

Financial Wellbeing Strategy (Housing, Andy Vincent)

Synopsis of report:

1. Runnymede Borough Council's Housing Service has compiled a Financial Wellbeing Strategy. The draft strategy was discussed at the Housing and Enabling Member Working Party on 12th October 2021 and 8th December 2021 and was also presented in draft to the 12th January 2022 Housing Committee meeting.
2. The draft strategy has identified the following objectives for the Housing Service to deliver over the next 5 years: -
 - Preparing tenants to manage their new home
 - Supporting tenants to grow their income in the longer term through education and employment
 - Maximising our tenants' disposable income - creating financial resilience for tenants in the event of a financial shock; often caused as a result of a disaster (fire or flood), 'major life event' or ill health.

And as a consequence, reduce the costs associated with the Housing Landlord Service

3. Consultation on the strategy commenced on 1st March 2022 to include Debt Awareness Week 22nd – 28th March 2022 with the consultation concluding on 29th April 2022. Events during the consultation period included focus group meetings with different cohorts of tenants impacted by the strategy objectives, a newsletter and website article, including a questionnaire.
4. Detailed results from the consultation are included in Appendix B attached to this report; and are summarised as: -
 - Fuel bills are the highest 'financial wellbeing' issue of concern for tenants
 - Tenants have suggested many areas where they think the Council could intervene – many of these are reflected in the strategy. These include budgeting, debt advice, help with employment, advice on utility providers and energy efficiency and economic and nutritious food shopping.
 - Pre-tenancy support tenants value – but particularly identify the need with support with furniture and decoration.
 - People value the use of incentives to encourage the take up of schemes
 - Training for young people on housing options is also considered useful

Recommendation:

- i. That Members approve the strategy (Appendix A) and note the actions within the strategy – such as a tenant incentive scheme and how the Council's Housing Service can support tenants to access employment, which will be brought to Committee for approval in March 2023 and June 2023, respectively.

1. Context of report

- 1.1 Runnymede Borough Council's Housing Service published its 30-year business plan in March 2021 (refreshed in March 2022) which highlighted the intention to publish a Financial Inclusion (Wellbeing) Strategy

A Financial Inclusion Strategy will seek to maximise income by promoting access to higher incomes and more stable forms of employment. The Business Plan commits resources to assisting tenants into employment and training, to ensure those residents dependent wholly or partly on benefits are receiving their full entitlement and to provide Debt Management advice. A Discretionary Housing Payment fund will be available accessible by HRA tenants not in receipt of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit, ensuring that low-income waged households above the benefit threshold can access temporary financial support. Promotion of digital inclusion for all our tenants will facilitate our financial inclusion ambitions.

- 1.2 A Financial Wellbeing Strategy supports a number of the Council's Corporate Plan Objectives, emerging Health and Wellbeing Strategy Objectives and Housing Service Objectives: -

Corporate Plan Objectives

Revived and Prosperous Economy	by supporting tenants into work, tackling problem debt, and improving financial resilience
Health and Wellbeing*	by tackling fuel poverty and supporting tenants to better understand their nutritional needs.

*Housing also has a significant impact on health – Runnymede Borough Council's Housing Service is committed to providing tenants with good quality 'Decent' accommodation. The offer drafted within the Financial Wellbeing Strategy goes beyond that to offer additional services to tenants that will further improve their health and financial resilience.

Emerging Health and Wellbeing Strategy Objectives

Healthy Homes	Ensure that residents of all ages can live in safe, secure, good quality homes, and are supported when necessary to be able to continue to live independently at home
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Working in Partnership to Tackle Health Inequality

To work in partnership with statutory agencies, voluntary, community and faith sector organisations, communities, and individual residents to identify and tackle health inequalities and levels of deprivation within the borough

Housing Objectives

- Maximise income and financial inclusion to ensure people can afford good quality housing
 - Maximise our tenant's disposable income - seek to address fuel poverty by enhancing the energy performance of our housing stock
- 1.3 The title of the strategy has been changed from the initial title of Financial Inclusion to Financial Wellbeing. This reflects the view that very few households are now excluded from the financial system.
- 1.4 The focus for social landlords has changed to assisting with promoting sustainable finances amongst their tenant populations and seeking to support tenants with issues such as fuel poverty, employment, and problem debt – hence the title of wellbeing.

2. Aims of the Financial Wellbeing Strategy

- 2.1 The draft Financial Wellbeing Strategy proposes the following aims for the authority: -
1. Preparing tenants to manage their new home
 2. Supporting tenants to grow their income in the longer term through education and employment
 3. Maximising our tenant's disposable income - creating financial resilience for tenants in the event of a financial shock; often caused as a result of a disaster (fire or flood), 'major life event' or ill health.
- 2.2 A consequence of the above aims is that this will lead to reduced costs associated with the Housing Landlord Service

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The Financial Wellbeing Strategy is identified within the Housing Business Unit Plan 2021/22 as (Quote from Runnymede Borough Council's Housing Asset Management Plan)

"We plan to ensure that the energy performance of all our homes achieves a C rating by 2030 in line with 'Cutting the cost of keeping warm – a fuel poverty strategy for England'

This links to our Financial Inclusion Strategy by helping to address fuel poverty – by reducing costs associated with achieving 'adequate' levels of heat with our homes."

4. Consultation and Next Steps

4.1 Consultation on the draft Financial Wellbeing Strategy ran from 1st March 2022 concluding on 29th April 2022.

4.2 Results from the consultation are included in Appendix B attached to this document.

4.3 The results can be summarised as: -

- Fuel bills are the highest 'financial wellbeing' issue of concern for tenants
- Tenants have suggested many areas where they think the council could intervene – many of these are reflected in the strategy. These include budgeting, debt advice, help with employment, advice on utility providers and energy efficiency and economic and nutritious food shopping.
- Pre-tenancy support tenants value – but particularly identify the need with support with furniture and decoration.
- People value the use of incentives to encourage the take up schemes
- Training for young people on housing options is also considered useful

4.4 As a result of the consultation the following additions have been made to the strategy: -

1. Ensure tenants have access to essential items – including furniture, bedding, etc, and other essential items – make children's' needs a particular focus.
2. Ensure prospective tenants are aware and are preparing for paying rent in advance.
3. Provide advice on seeking a competitive energy provider for new tenants

5. Resource implications

5.1 No additional resources are being requested on the draft Financial Wellbeing Strategy.

6. Legal implications

6.1 As what is proposed amounts to a significant change in the housing management service, the consultation will fulfil the statutory requirements to consult under section 105 of the Housing Act 1985. The consultation will extend to all Council tenants

6.2 The 5 regulatory standards place obligations on social landlords. The Rent Standard is one of three economic standards that the Regulator of Social Housing expects registered providers to comply with. It sets the requirements around how registered providers set and increase rents for all their social housing stock in line with government policy as set out in their [Policy Statement on Rents for Social Housing](#).

7. Equality implications

7.1 In line with its Public Sector Equality Duty, the Council must consider the need to advance equality of opportunity.

7.2 The Financial Wellbeing Strategy will seek to offer targeted support to small cohorts of the Runnymede Borough Council tenant population.

7.3 Each initiative introduced as part of the strategy will be proposed to Housing Committee in its own right. An Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken as part of the introduction of each.

8. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

8.1 Reducing fuel poverty, including education around the most efficient use of heating systems, is a key strand of this strategy. This has the potential to reduce the amount of carbon produced by residents living in council owned homes.

9. Conclusions

9.1 The draft Financial Wellbeing Strategy signals the intention of Runnymede Borough Council's Housing Service to develop a targeted approach to improving the financial resilience of its tenants.

9.2 The consultation with tenants on the aims of the strategy improved the Housing Service's understanding of tenants' priorities and enabled them to be better reflected in the 'offer' that is put together through the Financial Wellbeing Strategy.

(To resolve)

Background papers

None