quarterly with all other estates inspected at least annually. Whilst we have been able to evidence a record of when quarterly inspections are carried out we understand these annual 'street inspections' are not programmed or recorded and are carried out on an ad-hoc basis.

Several NHOs referred to a checklist they commonly used on inspections; this was later confirmed to be the unofficial procedure. The NHOs also have access to template forms for checking blocks and communal areas including green spaces however the form is very brief and the completed copies we have seen held very little information - some used RAG ratings

and gave detailed actions and outcomes and some were incomplete or even missing the RAG rating altogether. This underlines the inconsistencies in how the reporting template is used. A better estate inspection monitoring form was seen at Sanctuary Housing and could be adapted by Cottsway to improve the robustness of monitoring and reporting.

We understand the RAG rating system is based on red for health & safety issues and amber and green use a common-sense approach based on the service standards, policy and Cottsway's repairs' priorities. The Estate Management Policy and estate inspection checklist are attached at Appendix B and C, the template form at Appendix D.

4. Site visits – observations from estate inspections

Two members of the group attended estate inspections with NHOs as follows:

- Vanda White attended an inspection of blocks in Bampton with NHO Emma Walker on Tuesday 2 April 2024. No report of this inspection has been provided.
- Gill Browning attended an inspection of an independent living scheme in North Leigh with NHO Charis Tomlinson on Thursday 4 April. A report of this inspection was received.

Both group members were impressed with the NHO's thorough approach, but it was noted that neither were able to complete the inspection efficiently as they took notes and then typed up their findings when returning to the office. One NHO carried hard copies of the maps showing landownership. Following the inspections one NHO sent a copy of the Estate Inspection checklist (Appendix C), and one sent a completed Block Inspection form (Appendix D). Photos were taken on both inspections attended but we are not clear how these are used and where they are stored.

5. Surveys

We carried out surveys with the NHOs to establish what procedure they follow on estate inspections, what training they have had, how they record their findings, who they report them to and how they keep residents informed. We also surveyed the Neighbourhood Manager and Team Leader to help us understand how the programme is managed overall.

It is clear from the variety of answers that each NHO approaches the inspection process in their own way and that although there is some shared practice, there are also inconsistencies which could be improved upon. The results of the surveys were analysed for us by the CEO and a copy of the analysis and comments provided as Appendix E (this is not available for publication due to GDPR restrictions).

5.1. Shared practice:

- Most inspections take place every 3 months or more often for blocks or where there are repeat issues. Very few areas are inspected 6 monthly and only where there are few problems, no blocks or little grounds maintenance to check on.
- Use of the inspection checklist.
- All NHOs have had training in how to carry out an estate inspection.
- All NHOs check for damp and mould in communal areas.
- Fixed schedule ensures that enough time is allocated to inspections so NHOs can focus on issues and have a record of what has been observed and done previously.

5.2. Inconsistencies:

- Several NHOs record their inspections in a dedicated spreadsheet saved in a folder in their shared document folder. One NHO is currently transferring their inspection files to this folder, but others appear not to use it, saving reports elsewhere.
- Not all NHO's record their findings on the Block inspection template form. The ones we have reviewed often lacked detail and some didn't use the RAG rating system.
- NHOs record inspection findings in a variety of formats whilst on site – manual notes, email, checklist etc. Direct access to forms via a PDA would speed up the process.
- Some NHOs (3/7) use a rating standard such as the Housing Health & Safety Rating System (HHSRS).
- Most NHOs (6 out of 7) do not feedback to residents on their findings, or the resolution of any problems identified during an inspection.
- NHOs are often unable to access Cx for household information or the GIS system to check grounds maintenance areas whilst out on patch visits. This could also be resolved by use of PDAs.
- Training - only 3/7 NHOs have had contract monitoring and HHSRS training. One NHO observed that previous experience and training in a customer services role had been very useful.
- Annual inspections – the Estate Management Policy says all areas will be inspected at least annually however we understand these inspections are not formally programmed or recorded consistently and are carried out on an ad-hoc basis.

6. Conclusions

We were pleased to find that Cottsway compared favourably to several other landlords whose estate inspection services we looked at online (we also arranged to attend an inspection with another landlord but sadly this was cancelled). There is evidence of some good, shared practice and a clear procedure being followed. However, there are also inconsistencies in the recording of inspections and their findings and some areas which could be improved e.g. reporting back to customers and providing access to systems on site so that the NHO's job is made easier and more time efficient. There was some innovative and 'outside the box' thinking from the Neighbourhood Team, which was great to see, and thoughtful responses to our survey overall. We think this can all be capitalised upon to drive improvements and to make the estate inspection service more accessible to customers.

We would like to note that, in our previous reviews, we have always sought direct feedback from other Cottsway customers about the service area under review. For the first time, however, there was no group of customers to interview as estate inspections have been very poorly attended, if at all. We therefore believe that an increased awareness coupled with a feedback loop and better reporting will increase engagement and, though attendance at estate inspections is desirable, the main point is to ensure information on outcomes is available. Our recommendations are laid out below.

7. Recommendations

7.1. Consistency

1. Be clearer about what is inspected and when i.e., the difference between a quarterly inspection for areas with fire risk assessments (blocks) and annual inspections for estates (See Estate Management Policy).
2. Improve how annual inspections for estates are monitored and recorded.
3. Save all estate inspection records in the same format in the same place - consider using Cx module if appropriate.
4. Use consistent language - documents currently refer to Estate Inspections, Communal Area Inspection, area inspections, visual audits or walkabouts and estate management inspections.
5. Have a consistent approach - have an approved Estate Inspection Procedure that sets out how, what, when, recording, monitoring and reporting.
6. Consider using HouseMark photo book to ensure a consistent standard - new app available.

7.2. Communication

7. Track and publish outcomes on Cottsway's website ensuring customers can see the issues raised and track progress with resolving them (a feedback loop), including the RAG rating of results (see [Sanctuary](#) for an excellent example of a feedback loop).
8. Investigate if using group emails or SMS texts to blocks/streets/areas to promote estate inspections and feedback outcomes is a possibility.
9. Ensure estate inspection rotas and outcomes are published on noticeboards where available.
10. Consider an Estate Services booklet/info leaflet (similar to the one previously published by Optivo/Southern Housing) to include information on inspections and standards.
11. Make it clear on the estate inspections webpage how to report an issue in the neighbourhood i.e., fly tipping or graffiti. Consider a specific form.
12. Run an awareness raising campaign on estate inspections and costs of fly-tipping.
13. Raise awareness of the HHSRS and its role in estate inspections.
14. Promote estate inspections on phone lines, email footers, social media and make use of bulk mail-outs e.g., annual rent statements.
15. Promote use of ASB app to record fly-tipping, graffiti etc and share photos.
16. Investigate if estate inspection information can be included on customer portal.

7.3. Other

17. Provide a mobile device (PDA) that can be effectively used on-site by NHO's to record estate inspection findings, review maps, take photos and access Cx, Gismo etc.
18. Ensure NHO's receive training on estate inspections, contract monitoring and HHSRS at induction and an annual refresher.
19. Review estate inspection reports at NHO's quarterly appraisal meeting.

8. List of appendices

Appendix	Title
Appendix A	Review of other landlords' websites
Appendix B	Estate Management Policy (NH003)
Appendix C	Estate inspection checklist (informal procedure)
Appendix D	Block inspection report (template)
Appendix E	NHO survey analysis (not available for publication due to GDPR)

Appendix A: Review of other landlord's websites

Irwell (Manchester/Bolton/Bury/Lancs)

Very good page on website identifying who community coordinators are by patch and giving date/time of future inspections. Customers need to call or email to be put in touch with them.

<https://www.irwellvalley.co.uk/for-customers/tenant-information/your-neighbourhood/neighbourhood-inspections/>

Islington & Shoreditch Housing Association (North and East London)

Regular programme between local Neighbourhood Services Manager, neighbourhood officer and contractors which residents are welcome to attend. Template audit sheet complete, date and sign. Web pages by block giving details and a report to download from each inspection plus form to submit feedback if unable to attend. Also, information about cleaning spec, cyclical decoration and fire risk assessments, all with downloads. Once again you have to email them for details and also to join in an estate inspection, but no list of dates of inspections to be carried out. It does list outcomes of inspections also, giving a feedback loop to the tenants.

<https://www.isha.co.uk/cynthia-house.html>

[https://www.isha.co.uk/downloads/Your Home/In Your Area/Newcombe-Estate-%2023.12.2023-%20\(PDF%2084KB\).pdf](https://www.isha.co.uk/downloads/Your Home/In Your Area/Newcombe-Estate-%2023.12.2023-%20(PDF%2084KB).pdf)

Optivo now Southern Housing (London, Southeast, Midlands)

Regular programme with a photobook style leaflet for customers to explain what standards should be. Web page giving clear information about standards but not inspection programme dates. Customers need to report by phone or online. Can become resident monitors – again, need to contact Optivo to express an interest. Clear Information on website as to what is reviewed in an estate inspection, they also produce 'estate service standards' leaflets for tenants.

Please note, these documents are no longer available online.

Raven Housing Trust (Redhill, Surrey)

One page detailing what is covered by a neighbourhood inspection. They have neighbourhood wardens who are supposed to be out on their patches every day keeping an eye out for things. Can't find any formal programme mentioned or anywhere to sign up for customers, nowhere is information displayed neither outcomes or how to get involved in them.

<https://www.ravenht.org.uk/looking-after-my-home/my-neighbourhood/neighbourhood-inspections/>

Sanctuary Housing

An informative webpage that includes the standards, an explanation of the RAG rating system used and reports on each inspection. They also include a summary of how many inspections were carried out and where along with the number of red, amber and green ratings achieved and an overview of actions taken. However, this is only up to the end of Q3 2023/24.

<https://www.sanctuary.co.uk/your-neighbourhood/estate-inspections>

Soha

<https://www.soha.co.uk/neighbourhood-inspections/>

Call customer services to join in.

Peabody

<https://www.peabodygroup.org.uk/>

Can't find anything on their website about Estate Inspections.

Cottsway

Tenants have to establish contact to take part, and as highlighted during the meeting not all areas are actually inspected, just mainly the blocks of flats, also as listed upon estate inspections it refers to communal inspections not estate inspections. No advertising unless you search for when and where they will be held. There is also no feedback loop on the inspections.

<https://www.cottsway.co.uk/your-community/estate-inspections/>

Estate Management Policy

Document owner	Neighbourhood Housing Manager
Frequency of review	3 years
Date of current review	August 2023
Approved by	CLT 22/08/23
Date of next review	August 2026

Scope of policy

This policy applies to all Cottsway tenants, leaseholders, shared owners and mixed tenure developments owned or managed by Cottsway.

The policy describes how we manage our estates and maintain our land, trees and common areas.

Policy Statement

Effective tenancy and estate management is a vital part of our housing management offer to residents in our communities.

This policy defines our commitment to giving all our customers quiet enjoyment of their homes in a safe and secure environment that they can take pride in.

This policy supports our commitment to a safe and healthy environment in which to live and work. Our staff and contractors will comply with all health and safety requirements in delivering this policy.

Implementation

Our Neighbourhood Team is responsible for the effective delivery of this policy. All Cottsway staff are expected to be aware of our standards and alert to any issue that may arise on our estates and in our communities, especially where a rapid response is required to urgent issues that may arise.

This policy covers:

- Communal areas inspections
- Communal gardens and landscape maintenance
- Communal internal decorations and fittings
- Service Charges
- Fire safety
- Security
- Vandalism and graffiti
- Refuse disposal and litter

- Fly-tipping
- Communal cleaning
- Tree management
- Snow clearance
- Abandoned vehicles

Communal Areas Inspections

Area inspections are sometimes called visual audits or walkabouts. They are a good way to help monitor the condition of our estates and ensure that our residents see us in their communities.

Neighbourhood Housing officers are responsible for organising a programme of area inspections, and publishing them on our website so that residents, other members of staff and stakeholders have opportunity to participate. They will record unreported repairs in communal areas and follow-up to completion. All estates subject to fire risk assessments are inspected quarterly by the Neighbourhood Housing Officer, and other estates are inspected at least annually.

Communal Gardens and Landscape Maintenance

All estates subject to fire risk assessments are inspected quarterly by a Neighbourhood Housing Officer, and other estates are inspected at least annually.

Neighbourhood Housing officers will ensure that services delivered under contract are meeting the terms of the agreement and provide value for money. Regular review meetings will be held with contractors who must demonstrate a commitment to deliver a quality service.

Communal Internal Decoration and Fittings

We will decorate internal communal areas on our cyclical painting programme and renew floor coverings and fixtures and fittings according to condition, usage and types of materials. Prior to any work commencing we will contact residents to involve them in decisions about the decoration and colour schemes within their blocks.

Floor coverings, fixtures and fittings supplied will be durable, easy to clean and maintain, energy efficient and environmentally friendly.

Service Charges

Communal maintenance costs will be recovered by way of a service charge to residents who benefit from the use of communal areas.

Fire Safety

Our Landlord Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) procedure applies. An appropriately qualified person will undertake the assessment and report any actions required. The Neighbourhood Team will follow up remedial actions to conclusion.

We will give customers information about fire safety, prevention and detection, in a variety of media at the start of a new tenancy and where dangerous behaviour has been reported. This includes keeping communal spaces and fire exits clear.

We will ensure that all our properties meet fire and building regulations and have a current fire certificate where required. Fire-safety equipment installed is regularly serviced and tested.

Security

We will give residents advice about security in their home, such as adequate locks and home contents insurance, at the start of new tenancy or where a particular risk has been identified.

All communal areas will have adequate lighting. We will provide communal security lighting as necessary.

Neighbourhood Housing officers will ensure that the homes of customers who need additional security precautions appropriate to their particular circumstances, are delivered through the Sanctuary Scheme.

Vandalism and Graffiti

Where properties are vacant for a long period we will ensure adequate security provisions are made, such as boarding up or installing suitable security screens where necessary.

Neighbourhood Housing Officers and the Responsive and Void Work Supervisor will monitor empty properties to check for signs of damage or illegal occupation.

We will remove obscene, racist, sexist or homophobic graffiti within one working day of being made aware of it. All other graffiti will be removed within five working days of being made aware of it.

Refuse disposal and Litter

New customers will be given advice about safe disposal of waste. We will provide information about recycling facilities, disposal of garden waste and bulky items.

Where communal waste and recycling facilities (bin stores) are provided we will ensure that these are maintained, safe to use and able to cope with residents' domestic needs.

Fly-Tipping (dumping of waste)

Fly-tipping is the dumping of waste. It is anti-social and an arrestable offence. Where we can identify the person responsible we will charge them directly for clearance. Where we cannot the cost is charged to the block. Dumped items can be commercial, like building waste or car parts and tyres, or domestic, like mattresses, fridges and washing machines.

We will order the removal of any rubbish left on Cottsway land, including communal spaces. Where there are fly-tipping 'hot spots' Neighbourhood Housing Officers will work with environmental health services to provide Street Scene improvements and initiatives.

Our Communities team will support diversionary events such as clean up/skip days to engage all residents in the maintenance of their estates.

Tree management

We will conduct a cyclical survey of trees on communal land and record the need for any works. Works will be carried out according to the need, for example a tree will be treated as urgent if it is deemed by our surveyor to be in a dangerous condition.

Neighbourhood Housing Officers will work with customers who do not maintain trees within the responsibility of their tenancy.

Snow Clearance

Cottsway will not clear snow in communal areas. Customers in Independent Living Schemes can choose to have this service which will be canvassed via consultation. The cost will be recovered through their scheme service charges.

Abandoned Vehicles

An abandoned vehicle is one which has no current documentation, such as road excise duty (car tax), a valid MOT certificate or car insurance.

Neighbourhood Housing Officers will work with the DVLA and local authority to remove any vehicle deemed abandoned on our land. Any vehicle abandoned on the public highway will be reported to the police.

Partnership Working

We will work with all our stakeholders including customers, statutory, voluntary and community groups, and other landlords to deliver effective estate management. This may include initiatives like local area plans, good neighbourhood agreements, neighbourhood watch schemes and traffic calming measures.

Appeals

Customers are encouraged to follow our feedback and complaints service.

Responsibility

The Head of Housing is responsible for the implementation of this policy.

Equality Diversity and Inclusion

In applying this Policy we, and our contractors, will ensure that no person or group of persons will be treated less favourably than another person or group of persons because of race, colour, ethnic or national origin, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender presentation, physical disability or sexual preference.

Other Related Documents

Anti social behaviour policy and procedure
Abandoned vehicle procedure
Clear Communal Areas Policy and procedure
Landlord Fire Risk Assessment Procedure

Review Amendments

August 2023	Minor reformatting and language refreshed
	Re-worded to align with fire risk assessment procedure

Appendix C

Estate Inspection Check List

1) Inspect each block and ensure the following is happening:

- a. Identify any personal left items within the block - yellow card, note through letter box for all items within the block - other than front door mats. Take photos for evidence.
- b. Check the standard of cleaning - look at timetable. When was it last cleaned?
 - i. If not to standard, call contractor there and then. Evidence with photos.
- c. Are the fire doors locked? - If not, lock them. Use appropriate keys.
- d. Check emergency lighting - does it come on? If not, can you see the green light on the light unit?
- e. Are there any obvious block or communal repairs you need to log?
- f. Are there any H & S concerns which need flagging?
- g. Outside - review the standard of Grounds Maintenance - Grass, Shrubs, Hedges, Litter etc in line with contract
- h. Outside - inspect bin area and cycle sheds - are they clean and clear?
- i. Outside - are there any slides, paddling pools, climbing frames - yellow card them. These are of concern regarding our insurance.
- j. Are there any trolleys which need returning to the supermarket? Make arrangements for them to be collected and or identify who is abandoning them.
- k. Are any car repairs, caravans, abandoned cars on our land? Are there any cars parked on our grass and damaging it? If yes, take the necessary action.
- l. Identify if any breaches of restrictive covenants eg. placement of bins, storage of items, incorrect parking or vans too large.

2) Look at the grounds maintenance in the locality (not associated with blocks):

- a. Is the grass reasonable?
- b. Are the shrub beds and hedges neat and tidy?

- c. Is the area litter free?
- d. Are the local parking areas being tended to?
- e. Are there any abandoned cars, caravans, or car repairs happening?
- f. Are restrictive covenants being breached?

3) Follow up required. Store photos of all the issues you are dealing with for reference.

- a. Identify all the items of rubbish/personal belongings which will need a revisit or a letter/phone call. If sending letters, attach photos of the item/s concerned. Monitor until removed or arrange their removal. Send service charge letters, with photos attached as required.
- b. Identify any breaches of tenancy/restrictive covenants. Then action as above.
- c. Identify all issues and concerns related to Grounds Maintenance. Contact JOC to report your concerns and put on spreadsheet for Management information to be shared with JOC at regular Management meetings.
- d. Identify all issues and concerns related to Cleaning. Communicate with Carter and Faraday – follow up as required.
- e. Action one off issues. Car repairs identified, abandoned cars, general repairs identified and reported.
- f. Action any health and safety concerns.

Appendix D: Block inspection template

Estate Inspection of Shakenoak, North Leigh 05.4.24

	Traffic Lights	Comments	Action Taken	Outcome
External				
Grounds Maintenance		Meets standard		
Internal Including emergency lighting		Landings Clear Risers locked		
Bin Shed				
Cleaning		To standard		

Appendix E: NHO Survey Analysis – not available for publication due to GDPR