

# Sheltered Housing Staffing Review

**Cabinet**

**Date: 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2020**

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Author: Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety  
Director of Housing

Wards: All

Parishes Affected: All

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## **1. Purpose and Reasons**

- 1.1 To seek Cabinet's approval on the proposals to change staffing arrangements within sheltered housing by:
- 1.1.1 Ending recruitment of Residential Sheltered Housing Officers, and moving to a non-residential service model.
  - 1.1.2 Continuing to support tenants living in sheltered housing complexes with a dedicated team that incrementally becomes a non – residential model of employment.
- 1.2 This report is necessary to :
- 1.2.1 Address the shortfall in service charge which funds the service.
  - 1.2.2 Modernise working practices and reduce the overall workforce size.
  - 1.2.3 Release additional social rented accommodation which was formerly used as staff accommodation.
- 1.3 The proposals assist with the demand management principles of the Swindon Programme. Well managed, popular and sustainable sheltered housing assists in reducing demand on other services, in particular Adult Social Care, whilst keeping residents independent. In addition the organisational excellence work stream strives to develop a modern, effective and efficient workforce.
- 1.4 The proposals are not a key decision as there is not a significant impact on two more wards nor would there be a significant increase in the service's budget. Therefore the Council did not need to give twenty eight clear days' notice of this decision.

## **2. Recommendations**

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Approve the proposals to end the recruitment of residential Sheltered Housing Officers and to agree changes to a model of service delivery based on a cluster team model rather than a dedicated sheltered housing officer at the majority of schemes, as set out in the body of the report.

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- 2.2 Authorise the Director of Housing to reallocate the former sheltered housing staff accommodation once it becomes vacant as outlined in the body of the report, ensuring that allocations are sensitive to the location and if appropriate allocated to under occupying households.

## **3. Detail**

- 3.1 Housing Services manages just over 1350 sheltered tenancies, housed within 31 Sheltered Housing Schemes. The service has traditionally employed live in Sheltered Housing Officers (SHO's), who are still often referred to as wardens. Over time the service has changed, including: moving from a 7 day to a 5 day service many years ago, smaller schemes sharing one SHO and the establishment of a non-residential post at Cockram Court. However the majority of schemes (26) have a resident SHO or a residential vacancy filled by non-residential temporary staff. Currently 16 schemes have resident sheltered officers, 1 scheme has a non-residential sheltered housing officer and there are 8 temporary members of staff within the team .
- 3.2 The SHO carries out a range of duties including building management, weekday welfare calls for those residents who request it, responding to emergency situations, managing contractors and cleaners, liaising with health and social care agencies. Residential SHO's respond to out of hours emergencies when on duty (not at weekends). Outside of these times or to cover leave, vacant or non-residential posts, the Homeline team responds to emergencies following a call to the 24/7 Council control room located at the Civic Offices .
- 3.3 The service is funded by a service charge paid by tenants in addition to the rent and utility payments they make. The costs are pooled between all the schemes to protect tenants in smaller schemes from paying higher charges when they are all receiving the same service standard. Annually the service charge is reviewed, with the aim to recover the full cost of the service from charges. However, the service currently "under recovers" for the services provided. Under recovery means other (non - sheltered tenants) subsidise sheltered housing tenants and are paying for services which they do not receive. The under recovery is shown in the following table:

**Table 1 Under-recovery by financial year**

Year	Weekly service charge	Under recovery per tenant per week	Total under recovery per annum
2018/19	£25.85	£5.24	£339,000
2019/20	£26.68	£4.76	£308,600
2020/21	£27.40	£4.20	£275,400

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- 3.4 The service has other challenges too. Recruiting staff to residential posts is difficult. For staff, having a good work/life balance is challenging when you are living in the workplace. It is difficult to maintain professional boundaries with tenants when staff are also considered to be neighbours. Staff can also find career progression difficult, as it would mean losing their tied accommodation, which in the majority of cases is provided rent and utility services free.
- 3.5 The majority of social housing providers both locally and nationally have moved to a non-residential staff service model many years ago. Officers contacted a number of social housing providers to obtain details of how they operate. Additional information is shown in Appendix 1. The most common model in this sector is floating support across all the schemes or part time staff per scheme supported by a connection to a control room to respond to emergencies.
- 3.6 A review of the operating model for sheltered housing has been ongoing for around 18 months. Whilst the review has been underway, any vacancies have been filled by non-residential temporary staff. Homeline provide emergency support to sheltered housing when staff are not on site /on duty and at weekends. The number of attendances by Homeline hasn't increased during the review period with an average of 4-5 responses a day being consistent over the last 3 years.
- 3.7 cThis report was originally prepared and circulated in March 2020 when progress was disrupted by the lockdown and the implementation of the review paused. During lockdown, when face to face visits were not possible and moving forward into recent months, staff provided the daily call via the intercom which proved to be effective. This method of providing that service also freed up valuable time allowing staff to provide increased support for residents who were more vulnerable or who required more intensive support. The cluster model will lead to greater resilience within the service for the tenants, as it will replace the residential SHO who is currently a single point of failure. To address understandable concerns and as soon as the current Covid 19 restrictions are eased and it is safe to do so, the service will resume providing a weekday face to face call (via knocking on the resident's door) with all residents who request this service. The service will also continue a midweek intercom call / test to all residents.
- 3.8 The staff consultation process was completed. It is important to conclude this without further delay so that staff have clarity in relation to their future role and responsibilities. A key driver for the review is to modernise our employment practices and sustain a skilled, flexible workforce.
- 3.9 Tenants told us during the consultation process that they were nervous of change. It is important to recognise that anxiety may be greater at this time and the timetable for implementation must be sensitive to this. If the report is approved a detailed timetable will be agreed with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Public Safety.
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- 3.10 The key proposals from the review are recommended for implementation are::
- 3.10.1 The service charge must recover the cost of the service and keep the service affordable for existing and future tenants, without subsidy from general purpose tenancies.
  - 3.10.2 The service should move away incrementally from a residential model of employment (no existing staff would lose their home if they wish to remain) upon posts becoming vacant.
  - 3.10.3 Vacant staff accommodation would be re-let providing additional income.
  - 3.10.4 Overall staff numbers would reduce (from 27 to 22) with generally 2 staff members covering 3 buildings.
  - 3.10.5 Services such as the daily (week day) call, health and safety checks, out of hours support from the Homeline team would all remain.
  - 3.10.6 Sheltered Housing staff would work to a revised role profile, which gives greater flexibility and in some cases an increase in pay to reflect this.
- 3.11 No permanent Swindon Borough Council staff will be made redundant as part of this proposal as the service currently has a number of agency staff covering vacancies.
- 3.12 The new staffing model will see staff grouped into geographical team clusters comprising 3 buildings with 2 staff members. The clusters will continue to be supported by the existing supervisory staff and two floating Sheltered Housing Officers (increasing from one) who will assist with cover. E.g. annual leave.
- 3.13 As the proposal affects both tenants and staff, two separate consultations were undertaken to discuss the proposals of the review. The Tenants Association for Sheltered Housing (TASH) were advised of the proposals on 19th July, 2019. Following a discussion TASH representatives were asked to complete a questionnaire around the proposals with council staff supporting the schemes that had no TASH representation. The staff consultation is complete.
- 3.14 The feedback from TASH is shown in Appendix 2. Traditionally TASH have always been an excellent source of feedback and observation, and at the request of the TASH chair, the Tenant Scrutiny Panel were asked to oversee the resident consultation process.
- 3.15 Accordingly it was agreed to hold a series of consultations at every sheltered housing scheme. These meetings took place between 23/09/19 and 29/10/19. All tenants were invited to the meetings with an additional Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) information sheet provided as part of the invitation (shown as Appendix 3)
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- 3.16 A summary of the issues raised is shown in Appendix 4. All schemes were visited by at least two housing officers. Tenant Scrutiny Panel observed 4 meetings. 369 residents attended the meetings (representing 26% of all sheltered tenancies) in addition several letters / emails were received and 4 questionnaires from tenants who could not attend the meetings. Officers captured specific questions / observations from each scheme and read them back to residents at the end of the meeting to ensure they were a true representation.
- 3.16.1 Positive comments supporting the proposals totalled 34.
- 3.16.2 Negative comments expressing concerns totalled 165.
- 3.17 Generally schemes that are currently without a residential staff member (due to vacancy or double up arrangements) had less concerns about the proposals. It is perhaps not surprising that the majority of the residents who attended the consultations had concerns and anxieties around the change. The concerns were often in relation to the availability of staff as residents are used to having an SHO based on site and a feeling of safety and security if staff are present for more than the actual duties and contracted working hours they perform.
- 3.18 Tenants Scrutiny representatives felt the presentations had a consistent approach, with residents given appropriate opportunity to attend. In their opinion, they observed that more detail could have been provided relating to the hours staff will be on site, Homeline cover and what the service charges covers.
- 3.19 A second presentation was made to TASH on the 13th January, 2020. At this meeting group members expressed a range of apprehensions about the proposal around staff availability and support to more vulnerable residents (albeit that some of these concerns related to adult social care functions rather than housing). The group were also concerned about the potential impact of the concessionary TV licence, currently enjoyed by some sheltered housing residents, it was clarified that all tenants who currently receive this concession would keep it under existing rules. At this meeting the financial impact set out in Table 1 was discussed in detail. Tenant representatives were mindful of how the under collected costs are currently being absorbed into the wider rent pool. In discussion, tenants did not wish to see costs increasing but were interested in seeing the benefits of any reductions in cost once the new model is fully operational.
- 3.20 A report followed to the Housing Management Cabinet Member Advisory Group (CMAG) of 27th January, 2020. TASH members again expressed a range of concerns about the proposals including future use of former sheltered housing accommodation and the grouping of staff into geographical clusters. Officers were able to advise the group that very careful consideration would be given to any future allocation of former accommodation with additional rules and selective allocations. In relation to the cluster arrangements, TASH has not provided any alternative ideas for consideration but
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officers are receptive to feedback including once implementation has commenced. Generally TASH expressed a view that they weren't happy with the proposals but have been unable to offer any specific alternatives to address the service charge shortfall.

- 3.21 The letting of vacant SHO accommodation will initially generate additional rent income of £38K pa with a potential over time as all the accommodation converts to general needs accommodation, to generate an additional £125K pa. Due to the nature of the accommodation (it's often an integral design or in close proximity to the main building) Officers took the opportunity to discuss future use of the accommodation with both TASH and scheme residents. The primary concerns are shown in Appendix 4. Officers were clear that selection of potential tenants must involve enhanced / selective lettings procedures and take account of the specific issues (eg parking) at each scheme. If appropriate, and to ensure the tenancy succeeds, the allocation criteria for former Sheltered Housing Officer accommodation will consider under occupation outside of the normal allocations policy. In addition, there will a flexible approach to the normal age criteria. (for example an older couple with an adult child could be considered for 3 bedroom accommodation if they were the most suitable applicants ).

## **4. Alternative Options**

- 4.1 Alternatively the current level of staff could be retained (but in a non-residential capacity) but full recovery of service charge implemented. A concern would be that this raises the weekly service charge from the 2020/21 rate of £27.40 to £31.60 per tenant per week (over 48 weeks) which is a significant increase in current charges. Self-funding tenants receiving no benefits would need to pay the whole sum. For tenants who receive housing benefit or universal credit housing element this would increase the overall cost to the tax payer for funding this support. High service charges also have the potential to make sheltered housing a less attractive housing option for older people particularly as Housing Association service charges may be lower.
- 4.2 A more radical approach would be to cease having SHOs and manage the tenancies as we do with general purpose flats. A smaller number of staff would be required to carry out some building management functions (more a caretaker role) and emergency support would be via Homeline only. This proposal would require a significant amount of redundancies, which have not been costed.

## **5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management**

### Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 The proposals will reduce costs within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and correctly apportion costs between sheltered and general purpose housing. In the current year the service charge under recovers by £308,600. The letting of vacant SHO accommodation will initially generate additional rent income of £38K pa with a potential

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over time as all the accommodation converts to general needs accommodation, to generate an additional £125K pa.

## Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.2 Legal and Human Rights considerations have been taken into account in compiling this report. It is considered that the recommendations are compatible with the Convention rights.

## Climate Change Impact

- 5.3 Officers believe that there is no expected effect on the Council's carbon footprint.

## All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.4 Staff have been involved in a formal consultation process relating to the proposed changes.

## Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.5 A diversity impact assessment has been completed and a copy is available from the report author. The assessment identified that there was a potential to impact on older people or those with a disability, however this was very much due to a perception that the service was more radically changing rather than it being delivered in different way with key support components and emergency support remaining.

## Risk Management

- 5.6 There is potential for the Council to attract adverse publicity in this matter as it may appear that services to older people are being reduced. The existing services will be protected and delivered as a modern self-funding sheltered service fit for the future.

## **6. Consultees**

- 6.1 The Corporate Director of Finance and Assets (s151 officer) and Chief Legal Officer (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.
- 6.2 Opposition and Minority Group spokespersons were consulted when the Cabinet Member was considering making this decision under delegated authority. In order to enable the decision to progress, the Cabinet Member has requested that the decision be brought to Cabinet instead.

## **7. Background Papers**

- 7.1 None

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## **8. Appendices**

- 8.1 Appendix 1: Summary of local and regional sheltered housing staffing arrangements
- 8.2 Appendix 2: Summary TASH Questionnaire (from meeting of July 2019)
- 8.3 Appendix 3: Frequently Asked Questions Issued to All Sheltered Housing Tenants, Sheltered Housing Review
- 8.4 Appendix 4: Summary of Sheltered Housing Consultations 23.9.19 – 23.10.19

## **9. Key Decision/Decision in Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan**

- 9.1 This is not a Key Decision and is included in the Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan for December 2020.