

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Housing Management Sub-Committee	31 January 2013
Subject: Assaults on Housing Officers	Public
Report of: Director of Community & Children's Services	For Information
<p><u>Summary</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This report, which is for information, is to bring to the attention of Members the increase in cases of verbal and physical assaults against the City's Housing officers, and what is being done to address it. • During 2012 there have been 12 reported incidents of aggression towards Housing staff. This compares to only one incident in each of 2010 and 2011. It is important that we take this increase seriously, not only because the City has a duty of care towards its staff, but also to minimise the chances of a claim against the City if an officer were to be injured in some way. • Housing managers, led by the Health & Safety Manager, have formed a working group and have implemented a number of measures designed to protect staff and prevent a further increase in these issues. The measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Review of risk assessments and local working procedures ○ The introduction of security devices for high risk staff; ○ New training for lone workers in office situations; ○ A publicity campaign to encourage better behaviour; ○ Swift and decisive action being taken against perpetrators. 	

Main Report

1. Background

- 1.1 Front-line housing staff have always been at potential risk of violence from members of the public. Violence can manifest itself in various forms from verbal to physical assault. Housing officers carry out a range of highly sensitive work, such as collecting rent arrears and dealing with anti-social behaviour and neighbour disputes. They often have to deliver unwelcome messages – perhaps turning down a housing application, or a request for a repair which is the resident's responsibility.

- 1.2 In a survey of 200 social landlords carried out by the Chartered Institute of Housing's journal *Inside Housing*, a shocking total of 8,898 assaults on front-line housing staff were reported between January 2009 and April 2012. Most of these were verbal, but an alarming 1,350 were physical. The survey also showed that the number of physical attacks on housing staff in 2011 was a 35% increase on the number recorded for 2010.
- 1.3 In the City, we have been fortunate in having a very low incidence of aggression towards our staff. This may partly be due to the high quality of our services, and partly because we have staff on-site who get to know residents and form positive professional relationships with them.
- 1.4 However, the last year has seen a worrying increase in incidents of aggression and abuse towards our front-line staff. In 2010 and 2011, there was only one reported incident in each year in the Housing Service (covering all estates, including the Barbican). In 2012, there were 12 incidents.

2. Current position

- 2.1 The 12 incidents in 2012 comprised the following:
 - 3 cases of verbal abuse
 - 3 cases of verbal abuse and aggressive behaviour
 - 2 cases of threat of physical violence
 - 1 case of verbal abuse and threat to damage property
 - 1 case of verbal abuse and threat of physical violence against two members of staff
 - 2 cases of physical violence
- 2.2 Two incidents occurred at the Barbican Estate Office, four elsewhere on the Barbican, and six on other housing estates.
- 2.3 We think that there are a number of reasons for this increase. Firstly, there is increased pressure on residents as a result of the recession and the difficult financial situation many are in. This causes stress, which, in some people, can manifest as anger and aggression towards anyone who they perceive as being unhelpful. Front-line Housing officers are, by the nature of their jobs, potentially exposed to this behaviour.
- 2.4 We are also seeing an increase in mental health issues amongst residents, perhaps as a result of this stress. As demand on our housing stock gets

heavier, we are only able to house individuals and families who are at greatest need. These people are often already vulnerable and can find it difficult to integrate into a community. When problems arise, perhaps with neighbours, and staff have to intervene, tensions can be very high.

- 2.5 Another change in society which may be having an impact, is the use of social media, and the phenomenon of ‘cyber-bullying’. As evidenced by many recent press stories, there is a worrying trend for people to use social media to express negative views via such medium as web blogs, Facebook and Twitter in a very destructive manner. Generally, the use of social media is a very effective way of sharing information and feedback, and the vast majority of people using it do so in an entirely constructive way. However, our staff have already experienced incidents of very unpleasant and personal comments about them being posted. Not only is this distressing for the staff concerned, but it can generate a sense that it is acceptable to abuse and criticise officers, and it could be speculated that this, in turn, has an impact on face to face behaviour.
- 2.6 Finally, Housing management has been pro-active in encouraging staff to report incidents of abuse and aggression, rather than simply ignore them, and this will have had an impact on the reported figures. However, we believe that there are many other incidents where staff have turned a blind eye to unacceptable behaviour, and have not reported them. In a second national survey of front-line housing workers carried out in April and May 2012, more than a third of workers had not reported assaults to their employer.

3. Actions taken

- 3.1 By the middle of 2012 it was already obvious that decisive action was needed. The Health & Safety Manager, with the support of managers, formed a working group to discuss the previous and future incidents and to look at how we might safeguard staff. The group came up with a series of measures, many of which have already been implemented.

3.2 Risk Assessments and Work Processes

The group started their work by carrying out risk assessments of work processes and offices. The effectiveness of existing controls have been examined closely and checks made that all estates were following existing procedures and controls to ensure safe working. Where staff were felt to be vulnerable, either because of their workplace or working practices, we have recommended and implemented changes. An example of this is that in estates identified as a medium or high risk, we make sure that staff are never working alone. This has meant some adjustments to the opening

hours of estate offices, which has not always been popular with residents, but we have publicised the changes and the reasons for them widely, to explain why these steps have been necessary.

3.3 Security devices

The need for security devices was identified for staff working alone, either in offices, out on estates or in residents' homes. The Health & Safety Manager carried out research and identified a suitable device, which was then trialled by the staff who were felt to be at highest risk.

The trial was successful, and we now have a number of these Skyguard devices in use. The device, which can be discreetly carried and activated, links directly to a monitoring service. If the alarm button is pressed, the monitoring staff listen to what is occurring and summon appropriate assistance, be it police or medical staff in the event of an accident. Calls are treated as a priority by the police and the devices include a Global Positioning System (GPS) which pinpoints the location and allows assistance to be on site anywhere in London within 6 minutes. Calls are recorded, as well as monitored, so can be used as evidence if legal action needs to be taken.

These devices are cost-effective, as well as efficient, costing less than a mobile phone, but providing an easier and more discreet means of summoning help. Where staff already carry mobile phones, these can be adapted to function as a safety device. We are now looking to provide all appropriate staff with some form of device, and we are looking at the most effective solution for each individual, according to the nature of their work. For workers at a low risk, we are looking to supply a personal alarm.

3.3 Training

As well as ensuring that staff attend appropriate corporate training, we have run lone working training for office-based staff, using a specialist external provider. This training was very positively received and one participant fed back almost immediately that they had successfully used the techniques learned to diffuse a potentially explosive situation with a resident.

3.4 Publicity

The majority of our residents are courteous and considerate and enjoy a positive relationship with Housing staff. We do feel, however, that it is

important that everyone is aware of the problems caused by a few, and the impact this has on staff.

Estate newsletters which were published in December included an article to raise awareness of the issue of aggression towards staff. Designs for a corporate poster are being considered, and notices have been placed in all Housing offices, making it clear that unacceptable behaviour will not be tolerated.

This communication is also important to assure staff that these issues are being taken seriously and that we as an organisation will support them and press for the most severe penalties possible, this is key to maintaining staff morale.

3.5 Punitive measures

We have had a zero-tolerance policy on abuse and aggression towards staff for some time, but have rarely needed to invoke it, and the few cases which came to management attention were dealt with on an individual basis. In order to give staff reassurance, we have now introduced standard letters and procedures to deal with these matters.

Where a member of staff is subjected to verbal abuse or aggression of any kind, including shouting and bad language, a letter is sent to the resident concerned by the Housing Services Director, informing them that this behaviour is unacceptable, and warning that if there is another such incident, action will be taken.

Where the incident involves threatened or actual violence, there is now zero-tolerance. The Housing Services Director will send a letter advising the perpetrator that steps will be taken to withdraw their tenancy and remove them from their property, and a Notice to Quit will be served.

4. Further actions

- 4.1 As the impact of the welfare benefit changes begin to be felt, residents may be under further pressure and it is possible that there will be a knock on effect for staff. We will be monitoring the situation during the next year and will be working closely with colleagues in Corporate Health & Safety to identify further controls as necessary to eliminate or manage staff exposure to this hazard.

4.2 In the meantime, we will be exploring a series of changes to the way our estates are run and putting staff security at the heart of these. These changes will include:

- Strengthening the operational management of our estates and the staffing resources devoted to rent collection. Proposals will be brought to the next meeting of the Housing Management Sub-Committee.
- Developing protocols for dealing with social media and cyber-bullying. The Resident Involvement Team are running a Social Media Project and will be looking at this issue as part of that work.
- A review of Estate Office hours, in consultation with residents to ensure that staff are available at the times most needed, but are not left alone at any time.
- Installing CCTV in estate and sheltered scheme offices.
- Reviewing the design and layout of offices to protect the personal space of staff and ensure they have escape routes.

4.3 The Corporate Health & Safety Team are planning a campaign to encourage accident and near miss reporting and to launch a new reporting facility. This will be live in February, and we will be using it to ensure that all incidents of abuse or assault on staff are recorded.

5. Conclusion

5.1 It is hoped that Members will support all the existing and planned actions taken to address this issue. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Departmental Health & Safety Manager, June Bridge, for her excellent efforts on this matter.

Financial and Risk Implications

All measures requiring financial input are being funded through local budgets – in particular the Housing Health & Safety budget. No extra funding is required at this time.

The issue has been identified as a priority on the Departmental Risk Register. There are risks to the wellbeing of staff if we do not take action to address this issue, but we believe that this is being mitigated by the actions we have implemented.

HR Implications

If we do not manage the increase in these incidents, then we will be at risk of increased stress and sickness for staff. We have had one incident where a worker felt unable to return to their base following an incident, and we have

worked very closely with HR to address this and to provide appropriate support. This clearly carries unnecessary cost implications for the department as well as impacting on service delivery.

Staff exposed to violence could also potentially take a claim against the CoL as an employer for an injury at work. The mechanisms outlined above are key in being able to defend any such claims.

As violence is an accepted workplace hazard it is regulated for under the provisions of the Health & Safety at Work Act. Incidents, if severe enough leading to more than 7 days of work as a result of an incident; or a physical injury as a result of an assault become reportable to the HSE (Health and Safety Executive) under the RIDDOR provisions (Reporting of Injuries Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations). Any following intervention by the HSE where they identify a material breach, such as a failure to implement risk assessment controls could see the Corporation charged for their time in carrying out the intervention, currently £139 per hour.

We will continue to monitor the position and to liaise with colleagues in HR to get necessary advice and assistance.

Strategic Implications

The measures outlined in this paper contribute to the Departmental Priorities of

- Improving the health and wellbeing of communities and individuals; and
- Making best use of resources and improving the way we work.

The issue has been reported to the Corporate Health & Safety Committee, which is monitoring the situation actively, and is discussed regularly at the Departmental Health & Safety Board, which has identified lone working as a high priority for action.

Consultees

The Town Clerk, Chamberlain and Comptroller & City Solicitor have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

Contact:

Jacquie Campbell, Head of Barbican & Estates

0207 332 3785

jacquie.campbell@cityoflondon.gov.uk