

Epping Forest District Council

HOUSING SERVICE STRATEGY ON HOUSING MANAGEMENT

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Housing Service Strategy relates to the Council's approach to the provision of Housing Management Services. The Strategy sets out how this element of the service is delivered by Housing Services and includes links with other services both internally and externally.
- 1.2 Housing Management is an important front-line service which covers a wide range of activities and is delivered through the Area Housing Offices. It ensures, perhaps more than any other part of the service, that good landlord and tenant relationships exist so that tenant's rights and responsibilities in respect of their Conditions of Tenancy are clearly communicated and understood.
- 1.3 The recovery of rent arrears and dealing with anti-social behaviour is undertaken by the Area Housing Offices. These areas of work are not covered by this Strategy as it is covered in two separate Housing Services Strategies approved by Overview and Scrutiny Committee (1).
- 1.4 This Housing Management Strategy has been formulated in consultation with representatives of the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, and includes information contained in Housing Services Policy & Procedures. The Strategy was approved by the Housing Scrutiny Panel

2. Background to Housing Management

- 2.1 The Housing Management Service is delivered through two Area Housing Offices (north and south), and the Limes Farm Estate Office which is a sub office of the Area Housing Office (South).
- 2.2 At each of the Area Housing Offices the Area Housing Managers have Section meetings at least every two months to ensure staff communication on policy, procedural, and performance matters etc. The Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) is a member of Housing Management Team, comprising the Head of Housing Services and Assistant Head of Housing Services (Property and Resources).

3. Coverage

- 3.1 This Housing Service Strategy covers the Council's approach to;
 - a) Changes in tenancy, including succession, mutual exchanges, and other assignments;
 - b) Breaches of tenancy conditions relating to the Strategy;
 - c) Proposals for an Introductory tenancy scheme
 - d) Unauthorised occupation;
 - e) Transfer and estate inspections;
 - f) Older and disabled persons garden maintenance scheme;
 - g) Boundary disputes;

- h) Compensation for Tenants' Improvement Scheme and alterations and improvement to dwellings by tenants or others;
- i) Estate enhancements/ Grounds maintenance;
- j) Abandoned vehicles;
- k) Cleansing of communal areas;
- l) Right to buy, land sales applications and release of restrictive covenants;
- m) Management transfers;
- n) Vehicular crossovers; and
- o) The review of the Strategy;

4. Relationships with other Documents

- 4.1 The Housing Management Service forms part of the Council's overall Housing Strategy which is set out in the Council's Housing Strategy 2004-2007.
- 4.2 The Council has adopted its Housing Charter which sets out, in simple, clear and precise terms the Council's general approach to all its housing services.
- 4.3 The Council's Standard Tenancy Agreement forms the contractual agreement between the Council and its tenants and was reviewed during 2001/2.
- 4.4 Housing Services has detailed Policies & Procedures for most of its functions and the work of the housing management service is included in this document which gives important guidance to staff.
- 4.5 Following the completion of the Best Value Service Review of Housing Services in March 2004, the Service Development Plan, which is monitored by Members, includes many improvements to the housing management service.
- 4.6 Literature on rents, benefits, vehicular crossovers, succession, and other leaflets are on display at both Area Housing Offices and the Limes Farm Office, and featured from time to time in relevant publications, (Housing News etc). All tenants have received a copy of the Tenants Handbook which explains about all matters relating to their tenancy.
- 4.7 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan gives detailed information on the objectives, plans and financial forecast for the HRA as a whole.
- 4.8 Important statistical performance information is available and monitored at quarterly Performance Management meetings chaired by the Head of Housing Services.

5. Aims and Objectives

- 5.1 The aim of the Council's Housing Service Strategy on Housing Management is:

“To ensure that tenants are advised in all matters relating to their tenancies whilst actively seeking to maximise the use of the Council's housing stock improve housing estates and dealing with breaches in tenancy conditions through good landlord & tenant relationships, which involve tenants both individually and collectively on issues concerning the management of their homes”

- 5.2 This aim will be met by:

(a) Ensuring that all tenants are advised of theirs and the Council's responsibilities under the Tenancy Agreement at its commencement and throughout the period of the tenancy;

- (b) Keeping close links between tenants and their Housing Management Officer to reduce the likelihood of breaches of the Tenancy Agreement;
- (c) Acting in accordance with Part IV of the Housing Act 1985 (Section 87-89) and the Council's discretionary policy on under occupation and succession.
- (d) Consulting with tenants on issues regarding their home or local community which may affect them;
- (e) Encouraging tenants to set up their own Residents Association;
- (f) Taking appropriate actions to deal with breaches of tenancy conditions;
- (g) Ensuring the Council's housing estates are properly maintained; and
- (h) Dealing with breaches of covenants by people occupying former Council homes;

6. Statutory Requirements

6.1 The relevant key statutory requirements for housing management are as follows:

a) Housing Act 1985

- Notice of proceedings for possession or termination (Section 83)
- Grounds and orders for possession (Section 84)
- Extended discretion of Court in certain possession proceedings (Section 85)
- Succession (Sections 87, 88, & 89)
- Assignment, lodgers, and subletting (Sections 91, 92, 93, 94, & 95)
- Repairs and improvements (Sections 96 to 101)
- Variation of terms of tenancy (Sections 102 & 103)
- Variation of rent (Section 102b)
- Provision of information and consultation (Section 104)
- Consultation on matters of housing management (Section 105)

b) Health and Safety at Work Act 1974

c) Environmental Protection Act 1990

d) Wild Animals Act 1976

e) Data Protection Act

7. Client Consultation, Information & Involvement (Statutory Requirement)

7.1 The way in which tenants will be consulted, informed and involved with regard to the Council's policy on housing management is as follows;

- a) Consultation with the Tenants' and Leaseholders Federation;
- b) Consultation with recognised tenants' associations;
- c) Information to tenants in publications e.g. Housing News, Annual Report;
- d) Posters on services displayed throughout the District;
- e) Liaison with the Citizens Advice Bureaux;

- f) One to one consultation with tenants;
- g) Changes in policy
- h) Changes under Part IV Section 102/3 of the Housing Act 1985 to amend the Standard Tenancy Agreement; and
- i) Consultation on matters of housing management Part IV Section 105 of the Housing Act 1985.

8. General Principles

- 8.1 Section 5 of the Housing Services Strategy sets out the aims and objectives of housing management. This Section details the general approach taken on the delivery of the service under the following headings:

8.2 Changes in Tenancy

Changes in tenancy will be managed in accordance with legislation and the Council's discretionary policies. The areas of changes are as follows:

a) Succession

The law of succession is found within the Housing Act 1985 Part IV Sections 87-89. Succession can occur following the death of the secure tenant. One succession to a secure tenancy is allowed under the legislation with the spouse being preferred. Should there be no surviving spouse then a family member can succeed to the tenancy who may be required to move to suitable alternative accommodation should they be under occupying. The Council's discretionary policy on under occupation is applied which allows a family member who has been living in the property as their only or principal home for more than ten years or if they are over the age of 60 to under occupy by one bedroom. In addition, the Council's policy on discretionary succession is applied, which in simple terms allows all succession cases to be treated as if there had not been one succession.

b) Assignment

Under the Housing Act 1985, tenants have the right to assign their tenancy to anyone who would be eligible to succeed to their tenancy upon their death. When a formal request is received a Deed of Assignment will be signed by both parties concerned.

c) Mutual Exchanges

All secure tenants have the Right to Exchange. All mutual exchanges will be administered by way of assignment thereby protecting the rights of the tenant and the Council. Housing Services will visit all Council tenants seeking an exchange to give advice and assistance, inspect the condition of the properties, ensure there is a clear rent account and note any other relevant information prior to giving permission in accordance with current legislation.

d) Any Other Changes in Tenancy

Any other changes in tenancy such as name, marital status will be administered by Housing Management, with the Housing Needs Section being notified. Following an investigation into the validity of the changes the tenant will be formally notified of any changes.

9. Joint Tenancies

- 9.1 When an existing tenant requests the creation of a joint tenancy an analysis of the tenancy history will be undertaken. A joint tenancy will not be granted if there has been a previous succession to the tenancy, due to the new joint tenancy removing the succession which has already taken place. Generally requests for joint tenancies with relatives will not be granted. In some circumstances joint tenancies with carers may be granted provided the carer has themselves given up accommodation to care for the secure tenant. Housing Management will observe Council policy and DTLR Circulars when taking decisions.

10. Introductory Tenancies

- 10.1 Under the Housing Act 1996 local authorities were given discretionary powers to operate a scheme of "introductory tenancies" whereby all new tenancies allocated would not be secure until after a twelve month "trial" period. At the time of the scheme being permitted under the Act, the Council decided that it would not operate such a scheme. However, as part of the Best Value Service Review it was agreed that the use of these discretionary powers be reviewed and "challenged" as this could be a useful tool in tackling anti-social behaviour and other breaches of tenancy conditions. Following consultation with the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation, the Anti-Social Behaviour Group, and the Citizens Advice Bureau, a report has been submitted to the Council's Cabinet for consideration. It was agreed that a consultation exercise will be undertaken, in accordance with the regulations, and a further report will be submitted to the Cabinet on the outcome in September 2005.

11. Management Transfers

- 11.1 If in exceptional circumstances a tenant needs to be transferred to alternative accommodation for housing management reasons e.g. due to personal risk, confirmation from appropriate sources, ie the Police or the Social Services Department, will be obtained. Both the Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) and the Housing Needs Manager will authorise Management Transfers. Should there not be agreement by these two senior officers then the Head of Housing Services will make the final decision on the case.

12. Vehicle Crossovers

- 12.1 For all current and former Council properties Housing Management will assess all applications for vehicular crossovers ensuring that the Council's existing policy is applied. Residents of neighbouring properties will be consulted with their views being taken into account before permission is granted.

13. Breaches of Tenancy Conditions

13.1 Prevention

Housing Management will work proactively through home visits, estate inspections, to insure against breaches of tenancy conditions. This will attempt to identify neglect

of gardens, rubbish dumping, vandalism and the general external condition of properties.

13.2 Action Taken in Response to Breaches of Tenancy Conditions

When an alleged breach is reported, the Housing Management Officer will investigate the case and in the first instance undertake a home visit. If an actual breach is identified the tenant will be notified formally of the breach and given a deadline by which to resolve it. The implications of their action under the terms of their tenancy will also be explained. Should Housing Management serve Notice or proceed to Court appropriate evidence will be gathered as necessary.

13.3 Boundary Disputes

When Housing Management receive written confirmation of a boundary dispute a Housing Management Officer will visit. If appropriate, a joint visit will be made with Environmental Services Surveyor Assistant. In difficult cases the Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) may arrange for a Consultant Chartered Surveyor to be employed in order to resolve the matter. All parties will be told of the decision in writing. Should any of the parties dispute the decision they will be advised that it shall stand unless they provide documentary evidence to the contrary.

13.4 Breaches of Covenants

When Housing Management receive a complaint of a potential breach of a covenant on a former Council dwelling the matter will be investigated. If appropriate the freeholder/leaseholder will be notified of the breach and if it persists the Head of Legal and Administration will be asked to take Court action.

13.5 Unauthorised Occupation

a) Tolerated Trespassers

Tolerated trespassers are those who are left in occupation and have no right to remain in that property but are about to be re-housed in alternative accommodation. In these cases the occupiers will pay a use and occupation charge until they are transferred.

b) Unauthorised Occupiers

In the case of unauthorised occupation the Head of Legal and Administration Services will be asked to apply to the County Court for possession within 5 days. A Notice will be fixed to the door of the property.

14. Estate Inspections

- 14.1 Housing Management Officers will inspect the areas they are responsible for on a regular basis and will generally identify problems whilst they are visiting tenants on other matters. More formally, Area Housing Managers will undertake annual inspections of estates with each of their Housing Management Officers and record requested actions to

ensure that estates are kept to a high standard.

15. Older and Disabled Persons Garden Maintenance Scheme

- 15.1 Housing Management will monitor the Older and Disabled Persons Garden Maintenance Scheme which is managed by Epping Forest Voluntary Action. Provided applicants have no one living at the property who is under 70 years of age and have a clear rent account they will be added to the list and dealt with in date order. Housing Services fund Epping Forest Voluntary Action's part-time Co-ordinator with around forty vulnerable tenants gardens being maintained on a six-weekly basis between April and October.

16. Compensation for Tenants Improvements Scheme

- 16.1 Requests from tenants to undertake improvements will be received by Housing Management and passed on to the Housing Repairs Section to deal with the technical aspects. Providing the improvement is one that qualifies under the scheme the Housing Management Officer will ensure the rent account is clear, if appropriate consult with neighbours, and if agreed write to the tenant giving consent and details of how to claim their compensation on vacation of the property. When the improvement has been completed the Housing Repairs Officer will visit to ensure the improvement has been carried out satisfactorily. When a claim has been made the Housing Repairs Officer will visit again to inspect, and if satisfied the Housing Management Officer will calculate and arrange payment of the compensation.

17. Alterations and Improvements (Not Qualifying for the Tenants Improvement Scheme)

- 17.1 The Tenancy Agreement requires tenants to seek permission before undertaking any improvements to their properties. After checking that the improvement does not qualify for the Compensation Scheme (see 16.1) is a straightforward improvement e.g. shed, greenhouse, no structural works, permission will be granted. If the request is more complicated then the Housing Repairs Officer will be asked to carry out an inspection. If appropriate neighbours will be consulted and their views taken into account. The tenant will be notified of the decision in writing.

18. Estate Enhancements & Grounds Maintenance

- 18.1 The Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) and the Area Housing Managers (North and South) attend quarterly meetings with Leisure Services in order to monitor the Grounds Maintenance Contract for Housing Services. Housing Management also become involved in small and large improvement schemes.

19. Abandoned Vehicles

- 19.1 When vehicles appear to be abandoned and are identified on Housing Act land, if they are untaxed the Housing Management Officer will contact Environmental Services who will determine ownership via the DVLA computer link. For those which are clearly

abandoned, Environmental Services will be notified to arrange for a Notice to be attached to the vehicle warning the owner of its removal within seven days and, if appropriate, to remove the vehicle. If the vehicle is in such a poor condition that it is likely to cause a danger it will be removed immediately.

20. Caretaking Service & Cleansing of Communal Areas

20.1 Housing Management will undertake and monitor the cleaning service which includes all sheltered housing scheme cleaners, mobile cleaners, and cleaners at some designated blocks across the District. In addition there are three Caretakers, two at Limes Farm Estate, Chigwell and one at the Oakwood Hill Estate, Loughton.

22. Right to Buy

22.1 Housing Management will respond to enquiries from the House Sales Section concerning the tenancies of tenants who have applied to buy their home.

23. Land Sales

23.1 When a request is received to purchase a piece of Housing land the Housing Management Officer will inspect the site and seek the advice and agreement of their Area Housing Manager. If the land is less than 50 square metres, in accordance with delegated authority, the Head of Housing Services in consultation with the Housing Portfolio Holder and local Ward Members will decide if the land can be sold. If all are in agreement the proposed purchaser will be advised of the valuation and the land will be sold. If the request is refused then they will have the right to Appeal against the decision. Requests to purchase land in excess of 50 square metres will be referred to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

24. Covenant Approval

24.1 Housing Management will deal with requests from the owners of former Council properties who are seeking permission to carry out improvements. In addition to receiving requests, any improvement works to former Council properties that have not been notified will be identified on estate inspections and through checking the list of planning applications. If any request is refused they will have the right to Appeal against the decision.

25. Housing Welfare Officer

25.1 In August 2001, the Council employed one full time Housing Welfare Officer, funded from the Supporting People budget, who assists Housing Management Officers in dealing with vulnerable tenants. Cases are referred through the Area Housing Managers where vulnerable tenants are in need of housing welfare support. The Housing Welfare Officer will visit tenants, offer counselling, advice, support, assist with tenancy set-up, benefit and employment advice or any other help they may need to in order to sustain their tenancy. The Housing Welfare Officer manages up to a maximum of twenty-eight cases.

26. Best Value Considerations & Action Plan

26.1 Following the completion of the Best Value Services Review of Housing Services in March 2004, the Service Review Panel set up to oversee the Review agreed a Service Development Plan for Housing Services. The actions in the table below (some of which

are included in the Service Development Plan and Section 8 of this Strategy) will be undertaken in the future by Housing Services in order to enhance the Housing Management Service.

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
To consult with tenants and partner agencies, in accordance with the regulations, on the proposal to introduce an Introductory Tenancy Scheme for all new secure tenants. The outcome of the consultation will be reported to the Cabinet for consideration.	Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations)	September 2005	Existing resources
Implement the additional Open Housing Management Computer System (OHM's) housing management process module to improve monitoring of housing management cases.	Head of Corporate IT Services Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) Housing Resources Manager	April 2006	Existing resources
Explore greater use of CCTV on estates to combat fly-tipping	Area Housing Managers	April 2006	Existing resources
Explore with Environmental Services the introduction of a voluntary surrender scheme for abandoned vehicles.	Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations)	September 2005	Existing Resources
Complete the annual environmental improvements on estates in liaison with Housing Assets.	Area Housing Managers	April 2006	Existing Resources

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
Continue to support all	Area Housing	On-going	Existing

Resident Associations and attend meetings when appropriate.	Managers		resources
Work with tenants involved in any major projects e.g. Springfields, Waltham Abbey and Wickfields, Chigwell improvement schemes.	Area Housing Managers	On-going	Existing resources

27. Future Developments

- 27.1 The following “SWOT” analysis identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the areas covered by the Service Strategy.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledgeable and committed staff • Improved recovery of former tenant arrears through external debt recovery service • Provision of Housing Welfare Service to assist vulnerable tenants • Robust policies and procedures • Integrated housing computer system • Charter Mark accreditation • ISO 9001:2000 accreditation • Good tenant consultation framework • Comprehensive performance monitoring • Healthy Housing Revenue Account 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor response from tenants when attempting to set up Resident Associations • Low staffing levels compared to other local authorities and housing associations
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent appointment of two additional Housing Management Officers • Exploring the use of a voluntary surrender scheme for abandoned vehicles • Introducing improved cleaning service on the Ninefields Estate, Waltham Abbey • Proposal to increase CCTV coverage at both the Oakwood Hill Estate, Loughton and Ninefields Estate, Waltham Abbey • Increasing the number of Residents Associations in the District 	<p>Threats</p>

28. Resourcing the Strategy

28.1 For housing management purposes the District is split into two areas with one Area Housing Office based at The Broadway, Loughton in the south of the District and the other based at the Civic Offices, Epping.

28.2 The number of staff covering all housing management duties in 2004/2005 were 15 FTE. However, the Cabinet agreed that due to increased workload including increased number of anti-social behaviour cases, attendances at residents association meetings etc. that one additional Housing Management Officer be appointed at each of the Area Housing Offices. Therefore, the number of staff covering all housing management duties has increased in 2005/2006 to 17 FTE.

- 28.3 Area Housing Managers are based at each of the Area Housing Offices. One of the Housing Management Officers at each of the Area Housing Offices is designated as a senior, which includes the Limes Farm Satellite Office, Chigwell.
- 28.4 Housing Management staff delivering this Strategy in 2005/2006 are approximately 10.25 FTE which includes the staffing levels detailed in paragraph 28.5, and other officers time spent on the Housing Management Service. The projection for the number of staff required to deliver the Strategy over these and the following two years is detailed in the following table:

Staff Resource Projections				
Posts	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Housing Management Staff (FTE)	10.25	10.25	10.25	10.25

- 28.5 The following table details the estimated proportion of Housing Management, and other officer's time spent on the Housing Management Service for 2005/2006:

Staff Resources Breakdown	
Posts	FTE
Head of Housing Services	0.1
Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations)	0.3
Area Housing Managers x 2	1.4
Senior Housing Management Officers x 3	1.5
Housing Welfare Officer x 1	0.5
Housing Management Officers x 6.5 FTE	3.25
Housing Assistants x 3 FTE	2.7
Clerical Assistant x 0.5 FTE	0.5
Total	10.25 FTE

29. Key Targets and Performance Monitoring

- 29.1 The Council will monitor performance and compliance with this Strategy through quarterly performance management meetings with the Area Housing Managers, to ensure that the following targets are met:

Key Targets & Performance					
Performance Indicator	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
	(Target)	(Target)	(Target)	(Target)	(Target)
Frequency of formal estate inspections between Area Housing Managers and Housing Management Officers	Annually	Annually	Annually	Annually	Annually
Rent collection rate	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Rent arrears as a percentage of the rent roll	2.2%	2.15%	2.1%	2.05%	2.00%
Former tenant arrears collection rate	£44,000	£44,000	£44,000	£44,000	£44,000
Caseload of the Housing Welfare Officer	No target	No target	No target	No target	No target
Numbers of abandoned vehicles	No target	No target	No target	No target	No target
Letter responses	8 days	8 days	8 days	8 days	8 days

30. Reviewing the Strategy

30.1 The Strategy for Housing Management will be reviewed in consultation with the Tenants' and Leaseholders Federation before May 2008.