

# HOUSING COMMITTEE MEETING

## Agenda Item 70

Brighton & Hove City Council

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Response to the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel report on the Housing Customer Service Team</b>		
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>30 April 2014</b>		
<b>Report of:</b>	<b>Executive Director – Environment, Development &amp; Housing</b>		
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	<b>Name:</b>	<b>Hilary Edgar</b>	<b>Tel: 29-3250</b>
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<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>	<b>All</b>		

### FOR GENERAL RELEASE

#### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 1.1 This report sets out the Housing response to the recommendations of the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel in their report on the Housing Customer Service Team (HCST). That report can be found at Appendix 1.

#### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the committee notes the evidence, findings and recommendations of the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel relating to the HCST.
- 2.2 That the committee agrees the actions proposed in this report in response to the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel's recommendations.

#### 3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel was set up in April 2013 following an externally supported and facilitated recruitment exercise. It was agreed that as part of the Panel members' training and development, they would split into two groups, each undertaking a pilot scrutiny review so that in this way involvement and hands on learning could be most effective. One group reviewed a sample of standard letters used within Housing. The report based on this review has already been reported to March's Housing Committee, Area Panels and Housing Management Consultative Sub Committee. The report from the other group, on the HCST, is the subject of this report.
- 3.2 The Panel agreed the scope of their review of the HCST would be to:
- 3.3 Focus on the specific queries that are dealt with by the HCST through telephone calls and possible face to face contact at the reception desks.

- 3.4 See if the HCST who deal with general housing enquiries (but not repairs enquiries) for residents are meeting the needs of residents.
- 3.5 Identify if there are any improvements the service could make.
- 3.6 Housing would like to thank members of the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel for their work, the healthy and open exchanges between members of the panel and staff from all parts of the service and for the recommendations they have made on ways the work of the team can be improved. It was a pleasure to work with the Panel and benefit from their interest and enthusiasm for their work.

#### **4. RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

##### **4.1 Recommendation 1**

**4.2 *The Panel believes that investment in ICT is vital to support the Housing Customer Service Team, as well as other housing services. It recommends that the Head of Housing commits to exploring the corporate Customer Experience Management (CEM) platform, being rolled out in other services, to see if there is a business case to be presented to the Customer Access Programme Board for it being introduced as a priority for the Housing Service.***

4.3 This recommendation is agreed in full.

4.4 Members of the HCST have visited City Clean to see how that service uses Firmstep, the corporate CEM platform. They can see many ways in which this system would help to improve the service they, and other teams within Housing, offer residents. Firmstep provides a way to record all types of contact, face to face, on the phone and email, and makes full case histories available to officers when dealing with queries. It would enable officers to provide tailored information on other services relevant to the person they are helping and save residents from repeating details each time they contact the council. Firmstep is able to provide a wide range of performance monitoring reports eg on the volume and type of contacts, to link into 'back office' systems, provide 'self-serve' options for residents through the council's website and integrate with work tasks in such a way that the minimum number of people needed are involved in the process.

4.5 The Head of Housing is currently working on a business case for prioritising the development of Firmstep in Housing and it is anticipated that this will be presented to the Customer Access Programme Board in May. The business case will set out the budget and other resources needed to introduce Firmstep, timescales from project development to implementation, and how Housing will work with residents to identify and prepare for the changes Firmstep will bring to services and processes. This work has the support of the corporate Customer Programme Manager who has worked with other services to introduce Firmstep.

##### **4.6 Recommendation 2**

**4.7 *The Panel would like to know how the Housing Service is planning to improve its ICT systems. Therefore the Panel recommends that:***

- 4.8 The Head of Housing provides a position statement on ICT for the April 2014 Housing Committee meeting.**
- 4.9 The Head of Housing produces a business plan for ICT in the Housing Service, including the Housing Customer Team. This would include short, medium and long term objectives, to be provided within four months of this Panel report going to committee (August 2014). This business plan should be provided to the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel and presented to Housing Committee.**
- 4.10 The funding information in the business plan should include whether the Housing Revenue Account could be used to fund the introduction of ICT improvements as a matter of priority.**
- 4.11 The Panel would like to see the business plan for ICT to feed into the business planning process for the Housing Customer Service Team and any other relevant teams.**
- 4.12 This recommendation is agreed in full.
- 4.13 The position statement on ICT is set out in 4.14 to 4.18 below.
- 4.14 There are a number of stand alone ICT systems within Housing, each serving a different purpose. OHMS (Open Housing Management System) is the main system used within housing management. This has at its core a database with details about each property in the Housing Revenue Account and tenants (current and former), and discrete modules linked to this data on eg arrears, repairs (now used in conjunction with MCM, Mears' repairs system) and process management (a range of sequences tied into different processes eg gas access and dealing with nuisance). A process management sequence was set up to record customer contact and is used by the HCST each time they deal with a resident. The process management sequence to record contact is a good example of how existing systems have been adapted on an ad hoc basis to meet specific needs. Although it provided a 'quick fix' solution to the new Housing Customer Service team's need to record contact, it is not capable of providing the benefits of a bespoke CEM system eg performance reporting, integration with working practices, full self-serve options and ease of use – functions that have been identified as lacking by the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel.
- 4.15 The current and future environment for housing means that it needs ICT to provide flexible and innovative solutions for delivering services that meet the needs of a constantly changing business. Routes into the service are changing, with a greater appetite amongst residents to make contact without coming into housing offices and amongst officers to record information directly onto handheld and laptop devices while working remotely eg on site, in residents' homes and when providing surgeries/drop ins at community events or partner organisations' premises. ICT in Housing needs to support this type of service.
- 4.16 Work is currently being carried out to develop an ICT plan within Housing to ensure it is both fit for purpose and meets current and future business needs. As part of this work staff have been invited to a workshop where they will be asked to consider how well the systems they currently use support their work and the

corporate priority to modernise services. From this, an ICT business plan with short, medium and long term goals will be developed and, as requested, reported to the September Housing Committee. This plan will include actions to review services in conjunction with residents on the Business Improvement Service Improvement Group to ensure they too meet the modernisation agenda. This is because although new technology can lead to service improvements, unless business processes are also reviewed and streamlined at the same time, their impact will be limited.

4.17 The Housing Revenue Account will fund this work and changes to ICT systems that are for the benefit of council housing residents eg Firmstep and any other systems that change as a result of the ICT plan.

4.18 The work to develop Firmstep within Housing will be included in the ICT business plan and the team plan for HCST in 2014/15.

#### **4.19 Recommendation 3**

**4.20 While the OHMS computer system continues to be used, the panel feels it is beneficial to recommend that its service and cost effectiveness is evaluated to determine whether future investment is needed for upgrades to the system to meet service needs. The evaluation could also assess whether consideration needs to be given to the replacement of the housing management ICT system in the longer term. The findings of this evaluation should be incorporated into the business plan for ICT and the relevant business plans for the Housing Service.**

4.21 This recommendation is agreed in full.

4.22 The ICT plan will include a review of OHMS to determine whether it continues to be fit for purpose or whether there is a system on the market that would better meet Housing's needs.

4.23 The council is part of a national group with other OHMS users and will refer to this group when it evaluates the system.

#### **4.24 Recommendation 4**

**4.25 The Panel feel that the Housing Customer Service team should plan to co-locate their telephone contact centre to the Housing Centre. This should help staff to network to resolve residents' cases quicker because the team require strong links with many other specialist teams, most of which are based at the Housing Centre. If this relocation is being planned, the Panel would like to know when it will happen. The Panel also seeks reassurance that the effect of any relocation of the service is taken into account in the business plan for ICT.**

4.26 This recommendation is agreed in full and has already happened.

4.27 The HCST phone team moved to the Housing Centre at the end of March. This happened without any disruption to ICT or telephony services. The additional space at the Housing Centre means that it has been possible to set up a screen

for the whole team to see the number of staff that are available to take calls, the number of calls coming in, any that are waiting and whether any have been abandoned. This 'real time' information allows managers to vary the number of staff dealing with calls to minimise call waiting times and match need with available resources.

- 4.28 Initial feedback from the Housing Customer Service team is that this move has been positive and they are using co-location as an opportunity to go and discuss issues as they arise with colleagues in other teams. This will be encouraged at the May HCST team meeting which will include an invitation to all teams within the building (including Mears and PH Jones) to come and participate in discussions on how they can work more closely together now that they are based in the same location.

## **5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION**

- 5.1 The Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel considered the results of a resident survey on the Housing Customer Service team's work, comments on the Brighton & Hove Resident Community Forum website and survey results from the November 2013 City Assembly in its report.
- 5.2 As with other Tenant Scrutiny Panel reports, once it has been to Housing Committee, the report will be consulted upon at Area Panels, before going to Housing Management Consultative Sub Committee.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

- 6.1 This report sets out the actions proposed by Housing to meet the recommendations in the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel's report on the work of the Housing Customer Service team.
- 6.2 If supported, these actions will lead to the introduction of a comprehensive ICT business plan within Housing outlining actions for the short, medium and long term to support its implementation. This will lead to the introduction of Firmstep, improved customer access to the Housing service and more efficient systems and processes for both residents and officers, leading in turn to better service delivery.

## **7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:**

### Financial Implications:

- 7.1 The costs of introducing a comprehensive ICT business plan within Housing will be met from current staff resources included in the HRA revenue budget for 2014/15 and beyond. Any input from IT specialists may incur extra costs but these will be monitored as part of the Targeted Budget Management (TBM) process and should be manageable within current budgets. The costs associated with the potential introduction of Firmstep and any changes to the current housing management ICT system will be more significant and each will require a business case, identifying the costs and benefits. Once the costs and benefits have been identified, any agreed proposals will be included in the future

budget strategy for the HRA (reported back to this committee) and the overall HRA business plan.

*Finance Officer Consulted: Name: Monica Brooks Date: 16/04/14*

Legal Implications:

7.2

The approved ways of working for the Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel provide for the Panel's recommendations to be presented to the Housing Committee. That Committee has to agree a response to the report/recommendations, which is then reported back to the Scrutiny Panel.

*Lawyer Consulted: Name Liz Woodley Date: 09/04/14*

7.3 Equalities Implications:

Firmstep will provide much better equalities monitoring within the Housing Service by being able to provide comprehensive reports on who is accessing services and why. This data will be used in Equalities Impact Assessments and to tailor services for particular groups of residents and individuals.

7.4 Sustainability Implications:

Improved ICT and work processes will eliminate waste within Housing and lead to cheaper and more efficient services. A wider self serve offer and more mobile workforce will make it easier for residents to contact Housing without making a journey to housing offices.

7.5 Crime & Disorder Implications

There are no direct crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

7.6 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

There are no direct risk and opportunity management implications arising from this report.

7.7 Public Health Implications

There are no direct public health crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

7.8 Corporate/Citywide Implications

Improved ICT within housing will contribute to one of the four priorities in the Corporate Plan 2014/15 – modernising the council.

## **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

### **Appendices:**

1. Tenant and Resident Scrutiny Panel Housing Customer Service Panel Report, February 2014

### **Documents in Members' Rooms**

None

### **Background Documents**

None

