

HOUSING MANAGEMENT SUB-COMMITTEE – 23 January 2002

Minutes of the meeting of the **Housing Management Sub-Committee** held on **23 January 2002** when there were present:-

	Cllr Mrs J Hall - Chairman	
Cllr T G Cutmore		Cllr C R Morgan
Cllr C C Langlands		Cllr Mrs M A Weir
Cllr V H Leach		

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs P A Capon, Mrs L I V Phillips, R A Pearson and Mrs W M Stevenson.

SUBSTITUTES

Cllr P D Stebbing

OFFICERS PRESENT

S Clarkson	Head of Revenue & Housing Management
C Burton	Housing Manager
A Coulson	Housing, Client & Strategy Officer
Ms S Worthington	Committee Administrator

153 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr C C Langlands declared a non-pecuniary interest in items 7 – 11 by virtue of being the leaseholder of a former Council property.

154 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2001 were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

155 TENANT INVOLVEMENT

(Note: The Chairman admitted this as an urgent item in view of the need to expedite the process of tenant participation)

At a meeting of the Tenant Involvement Steering Group earlier, a series of initiatives were formulated to involve tenants in the development of policies on the housing service.

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On a motion moved by Cllr V H Leach and seconded by Cllr T G Cutmore it was:-

Resolved

That the Community Services Committee considers a report outlining tenant involvement initiatives. (HRHM)

156 RENT COLLECTION AND ARREARS MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Sub-Committee received the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management proposing the adoption of a revised rent collection and arrears management policy.

An internal audit review recommended that a complete overhaul of the rent management policy and procedure should be implemented as soon as was practicable.

If adopted, a copy of this policy will be included in all new tenants' information packs.

It was the consensus of the Sub-Committee that, with respect to arrears, OAPs should continue to receive a letter after the account has been in arrears for two weeks rather than after one week as in the case of all other tenants.

In response to a Member query relating to payment of rent by direct debit, Officers confirmed that tenants were able to pay by banker's standing order.

Officers also confirmed that a computer log was made of all contacts made by tenants with the Council with respect to the payment of rent arrears.

In response to Member concern that, after 1999 there appeared to be an increase in arrears submitted for write-off, Officers verified that from 2000 onwards there was an accumulation of arrears from the previous 4 years. This was a conscious decision to concentrate resources on pursuing debts which were considered to be economic to collect.

Resolved

That the Rent Collection and Arrears Management Policy, as specified in Appendix 1 (copy attached to the signed copy of these Minutes), be adopted. (HRHM)

157 MUTUAL EXCHANGES

The Sub-Committee received the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management, asking Members to consider a change of policy on the acceptance of mutual exchanges of social housing and their impact on the Housing Revenue Account.

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In all cases the moves are at the request and for the benefit of the tenants. However, the cost is generally met from rent payments. Most housing authorities try to re-charge the costs associated with landlords' checks and the administrative costs of inspection before vacation. At Rochford this would be approximately £135.

Officers confirmed that there were 7 mutual exchanges last year.

Members concurred that it was unreasonable that rent payers collectively carried the financial burden of these mutual exchanges.

Recommended

- (1) That a Mutual Exchanges Administration Fee of £135 be introduced.
- (2) That the fee level be reviewed annually as part of the Budget process. (HRHM)

158 TRANSFER INCENTIVE SCHEME

The Sub-Committee received the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management asking Members to consider the reintroduction of the Transfer Incentive Scheme as a means of financial encouragement to tenants to move to a smaller property.

Officers confirmed that the proposed scheme would only apply to residents living within the District.

In response to a Member query relating to tenants moving down to a bungalow or sheltered housing, Officers confirmed that currently it was Council policy that properties would be re-decorated prior to occupancy. However, this policy would be one of a number of issues considered as part of the Best Value Review of Housing Management. Once properties are vacated all carpets are removed by the Maintenance Department.

Members were advised that tenants were able to prioritise locations within the District for transfer.

Recommended

- (1) That the Head of Revenue and Housing Management be authorised to make cash incentive payments of £1500 per bedroom foregone to those Council tenants transferring to a smaller property.
- (2) That Council consider the inclusion of a variation to the Budget by the addition of £20,000 in the Housing Revenue Account for 2002/3 for the purpose of reintroducing the Transfer Incentive Scheme. (HRHM)

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159 TENANTS' IMPROVEMENTS – SURVEY RESULTS

The Sub-Committee received the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management asking Members to consider the results of a survey recently undertaken to establish what improvements tenants would like to see made to their homes.

The survey demonstrated that the highest priority for tenants was the replacement of front and back doors.

Members considered that the response received to the survey was decent and welcomed an initiative which sought to improve security for tenants.

Resolved

That the Housing Management team continues to respond to the needs and aspirations of tenants within the resource allocations available and continues the programme of property upgrades within the Capital Programme. (HRHM)

160 EQUITY SHARE PROPERTY

The Sub-Committee received the exempt report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management asking Members to consider the “repurchase” of 25% equity share of a property following the death of the tenant/leaseholder.

Recommended

That the Corporate Resources Sub-Committee considers that the 25% Equity Share be repurchased at valuation. (HRHM)

The meeting opened at 7.30 pm and closed at 8.15 pm

Chairman

Date

RENT COLLECTION AND ARREARS MANAGEMENT POLICY & GUIDELINES

Policy Statement

The Council recognises that the prevention and effective management of rent arrears is crucial both in terms of maximising the resources available to maintain the stock, provide efficient services to tenants and to respond to the performance management requirements of Best Value and inspection.

1. Aims and Objectives

- 1.1 To provide tenants with accurate information relating to the rents and other charges due;
- 1.2 To provide a variety of methods of payment that are convenient and easily accessible to tenants and residents;
- 1.3 To ensure that all literature and communication to tenants about arrears is clear, concise and easy to understand;
- 1.4 To maximise tenants' income by providing advice and assistance on welfare benefits, Housing Benefit and referring to agencies that provide money management advice;
- 1.5 To make personal contact with tenants who fall into arrears, at an early stage, before debts become onerous and difficult to manage;
- 1.6 To take a firm but sensitive approach to tenants and former tenants in arrears;
- 1.7 To utilise a variety of recovery methods, including repossession in pursuit of repayment;
- 1.8 To improve service standards by setting team targets for the collection of rents.
- 1.9 To continually improve upon key Performance Indicators and aim to be in the top quartile of Local Authorities;
- 1.10 To comply with statutory requirements on Equal Opportunities, Human Rights, and the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice in Rented Housing.
- 1.11 To provide information on the arrears process and options available.

2. Actions to limit Arrears.

A) Pre-Tenancy

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- 2.1 Provide all new tenants at the time of letting with accurate information about:
- The Rent
 - Service Charges
 - Any other service charge such as heating
 - A copy of the Tenancy Agreement
 - Methods of payment
 - The 'One Stop' service for advice and help on claiming Housing Benefit.

B) Post-Tenancy

- 2.2 Visit tenants within four weeks of the commencement of their tenancy, (or earlier if a payment is missed) in order to discuss any tenancy issues including payment of rent.
- 2.3 Encourage tenants to apply for Housing Benefit and visit welfare benefit advice agencies and debt counselling services such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, if they consider the amount of rent payable to be unaffordable.
- 2.4 Implement the staged approach whilst having regard to the size of the arrears, reason for the arrears, the period of debt, household circumstances and the tenant's response.
- 2.5 Negotiate an Agreement to reduce the arrears in realistic and affordable instalments, which are reasonable, taking into account the particular circumstances and debts of the tenant.
- 2.6 Maintain written records of all action taken at each stage in the arrears recovery process, in particular attempts to contact the tenant, interviews and conversations with the tenant and details of repayment agreements.
- 2.7 Encourage tenants in receipt of Income Support, wherever possible (currently after 4 weeks gross arrears), to agree to having rent directly deducted from their benefit.
- 2.8 Apply to the Court for possession only after all potential solutions have been explored including Attachment of Earnings.
- 2.9 Evict tenants only as a last resort and advise tenants who are to be evicted that they may be considered intentionally homeless, but liaise with the Homeless Section.
- 2.10 Liaise with Housing Benefit on applications, notification of changes of circumstances, overpayments, and to resolve problems.
- 2.11 Liaise with relevant agencies for tenants who may be vulnerable, for example, because they are elderly, mentally ill, have young children, or learning or language difficulties.

C) Former Tenants' Arrears

2.12 Pre-Termination of Tenancy

- Inform the tenant of any rent arrears.
- Contact the tenant to reach an agreement to pay, with the aim of clearing the arrears before the tenancy ends.
- Obtain a forwarding address.

2.13 Post-Termination

- Begin recovery procedures without delay.
- Send a final statement and advise how payment can be made.
- Liaise with Housing Benefit to check whether any payments or overpayments are due.
- Monitor the account and take legal action if required e.g. money order or attachment of earnings.
- Try to trace all former tenants who leave without a forwarding address by contacting all relevant sources.
- Assess recovery prospects and consider write-offs as appropriate.