



HOUSING SERVICES DEPARTMENT

RENT INCOME STRATEGY

2004 – 2007

POLICY STATEMENTS

MARCH 2004

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HOUSING SERVICES DEPARTMENT

RENT INCOME STRATEGY 2004 – 2007

AIM

“To establish the Association as a top performer and achieve Housing Corporation top quartile status for Rent Arrears Performance” – Business Plan 2004 – 2009

Nine areas of operation have been identified, which will enable the Association, and in particular the Rent Income Team, to achieve its objective. Targets will be set in order to achieve the top quartile status.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

The nine areas of operation are:

1. Publicity

Using targeted adverts, newsletters and leaflets the Association will aim to catch tenants attention, whilst making the arrears message clear. The following publicity will be used to raise awareness,

2 yearly newsletters aimed at:

- raising awareness
- publicising services
- offer assistance
- reporting performance
- asking for involvement feedback

Service leaflet The purpose is to:

- explain policy
- summarise help available
- signpost outside agencies

Rent Statements sent quarterly

- give tenant clear picture of account
- familiarisation with monetary issues

N.B. All publicity will be available in the tenant's first language, in other formats, Braille, large print, tape recording

2. Corporate Commitment

Every time a tenant makes contact, the Association's staff should be able to identify if they have arrears. If this is the case they should be referred to the Rent Income Team, who insist on discussing it. The Rent Income Officer shall Underpin this commitment by

- using I.T. system to monitor serious arrears
- advising Neighbourhood Management and Property Services Team of tenants they are seeking to contact

3. Housing Benefit

It is vital in order to achieve the strategic aim, to develop possible relationships with Housing Benefit Departments. The Rent Income Team will establish regular liaison meetings with all of the Local Authorities paying benefit to the Association. In particular the liaison should focus on communication, payment and minimising and recovering overpayments, with the aim of establishing service level agreements.

The Rent Income Team will be accountable for the collection of housing and other benefit information, whilst re-enforcing the tenant is responsible for the payment of rent and claiming benefit.

A pro-active approach is required to deal with the complex issue. Changes in legislation and poorly resourced Housing Departments can cause problems, but the Rent Income Team can minimise these by ensuring:

- ◆ Awareness of entitlement and benefit rulings
- ◆ Ensuring tenants complete Housing Benefit forms accurately and provide the information as quickly as possible
- ◆ Ensuring renewal forms are completed as soon as they are received, minimising delay and therefore the risk of losing benefit
- ◆ Ensuring awareness of discretionary Housing Benefit and circumstances
- ◆ Obtaining consent from tenants to discuss Housing Benefit claim with the Local Authority

The overall aim of the benefits strategy is:

- ◆ To maximise the income of the tenants of the Association
- ◆ Reduce the arrears owed to the Association
- ◆ Improve the cashflow of the Association
- ◆ Offer a customer orientated service to those tenants claiming Housing Benefit

4. Debt Advice

Money or debt advice should be an integral part of the Association's Rent Income Strategy. The services provided will be advertised widely in all the Rent Income literature. With average household debt rising it is important that links are made with advice agencies. Frontline Rent Income staff will be responsible for offering basic advice with complex cases being referred to specialists.

The strategy should be based around 3 key targets:

- ◆ Advice and assistance for tenants in debt, to enable them to take control of their financial situations
- ◆ Advice and assistance for new tenants to prevent debt occurring
- ◆ Liaison with outside agencies to promote money advice services and debt reducing strategies

5. Home Visits

The Rent Income Team will visit all tenants in arrears annually, and in the case of new arrears cases more frequently if necessary. The purpose of these visits is to:

- ◆ Establish personal contact and build relationships with tenants
- ◆ Establish current household and financial circumstances
- ◆ Check ability to pay or keep to agreement
- ◆ Re-enforce Association's commitment to help
- ◆ Raise awareness of policy and outside agencies

The Team will also visit all new tenants within 4 weeks to ensure payments are being made and/or benefit forms and relevant information has been received and is being processed.

6. Telephone Contact

Telephone contact is seen as second only to personal home visits. The advantages of this method of contact are:

- ◆ Personal contact made with tenant
- ◆ Two-way conversation can take place
- ◆ Tenants are able to raise queries
- ◆ Tenant feels morally committed after a telephone conversation
- ◆ The Rent Income Team can operate outside the normal 9-5 working day without compromising Health and Safety

When dealing with incoming telephone calls the Rent Income Team should:

- ◆ Deal with calls immediately wherever possible, or call back the same day or a mutually convenient time
- ◆ Provide tenants with details of telephone numbers for each member of the Team
- ◆ Adopt guidelines which advise staff on service standards when having telephone conversations with tenants
- ◆ Provide arrangement for dealing with telephone calls when staff are unavailable
- ◆ Monitor, review and seek customer feedback on the performance and effectiveness of the service

7. Training

It is vital for the success of the Rent Income Team, in carrying out the Policy and Procedure and adhering to its strategic aims that a comprehensive training programme is undertaken.

Regular training should underpin the aims and objectives and enable the Team to carry out duties to the best of their abilities.

Each Policy will incorporate a training section. This section will advise what training and how frequently staff are required to undertake to use the Policy or carry out a function.

Individual team members training needs will also be addressed through quarterly IIP meetings with line managers.

Training should cover areas in both the Strategy and the 8 Policies used by the Association. Additional training will be required in Customer Care and dealing with aggressive behaviour.

8. Performance Targets, Monitoring and Review

Management information is vital in order for the Association and the Rent Income Team to establish monitoring and review performance.

Targets for performance must be set at a strategic level and at officer and public level. The Rent Income Team will meet weekly to review performance which will be regularly reported to the Board.

Monitoring and review should include tenants and the Rent Income Team will seek to set up "Review Groups" aimed at improving performance.

The Association's performance indicators and targets for Rent Income are included in the Department's KPI's for Rent Arrears and Collection

In addition to the Performance Indicators the Rent Income Team will use additional management information to manage arrears this includes:

- Weekly print-outs of tenants in arrears
- Monthly summary reports by arrears category
- Terminated tenant arrears/credits
- Ad hoc specialist reports

Management information will enable the Rent Income Team to pinpoint problems, identify trends and target resources appropriately.

9. Quality Assurance and Accreditation

The Association in its pursuit of top performance will seek accreditation and quality assurance for its Strategy, Policy and Procedures used for Rent Income collection and prevention.

The benefits of this are three fold:

- ◆ It promotes consistency and compliance with policy and procedure. Following procedure ensures staff take appropriate action, and it demonstrates to outside agencies such as the Court that all possible effort has been made
- ◆ It can help motivate staff and the Team through external recognition of the service delivery being good
- ◆ Checks on service delivery are important. It is important to have Quality assurance measure in place to define the objective of the Rent Income function

In addition they should be communicated to tenants and developed on feedback and reviewed with the help of tenants.

Consideration will be given to ISO9002, Charter Mark, EFQM and other suitable accreditation to achieve this strategic aim.

10. Policy

In order to achieve top performer status, it is important that the Association adopts Policies, which are robust, comprehensive and that these send out a clear message, which summaries what is expected. This message needs to be communicated to staff, Board Members and tenants.

It is also vital that in addition to the individual policy documents, the Association develops a 'Policy Statement', which indicates the Rent Income Team's intentions for dealing with and preventing arrears.

Rent Arrears Policy Statement

In pursuing its primary aim of housing those in greatest need, Cosmopolitan Housing Association recognise that there will be tenants who fall into difficulties in meeting regular payment of rent. It is the Association's policy to offer assistance in overcoming financial difficulties. Assistance will range from initial and continuing advice on housing and related benefits, debt counselling and arranging arrears repayment agreements, which reflect the tenant's ability to pay.

The Association has to ensure its own financial viability and policy needs to ensure rent payments are made. Every assistance, will be offered to tenants who fall into rent arrears, however tenants are ultimately expected to meet their obligation to pay the rent that is due.

The Rent Income Team is responsible for minimising the amount of arrears owed to the Association.

A balance must be made between the social and financial circumstances of the tenant and the financial needs of the Association.

Support and assistance will be given through regular publicity offering new and existing tenants benefits health checks, offering and signposting welfare benefit advice to provide tenants in arrears with benefit and money advice.

The Rent Income Team will ensure there is early identification of arrears and will have direct personal contact with tenants.

Staff will be fully trained and will be flexible in order to make reasonable judgements when dealing with individual cases.

Clear procedures will be provided to staff to ensure a consistent approach when managing arrears whilst complying with current best practice and equal opportunities principles.

Every effort will be made to support tenants to manage rent arrears, but should a tenant be unwilling to clear the arrears or agree to a suitable payment plan, legal action will be taken.

Ultimately this could lead to tenants losing their home.

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3. SUPPORTING POLICIES

In pursuit of this statement the Association will adopt the following policies:

Rent Arrears Policy

Fast Track Arrears Policy

Rent Collection Policy

Eviction Policy

Benefits Policy

Bad Debts Policy

Vulnerable Tenants Policy