

Living the High Life

**Cruddas Park Tower Blocks
Tenants Group 2001**

CONTENTS

	Page
Background	2
Our Vision	3
Key Recommendations	4
The Role of the Security Porter	5
A Dedicated Estate Management Team	8
Appendix - The blocks and their location	11

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1. Background

Cruddas Park Flats are home to over 1,500 people, a significant proportion of whom are elderly and vulnerable

In December 1999, the Council proposed that the 24-hour Security Porter service in the ten tower blocks be replaced with a concierge service (also linking in Cruddas Park Flats which does not have a Security porter), consistent with the rest of the City's high flats.

Tenants felt that this would seriously jeopardise their security and quality of life in Cruddas Park flats.

Tenants Response

Extensive consultation over this proposal was carried out by the Cruddas Park Tower Block Tenants Association, which has resulted in 200 tenants directly having a say in how the service should be shaped in the future.

The tenants group held an initial public meeting and then 10 block meetings; in addition the group produced two reports ("Porters versus Concierge" and "The Porters Service") setting out the views of local people.

This work culminated in a public meeting that was held at the Park Road Community Centre on 5th June 2000. At this meeting the Council agreed to work with tenant representatives to review the security porter service and to identify its strengths and weaknesses in order to recommend improvements to the service.

As part of this review we surveyed all the porters. The findings from our extensive consultation have informed this review. We firmly believe that the porters are vital to the long-term sustainability of our community and that the housing management service can be made more effective and responsive to tenants' needs.

The Steering Group

A Steering Group was set up to carry out this review comprising tenant representatives from the ten tower blocks and Cruddas Park High Flats, Newcastle Tenants Federation, the Community and Housing Manager and Community Development Workers. This report is the result of the work of the Steering Group.

We decided that the Porter service could not be looked at in isolation from the rest of the Housing Management service.

This report contains recommendations that will hopefully bring about changes to the working practices of not only the security porters but of all the housing staff who work on our estate.

2. Our Vision

All of the tower blocks in Cruddas Park are currently viable however none of us should be complacent about this. We believe that all the blocks can have a long-term future and our community can go from strength to strength.

We all have a role to play - the community, our local housing management service, the Council, New Deal for Communities and all providers of services in the area. Together we can make sure that the community in the blocks plays an active role in the regeneration of our area and the West End in general.

New Deal for Communities has set aside £3.5m towards the external fabric overhaul and new windows in the blocks. This figure has been matched by an additional £3.5m from the council. The priority for our community is the release of this money so that the work can begin.

Our vision for 2010 is that the tower blocks will have benefited from a high quality refurbishment programme including new windows and enclosed balconies, with repair to the external fabric of the buildings giving the blocks an extra 30 years of life.

The security equipment will have been upgraded to allow residents the benefits that this brings in enabling controlled door entry, and improved monitoring of the common areas to increase security and the feeling of well being amongst residents.

Residents will also have individual burglar alarms and each flat will be linked to the security porter by a telephone handset. The estate will have its own neighbourhood housing management service in which the security porter plays a key role.

The elderly residents living in the high flats above the shopping centre will also benefit from a 24-hour porter presence in their block. Day to day

services like repairs reporting, allocations, rent and housing benefit advice and tenancy enforcement matters will be delivered locally on site within offices in one or two of the tower blocks.

An appropriate and agreed allocations policy will have brought stability to the estate by ensuring wherever possible that tenants who move into the blocks are people who are suited to, and content with tower blocks living and that the appropriate support services are in place for the more vulnerable members of our community.

In this way the housing management service will be re-focused to deliver a service that is responsive to the needs of residents, involving a closer working relationship between tenants, their representatives, council officers and all service providers.

We believe that the City of Newcastle cannot afford to lose such a valuable and successful housing resource. These improvements will ensure that the Cruddas Park flats continue to remain viable for the long-term future.

3. Key Recommendations

- The current video equipment should be replaced as soon as possible
- Early release of the money from New Deal for Communities and the Council for the external refurbishment of our tower blocks
- The role of the porter should be seen as pivotal to the success of the blocks. The current 24-hour security cover in the ten tower blocks by the Security Porters should be retained and this service extended to Cruddas Park High Flats
- We need to establish a dedicated estate management team, which includes estate officers and porters to manage the ten tower blocks and Cruddas Park High Flats
- A base for this new team should be created in one of the tower blocks - a 'superlodge'
- Adequate management support, training and resources to be made available to the team to deal with the range and complexity of issues experienced in tower blocks which house a high proportion of vulnerable tenants

- A commitment from the Council to work in partnership with the Tower Blocks Tenants Group, High Rise Tenants Associations and the Estate Housing Management Committee to realise our vision and goals for our estate; and to achieve this by linking into New Deal for Communities

4. The Role of the Security Porter

Our extensive consultation has confirmed that the main reason why tenants like living in the blocks and do not want to live anywhere else in the West End is the security and peace of mind they enjoy in having a porter in every block for 24 hours of the day.

All tenants agree that this gives them real peace of mind and that the security should be extended to cover Cruddas Park High Flats.

Tenants believe that the service can be improved and that this is crucial to the long-term sustainability of the community who live in the eleven blocks, which are located in this small geographical area close to the City Centre.

Security

- **Retaining 24 hour cover in each block & monitoring security equipment**

As mentioned above, we see this as the core and primary role of the porter, which must not be compromised in any way. In addition this service should be extended to the Cruddas Park Flats where tenants (in the majority elderly and/ or disabled) have been experiencing constant nuisance and disruption as people who do not live in the block gain access to the block during the day and evenings.

- **Supervision of Foyer areas**

We feel that the porters should play a more pro-active role in monitoring what goes on in the foyer. If people are causing a nuisance they should be challenged.

- **Monitoring 'tailgaters'**

Porters need to monitor 'tailgaters' more actively and challenge every person who attempts to enter by either following a tenant in; buzzing the porter or other tenants randomly.

- **Roving Porter outside the blocks**

There is a need for porters' duties to include periodic inspection of the immediate area surrounding the blocks. This could be done during shift changes by having overlapping shifts.

Providing support

The porter is the first point of contact for all tenants who live in the blocks and their visitors. It is essential that they have the skills to welcome people to the block, deal with queries and, if they are unable to resolve an issue, make a note of the request and pass it onto the appropriate person who can deal with the issue.

Meeting the needs of vulnerable tenants

There is a very diverse community living in the blocks and a high percentage of tenants are vulnerable for a whole range of reasons. Porters could play a crucial role in providing support for vulnerable tenants including:

- Voluntary Register - Maintaining a computer database of vulnerable tenants containing details on emergency contacts, medication etc. Porters could also have access to details of emergency contacts for all tenants if tenants want to give these details.
- Alerting a tenant's named contact if they are not seen for a few days.
- Contacting their named relation, support person or social worker if they are not well or need assistance.

Assistance in emergency situations

Their unique role and 24-hour presence mean the porters can provide invaluable assistance in emergency situations by offering First Aid, contacting the emergency services and informing a relation/friend. In addition they could also take in-coming emergency messages and pass them on to tenants.

Signposting / Source of information

Porters should be a useful source of local information for all tenants. For this to happen training will be needed to raise their awareness and improve their skills and knowledge. They could also be equipped with directories of useful organisations and agencies, to signpost people to.

Practical assistance

Some porters are very good at coming to the aid of an elderly or disabled tenant and assisting them with doors or getting taxis. This practice should be made consistent across the service. Another suggestion is that Porters could make available a 'trolley' for tenants' use, which would be particularly beneficial for tenants moving in or out.

Working closely with tenants

The tenants groups and Estate Housing Management Committee would welcome a far closer working relationship with the porters, which would improve communication between all parties.

Distinction in night / day time jobs

There has been discussion about whether a distinction could be made between the day and nighttime shifts. The daytime shift having a wider customer focus and the nighttime shift mainly security-oriented.

Many of these suggestions are examples of current good practice, and some porters already perform these standards, however they need to be consistently applied across the whole service. Other suggestions are 'enhancements' to the security porter's role, which we believe will ensure a first class service is delivered to our community.

The porter's role needs to be more holistic and relevant to tenants' needs it needs to be enmeshed into the whole housing management service and porters need support and training to ensure that they can deliver the service in this way.

5. A Dedicated Estate Management Team

Currently, management of the 11 tower blocks is divided between four estate officers and their respective Housing Assistants. This creates:

- Lack of consistency in management style/practice across the blocks
- An estate officer responsible for a combination of family estates and tower blocks may be tempted to adopt a more 'hands-off' approach with the tower blocks (as it has a 'responsive' Porter to act as a 'buffer') and to prioritise the family estates
- In terms of liaising with tenants, it is not practicable or effective for the Tenants Associations to deal with four estate officers
- As mentioned earlier, the porters do not feel part of the 'housing management team'.

Developing a dedicated team

We believe that the tower blocks would benefit greatly from having its own dedicated estate management team which includes the Porters. The advantages will be:

- Increased efficiency and consistency
- More effective team work and improved communication
- Improved liaison with tenants' group and other agencies
- A more responsive service to tenants living in the blocks

On-Site Management Base - 'Super-lodge'

Consistent with the previous recommendation, we propose that there be a localised management team based in a tower block foyer - a 'superlodge'.

We envisage the following services being available from this base:

- Reporting of repairs and other housing/environmental issues
- Dealing with/interviewing tenants regarding complaints, tenancy issues and rent arrears
- Letting flats
- Collection of Housing Benefit renewal forms

- In addition other service providers could use the 'superlodge' to provide a local service to the community including welfare rights and the police.

Staff Management Issues

The recommendations in this report will only work if there is a committed team of highly motivated people managing all the tower blocks in the Cruddas Park area including the High Flats above the shopping centre. For a long time porters did not feel part of the general housing service in fact they felt isolated from it.

More recently effort has been put into dealing with this with some success, however our recent survey of porters shows that some porters still feel isolated and demotivated.

We believe that all workers involved in the housing management of the blocks should be based within the blocks and that they should see their role in its' widest sense.

There needs to be regular daily contact between the estate officers and the porters so that they can both keep each other regularly updated on any developments in and around the blocks - be they individual tenancy issues or environmental issues.

All workers should feel that they are part of a team and exchange ideas, information and good practice which will result in them learning from each other and the service developing and improving for everyone.

For this to work effectively we believe that two senior porter posts should be created. The seniors would have day today responsibility for overseeing and managing the service. They would be a point of contact for all porters and advise porters on any specific queries or any difficult situations that they have had to deal with.

The appointment of two seniors would also give the porters a clearer career structure; they would potentially have something to aim for.

Overall responsibility for the porters and estate officers would remain with the local Community and Housing Manager. The way in which the service is delivered will continue to be monitored by the local tenants group and the Housing Management Committee and tenants will have a key role in this.

Training needs

The ideas which we have set out in this report for the future of the service delivered to our blocks are dependent on staff being managed well and receiving adequate training to enable them to carry out their responsibilities.

Security Porters currently receive training on issues around equality and handling difficult situations we believe that this should continue and be enhanced; in addition, training is needed in the following areas:

Vulnerable Tenants

As front line staff having the most regular contact with vulnerable tenants, it is vital that Porters receive training on issues relevant to vulnerable tenants. The Tower Blocks have one of the highest proportions of vulnerable tenants in the City and the Porters are in a key position to provide a 'Best Value' service to them.

Areas of training could include increasing awareness and understanding of the needs of tenants with disabilities, mental health issues, substance users and asylum seekers/ refugees.

First Aid

Porters are often the first or only members of housing staff at the scene of an emergency incident. In the crucial few minutes before the arrival of the Emergency services the action they take could be vital.

APPENDIX

The Tower blocks are situated between Westmoreland Road and Scotswood Road in the Cruddas Park area of the city.

There are 1,018 flats within 11 high-rise tower blocks, comprising of:

One 20-floor tower block: Cruddas Park House.

Eight 14-floor tower blocks:
The Beeches
The Cedars
The Hawthorns
The Larches
The Pines
The Poplars
The Sycamores
The Willows

Two 12-floor tower blocks:
King's Meadows
Haughton Court.