

Item

REVIEW OF A SUITE OF HOUSING-RELATED POLICIES



To:

Councillor Richard Johnson, Executive Councillor for Housing
Housing Scrutiny Committee 16/01/2019

Report by:

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Wards affected:

All

Not a Key Decision

1. Executive Summary

1.1 A review of a suite of tenancy management, repair and void management policies, and the way the service recovers money owed to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for rechargeable work, damage to HRA assets or fees relating to HRA owned property or land.

2. Recommendations

The Executive Councillor is recommended to:

- 2.1 Agree the suite of revised policies
- 2.2 Note the review dates listed within each policy and to delegate authority to the Head of Housing to determine if individual policies should be brought back for committee approval depending on the degree or significance of any changes made at review points.

3. Background

- 3.1. A key component of the Housing Transformation Programme was to ensure the affected services in Housing could achieve value for money by managing staff time, customer expectation and finances well following the implementation of necessary savings to the HRA.
- 3.2. Following the restructure of housing and repair teams in 2017/18, ensuring the new teams were fit for purpose included a review of how the service managed voids and lettings and anti-social behaviour.
- 3.3. As part of the voids and lettings process review, it was recognised that all teams who had a hand in efficiently dealing with a void and the subsequent re-letting of the property would need to be working with clear processes that translated across the appropriate functions.
- 3.4. It was also recognised that there was a need to identify which costs in these services were predominantly due to undertaking repairs or other work that was not the Council's responsibility; what the Council should be providing and what should be the tenants', leaseholders' or residents' responsibility. Clear procedures were needed to ensure that, where money was due to the Council, it could be recovered quickly to minimise the impact on Housing's budgets.
- 3.5. The review was completed by a team of staff from key service areas with responsibility for voids and lettings. A number of areas of waste, as well as opportunities, were identified where processes further up and down the voids and lettings 'chain' (in Housing Advice and City Homes, for example) could be improved to better manage customer expectations, save time for both customers and staff and save money.
- 3.7. Staff developed an implementation plan to put the improvements in place. A significant part of this was a review and refresh of key areas of service policy relating to the voids and lettings process. The team looked at how other authorities had implemented fair, consistent and transparent policies that benefitted tenants, leaseholders and residents, as well as the Councils themselves.
- 3.8. It was recognised by staff that, for the above outcomes to be achieved, a number of other tenancy management policies would require reviewing.
- 3.9. The policies for agreement are attached at Appendix A. Please note this is not an exhaustive list of policies that require a review – the publication of the Housing Green Paper, expected in 2019/20, will trigger a

requirement to refresh the Council's Tenancy Strategy, Tenancy Policy and then subsequent policies in all areas of Housing. Further work will be undertaken over the coming year and shared with tenant and leaseholder reps and members as required.

3.10. The key outcomes of each policy have been summarised in 4 below.

4. Policy content

4.1 Re-chargeable Works Policy and Schedule

- A refreshed rechargeable repairs policy; broadened to include other areas of service where a charge will be applied for damage, or work being undertaken by the Council if the tenant or resident fails to complete the work themselves.
- A Schedule of charges has been devised (attached to the policy), covering all areas of housing including general, sheltered and temporary as well as land.
- Key areas include:
 - Damage to council-owned assets
 - House, garden and building clearance at the end of a tenancy (currently costing over £100k per annum)
 - Blocking unauthorised access across council/housing land
 - Key fob replacement
 - Charge to be levied following the need to break-in to undertake a gas service
 - Removal and storage of personal possessions
 - Pull-cord system (city-wide community alarm customers only)
 - Replacement of goods provided in temporary housing
 - Fees associated with mutual exchange survey work
- To ensure the charges are fair, they have been set using the Council agreed pricing schedule; at the time of writing this report, this is the *National Housing Federation Schedule of Rates*.
- The charges are applicable to all types of tenancy and or residency in the City where the asset is owned by or provided from Cambridge City Council's HRA.

- Through visits, correspondence and an updated and clear website, the emphasis will be on prevention as opposed to charging; giving tenants and residents the opportunity to satisfactorily rectify the work themselves prior to any recharge or charge being applied.
- Officers performing the voids and lettings function have also taken the opportunity to refresh the Council's 'Five-point Promise' to update those areas that are either ambiguous, the responsibility of other services or the tenant themselves. The promise, showing the revisions, is included at Appendix B.

4.2 Disposal of Possessions & Personal Data Policy

- An agreed procedure between Estates & Facilities, Streets & Open Spaces and City Homes for the disposal of any personal data left behind in Council property at the end of a tenancy.
- A revised Inventory of Possessions, widened to prevent fraudulent insurance claims.
- An updated Section 41 Notice
- Clarification of the collection of possessions process.

4.3 Under-Occupation Assistance Policy

- A decision to vary the amount of removal grant payable to reflect the size of the property being vacated. This will allow more people to benefit from the scheme.
- Clarification that any debts owed to the Council will be deducted from any payment, including rechargeable work.
- Clarification of the acceptance of mutual exchange applicants, including when the grant will be paid to the City's tenant in this instance.
- Inclusion of eligibility criteria for council tenants looking to utilise the scheme.

4.4 Garage Use Policy

- Refreshed to recognise the variable pricing structure depending on location, use and user.
- Introduces a clearer system for prioritising applications.

4.5 Access Licence Policy

- An agreed process for enforcement and termination of access licences where payment has stopped, or terms of the access being granted broken.

4.6 Assignment Policy/Succession Policy

- A refresh of these policies, reflecting current legislation on assignment and succession, recognising that, at the present time, the Council has opted not to introduce the amendments in the Localism Act 2011.

4.7 Mutual Exchange Policy

- Clarification that, where a property is larger than a household needs, the Council will avoid under-occupation and decline the request.
- Clarification that both applicants must meet the required eligibility criteria, as laid out in the Council's Lettings Policy, in order to be successful in their application.
- Clarification that the 42 days deadline to make a decision will not be activated until all necessary documentation has been received and necessary repairs or reinstatement of alterations completed.
- The introduction of a fee for the Property Survey, if the Council subsequently has to decline the application due to failure on the tenant's part to complete the work to a satisfactory and agreed standard.
- The introduction of a fee for the mandatory electrical safety test that will be undertaken by the Council going forward.

4.8 Subletting & Fraud Prevention/ Abandonment & Long-Term Absence/Business Use/Decant/Tenancy Changes Policies

- Refreshed and, where applicable, elements of risk checked by Fraud, Legal Services and Support Services.

4.9 Tenant & Leaseholder Alterations & Improvements Policy

- Completed by the Asset Team in Estates and Facilities in July 2018, and included in this suite of policies for consultation and agreement.

4.10 Income Management & Rent Arrears Policy

- Completed by the Housing Officer (Income Collection Team Leader) in July 2018, and included in this suite of Policies for consultation and agreement.

5. Implications

(a) Financial Implications

The review of these policies will not have significant financial implications on customers, as the principle of recharging tenants and residents for services that are not the responsibility of the Council, or fees for the granting of rights, have been in place for a number of years.

The re-enforcement and commitment to following up on these charges will have a positive financial impact on the HRA as money due is currently not able to be collected due to a lack of clear procedures and processes.

(b) Staffing Implications

It is expected that the review of key policies, and subsequent procedures to ensure adherence to them, will ensure staff are working more efficiency within teams and with colleagues in other parts of the Council.

(c) Equality and Poverty Implications

The review of these policies will not have significant financial implications on customers as the principles of recharging tenants and residents for services that are not the responsibility of the Council have been in place for a number of years.

The focus of the Council will be to encourage tenants and residents to undertake repairs that are the responsibility of the tenant and/or chargeable work, so a charge does not have to be raised against them. Signposting to

alternative support will be provided on the internet to give tenants as much advice as possible in managing any work themselves.

(d) Environmental Implications

None

(e) Procurement Implications

None

(f) Community Safety Implications

None

6. Consultation and communication considerations

Previous drafts of the policies were shared with Tenant and Leaseholder Representatives and their feedback considered and included as appropriate.

7. Background papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

8. Appendices

- A. Re-chargeable Works Policy and Schedule
- B. The Council's Five-Point Promise
- C. Disposal of Possessions & Personal Data Policy
- D. Under-Occupation Assistance Policy
- E. Garage Use and Arrears Policy
- F. Access Licence Policy
- G. Assignment Policy
- H. Succession Policy
- I. Mutual Exchange Policy
- J. Subletting & Fraud Prevention Policy

- K. Abandonment & long Term Absence Policy
- L. Business Use Policy
- M. Decant Policy
- N. Tenancy Changes Policy
- O. Tenant & Leaseholder Alterations & Improvements Policy
- P. Income Management & Rent Arrears Policy

8. Inspection of papers

If you have a query on the report please contact David Greening, Head of Housing Services, tel: 01223 – 457997, email:

david.greening@cambridge.gov.uk

For the Tenant & Leaseholder Alterations & Improvements Policy and Rechargeable Works Policy & Schedule, please contact Lynn Thomas, Head of Housing Maintenance & Assets, tel: 01223 – 457831, email:

lynn.thomas@cambridge.gov.uk

For the Income Management & Rent Arrears Policy, please contact Sue Amner, Housing Officer (Income collection Team Leader), tel: 01223 – 458346, email: sue.amner@cambridge.gov.uk