

Increase provision of Housing Response Officers at the tower blocks

Overview & Scrutiny Panel 23 November 2021

Report Author	Sally O'Sullivan, Tenant and Leaseholder Services Manager
Portfolio Holder	Cllr Jill Bayford, Cabinet Member for Housing
Status	For Decision
Classification:	Unrestricted
Key Decision	Yes
Reasons for Key	An Executive Decision that involves increasing the service charge of tenants and leaseholders specifically in tower blocks for an enhanced service.
Ward:	Thanet Wide

Executive Summary:

This report seeks authority for the council to enhance a service provided to the residents of its six tower blocks and in doing so, increase the service charge to cover the costs.

It is proposed that the council introduce a new service charge to cover the cost of a dedicated Housing Response Officer (HRO) service to these six blocks. For 2022/23 this charge is proposed to be £2.56 per week. This will fund two full-time equivalent Housing Response Officer posts.

Recommendation(s) to Cabinet:

Cabinet is asked to:

1. Approve the introduction of an additional service charge to the tenants and leaseholders of the 6 tower blocks in the district, to enable the provision of 2 x HRO's dedicated solely to the tower block estates.
2. Recommend to full council that the necessary budget is approved for this service, funded from the new service charge.

Recommendation(s) to OSP:

The Panel is asked to:

1. Comment on the proposal to introduce a new service charge for tenants and leaseholders of the council's six tower blocks to fund an enhancement to the Housing Response Officer service and make any recommendations to Cabinet in respect of the recommendations.

Corporate Implications

Financial and Value for Money

Housing Revenue Account revenue and capital budgets are reviewed annually and include provision for increasing service charges levied on tenants and leaseholders for services provided by the council

There is not enough revenue budget available in the HRA to increase the current establishment by 2 Housing Response Officers (HROs). Introducing a new service charge of £2.56 per week to the tenants and leaseholders of the tower blocks will provide the finance required to cover the costs of 2 more officers and a van.

The service charge will be reviewed annually alongside the annual rent review to ensure that the full costs of this service continue to be recovered.

Any costs falling within 2021/22, particularly in relation to salary costs in February or March 2022 can be funded from Housing Revenue Account balances.

Legal

The council's leases and social tenancies allow for itemised service charges to be raised for reasonable costs in relation to housing maintenance and management.

Both leaseholders and tenants are advised annually about the level of service charges and provided with a statutory notice period of 28 days. The new service charges proposed in this report will be subject to the statutory 28 day notice period and are proposed to be introduced with effect from Monday 4 April 2022.

The only exception to this is where a leaseholder has exercised their right to buy within the last 5 years. In these circumstances new service charges cannot be introduced until the 5th anniversary of the RTB completion.

Corporate

The council's Corporate Statement sets out its commitment to, 'Improve standards and safety in homes across all tenures.

Equality Act 2010 & Public Sector Equality Duty

Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to the aims of the Duty at the time the decision is taken. The aims of the Duty are: (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it, and (iii) foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

Protected characteristics: age, sex, disability, race, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief and pregnancy & maternity. Only aim (i) of the Duty applies to Marriage & civil partnership.

This report relates to the following aim of the equality duty: -

- To advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

The council's tenants and leaseholders include residents that have protected characteristics as set out in the Public Sector Equality Duty.

The completion of the works set out in this report will benefit all tenants and leaseholders, including those with protected characteristics.

CORPORATE PRIORITIES

This report relates to the following corporate priorities: -

- Communities

1.0 Introduction and Background

1.1 The council owns approximately 3,400 tenanted and leasehold homes. All costs, investment and income for these homes is managed with the council's Housing Revenue Account, and revenue and capital budgets are reviewed annually.

1.2 In addition to the annual review of revenue and capital budgets, key decisions are also required for any proposals to increase the service charges to tenants and leaseholders

1.2 More resources are required to improve the cleanliness and appearance of our tower blocks. This can be achieved by creating two new HRO roles within the TLS structure. To finance the two new roles, it is recommended that the council introduce an additional service charge to the tenants and leaseholders of these blocks.

2.0 Increasing HRO services to the tower blocks

2.1 Since the Tenant and Leaseholder Service has been brought in house, we have recognised that there is a lot of work to do to improve the condition of our tower blocks.

2.2 In our customer survey, carried out in January 2021, our tenants and leaseholders told us the areas most important to them to improve were:

- Improvements to repair, maintenance and cleaning
- Environmental issues (waste/litter, mould and pests)

2.3 Our recent landlord compliance audit told us we need to be better at keeping our residents safe from hazards, by checking communal areas more often for stored and dumped items and taking action where necessary.

- 2.4 We receive many complaints from residents about the following at our tower blocks:
- Litter
 - Weeds
 - fly tipping (including refuse, cardboard and furniture left in the communal area)
- 2.5 The barrier that prevents us from doing these things to a higher standard is the number of frontline staff we have out and about on the estates. We therefore need to find a way to increase the number of HRO's to improve our service provision.

3.0 Resident Consultation

- 3.1 The council ran a resident consultation between 28 June 2021 and 31 July 2021 to establish the level of support for this initiative, alongside a survey that tested the levels of satisfaction with common issues that affect the blocks and which HROs help reduce: disposal of rubbish using the chutes, amount of litter and dumped rubbish, cleaning in their block and how safe they feel.
- 3.2 In total 76 out of 455 (16.7%) customers engaged in the consultation, giving a representative proportion of opinion.
- 3.3 The data has been split into three customer groups: those who support the increase 'yes', those who do not 'no', and those who are 'unsure'. Here is a summary of findings:
- 46.1% of customers were in favour of increasing the number of HROs.
 - Of the residents that expressed a preference, 62.5% were in favour of the new service and the new service charge.
 - Those who supported an increase in HROs had higher levels of satisfaction with common issues that affect their blocks.
 - Those who supported an increase in HROs had a higher awareness of their presence in the blocks.
 - The findings indicate those who answered 'no' have a lower awareness of the HROs and what they do.
 - If the number of HROs and service charge were increased, a campaign which explains the impact of the HROs is needed to reassure those who are 'unsure'.

4.0 Service Charge

- 4.1 It is proposed to introduce a new service charge of the tower block residents by £2.56 per week from 4 April 2022 for 2022/23 to cover the cost of the additional HRO's. How this cost has been calculated is detailed in annex 1.
- 4.2 For residents claiming Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit, service charges for communal areas can be claimed and therefore they will not be financially impacted
- 4.3 Summary of residents circumstances:

- 9% of the high rise units are leasehold, purchased under the Right to Buy legislation. Leaseholders are responsible to pay their service charge.
- 39% is the proportion of leaseholders that sublet their property.
- 77% of tenants claim benefits and therefore the extra charge would be covered by this

5.0 Next Steps

- 5.1 If approved, and subject to the inclusion of the income generated by the new services charges being included within the approved budget, the new service charge will be implemented with effect from 1 April 2022.
- 5.2 Work to recruit additional HROs can start immediately and any costs falling within 2021/22, particularly in relation to salary costs in February or March 2022 can be funded from Housing Revenue Account balances.

Contact Officer: Sally O'Sullivan, Tenant and Leaseholder Services Manager
Reporting to: Bob Porter, Director of Housing and Planning

Annex List

Annex 1: calculation of service charge

Background Papers

N/A

Corporate Consultation

Finance: Chris Blundell (Director of Finance)

Legal: Estelle Culligan (Director of Law and Democracy)