

HOUSING IN PRACTICE

# Trent & Dove Housing: Helping tenants avoid falls at home



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**This case study shows how a housing association advises elderly tenants on how to avoid falls in and around their home.**

## The Fosters' story

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Prior to last autumn, Anthony Foster had fallen four times in just 12 months in the bungalow where he lives with his wife, Merle. On the fourth occasion, he spent three days recovering in hospital.

But nine months later, the couple feel more secure. Following a home safety check carried out by Trent & Dove Housing, changes have been made inside and outside the property.

A threshold strip was replaced in the bathroom and a rail fitted to an external wall. The Fosters, who have rented the bungalow near Burton-on-Trent for 13 years, now walk around more safely. They also feel fitter from exercising more.

The couple were among the first tenants to take part in a fall prevention project launched by Trent & Dove last year. Merle, aged 75, is happy because she feels her 80-year-old husband is less at risk when he walks around using his wheel frame. "We feel more confident and can get out in the fresh air," she says.

## Why do tenants need advice on preventing falls?

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Falls are the single biggest cause of accidents in the home. As people grow older, [they are more likely to fall in their home and elsewhere](#), thereby running the risk of serious injury.

On average, people aged 65 have a one in three chance of falling each year. By the time they reach 80, the probability increases to 50%. The annual cost to the NHS of people falling in the home [is estimated to be about £2.3bn](#).

Causes include muscle weakness, deteriorating eye sight and poor balance. Loss of confidence following a fall can be damaging mentally as well as physically, meaning elderly people are less likely to go out or take regular exercise.

Studies also suggest people on lower incomes, including tenants in social housing, are more likely to suffer poor health and so are at greater risk of falling. "The poorer you are, the poorer your health outcomes are going to be," says Anna Hickman, head of health and safety at Trent & Dove.

## What sort of assistance is offered?

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Trent & Dove Housing owns about 6,000 properties in east Staffordshire and other parts of the Midlands. About a quarter of its 8,400 tenants are aged 60 or above. All live independently in their own homes or have individual flats in sheltered housing.

The fall prevention project, based on materials devised by the [Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents \(RoSPA\)](#), aims to educate staff and tenants about home safety, providing bespoke guidance and making improvements as needed.

As well as identifying hazards and suggesting home adaptations, it covers lifestyle issues, such as how regular walking improves a person's leg strength, or the need for a good diet and regular hydration. Pensioners may also be advised to replace worn-out slippers.

Previously, the housing association was only likely to find out when a tenant fell outside their home, typically on a footpath or driveway. "We wanted to see if we could reduce falls through one-to-one interventions by tackling health and safety behind the front door," says Hickman.

## How does the project work?

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The project revolves around training Trent & Dove staff to become 'fall fighters'. This includes its repair and tenant services teams, which are most likely to enter a property or become aware of tenants' circumstances.

"Training for frontline staff enables them to identify individuals at elevated risk," says Jules Robinson, Trent & Dove's Customer Health and Safety Advisor. "It means that we make the most of our existing contact points with tenants."

While staff identify those most at risk, all tenants aged 60 and above are now being offered a home safety check. This looks at everything from the condition of carpets to the amount of clutter in bedrooms. Tenants are also asked about their most recent medication review, how regularly they exercise and what they eat.



**Source: Trent & Dove Housing**

Many tenants are keen to receive advice and accept the support offered, but not all. Initially, home visits were offered to people in their 80s or older who were at highest risk. As the project was rolled out to tenants in their 60s and 70s, uptake dropped. “Some people don’t necessarily see themselves as at risk,” says Robinson.

Much of the advice is straight forward, focussing on floor coverings or asking when someone last had their eyes checked. While these are things people can mostly do for themselves, association staff need to be tactful, guiding tenants towards the right decision. “The fact tenants opt in to the project plays in our favour,” adds Robinson. “People are generally very receptive and positive about the help you’re giving.”

Within six months of a safety check, tenants receive a follow-up call. This reveals, for example, whether people are exercising more or made other lifestyle changes. They are also asked whether they have fallen at home since the safety check.

## How successful has it been?

By April, Jules Robinson had carried out home safety checks in 142 properties. Follow-up calls revealed the number of falls by tenants was down by 46%.

In addition:

- 91% of tenants said they knew more about fall prevention
- 83% of tenants said they felt safer at home
- 74% of tenants had taken action to reduce the risk of them falling at home
- 71% of tenants said they felt they were less likely to have a fall at home.

The most common environmental changes in homes where advice was given were the installation of handrails and grabrails (32% of cases), followed by better flooring, rugs and mats (30%). In 44% of cases where individual advice was given, tenants were advised to exercise more.

## Spreading the word

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Trent & Dove has been recognised for the quality of its work by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. In April, it became [the first ever winner of the society's Falls Prevention Trophy](#), competing against 2,000 private and public sector bodies, including local authorities.

Judges praised the way Trent & Dove adapted RoSPA's fall fighters initiative and is rolling out prevention measures among staff. Awareness sessions are run for tenants in sheltered accommodation and for community groups.

But the greatest gains are made by visiting elderly tenants at home. Here staff can listen to other concerns, helped by the fact they are chatting to people face-to-face rather than communicating by phone or email.

"It's invaluable to be able to spend time with people," says Robinson. "It can help you understand why there is resistance to your ideas. Perhaps there is something else on their minds."

Later this year, Trent & Dove plans to publish a report about the project that is likely to be of interest to other social landlords. It hopes to demonstrate the project's clear social return on investment and encourage others to adopt the model.

"The crucial next step is to share the model and help other decision makers in the sector to see the benefits of fall prevention awareness to people and communities," she adds.

## Conclusion

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As people live longer, there is greater pressure on social landlords to provide homes that tenants like and meet their needs. Most want to remain in their own home rather than move to residential accommodation, but need to feel secure, not threatened, by their immediate environment.

By offering practical tips and making adaptations where needed, Trent & Dove hopes to not just reduce the number of falls among elderly tenants but make them fitter and healthier through regular exercise and other lifestyle changes.

The key, says Robinson, is for residents' health and safety to be seen as important across the organisation, and not the responsibility of one department. "Everybody is interested in reducing risks to their safety," she adds. "So long as you balance the advice you're giving, people see it as reasonable."

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