

Committee:	Date:
Housing Management & Almshouses Sub Committee	25 September 2014
Subject:	Public
Review of Housing Service's Complaints Policy	
Report of:	For Decision
Director of Community & Children's Services	

Summary

This report introduces a complaints policy which, whilst fitting within the corporate policy, is specific to the Housing Service.

The development of the policy, which is attached as Appendix 1, has been prompted by changes to the national system for dealing with housing complaints. Whilst the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) deals with most complaints about local authority services, those relating to housing services are now largely referred to the Housing Ombudsman (HO), which previously covered only housing associations.

The need for a specific policy and procedure which gives a details and specific path for residents of our housing estates to make complaints was also identified in the recent Resident Communications & Engagement Review.

A detailed procedure for Housing staff and a leaflet for residents have also been produced. The procedure is attached as Appendix 2 and a draft of the leaflet will be provided to Members at the meeting.

If approved in principle by Members, the draft policy and procedure will be taken to the new Housing User Board, a resident consultation panel, for their feedback. If any major changes are suggested as a result of the consultation, amended versions will be brought back to a future meeting.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report;
- Agree, in principle, the draft Complaints Policy & Procedure which form Appendix 1 & 2 to the report.

Main Report

Background

1. The recent review of Resident Communications and Engagement highlighted a need to review and update our Complaints Policy. In addition, recent changes to

the Housing Service management structure required a review of how complaints are processed and escalated internally.

2. In a wider context, since April 2013 the Housing Ombudsman (HO) has dealt with all complaints about social housing. Tenants of local housing authorities and Arms Length Management Organisations previously had the right to refer complaints about housing to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO).
3. The HO continues to investigate complaints against housing associations and in addition, investigates complaints about a local authority's landlord function. This means that complaints about a local authority's relationship as landlord to its tenants or leaseholders are now considered by the **HO** rather than the LGO.

Key elements of the proposed policy

4. The policy sets out a four stage approach, reflecting the corporate policy. These comprise an informal stage, where local staff try to resolve the complaint; Stage 1, where the complaint is investigated by the relevant Area Housing Manager; Stage 2, where the complaint is referred to the Assistant Director; and Stage 3, where the complaint is reviewed by the Town Clerk.
5. A clear distinction is made between 'service requests' (such as requests to deal with neighbour nuisance or a report of a maintenance problem) and actual 'complaints', which are an expression of dissatisfaction with the way in which a service has been provided or an issue dealt with.
6. Limits have been placed on the amount of time which can lapse between an event and the complaint being made. A complaint must now be made within six months of the incident prompting it. This has been introduced on the advice of the Housing Ombudsman to prevent complaints being made so long after an event that an investigation is difficult. Similarly, if a resident wishes to escalate a complaint to the next stage, they must do so within 30 days of receiving a response.
7. The policy makes reference to the existing departmental Vexatious Complaints Policy and sets out a procedure for invoking this which involves the Director.
8. Increased information will be provided to Members in future regarding housing complaints and a confidential briefing will be given to the Chairman and Deputy Chairman .

Complaints Procedure & Leaflet

9. It is important that our intention and commitments regarding complaints are open and transparent, and that residents have access to these so that they understand the channels open to them. To this end we have created a Complaints Procedure to complement the updated Policy. This is attached as Appendix 2. We have also created a short information leaflet for residents explaining the updated process for making a complaint. A draft copy of this will be made available to members at the meeting.
10. If Members agree the draft documents in principle, we will apply them immediately, but will publish them as a draft and seek feedback from residents

via the Housing User Board (HUB). The final version will be brought back to the Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee for signing off once feedback has been considered and incorporated.

11. The Policy will be made available on the City's website and in all estate offices. The leaflet explaining how to make a complaint will also be published online and included in all new tenancy welcome packs.

Next steps

12. Work with the HUB to incorporate residents' feedback on the draft Complaints Policy and Procedure.
13. Publish and distribute the new leaflet for residents
14. Review the policy and accompanying documents annually.

Consultation

15. The Housing User Board (HUB) will be officially launched at Resident Celebration Day on 18 October 2014. This group comprises residents from across our estates who have indicated they would like to be involved in consultation activities. The first task assigned to the HUB will be to provide comments and feedback on the proposed Complaints Policy and Procedure. Minor amendments will be incorporated where appropriate but any major changes will be brought back to this Sub-Committee for decision.
16. The Town Clerk, Comptroller and Chamberlain have been consulted in the development of this report, policy and procedure.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 Draft Housing Service Complaints Policy
- Appendix 2 Draft Housing Service Complaints Procedure

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