

Subject:	Access to Housing Services		
Date of Meeting:	13 November 2013		
Report of:	Executive Director – Environment, Development & Housing		
Contact Officer:	Name:	Hilary Edgar	Tel: 29-3250
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Ward(s) affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY**

- 1.1 This report considers how housing services are provided within the context of the multiple pressures affecting the council and its residents. It proposes changes to service provision in order to respond to these pressures and maintain relevance for council tenants.
- 1.2 One of the four main priorities in the council's Corporate Plan 2011-2015 is 'modernising the council'. To meet this priority the council aims to provide services that are cost effective and sustainable. The recommendations in this report take account of the rapidly changing financial environment as well as how changes in the way residents are using services and their implementation will contribute to the council's aim to modernise.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Housing Committee approves the Resident Access Strategy set out in sections 4.2 to 4.4 of this report.
- 2.2 That Housing Committee approves the following Changes based on the Resident Access Strategy:
- (i) closure of the Selsfield Drive Housing Office and relocation of services to the Oxford Street Housing Office by the end of 2013/14
 - (ii) removal of cash desks from the housing offices in 2014/15 once all residents who currently use this facility have been given advice and support to change to other payment methods.
- 2.3 That Housing Committee approves that, once vacated, the Selsfield Drive Housing Office be demolished in order to be redeveloped, subject to planning consent, for new homes under Phase 2 of the New Homes for Neighbourhoods estate regeneration programme.

3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Housing management services are currently provided through five housing offices; Oxford Street, Lavender Street, Selsfield Drive, Victoria Road and Whitehawk Hub. There is also a contact hub within the service which handles calls to the services main enquiry line, 293030.
- 3.2 There are a number of reasons to review the way housing services are currently provided.
- 3.3 Cost of housing office accommodation
- 3.4 A review of the housing management service in 2012 by the Housing Quality Network advised that for the service to make further financial savings, housing offices and the associated staff costs need to be reduced. Our overall service costs per unit of residential accommodation were assessed as being slightly high in comparison to other housing organisations. Any savings that can be made by providing services differently can be diverted to investment in current and new housing stock and to meet tenants' increasing support needs.
- 3.5 Welfare Reform
- 3.6 The majority of tenants whose rent is currently paid to the council through Housing Benefit will be responsible for making rent payments directly to the council when the main welfare reform change, Universal Credit, is introduced from 2014. Since April 2013 under occupying tenants on Housing Benefit have had their Housing Benefit reduced in respect of their 'spare' room(s) with some having to pay rent for the first time. This experience has shown that to help tenants through the cultural and practical changes needed to make regular payments requires proactive contact by officers with a wide ranging offer of support.
- 3.7 Changes to the housing offices
- 3.8 Although from a resident's point of view the housing offices continue to look the same from a 'front of house' perspective, there have been a number of changes within the offices.
- 3.9 Lavender Street Housing Office has been shared with Children's Services teams since 2011 (which brings an income of £90,000 per annum to the Housing Revenue Account).
- 3.10 In 2011 a number of housing teams co-located with Mears in the Housing Centre which has released space in the local offices.
- 3.11 The restructure within the housing service last year means staff are now more mobile and move between offices and appointments. This has resulted in more desks being available in some housing offices than are required for staff use.

- 3.12 The Manor Place Housing Office was relocated, without a cash desk, to Whitehawk Hub in April 2012.
- 3.13 The council's 'hot desking' policy is used in Lavender Street and the Whitehawk Hub, allowing a more flexible approach to staff working in these offices.
- 3.14 Victoria Road Housing Staff will relocate into Portslade Town Hall in the summer of 2014.
- 3.15 Changing resident demand
- 3.16 The current housing offices are a legacy from the old 'district' housing office days, when each of the five offices had a multidisciplinary team of staff and the main way into these services, or to pay rent, was by residents coming into the offices.
- 3.17 There has been a marked change in the way residents contact the housing service in recent years with an increase in the number choosing to do this on line or by phone, and a decrease in the number of residents coming into the offices. This means that while all of the housing offices remain open in their current format, officer time is spent staffing reception and cash desks that are no longer as well used as they used to be when they were set up.
- 3.18 Appendix 1 includes information on current use of housing offices.
- 3.19 A number of conclusions can be drawn from this information and from changes to the way staff now work, following last year's restructure.
- 3.20 The Contact Hub, set up in last year's reorganisation, has taken on the call function and other non face to face contact for the housing offices.
- 3.21 The number of people using the local offices is a small and declining resident group.
- 3.22 The number of transactions processed through the cash offices has decreased by 32% over the past 3 years, with tenants choosing to pay their rent using other methods.
- 3.23 Straightforward interactions like photocopying documents can be replicated easily, just as locally.
- 3.24 More complicated queries are most commonly not met on a single visit as they require the input of specialist staff, not based in the building.
- 3.25 Better outcomes in these cases could be achieved by introducing an appointment service, with home visits for those who find travelling difficult.

- 3.26 Technology means housing offices no longer need to be area specific, all of the offices can be access points for all residents, regardless of where they live.
- 3.27 All of these changes mean that the way housing services are provided needs to be reviewed. In doing this, consideration needs to be given to whether offices should be developed, maintained or disposed – decisions that need to link to the way residents now choose to access services.

4. **A NEW RESIDENT ACCESS STRATEGY**

- 4.1 The following principles form the basis of a new strategy on providing housing services, taking account of the range of access methods that are now available to residents:
- 4.2 We will provide a range of ways for residents to contact housing services to ensure we offer a universal service that is convenient, consistent and has particular regard for the most vulnerable.
- 4.3 We will work collaboratively with other services and agencies to maximise single point resolution of queries and problems.
- 4.4 We will implement this strategy with integrated service reviews to ensure that our provision continually adapts to changes affecting residents and that we make the best use of resources.
- 4.5 Implementing this strategy will involve making changes, stopping some ways of doing things and introducing new services supporting vulnerable tenants, not least through the multiple impacts of welfare reform.
- 4.6 The New Resident Access Strategy follows on from the Customer Access Strategy Phases 1, 2 and 3. These reports were consulted on at Housing Management Consultative Committees and agreed at Housing Cabinet Member Meetings on 3rd March 2010, 20th October 2010 and 19th October 2011 respectively.
- 4.7 In Customer Access Strategy Phase 1, ten broad principles were agreed as the basis on which improvements to customer service should be made. This included better use of resources to reduce waste, provision of a range of ways in which residents could access housing services and tailoring services to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.
- 4.8 In phase 2 a single point of telephone contact for Tenancy Management Enquiries was agreed and it was agreed to co-locate at Lavender Street Housing Office with Children's Services.

- 4.9 Phase 3 built on the above but also included a recommendation that consultation with staff was initiated to enable implementation of the agreed changes, and that consideration was given to opportunities for better use of housing offices.

5. CHANGES TO SERVICE PROVISION

- 5.1 Using the Resident Access strategy above to review the current housing offices, the following changes in service provision are recommended:

Closing the Selsfield Drive Housing Office and relocating the relevant housing services to the Oxford Street Housing Office by the end of 2013/14

This proposal is being made for the following reasons:

5.2 Low use by residents

- (i) Over a two month period there was an average of sixteen callers per day to the Selsfield Drive reception. The top three reasons callers came into the office were for Housing Benefit, Homemove and queries about other council services, with many of these simple and brief transactions, such as picking up a form, or getting documents photocopied.
- (ii) Appendix 2 includes further information about the reasons why residents came to the Selsfield Drive Housing Office.

5.3 Potential to make better use of staff resources

The reception is permanently staffed while the housing office is open to the public. If the reception facilities at Selsfield Drive are provided at Oxford Street Housing Office, the equivalent of two full time Housing Service Adviser (HSA) positions will be freed up to focus on offering more targeting support to tenants and added to the Housing Customer Services Team.

5.4 Alternative facilities

- (i) An increasing range of services are available on line and over the phone. Not every resident wants to make contact this way, and for those who still want to do business in person, residents will be able to visit the Oxford Street Housing Office. Many residents in the Moulsecoomb area already use the Oxford Street office due to the distance they live from Selsfield Drive and the fact it is on direct bus and shopping routes.
- (ii) For residents who would find travelling difficult, or where the nature of the issue dictates, home visits will continue to be offered.
- (iii) Housing staff are currently working with the library and other services to supplement the service available in housing offices with advice and

support sessions available in libraries and other community settings. The table in Appendix 3 shows the range of ways that the ten most frequent queries at Selsfield Drive Housing Office can be provided.

5.5 Cost savings

These are set out in the financial implications section below. In addition to the cost savings, there is an opportunity to redevelop the site of the Selsfield Drive Housing Office for residential accommodation.

Removing cash desks from the housing offices in 2014/15

This proposal is being made for the following reasons:

5.6 Reducing use by residents

The number of transactions processed through the cash offices is decreasing as tenants choose to pay their rent by other methods. Brighton & Hove City Council is unusual in still having cash desks in housing offices, with many councils having moved completely to alternative and cheaper methods of cash collection. Adur Council, Worthing Homes and Eastbourne Homes no longer have cash desks in housing offices.

5.7 The range of alternative and cheaper payment methods

Tenants have a choice of ways to pay their rent and other charges, including direct debits, standing orders, telephone payments, internet payments and payment in person via Pay Point cards in shops and Post Offices. The direct cost to the council per transaction for these types of payment methods varies between 6p for direct debits to £1.30 at cash desks – the most expensive type of transaction.

5.8 Universal Credit

This will see residents who are on full Housing Benefit paying their rent directly to the council for the first time. Welfare reform changes will therefore require a model of service delivery that is targeted to the specific needs of individual residents in a proactive and personalised way. Waiting for those in need to call into a housing office could lead to a 'too little, too late' service. The aim is to start these new payers using the cheaper, and more sustainable types of payment methods, rather than use cash offices which are the most expensive method and one that involves carrying large sums of money from one place to another.

5.8 Potential to make better use of staff resources

The Financial Inclusion Assistants who currently work in the cash offices would move to the Financial Inclusion Team and provide advice and support to residents on an individual basis in preparation for the welfare reform changes

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 6.1 The successful approach used when relocating the Manor Place office to the Whitehawk Hub will be used in the relocation of Selsfield Drive and closure of the cash desks. This approach ensured there was a good lead in period which gave time for officers to work closely with residents. This involved running advice sessions at Manor Place Housing Office, in local sheltered schemes, going to resident association meetings, speaking to regular users of the office as they paid their rent and providing a series of written communications
- 6.2 All current users of the cash desks will be offered advice and support on an individual basis to help them make the change to other methods of payment. Once this has been done, cash desks will be removed from the housing offices.
- 6.3 The proposals in this report were discussed at the September round of Area Panels and at Housing Management Consultative Sub-Committee on 29th October 2013. A list of comments made by residents is attached in Appendix 4.
- 6.4 At Area Panels the proposals were generally well received. At North and East Area panel a question was raised about the impact of closure on the Bates Estate, the area closest to the Selsfield Drive Housing Office. Ongoing work with the library service will mean that Moulsecoomb Library, which is close to the existing Selsfield Drive Housing Office, will offer the facility for residents to drop off forms and use a free phone to connect with a range of council services.
- 6.5 At Housing Management Consultative Sub-Committee a number of comments were made. A list of comments is attached in appendix 4. A concern was raised about charging laundry cards without cash desks. Work to find a solution to this is ongoing. A suggestion was made that a financial incentive is given to people who are willing to pay by direct debit. This will be given consideration and be the subject of a future report as appropriate.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Using the principles within the framework of the new resident access strategy, it is recommended that the Selsfield Drive Housing Office is closed and services relocated to the Oxford St Housing Office by 31 March 2014 and that cash desks are closed within the financial year 2014/15.
- 7.2 These actions will free up resources – staff and money – that can be better used to target support and services to residents in preparation for the welfare reform changes. Land will also be freed up in Selsfield Drive and provide an opportunity to build much needed accommodation.
- 7.3 There will continue to be a choice of ways for residents to access housing services and the current routes will be supplemented by new initiatives to strengthen the role other services, for example libraries, can play in providing advice in local communities.

8. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

- 8.1 The savings associated with the closure of Selsfield Drive are estimated to be £70,400 at current 13/14 prices. This assumes a real cost saving to the HRA of £24,300 in premises costs and a further efficiency saving of £46,100 relating to two Housing Services Adviser posts being moved to other positions within the Housing Customer Services team, thereby alleviating financial pressures in this area of the service.
- 8.2 The costs associated with closing the four cash desks are estimated to be £94,700 per annum at current 2013/14 prices. This assumes a total of five full time equivalent (FTE) Financial Inclusion Assistants, transaction costs of banking and daily security collections. If the cash desks close at the end of September 2014, the saving during 14/15 will equate to half of this cost, £47,300. The full year saving will not be realised until 2015/16. 1.8 FTE staff have already left the organisation under the council's voluntary severance scheme and are therefore real cash saving to the HRA. The other three staff will be moved to the Financial Inclusion Team to undertake work in preparation for the welfare reform changes, thereby reducing the financial pressures for more staff in this area.
- 8.5 As the HRA is a ring fenced account, all savings are reinvested in the HRA for the benefit of tenants and leaseholders. If agreed by this committee, these changes will be reflected in the 2014/15 HRA Budget.

Finance Officer Consulted: Monica Brooks

Date: 29/10/2013

Legal Implications

- 8.6 The Housing Committee has delegated powers to discharge the council's functions as a housing authority, and more particularly its functions as a housing landlord. The recommendations within the report therefore fall squarely within its terms of reference. The council is statutorily required to take Human Rights into account when making decisions but it is not considered that any individual's Human Rights Act rights would be adversely affected by the recommendations in the report

Lawyer Consulted: Liz Woodley

Date: 30/10/2013

Equalities Implications

- 8.7 An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been carried out on the recommendations in this report. Actions to mitigate the implementation of these recommendations have been discussed within this report. Should the recommendations be agreed, a similar approach to the closure of Manor Place

will be followed, where all the actions arising out of the EIA were incorporated into the project plan to manage the office relocation.

Sustainability Implications

- 8.8 The recommendations in this report will contribute to the following One Planet Living principles:

Zero Carbon – closing an office that is not well used and relocating staff to existing buildings within the housing office accommodation portfolio will reduce the energy costs paid by the Housing Revenue Account.

Zero Waste – closing Selsfield Drive Housing Office will reduce the amount of paper and other materials currently used in these facilities. As with Manor Place, we will recycle redundant office furniture and fixtures to other housing offices or community groups.

Crime & Disorder Implications

- 8.9 None.

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications

- 8.10 Relocating the services provided at the Selsfield Drive Housing Office and developing those available in the Moulsecoomb Library provides an opportunity to develop the housing office site for residential use. The City Regeneration team have been advised of this opportunity.

Public Health Implications

- 8.11 None

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 8.12 The recommendations in this report support one of the four main priorities in the Corporate Plan 2011-2015, to 'modernise the council'. They will also require Housing to continue to work closely with the Library Service to develop the role of Community Hubs, as places for people to learn, develop skills (especially IT skills), find information and access services – local and national, especially online.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

1. Current use of housing offices
2. Queries at Selsfield Drive Housing Office
3. Face to face transactions
4. Resident Comments from Area Panels and Housing Management Consultative Sub-Committee