

Appendix 3 – Recruitment of Additional Housing Liaison Officers

Report for	ELT
Title	Recruitment of additional Housing Liaison Officer team to achieve multiple business plan objectives.
Business plan link	Improved customer satisfaction through greater visibility and presence on estates
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Summary

1. This report sets out a business case to recruit 4FTE additional Housing Liaison Officers in Tenancy Services, to carry out tenancy occupancy checks to all secure tenancies in general needs council housing; increase levels of contact and engagement with our customers and achieve a step change in customer satisfaction, engagement and performance outcomes.
2. The purpose and outcomes are -
 - Enable a comprehensive programme of visits to all general needs housing tenants over a 2 year cycle
 - Carry out a rolling programme of visits to leasehold properties – to promote improved service charge collection; and reduce the risk unauthorised alterations and other breaches of the lease
 - Increase targeted visiting, for example making contact with tenants about to terminate their tenancy and people who report very high or very low numbers of repairs
 - Support the work of Income Management and Financial Inclusion teams, to engage tenants on managing the introduction of Universal Credit, helping to minimise arrears and financial exclusion
 - Increase visiting and personal contact with households in rent arrears, prior to legal action - improving arrears recovery and reducing the risk of cases progressing to the point of eviction
 - Support Homelessness Reduction Act responsibilities to mitigate risk of homelessness
 - To carry out occupancy checks and ensure that we have accurate household information for all tenancies, to reduce the incidence of hidden homelessness and housing need within our housing stock
 - To ensure we identify all cases of fraud, sub-letting and abandonment, to be able to recover properties for letting – initial estimate of 50 additional properties to be recovered
 - To promote options for downsizing, amongst under-occupying tenants
 - Identify vulnerability and reduce the risk of future tenancy failure that may lead to possession action and consequent homelessness
 - Identification of potential disrepair issues giving rise to legal claims, reducing financial exposure to legal costs and compensation
 - Improved identification of fire risks in homes, enabling us to deliver advice, make referrals and reduce the risk
 - Increased action on unauthorised alterations, enabling improved enforcement to reduce the risk to our residents and the fabric of buildings
 - Increased intervention prior to tenancy termination to ensure properties are more often clean, clear and in good repair at the point of becoming void
 - Higher awareness of vulnerability among residents, the ability to make appropriate referrals and pick up issues before a crisis point
 - Much higher levels of engagement with our customers, enabling us to improve satisfaction levels

- Opportunities to promote participation in resident associations and other community initiatives
 - Personal engagement with under-occupying tenants and the opportunity to increase levels of downsizing moves, freeing up larger family properties. Discuss alternative housing options and ways that HfH can help support tenants who would like to downsize, to achieve their aspiration.
 - Increased HfH visibility and presence in neighbourhoods, more likely to spot and respond to specific problems affecting communities
3. The staff will be part of existing Tenancy Management area teams, managed within the existing structure and using existing policies, procedures and management systems, but would have a dedicated role to deliver this project.

Recommendations

4. To recruit four additional Housing Liaison Officers to enable visits to all general needs tenants over 2 years, to carry out occupancy checks and property inspections to around 8,000 general needs housing properties that have limited contact with our services.
5. The aim of the visits is to –
- Confirm occupancy by the named tenant
 - Confirm household make-up
 - Identify vulnerability, safeguarding or other issues that may require referral for additional services
 - Identify underoccupying households that may benefit from options to downsize
 - Identify obvious disrepair issues
6. Having this programme of visits carried out within Tenancy Management will mean it is integrated with the work of the teams. This will provide the following benefits –
- Ensure it is carried out in the most efficient way;
 - Reduce scope for duplication of effort and streamline staff activity;
 - Make use of existing procedures, referral routes, partnerships and local knowledge;
 - Lead seamlessly into follow up actions such as tenancy enforcement, where required;
 - It will provide resilience and cover for absence so that workload volumes can be maintained throughout the programme;
 - Provide a cohort of similarly trained and knowledgeable staff who can work closely together and provide mutual support;
 - Promote good communication with residents associations through established links.
7. That the Tenancy Management teams complete a minimum of 80 visits per week, in addition to the existing workload. This will include follow up visits to achieve access; cover for absences; and downtime. The four staff will be dedicated to this role but working alongside existing Housing Liaison Officers who can provide cover for each other.

Measurable Outputs and Targets

8. The team will work to specific targets and the outputs will be measured to be able to track the value for money and service outcomes achieved. This will include –
- Identify abandonment/fraud/unauthorised occupancy – research suggests an unauthorised occupancy level possibly as high as 3% for social housing in London. A target of recovering 50 additional properties is not unreasonable, which would represent 0.6% of the properties visited

- Action leading to tenant successfully downsizing/transferring to Support and Well-Being scheme – target of 50 cases
 - No. of cases of potential disrepair identified and reported for action
 - No. of vulnerability/safeguarding issues identified and follow up actions taken
 - No. of cases of potential financial exclusion/ benefits referred, level of additional income achieved/arrears recovered as a consequence
 - Number of unauthorised alterations identified and rectified
9. The team would be monitored for timely action to ensure that the benefits of the project are captured, including for example -
- Completed visits – minimum 350 per month
 - Referral for tenancy enforcement/service of NTQ – within 24 hours of visit
 - Report safeguarding concern – same day
 - Refer disrepair concerns – within 2 days
 - Refer for follow up advice or support on downsizing – within 2 days
 - Record date for follow up visit – within 3 days

Background

10. With a high number of households in temporary accommodation, a strategic priority of both Homes for Haringey and the Council is to reduce both the numbers and cost burden of homelessness. There is a key role for Tenancy Management to ensure that our housing stock is being used in the most effective way to meet the needs of residents of the borough.
11. The existing programme of visiting to residents is carried out within limited resources and targeted to meet key priorities for our role as a landlord. These include –
- Ensuring proper conduct of introductory tenancies
 - Identifying vulnerability and risk
 - Reducing the incidence of anti-social behaviour and tenancy breach
 - Identifying and tackling fire risks, disrepair and other issues that may adversely affect residents and cause expense to the Housing Revenue Account
 - Advising and informing tenants to be able to make best use of their home
 - Signposting and referring to other agencies for other services and support
12. The targeted nature of visiting means that while some tenants have extensive contact with our service, over 50% of our tenants have little or no contact. This can be because there is no recorded vulnerability, they have not reported issues to us and they appear to be conducting their tenancy correctly. However, there is also likely to be a significant minority who have hidden housing need or vulnerability. A large number of tenants, around 3,000, appear to be under-occupying their home according to current information we have. In addition, there are likely to be a number of cases of tenancy fraud or abandonment that have not come to our notice.
13. Currently the service recovers around 48 properties per year from tenancy fraud. The usual measure of the saving achieved is £18,000 per property – a calculation by the Audit Commission from some years ago. Even by this conservative measure, the saving currently achieved is £864,000. It is not unreasonable to expect that a further 50 properties could be recovered from tenancy fraud as a result of a comprehensive programme of visits. This would deliver a saving of £900,000 Further recoveries from abandonment would increase the saving further and increase the scope to rehouse homeless households.
14. Whilst carrying out their occupancy audits, officers will also carry out a visual check of the condition of the property they are visiting. The need to identify disrepair issues and repairing obligations is acute; legal costs and disrepair claims are escalating.

15. Whilst the visits are being conducted, the team will also check whether there are any concerns around the household. They will identify any safeguarding issues or whether there may be other cause for concern. They will make any referrals as appropriate and ensure a seamless approach for the customer.

Outline of the Project

16. The programme of visits will be planned and managed within the Tenancy Management teams. They will be additional to the other routine visiting of the teams which includes –

- Vulnerability visits
- Tenancy occupancy checks – to a limited sample of tenancies
- Introductory tenancy visits
- Right To Buy visits
- Mutual exchange and pre-termination visits

By integrating the visits with the existing activity of the teams, it will be possible to carry this out in the most efficient way and ensure comprehensive coverage of the housing stock

17. After each visit, required follow-up actions will be recommended. This will include:

- Identifying empty and abandoned properties and dealing with any unauthorised occupation, re-possessing properties and initiating proceedings where necessary;
- Recording household composition
- Recording visit outcomes
- Referral to other agencies and service as required, follow-up action
- Initiating action to recover possession or for further investigation by a Tenancy Caseworker
- Recommending timescales for follow-up visits
 - Identifying customers who may be vulnerable or where there are safeguarding concerns, taking appropriate action and making referrals to relevant agencies;
 - Referring other concerns and issues raised to other Homes for Haringey and Council services, delivering a more joined-up approach.

Resource Implications

18. The estimated cost of four Housing Liaison Officers is £133,612 per year for salary and on costs. In addition there will be initial costs of –

- Recruitment to the roles
- Provision of tablets, phones and any other equipment required

The cost of managing, training and supporting the additional staff will be absorbed within existing resources. Travel expenses would be met within existing budget provision.

One full time post will be funded through a transfer of resources from Income Management, at a cost of £33,403. It is proposed that the other three additional posts are funded via a contribution of £100,209 out of the resources of £185,734 to be achieved through the Tenancy Services restructure proposals.

Human Resources Implications

19. The proposed staff are additional to the existing structure. Four new fixed term positions would be created to carry out the role, under the existing Housing Liaison Officer job description, grade sc6-SO1 (attached as appendix). Given the short-term nature of the project recruitment would be sought for experienced staff with the least need for induction and training.

Equalities Impact

20. It is intended to ensure a visit to all households in council housing with a secure tenancy. No household will be disadvantaged by this exercise.
21. Monitoring and an impact assessment will take place as a result of this exercise, when conducting occupancy audits. For example, it will look to show whether there is any cause for concern or safeguarding concern amongst specific groups or whether there is a trend in terms of abandonment or unauthorised occupation.