

<b>Committee(s):</b>	<b>Date(s):</b>	<b>Item no.</b>
Housing Management & Almshouses Sub Committee	26 September 2013	4
<b>Subject:</b> Assaults on Housing Officers & Lone Working Policy	<b>Public</b>	
<b>Report of:</b> Director of Community & Children's Services	<b>For Information</b>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Summary</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In January 2013, the Housing Management Sub-Committee received a report on the rise in incidents of aggressive behaviour towards housing staff. During 2012, there were 12 incidents, compared to only one in 2011 and 2010. The report outlined measures which were being taken and Members asked to be kept informed of the situation.</li> <li>• In 2013 to date there have been only three incidents, one of physical assault and two of verbal assault. However, nationally there is concern at the increasing number of assaults on front-line housing staff, particularly following an incident in Brixton in July 2013.</li> <li>• A further set of measures have been implemented to build on previous actions. These include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Increased use of Skyguard personal security devices;</li> <li>○ Security measures at estate offices;</li> <li>○ Strengthened operation management on estates and an increase in staff working on rent arrears and with vulnerable people;</li> </ul> </li> <li>• A draft Lone Working Policy for the Community &amp; Children's Services Department has been developed to complement the corporate policy by adding specific detail.</li> </ul>		

## **Main Report**

### **1. Background**

1.1 In January 2013 the Housing Management Sub-Committee received a report outlining the rise in verbal and physical assaults on the City's Housing staff during 2012 and setting out measures being taken to support and protect staff.

1.2 These measures, planned and implemented by a special staff working group, included:

- A 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.

1.3 Since then, the vulnerability of housing staff nationally has gained a higher profile. In June 2013, 'Inside Housing' published the results of a 12 months survey which showed a growing trend of hostility towards front-line staff working in housing. Figures for the first quarter of 2013 indicated an increase in verbal and physical assaults compared to the previous year.

1.4 In July 2013, a housing officer from Metropolitan Housing Partnership and a bailiff from Her Majesty's Courts & Tribunals Service were injured when a man opened fire on them as they attended a property in Brixton to carry out a court-ordered eviction due to rent arrears. The injuries were not life-threatening and police arrested the perpetrator swiftly, but the incident has increased fears that front-line housing staff are particularly vulnerable to threats and physical violence.

### **2 Current position**

2.1 To date, in 2013, there have been only three reported incidents of assaults. One was a physical assault on a Barbican car park attendant, involving a non-resident. The others were verbal assaults – one, on Avondale Square Estate, to a contractor and the other by telephone to an apprentice working in the Benefits Team.

2.2 We are pleased and relieved that such incidents have reduced compared to 2012 and hope that this position will continue. Nevertheless, with the incident in Brixton and the national picture in mind, we have taken additional steps to improve the security of staff where possible.

- 2.3 Many of our staff now carry a hand-held Skyguard security device and there is one available in each estate office to be taken out by staff on home visits. 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.
- 2.4 Estate offices are being remodelled where necessary to provide better personal space and escape routes for staff in an emergency. We have installed CCTV in one estate office, where there was a particularly high number of unpleasant incidents.
- 2.5 We have strengthened the operational management of our estates, putting more resources at a local level and increasing the team responsible for the collection of rent arrears. We are also increasing the team which works with our most vulnerable tenants.
- 2.6 A new corporate system for reporting incidents and ‘near-misses’ has been introduced. This has been widely publicised to housing staff and we are using it to make it as easy as possible for them to report anything of concern.

### **3 Lone Working Policy**

- 3.1 Risk assessments and reviews have taken place to minimise the requirement for staff to work alone. However, it is not possible or practical to eliminate lone working in the Housing Service. Officers on our smaller estates and our Sheltered Scheme Managers are frequently working alone as there is not the work to justify increasing staffing – especially as the cost of front-line staffing is charged to tenants and homeowners through service charges. Staff carry out home visits and are out and about on our estates constantly, and it would be unreasonable to change this.
- 3.2 We have minimised risks and provided support as far as is possible by means of the measures outlined in the January report and above. We wish now to introduce a Lone Working Policy which will be specific to the Community & Children’s Services Dept. This complements the existing corporate policy, but adds specific details pertinent to housing and other staff.
- 3.3 The proposed policy, which is attached at Appendix 1, sets out the position of the department with regard to Lone Working. It outlines the

responsibilities not just of managers, but of individual members of staff, who have a duty to take precautions and make use of the processes and equipment provided to protect them. The policy outlines measures taken to support staff and includes procedures, advice and guidance for them to follow.

3.4 It is proposed that the draft policy will be presented to the next meeting of the Community & Children's Services Committee for approval.

#### **4. Financial and Risk Implications**

4.1 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.

4.2 The issue has been identified as a priority on the Departmental Risk Register. As violence is an accepted workplace hazard it is regulated for under the provisions of the Health & Safety at Work Act.

#### **5. HR Implications**

5.1 If we do not manage the increase in these incidents, then we will be at risk of increased stress and sickness for staff. 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.

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

#### **Consultees**

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

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