



Department for
Social
Development
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SmartMove
Accommodation & Support Services

The Tenant Experience

The following case studies demonstrate that with the right assistance and support, individuals for whom the private rented sector would not automatically appear to be the best tenure option, can find a home and a tenancy that works well for them. The private rented sector is often seen as a short-term option, a stop-gap while waiting for another, better housing option; however, as these stories illustrate it can be much more than this.

MARTIN



“Being placed in SmartMove accommodation helped me gain custody of my two daughters and live in the one place for a long time, which I have never done.”

Martin had actually been offered accommodation in the social rented sector in advance of taking on his SmartMove tenancy. He rejected two offers as they were both for a one bedroom flat and didn't take into account the fact that he was trying to gain custody of his two daughters and would need an additional bedroom if he was successful. Martin decided that the private rented

sector would offer him more flexibility and has now held a tenancy with SmartMove since October 2005.

During this time, Martin received a lot of support from SmartMove in the form of both home and office visits and many letters were written in support of his custody application. Martin fell into rent arrears a number of times at the start of his

tenancy and SmartMove negotiated a reduced rent level with his landlord for three months and also applied for a Discretionary Housing Payment on his behalf. Without this support it is likely that Martin would have been evicted by his landlord.

Some of the help Martin received was at a very practical level – he was not heating the property correctly and there was a great deal of damp and condensation building up which was causing permanent damage. SmartMove staff stepped in and explained to Martin how to heat and ventilate the property correctly.

After Martin won his custody battle and gained full-time custody of his daughters, SmartMove helped him to move from a one bedroom flat to a three bedroom house.

Martin and his daughters have settled really well into their new home and have come so far that they only need twice yearly visits by the SmartMove team.

Being given the chance of secure accommodation within the SmartMove stock and having a support network around him, has helped Martin in attaining a stable life for himself, and more recently, his daughters.

PHILOMENA



Philomena is a lone parent with one child. She has had a tenancy with SmartMove for three years, but a big part of her story is that through SmartMove she was able to get back into work.

She met with an advice worker in November 2009 and had a better off calculation done, which showed that she would actually have more money if she returned to work.

A further appointment a few weeks later helped her to source employment for 16 hours per week and assisted in her claiming return to work credit as well as advice on childcare and help with childcare costs and working tax credits.

Philomena has been in continuous employment ever since.

SEAMUS



“SmartMove have made such an impact on my life.”

Seamus needed help to access accommodation after being released from prison. He had no housing arrangements made and nowhere to go. Seamus had no immediate access to any benefits and no deposit. He was housed in the private rented sector through SmartMove

within 24 hours of his release.

The main priority for SmartMove in Seamus' case was to find good affordable accommodation with a landlord who was willing to accept him onto the savings scheme. SmartMove was able to do this through one of

its registered landlords. The next issue that needed to be addressed was helping him get access to the benefit that he was entitled to and also helping him to access money to live on straight away. This was done through SmartMove's onsite financial advice worker.

Seamus received support and advice while settling in to his new home and the SmartMove team maintained regular contact with him. Seamus is now well-settled in and has access to his children who he sees on a regular basis. Seamus says: “When I first left prison I felt very vulnerable, alone and didn't know what road I was going to take. I had nowhere to put my head down and this would have had a detrimental affect on my mental health and alcoholism. I now see my children on a regular basis and receive a lot of support from my children's mother as well as SmartMove. I now feel I am moving on in my life and things are looking up.”

MEGAN

Living in the private rental sector has enabled Megan, a young mother, to say close to her support network.

Megan has lived in a SmartMove property for several years, but the original tenant was her mother. Megan's Mum left Belfast to move in with her new partner and Megan's brother then took over the tenancy so that they could stay in their home.

Her brother now wants to move into another property with his partner and as Megan is now over 18 she would like to take over the tenancy on her own as she is settled there with her baby and has made it her home. She also has a strong support network in the area.

Due to her age Megan has only recently been able to claim housing benefit and her tax credits are not up and running yet. These combined factors as well as the costs of taking care of her newborn baby mean that unfortunately Megan has found herself at risk of being made homeless by her landlord due to her significant rent arrears.

Since becoming involved with Megan, SmartMove have been able to signpost her to Mary Bartolo who is a Community Outreach Advisor with Ligoniel Improvement Association, part of the North Belfast Advice Partnership. Mary runs a benefit clinic from SmartMove's North Belfast office one afternoon per week.

Working with Mary and the SmartMove tenancy support officers has enabled Megan to get her housing benefit backdated to help with her rent arrear. This along with lengthy negotiations between Megan's landlord and the SmartMove team in North Belfast office have meant that an affordable payment plan as worked out with Megan to ensure that she can stay in her home.

SEANEEN



Seaneen first approached SmartMove in July 2009 - she had been living with her mother but needed to

leave home due to family circumstances changing. After speaking with Seaneen the SmartMove team decided that the private rented sector was probably the best option for her in terms of affordability.

SmartMove were able to arrange a Housing Benefit calculation for Seaneen to ensure that the shortfall between her housing benefit and rent was going to be affordable for her. Location was also important for Seaneen as she has a small child and needed to be close to her support network. SmartMove found a suitable two bedroom property in the right area and Seaneen was able to move straight in.

Seaneen has managed the tenancy really well with minimal tenancy support, and has only required advice on housing benefit changes, repairs and paying her rent.

She was interested in getting back to work and approached SmartMove for some advice. They arranged an appointment with an advice worker from Wolfhill advice centre, who calculated that it would not be detrimental for her to go back to work part time.

Seaneen is now on placement with SmartMove on a part time basis through the Springvale scheme. Seaneen says she has gained a lot of skills through SmartMove and is keen to stay in employment and hopefully further develop her career.

These tenants are SmartMove tenants but perhaps more importantly they are social lettings agency tenants, they have been part of a private rented sector access scheme and have had their deposit guaranteed. Whilst SmartMove NI support these particular tenants through this particular scheme there are lots of variations on this with scope for housing associations, voluntary organisations, government and others to get more involved in opening up access to the private rented sector and supporting people in making it their home.