

Committee	Dated:
Housing Management and Almshouses Sub-Committee	23 July 2018
Subject: Tenancy Visits Programme	Public
Report of: Director of Community and Children's Services	For Information
Report author: Dean Robinson – Team Leader, Tenancy Visits Project	

Summary

The Corporation has a duty to ensure fair, effective and efficient use of its housing assets. To help ensure this, officers currently visit and inspect up to a third of tenanted properties each year. There is a growing need to update the information provided through these visits more quickly than at present to ensure proper delivery of the landlord function and other services for residents. The Departmental Leadership Team has therefore decided to implement a comprehensive visit programme to collect and improve baseline data across all tenanted properties within a six-month timeframe. Trial visits of leasehold properties on Golden Lane Estate will also be included to assess the benefits for leaseholders and the Corporation. Advance publicity about the programme has been issued and residents will be notified again when visits are due to commence on their estate. The programme will require the creation of a dedicated temporary team to work full time on the programme. A preliminary budget of £138k has been identified to deliver this. The programme is scheduled to begin in August 2018.

Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- note the report.

Background

1. The Corporation has a duty to ensure fair, effective and efficient use of its housing assets. This requires it to ensure that stock is properly let and used for its intended purpose, that service delivery arrangements incorporate principles of equality and diversity, and that it understands its tenants' needs. A number of these requirements have been given added emphasis in recent years through legislation such as the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud Act 2013 and the Equalities Act 2010, both of which strengthened the powers and responsibilities of social housing landlords in their respective areas.

2. To help ensure these duties are carried out effectively, officers currently visit and inspect up to a third of its tenanted properties each year. Tenancy visits enable the Corporation to ensure properties are being properly occupied and maintained in accordance with tenancy conditions. They also help us to get to know our tenants and their specific needs better. Visits may, for example, help us to uncover tenancy fraud, update household information where circumstances have changed, or identify additional or changed needs within households which can then be addressed.

Issue

3. There is a growing need to improve the information obtained and provided through these visits more systematically than we do at present to establish a minimum baseline standard across all tenanted properties. The level of data held on our rent accounting system for these properties is not sufficiently uniform to support the customer insight necessary to deliver better and more personalised services to households. We need to obtain improved electronic contact details for households such as mobile phone numbers and email addresses in order to be able to communicate more quickly and across a wider number of channels.
4. In the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we also wish to ensure that all residents are better informed about home fire safety and evacuation procedures. We wish to look at potential fire risks within homes and, in liaison with the London Fire Brigade, ensure that residents are supported to take appropriate precautions. Greater intelligence about households with children and vulnerable adults will also help us to ensure that relevant information is available in an emergency situation.
5. To be useful and effective, these improvements need to be delivered quickly and simultaneously. This will not be possible using existing staff resources over the current cycle of visiting households every three to four years.

Planned action

6. A proposal was accepted by the Departmental Leadership Team and Chief Officers to implement a comprehensive one-off tenancy visit programme within a six-month timeframe. Projects costs will be met initially from local risk budgets, but the Chamberlain has agreed to meet any shortfall incurred at the end of the financial year.
7. Key objectives for the project are to:
 - improve resident safety and comfort by providing advice or referral to other agencies on:
 - home and fire safety, including evacuation advice and an assessment of any risks;
 - repairs and maintenance;
 - domestic energy advice and housing benefits;
 - issues such as hoarding and safeguarding;
 - improve the quality of tenancy data on the housing management information system to a minimum baseline standard;

- improve future communication and engagement with residents by updating electronic contact details and preferred methods of communication
 - help ensure proper and efficient use of housing assets by identifying instances of:
 - tenancy fraud, misuse, disrepair or unauthorised alteration of properties;
 - under-utilisation (including illegal sub-letting, non-occupation, under-occupation);
 - overcrowding.
8. The programme of visits will cover all the City's social housing properties. It has also been agreed to include leasehold properties on the Golden Lane Estate as a trial, to assess the benefits for leaseholders and the Corporation. The scope of these visits will be adapted to meet the requirements of leaseholders and leasehold management. It is expected that visits to leasehold properties will not take place until early 2019, following completion of the main programme to visit the City's properties.
 9. The project requires the creation of a dedicated team of one team leader and five visiting officers working full time on the programme. Temporary staff will be recruited to form most of the team. Local estate officers will also work on the team when the programme is running on their estate, to provide local knowledge and staff development. The team will undergo an intensive training programme before the visits start to ensure they are knowledgeable in all areas to be covered.
 10. A preliminary budget of £138k has been agreed by the Departmental Leadership Team to deliver the planned programme of visits. Programme development and management costs will be met from existing departmental budgets.
 11. Residents will be notified about the visits through our website, newsletters and posters in local estate offices. Flyers will also be posted to all households notifying them when the visit programme is due to commence on their estate. Where visiting officers are unable to make contact with residents during the initial visit, arrangements will be made to enable a call back at a specific time. This may include evening or occasional weekend visits. Visits will be carried out by officers working in pairs and all officers will carry ID.
 12. The visit will include a questionnaire to collect a range of household personal and other data to enable us to carry out our landlord function and provide other personalised services for residents. Residents will be asked to provide photo ID during the visit. Residents will be informed at the start of each visit about why we are collecting the data, and how we will ensure it will be treated confidentially. The visit will also include a brief inspection of each property and a discussion to provide advice and guidance to residents as set out in paragraph 6 above. Each visit is inspected to take between 30-45 minutes.
 13. Visiting officers will be working closely as required with other services, such as Housing Benefit, Tenancy Support, Adult Social Care and the City's Anti-Fraud Team, to provide referrals for further advice, support or action as necessary.

14. Officers will be looking at how the data gathered will be kept regularly updated once the project is complete so that it remains valuable.

Current position and next steps

15. A team leader has already been recruited to develop and plan the project, and has been working with managers on this in recent months.

16. Work to develop a communication plan and the digital tools for data collection is nearing completion. This has included work to ensure compliance with the recently introduced General Data Protection Regulations and visits to estate team to ready them for the programme. Residents have also received initial notification of the programme via the residents' newsletter. It is expected that the team of visiting officers will be recruited and trained during July and that the first visits will commence early in August.

17. Project updates will be provided to your Sub-Committee during the programme, and a post-project review will take place and be presented when the work is complete.

Recommendation

18. Members are asked to note the report.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

19. The tenancy visit programme is a key objective in the Housing & Neighbourhoods division business plan and contributes to the delivery of Strategic Priority 4 – *Supporting our Communities*, and it also contributes to Priority 2 - *Making better use of existing homes*.

Appendices

None.

Background Papers

None.

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