

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 23 April 2014

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D. Stallan

Subject: Review of Housing Management Staffing Levels – Welfare Reforms

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**Committee Secretary:
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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the Housing Scrutiny Panel, as requested by the Cabinet, reviews Housing Management staffing levels following the appointment of 2FTE additional permanent Housing Management Officer Posts agreed by the Cabinet under the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan; and**
- (2) That the Panel endorses the officer's view that the existing Housing Management staffing levels are currently sufficient to meet service needs.**

Report:

1. At its meeting on 22 October 2012 (Minute 54 refers), the Cabinet considered a report on Welfare Mitigation. It was reported that the Welfare Reform Act 2012 would have a significant effect on Council tenants and that the Council had commissioned the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) to undertake a major study into these effects and propose ways of mitigating them. An officer Welfare Reform Mitigation Project Team had been established which had produced a Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan, which was adopted by the Cabinet.
2. As part of the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan, it was agreed that two additional Housing Management Officers be appointed on a permanent basis, with immediate effect, in order to help minimise the effect of the Welfare Reforms on Council tenants, funded from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).
3. It was further agreed that Housing Management staffing levels be reviewed during 2013/2014 in light of the actual level of increased rent arrears, hence the need for this report.
4. The two additional permanent Housing Management Officers were subsequently appointed. One officer is based at the Area Housing Office (North) at the Civic Offices, Epping with one based at the Area Housing Office (South) at The Broadway, Loughton. Progress made to date is as follows:

Area Housing Office (North)

5. The additional 1FTE Housing Management Officer commenced work in January 2013.

6. The Area Housing Office staffing was re-organised in order to achieve a more targeted approach to rent arrears recovery. The Assistant Area Housing Manager now deals with all rent arrears cases above £500, including all problematic cases. In order to free up time to deal with these more challenging cases, the Assistant Area Housing Manager's "patch" of properties has been reduced. This has been achieved by re-distributing properties amongst the Housing Management officers. This has enabled a greater focus on rent arrears recovery action, targeting particular tenants and carrying out home visits on a regular basis. The Assistant Area Housing Manager has taken more responsibility generally for the work of Housing Management Officers on rent arrears, by way of joint visits and attendance at Court hearings. Housing Management Officers' work is now able to be monitored more closely, which includes monthly one-to-one monitoring meetings.

Area Housing Office (South)

7. The additional 1FTE Housing Management Officer commenced work in March 2013.

8. A similar arrangement has been put in place as with the Area Housing Office (North). However, the south of the District includes the Satellite Office at the Limes Centre, Chigwell. Both the Assistant Area Housing Manager based at The Broadway Area Housing Office, and the Assistant Area Housing Manager (Limes Farm) no longer have a "patch" of properties, which has been achieved by re-distributing these properties amongst the rest of the Housing Management Officers. As with the North of the District, this has enabled a greater focus on rent recovery action, targeting problematic cases with over £500 of arrears and visiting the tenants concerned on a regular basis. The Assistant Area Housing Managers have taken more responsibility generally for the work of Housing Management Officers on rent arrears by way of joint visits and attendance at Court. Housing Management Officers' work is now able to be monitored more closely, which includes monthly one-to-one monitoring meetings.

9. In addition to the above, it should be noted that each Assistant Director within the Communities Directorate holds quarterly Customer Improvement Meetings with each of their Managers. At these meetings a number of performance-related issues are carefully monitored, including rent arrears performance. The following statistical information on rent arrears is considered in order to assess performance:

- Rent collected as a proportion of the rent owed
- Rent arrears as a percentage of the annual debit
- Housing Benefit overpayment arrears
- Court costs arrears
- Number of Notices of Seeking Possession served
- Number of Court hearings scheduled
- Number of Possession Orders obtained
- Number of Stays of Execution granted
- Number of Eviction Warrants executed
- Number of Distress Warrant letters sent
- Number of home visits/letters/interviews undertaken
- Number of tenants supported by the Family Mosaic Support Service

Rent Arrears Performance

10. Rent arrears performance is monitored under KPI 40 "What percentage of the rent due from our Council home tenants was paid?" The following table sets out performance under KPI 40 for the past four quarters, compared with the previous two years:

Quarter	Target	Actual
Q4 2013/2014	96.0%	97.60%
Q3 2013/2014	96.0%	96.45%
Q2 2013/2014	96.0%	95.77%
Q1 2013/2014	96.0%	93.27%
Q4 2012/2013	97.0%	97.16%
Q4 2011/2012	97.0%	97.68%

11. As can be seen, the target has been met in the last two quarters of 2013/2014 and in the previous two years. Although performance dipped in the first two quarters of 2013/2014 the improvement in the second half of the year was a particular achievement when taking into account the effect on tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit as a result of the Welfare Reforms. It is considered that a lot of this improvement was due to the additional staff resources and the new ways of managing rent arrears.

12. Under the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan referred to earlier in the report, another of the actions was to identify all tenants who are under-occupying their accommodation and are therefore affected by the removal of the Spare Room Subsidy (sometimes referred to as the "Bedroom Tax") which came into force in April 2013. Due to the two additional Housing Management Officers, it was possible to visit all tenants (around 380) affected and offer them advice on, for example, downsizing accommodation and the available incentives in order to avoid the subsidy, and budgeting advice etc. Of those visited, the vast majority decided to remain in their current accommodation and meet the additional costs.

13. In addition to the removal of the Spare Room Subsidy, under the Welfare Reforms there has been an increase in non-dependent charges for housing benefit, the introduction of the Benefit Cap and the Local Council Tax Support Scheme. Despite these additional reductions in benefits to tenants, the rent arrears target has been achieved.

14. Although the introduction of Universal Credit and direct payments of housing benefit to tenants has been delayed, it is anticipated that, when introduced, this could have a negative impact on performance in terms of rent arrears. It is therefore considered essential that the current staffing resources will be required to help mitigate the expected levels of arrears.

Staffing levels

15. The current staffing levels within the Housing Management Section are as follows:

Designation	Area Housing Office (North) (FTE)	Area Housing Office (South) (FTE)	Limes Centre Housing Office (FTE)
Area Housing Manager	1.0	1.0	Nil
Assistant Area Housing Manager	1.0	1.0	1.0
Housing Management Officers	5.5	3.0	1.5
Housing Assistants *	1.0	2.0	Nil
Totals	8.5	7.0	2.5

* It should be noted that Housing Assistants carry out a number of other Housing Management duties including recovery of former tenant debt and general administrative and typing work.

16. It is suggested that the Panel recommends to the Housing Portfolio Holder that the existing Housing Management staffing levels are currently sufficient to meet service needs.

Reason for decision:

To enable the Housing Scrutiny Panel, as requested by the Cabinet, to review Housing Management staffing levels, following the appointment of 2FTE additional Housing Management Officer Posts agreed by the Cabinet under the Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: Within existing resources

Legal and Government Implications

Welfare Reform Act 2012
Housing Act 1985

Consultation

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation will be consulted on the report at their next meeting.