

REPORT TO: HOUSING, DUNDEE CONTRACT SERVICES AND
ENVIRONMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE –
9 FEBRUARY 2009

REPORT ON: REVIEW OF THE LETTINGS AND RENT RECOVERY
CENTRES AND AREA OFFICE RESTRUCTURE

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF HOUSING

REPORT NO.: 4-2009

1. **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

The purpose of this report is to outline the results of the Review of the Lettings and Rent Recovery Centres and the Restructure of the Area Offices.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that the Housing, Dundee Contract Services and Environment Services Committee:

- 2.1. Approves the conclusions of the review.
- 2.2. Agrees the transfer of the provision of housing advice and information to the Customer Services Team within the Support Services Department, Floor 2, Tayside House.
- 2.3. Notes that the Director of Housing and Head of Personnel will progress the necessary establishment changes contained in this report.
- 2.4. Note the emphasis placed by the Department on taking effective action to improve customer service to applicants and ensure continuous improvement in service delivery from the Lettings Contact Centre.

3. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1. There will be an additional cost associated with introducing the establishment changes contained in this report. The cost will be £26,680, inclusive of employers' costs.
- 3.2. However, that will be partly offset by savings which will be achieved through the rationalisation of office accommodation in Shore Terrace.

4. **MAIN TEXT**

On 15 May 2006, the Housing Committee approved a report which recommended the establishment of Lettings and Rent Recovery Centres as well as the restructure of the Area Housing Offices.

The report also recommended that a comprehensive review of these changes be carried out following their implementation.

4.1. **Conclusions of the Review**

4.1.1. **Lettings Contact Centre**

The Council approved a new allocations policy in 2006. This major policy review necessitated the introduction of a new IT system to operate the new policy. The development of the IT system for the Lettings Contact Centre has had to be prioritised within the other major IT project priorities within the Housing Department. Work is now well underway on developing the new Lettings Contact Centre IT system and this is scheduled for introduction in late 2009. The new IT system for allocations will incorporate improvements reflecting the operation of the Lettings Contact Centre which would not have been possible if this IT system had been given priority over the other IT systems.

Inevitably, given the major change from the previous ways of working within the former offices to that within the new District Offices and Contact Centres, there has been a significant challenge in managing the change effectively. The introduction of the new Lettings Contact Centre, building the team, providing the necessary training and ensuring effective delivery of the lettings service and management of empty properties, two key areas of service delivery, has required a staged introduction.

Progress to Date

A Project Team headed by the Housing Strategy Manager was established and an improvement plan developed to tackle the necessary issues compiled.

Initially efforts have been concentrated on identifying areas where solutions to address the issues could be more easily developed and implemented.

This has led to:

- the introduction of improved audit trails and checking mechanisms;
- an extensive training programme for all staff within the Lettings Contact Centre being developed and implemented;
- an improved system for the management of suspensions from the waiting list;
- an improved system for reviews of applicants on the Council's waiting list;
- improved information for tenants terminating their tenancies;
- improved information and housing advice for applicants as well as improved processes for ensuring that new tenants are provided with support in sustaining their tenancy;
- improved tracking and monitoring of longer term voids and the introduction of a system to allocate more difficult to let properties by advertising these and applicants registering an interest in them.

Development of IT Systems

A project plan has been devised in conjunction with IT to deliver the new IT system necessary for the introduction of the new allocations policy. Significant work has now been completed on devising the specifications for the system and programming work is due to start shortly. The system specifications have been designed to provide an enhanced and effective IT system for the staff within the Lettings Contact Centre not only providing a platform for the operation for the new allocations policy but also enabling staff to provide better customer care. The system will also provide improved performance monitoring, including individual workbasket monitoring, as well as better management information and reporting.

The project plan will be closely monitored to ensure the introduction of the new system by late 2009.

Void Management

A systems review of the procedures and processes to manage empty properties will commence early in 2009 to complete an end to end review of all stages of the process. The aim is to improve performance by speeding up the re-let times for empty properties, introduce a better standard for re-let properties, ensure best value in repairs expenditure, ensure more effective allocations are made by reducing the number of offers required to re-let tenancies.

Training

A training plan for Lettings Contact Centre has been developed and implemented. The programme has three parts - weekly awareness raising and information provision sessions; skills training sessions carried out in small clusters for staff and one day sessions on customer care and team building. This will improve service delivery through more effective delivery from staff in the Lettings Contact Centre.

4.1.2. Rent Recovery Centre

The inception of the Rent Recovery Contact Centre also required major IT development. Rent Recovery was prioritised due to its business critical nature. The IT systems are now developed and in place. Work is progressing on the one remaining area for managing former tenant arrears. In the light of the implementation of this major change programme, performance on rent recovery has improved with current tenant arrears reducing to 7.5% of net debt at April 2008 and a continuing reduction in the trend comparison in 2008/09.

Progress to Date

All current tenant rent accounts rent recovery action is managed by the Rent Recovery Centre and the centre's purpose has already adopted radical change in the way it models rent arrears management.

The revised recovery process establishes sustained contact with the tenant from an early stage, giving opportunities for issues to be addressed and any potential eviction action to be avoided.

It is best practice, and in the interests of tenants in debt, that the preventative measures adopted are resourced adequately and implemented to reduce the level of arrears, and to assist those on low incomes in managing regular rent payments, while firm measures are agreed to deal with those refusing to pay or deal with their benefit claim entitlements.

An improved percentage performance result and a debt reduction of £200,000 in monetary terms were returned in the first full Financial Year that the Rent Recovery Centre was in operation. A sustained downward trend on this performance is being maintained in the current Financial Year.

With the earlier, continuing intervention in cases, the rent recovery process has resulted in less Notices of Proceedings being issued, less court actions being raised and reduced eviction actions, with a resultant reduction in legal costs. The number of evictions has reduced significantly.

Development of IT Systems

The IT specification detailed an enhanced and effective system for service delivery, with development carried out by a combined project team from the Housing Department, IT Department and Legal Services.

There is better data-matching across the Council systems resulting from the IT development, and a data link with SWD Welfare Rights Team and Legal Services to progress court action processes and outcomes.

Workflow in the Rent Recovery Centre is based on exception reporting, so that only rent accounts in arrears, or with increasing balances, or which have broken repayment agreements are reviewed. Cases are defaulted to workbaskets to be allocated on a task basis to individual team members work trays, with time targets and weighting to task complexity measured.

The system provides improved performance monitoring, from a range of an individual operative level to team target outcomes, which results in better management reporting also.

Symposium telephone systems and call recording processes have been adopted in the Rent Recovery Centre to measure all aspects of the service delivery. Customer Satisfaction Surveys carried out have returned an improved performance to tenants in the Advice with Rent Payment Difficulties, which has a target performance of 80% and returned 87% in 2007/2008 and the most recent results in 2008/2009 are at 95%.

Management of Former Tenant Arrears

Preparations for the transfer of Former Tenant Arrears and Homeless Services Unit accommodation debt will progress for the Rent Recovery Centre to manage new business in the revised arrears recovery process.

Due to IT development commitments to the Lettings Centre specifications, work on the former tenant arrears will be progressed once the Lettings Centre development is at an appropriate stage.

Training

A training plan has been implemented at the Rent Recovery Centre. Customer Care and Team Building were completed at an early stage of the change management, with Child Protection, Lone Working Practice and Welfare Rights Awareness sessions mandatory for the team members. Staff participate in monthly information and awareness sessions and quarterly reviews with their supervisors and manager to assess individual training requirements also.

4.1.3. Staffing

Staffing levels, overall, are sufficient to deliver the service with no evidence to suggest any overcapacity within the structure. However, some redistribution of staffing levels is seen as necessary.

The Director of Housing and the Head of Personnel will progress all necessary changes.

One of the other changes being proposed is that the Advice & Information Teams in the District Offices should have the facility, where necessary, to provide advice and information on a wider range of corporate functions, rather than being limited to purely housing issues. To achieve this it is suggested the Teams be aligned more closely with the Corporate Customer Services Team, based at Floor 2, Tayside House.

4.1.4. **Housing Surgery, Kirkton Community Centre**

The Surgery was established from week beginning 6 November 2006 and was based out of the Community Centre in Kirkton two half days per week. A Housing Officer was present at these times to deal with any housing issues raised by residents in the area.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of demand from local residents this facility has now closed.

4.1.5. **Advice & Information Team, 3 Shore Terrace**

As part of the Council's stated objective to improve services to the public and to move towards a one stop shop approach, a number of activities, mainly in relation to general information and advice, are currently being delivered, on behalf of their client departments, by the Corporate Customer Services Team based at Floor 2 Reception, Tayside House.

Whilst the client department retains responsibility for the service and how it is delivered, the staff who actually deliver the service are not part of the client department but are part of a multi-skilled group of customer advisors within the Customer Services Team.

There is a requirement, as part of this corporate objective, on all departments to examine current service delivery, particularly in relation to the provision of general advice and information, and to seek more effective ways of delivering such services.

The provision of general housing advice and information will be delivered from within a group of multi skilled customer advisors, to a specification agreed by the Housing Department, when the One Stop Shop in Dundee House opens. This report proposes to make that move now rather than wait until Dundee House opens.

The transfer of the provision of general housing advice from the Advice & Information Team will be closely monitored on an ongoing basis to ensure standards and quality of service provision is maintained.

4.1.6. **Office Accommodation, Shore Terrace**

The transfer of the provision of housing advice and information to Floor 2, Tayside House will allow the Housing Department to rationalise its accommodation requirement in Shore Terrace. As a result the office accommodation at 3 Shore Terrace will no longer be required which will ensure a saving of approximately £25,000 per year.

4.2. **Consultation With Staff and Trade Unions**

Staff and the Trade Unions have been fully consulted on the contents of this report.

The Trade Unions have agreed all recommendations contained within the report and are supportive of it.

The Trade Unions have also indicated that they will work closely with Management to ensure these changes are implemented as smoothly as possible.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This report has been screened for any policy implications in respect of Sustainability, Strategic Environmental Assessment, Anti-Poverty, Equality Impact Assessment and Risk Assessment. There are no major issues.

6. CONSULTATIONS

- 6.1. The Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executive (Support Services), Depute Chief Executive (Finance), Head of Finance and all other Chief Officers have been consulted on the content of this report.
- 6.2. Dundee Federation of Tenants Associations have been consulted on this report. Also, it is proposed to circulate the report to all Registered Tenants' Organisations asking for comments/feedback. Should any material changes be required in light of this exercise these will be reported to Committee.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

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JANUARY, 2009