

Leicester
City Council

WARDS AFFECTED
Type in Ward

FORWARD TIMETABLE OF CONSULTATION AND MEETINGS:

Cabinet

Housing Management Board

28 January 2002

10 January 2002

CUSTOMER CARE IN HOUSING

Report of the Director of Housing

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA), for the first time in many years, now has healthy reserves. It has been difficult to maintain some service standards and customer care through a period of rent capping which saw a 13% budget reduction, followed by two years rent freeze and last years rent cut.
- 1.2 This report indicates how improvements can be achieved in the day-to-day delivery of housing services to tenants, homeless people, benefit claimants and others by additional investment in customer care initiatives.

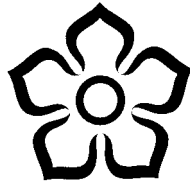
2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That £350K is allocated from the HRA reserves to progress service improvements through customer care initiatives.
- 2.2 That the Director of Housing be given delegated authority, in consultation with the Cabinet Lead for Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal, to spend up to £350K following consultation with tenants and other housing clients.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 The HRA reserves are estimated to be £3.187M at 1 April 2002. Depending on the outcome of the District Auditors housing subsidy audit, this figure may increase by a further £1m. It is the view of officers that a reasonable level of balances need to be maintained and a figure of £1.75m is suggested (although it should be noted that this figure is less than that recommended by the District Auditor who felt £3m was more appropriate).

3.2 Against the resources available in balances needs to be offset any costs arising out of rent restructuring. Unfortunately, at this stage it is impossible to put a figure on how much may be required, but it is felt that investment in customer care at this time, is both well overdue and would prove invaluable in the long term if housing services are going to continue to improve and develop.



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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1. Report

- 1.1 Although reaction of clients of housing services varies from excellent to poor and some specific surveys have been very complimentary, there is much anecdotal evidence from tenants meetings, complaints, Ombudsman investigations, and the recent MORI survey that indicate improvements can and should be made.
- 1.2 In particular, the MORI survey showed a decrease in satisfaction with Housing Services compared with 1998 both by the general public and tenants. The survey of 1,600 residents showed 32% were satisfied with Council Housing compared with 40% in 1998. The Council tenants in the sample were more positive but there was still a drop in satisfaction from 61% to 56%. This is of particular concern because of the recent investment in double glazed windows, central heating, rewiring, re roofing and many other home improvements. The survey was undertaken at a time when there was some adverse publicity over Braunstone and the Housing Benefit backlog, which may have influenced the survey.
- 1.3 Customer Care is a matter which is considered by the Housing Inspectorate and that customers' views need to be favourable as they have more influence over the status of the service, and its capacity to improve, than cost or other performance indicators.
- 1.4 The Government is placing significant emphasis on the customers view and the need to gain a 3 star Housing Inspectorate rating for certain funding initiatives such as Arms Length Companies, whether this is a route the Council or tenants wish to pursue is another matter, but clearly a 3 star rating will help to maintain Leicester as a Band 1 Authority for which additional resources are available under the Capital allocation system.

- 1.5 The Housing Service has been subject to many revenue expenditure restrictions caused by rent capping, including the 13% service cut in 1997/98, two years of rent freeze and last years rent cut. Now the financial position is improving for the HRA, greater consideration should be given to how we relate to tenants and other clients.
- 1.6 The need for more support for emerging communities is growing. At present, 14% of applicants on the Housing Register are persons from abroad and 52 languages are spoken by people living in Leicester.
- 1.7 To improve customer care, the following issues need to be addressed:
- Prompt factual response in a user friendly way
 - Cutting through bureaucracy to deliver outcomes
 - Staff being courteous to clients
 - Environment at public offices

1.8 **Prompt Factual Response £250k**

A prompt factual response requires good information that is readily available for staff who are trained to convert the question into an answer. Initiatives that are suggested to progress this are:

- New housing management information system
- DIP in Housing Benefits moving to local offices
- Better trained/informed staff to give consistent advice
- Remove Housing Benefit backlog
- Pilot touch Internet access screen to the proposed "Homeswap" scheme
- Initiatives to address the growing number of new languages in Leicester.
- Recruitment, induction and retention initiatives.

1.9 **Cutting through bureaucracy to deliver outcomes £50K**

Cutting through bureaucracy to deliver outcomes requires both interventions by an officer where problems have occurred and reviewing processes to reduce blockages, and complaints. Initiatives that are suggested to progress this are:

- Voids initiative - escorted viewing
- Training and service monitoring – Housing Repairs

1.10 **Staff being courteous to clients £50K**

Staff being courteous to clients requires customer care training for all staff having day-to-day client contact, which may include advice from other private and public organisations. Also includes a comprehensive induction package which will involve tenant representatives in training programmes.

1.11 Environment at public offices

The environment at public offices is very important in helping people feel relaxed, when they often have very stressful problems to resolve. Provision has been made in the Housing Capital Programme to improve local offices such as Saffron and Eyres Monsell as part of a rolling programme of local office improvements, which has already improved reception areas in Mowmacre, Rowletts Hill, Humberstone and St. Matthews. Also, Neighbourhood Renewal Funding will improve the New Parks local office.

In addition the Best Value Homeless Improvement Plan created a single generic pool of "Options Officers" by merging the Housing Advice Centre and Homeless Sections and developed a plan to improve the environment.

Conclusion

1.12 It is suggested that tenants and other clients are consulted on this report and asked to say how they feel improvements could be made.

1.13 It is intended to commence investment from April 2002.

LEGAL AND OTHER IMPLICATIONS

1. Legal Implications

None

2. Other Implications

OTHER IMPLICATIONS	YES/NO	Paragraph Within Supporting information	References
Equal Opportunities	Yes	1.6	
Policy	No		
Sustainable and Environmental	No		
Crime and Disorder	No		
Human Rights Act	No		
Elderly/People on Low Income	No		

3. Background Papers – Local Government Act 1972

MORI survey 2001

4. Consultations

Directors Board.

5. Report Author

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