

RENT ACCOUNTING EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT REPORT

Introduction

This report briefly summarises how the Equality Impact Assessment for Rent Accounting was undertaken, its scope and the key findings.

The assessment was undertaken by 3 officers from Landlord Services, a 'critical friend' (Paul Wood, Head of Customer Service), two tenant representatives (John Woodson and Maureen Bunday) and was overseen by the Council's Equality and Inclusion Consultant, Ian Barrett.

Impact Assessment

After the initial training session on 2nd June, the group met on 30th June 2010 to consider the scope of the service and areas to be assessed under the various equalities strands.

The service can be assessed in terms of its main functions:

- The review and calculation of rents and services annually, amendments to such charges to effect from the first Monday in April, and communication of the changes to tenants.
- Through the use of mainly automated systems to record tenants' payments against their weekly charges, to respond to customer enquiries throughout the year.
- Various back-office functions, such as statistical returns. These represent a considerable volume of the workload of the four-person Rents Team, but were not considered to be relevant from an Equalities Assessment viewpoint.

In fulfilling its obligations to tenants, both for the annual review of rents and charges, and the ongoing work of dealing with tenants' enquiries throughout the year, the Rents service relies on Equalities data recorded on the Council's Housing Management system, and collected from tenants themselves at the sign-up for their tenancies or subsequently supplied, mainly through Area Housing Managers (AHMs). It is AHMs who are the tenants' first point of contact for a wide range of issues affecting all aspects of their tenancies.

The Customer Service Centre provide general information to tenants, as to all Council customers, and access to many of the payment options.

The 2008 Tenant Satisfaction Survey asked about the level of satisfaction with rent advice. This was generally high, although not universally so, but did not differentiate between advice given by Area Housing Managers, the Customer Services Centre, Sheltered Support workers and the Rents team, so it is difficult to draw any clear lessons from it, and the survey did not otherwise mention rents.

The delivery of the Rents service to all groups represented by the Equalities strands was considered, as follows:

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- Sex (gender): Those involved in the assessment felt that the service was provided equally to men and women without any discrimination, as per the terms of their tenancies.
- Age: Tenancies are not granted to anyone under the age of 18 years, although licences might be granted to 17 year-olds. It was felt that all age groups were treated equally, and age by itself is not a barrier to accessing the service.
- Race: The service is provided to all groups, by definition gypsies/travellers¹ are unlikely to occupy properties to which the Rents team would provide a service. Translation services are available where the Rents team are aware that English is not easily understood.
- Disability and health: Sensory impairment was felt to be the most serious barrier to accessing the service. The Rents team may disclose information to a relative, support worker or carer where they have a standing instruction to do so, or the tenant is present, and documents are available in large print or Braille if required. A wide range of payment options exist, to help this and other groups, which are set out later in this report.
- Sexual orientation. The activities of the service were not thought to have any differing impact because of customers' sexual orientation.
- Religion and belief. There was considered to be no impact. Tenants may pay their rents by a number of different payment methods, and having a bank account is not a requirement for renting a house or flat, as some groups may have objections to the methods of high street banks.
- Transgender. Information is not held about this, but there was not thought to be any impact.
- Marriage and civil partnership. The Rents service is supplied on equal terms to anyone having a tenancy, whatever their status within a marriage or civil partnership, or not being in a relationship.
- Pregnancy and maternity. Rents may be paid by a number of different methods, so pregnant women were not felt to be disadvantaged with regard to accessing the service.
- Other groups. The Rents team work alongside Housing Benefits and Area Housing Managers to ensure that tenants can access appropriate help in paying their Rents in terms of affordability and convenience, and having an awareness of special needs with regard to the communication of Rents information.

Winchester City Council offers a wide range of payment options to its tenants:

- Cash or cheque at the Council's cash office. This is open only during working hours, and necessitates a visit to the Council's offices. However, this remains a popular method and the offices are within reach of a high proportion of residents.
- Payment by cash, cheque or debit card at any Post Office in the UK, or Paypoint outlet, ie certain convenience stores.
- Payment by Direct Debit. This is monthly, and collected in advance in order to satisfy tenancy conditions, but carries a guarantee that arrears

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are avoided and offers the convenience of avoiding a visit to a Post Office or the Council's offices.

- Standing Order. This is an instruction from the tenant to make a payment to the Council. When rents or service charges change, the tenant must tell their bank to amend the payment, so the guarantee of avoiding arrears does not exist (unlike Direct Debit) but the tenant maintains more direct control over the payment.
- Internet- the Council's website can accept payment at any time for anyone with a bank account and debit card.
- Telephone payments involving an automated system can be accepted at any time from anyone with a bank account and debit card.
- Telephone payments can also be taken with human help during office hours.
- Special arrangements exist at hostels for the homeless, and for tenants who are also employees of the Council.
- For tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit, this is credited direct to their rent account each Monday, as the rent charge is added.

The wide range of payment options offer a good degree of flexibility for tenants, enabling them to meet their obligations in a way that is most convenient for their circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER ACTIONS

- There were felt to be no particular areas for concern requiring further action or investigation.
- Annual Rent Notices and other documents sent to tenants as part of annual changes to rents and service charges are reviewed by the TACT Readers' Panel for readability and the use of plain English. This approach should continue and might be adopted for other communications to tenants about their rents.

¹ *Please note that understanding and awareness of the issues for Gypsy and Traveller tenants has improved since the report was written and the Rents Team have been involved in this process. Gypsy and Traveller tenants needs will have been covered as part of the impact assessment through consideration of providing different payments methods, options for accessing the service, providing information in different formats and checking information provided through the Reading Panel.*