

The County Farms Estate Results of Tenants Questionnaire 2023

Report of the Director of Transformation and Business Services

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

1) Recommendation

That:

- (a) The actions reported by the land agents to improve traceability of repairs and maintenance requests made by tenants be noted.
- (b) The proposal to report the questionnaire results and proposed actions to improve traceability of repairs and maintenance requests made by tenants in the Estate Winter Newsletter be endorsed.
- (c) The feedback confirming members beliefs that Norse require more funding to employ additional qualified Land Agent resource be explored at the earliest opportunity with officers of the County Council.

2) Background / Introduction

- 2.1 Between May and June 2023 an anonymous questionnaire was sent to 70 Devon County Farms Estate Tenants in order to garner feedback on their experiences.
- 2.2 A copy of the questionnaire is attached to this report at Appendix 1. A summary of the questionnaire feedback is attached at Appendix 2.
- 2.3 Overall, participation was very low with just 26% (18) of tenants responding to the survey.
- 2.4 In the main, the feedback was positive with just two notable areas that warranted further investigation and potential improvement. The two specific areas were:
 - (i) The perceived slow response rate for either South West Norse building surveyors and/or Devon County Council contractors to attend to both programmed and unforeseen repairs and maintenance. Linked to this feedback was an apparent lack of regular communication from building surveyors and contractors around the requisite repairs.
 - (ii) Tenants being unclear on how to and who to communicate compliments or complaints.

- 2.5 Some feedback suggested a greater need to improve support for new tenants. It was surprising some tenants didn't rate particularly highly the new entrants guide. The guide attached at Appendix 3 is believed to be relatively unique in the UK farm tenanted sector and we would like to understand what more tenants may wish to see in the guide.
- 2.6 It should also be recognised that despite best endeavours and best intentions some of the comments and observations made in the questionnaire feedback can simply not be resolved for practical, and at times, legal reasons. An example of this would be the comment made in responds to question 1 *'to ascertain the ingoing valuation, to ensure the incoming tenant can afford this commitment from the outset'*. Whilst every effort is made to negotiate, agree and report before viewing days an upfront valuation of an outgoing tenants' improvements, fixtures and fittings, this process is sometimes frustrated by an outgoing tenant and/or their agent. It should also be noted that there will always be other ingoing costs an incomer will be liable for such as the value of tenants' pastures, back fencing and fertility that cannot be determined until the tenancy changeover date.
- 2.7 The feedback comments to question 6 confirms Members and Land Agents belief's that additional qualified Land Agent resource is required. The level of resource has been reduced in the last 5 years, yet the workload and diversity of workload has undoubtedly increased. It is not disputed that the current resource is stretched too thin. Additional resource will require additional budget provision being made in the estate revenue account.
- 2.8 Questions 8, 9 and 10 relate to repairs and maintenance and this is where the majority of the more negative feedback arose. Some of the comments may simply relate to the fact that the Estate budget for repairs and maintenance is incredibly constrained and not helped by the recent unprecedented levels of inflationary cost increase in the construction industry meaning only the most pressing repairs can be afforded and justified. Other comments clearly relate to the quality of work carried out by Devon County Councils own contractors and in this regard, it is hoped that when the Council's Standing List of Approved Contractors (SLOAC) next opens for applications, more agriculturally focussed contractors can be encouraged and supported to join the approved list. However, some of the feedback concerns the performance of the South West Norse Ltd building surveying team. It has been agreed with the building surveying team that for Farms Estate repairs and maintenance work the Connect 2 'helpdesk' function will be used from January 2024 to log, record and track all requests made by tenants for landlord's repairs reported to the land agents. This will add an improved level of traceability and should prevent works instructions getting lost and/or delayed in email traffic.
- 2.9 It is important that for those tenants who took the time to respond to the questionnaire actions are implemented to improve the service and those actions are communicated in a timely manner. It is therefore intended to report a summary of the questionnaire results in the Estate Winter Newsletter, together with:
- (i) A statement covering the proposed intervention for service improvement referred to in 2.8 above.

- (ii) A statement on how tenants can report compliments or complaints, with the first point of contact remaining the Chairman or Vice Chairman of the Committee, followed by utilisation of the County Councils customer feedback service [Customer feedback procedure - Have Your Say \(devon.gov.uk\)](https://www.devon.gov.uk/customer-feedback-procedure)

3) Options / Alternatives

- 3.1 Alternative options have been considered and discounted as they are believed to either be contrary to current Estate policy and/or not in the best financial interests of the Estate.

4) Consultations / Representations / Technical Data

- 4.1 The views and opinions of the Devon Federation of Young Farmers Clubs and the Estate Tenants Association will be presented by the two co-opted members to the committee.
- 4.2 No other parties have been consulted and no other representations have been received
- 4.3 The technical data is believed to be true and accurate.

5) Strategic Plan

- 5.1 This report has a direct alignment with the Council's Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025 - <https://www.devon.gov.uk/strategic-plan>

Improving health and wellbeing - improve mental health by improving access to mental health and wellbeing services and strengthening support for young people at risk of emotional or mental health problems

6) Financial Considerations

- 6.1 The Author is not aware of any financial issues arising from this report.

7) Legal Considerations

- 7.1 The Author is not aware of any legal issues arising from this report.

8) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

- 8.1 The Author is not aware of any environmental impact (including climate change) issues arising from this report.

9) Equality Considerations

9.1 The Author is not aware of any equality issues arising from this report.

10) Risk Management Considerations

10.1 No risks have been identified.

11) Summary / Conclusions / Reasons for Recommendations

11.1 The Author has prepared this report in accordance with the findings of the County Farms Estate Strategic Review (April 2010).

Matthew Jones,
Director of Transformation and Business Services

Electoral Divisions: All

Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers

Background Paper

Date

File Reference

Nil

Contact for enquiries:

Name: Dan Meek, Director of Estates & Valuation, South West Norse, Venture House, One Capital Court, Bittern Road, Sowton Industrial Estate, Exeter, EX2 7FW

Contact: 01392 351066 or dan.meek@norsegroup.co.uk