



AGENDA ITEM: 5(I)

CABINET: 12th January 2016

Report of: Assistant Director Housing and Regeneration

Relevant Managing Director: Managing Director (Transformation)

Relevant Portfolio Holder: Councillor J. Patterson

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SUBJECT: COUNCIL TENANTS' FINANCIAL INCLUSION STRATEGY (HOUSING & REGENERATION)

Wards affected: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To approve the Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy at Appendix 1 be approved.
- 2.2 That the results of the consultation exercise and the revisions to the draft Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy be noted.

3.0 BACKGROUND AND CURRENT POSITION

- 3.1 Financial Inclusion is a key part of the Council's plan for improving the health and wellbeing of our local communities and will contribute towards our ambitions for a strong local economy. A multi-agency Universal Credit Task Group has been working to minimise the impact of Universal Credit (UC) on affected households within West Lancashire by improving pathways to employment and training and offering personal budgeting support to tenants.
- 3.2 The aim of the Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy is to support our most vulnerable and financially excluded tenants to manage better financially,

enabling them to play a full part in modern society. It has been found that tenants in social housing are disproportionately affected by financial exclusion and that they make up around 60% of all financially excluded people, and so the Financial Inclusion Strategy is drafted primarily to target West Lancashire Borough Council housing tenants, and much of the research informing the strategy has used this demographic as its base. However, the benefits of implementing the actions within the strategy will be felt by residents borough-wide. The advice services provided by the Council and the opportunities brought about through our work on Economic and Digital development and improvements will be available to all residents. It has also been found that financial exclusion can affect a whole community, rather than just individuals, so it is vital that we support our communities by tackling the problem and investing in solutions to resolve the issues faced by those experiencing financial exclusion.

- 3.3 A draft Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy was presented to Cabinet on 15th September 2015, for Cabinet to approve the draft for wider consultation. The Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy is targeted at our most vulnerable and financially excluded tenants to support them to manage better financially, and as such it will help ensure that those affected by financial exclusion receive the right advice and support to retain their home and quality of life without experiencing disproportionate financial pressure. The strategy will also link into any plans the Council develop to assist residents of the Borough, and has specific links with the Digital Inclusion Strategy to target tenants most in need to ensure they have access to channels and advice that will maximise their income.
- 3.4 Given the multi-faceted nature of the strategy, it was considered essential to allow residents, partner organisations and stakeholders to have the opportunity to comment on the Strategy and provide feedback to us to inform the final draft of the Strategy. We formally invited consultation responses from 69 different organisations. A full list of groups consulted with is attached at Appendix 2. In addition to this we published the draft Strategy on the consultation page of our website to invite further responses. We received detailed responses from two of the organisations we wrote to inviting comment, and a further response from another organisation. We have revised the Strategy in response to the responses received, and officers have also made further improvements in addition to this. The feedback received was very supportive. A summary of responses received and revisions made is listed below:

Organisation	Comment	Amendments made
SW Lancs Independent Community Advice Network	Strategy welcomed. Identified that the strategy is lacking information on fuel poverty and its impact on financial wellbeing.	Included reference to energy efficiency in Strategic Aim 6 (page 8) and included information on fuel poverty initiatives and services the council has in place (page 14). Also added an action relating to optimising funding for fuel poverty initiatives in the action plan (page 19).
West Lancs Ark	Positive feedback noting that the issues raised mirror those experienced by the	Action added to the Action Plan to conduct specific awareness raising and take-up campaigns

	groups' clients, including the impact of welfare reform. Raised issues regarding the complex nature of application forms and the formality of automated letters, the wording of which can be worrying for the recipient. Access to training was raised as an issue, as was access to IT equipment and computer literacy.	for groups on low incomes in response to concerns regarding the impact of welfare reform (page 17). A response was sent to the group giving details of some of the services we provide so that this information can be shared with their clients. This includes assistance with filling in forms, a review of our standard / automated letters, advice and assistance from our financial inclusion officer for tenants looking for work and pre-tenancy work with new tenants and additional support if we are unable to house them. We also directed the group to the computers available at community centres and referenced the digital inclusion strategy including a copy of the strategy.
Lancashire Community Finance	The group were concerned to note that while highlighting other financial solutions such as credit unions, the strategy failed to acknowledge that Lancashire Community Finance have been providing fairly priced loans and free money education to financially excluded tenants and are a not-for-profit community lender.	Redrafted the strategy to read "tenants and applicants will have other financial solutions available to them e.g. credit unions, community finance organisations and other low cost lenders" (page 11)
Additional changes made by officers		
Strategy has been set as a three year strategy, whereas previously the strategy had no end date.		Page 1
The council's vision and values have been updated.		Page 3
Information provided in the strategy regarding how it will be reviewed and monitored to ensure that it is having a positive impact and noting that feedback will be provided to Cabinet as necessary. Performance indicators will be developed to support this process.		Page 16

4.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS/COMMUNITY STRATEGY

- 4.1 Implementation of the Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy will have significant positive impacts for the sustainability of the Council's housing tenancies.

5.0 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy will support the Council's ability to collect revenues. This is particularly relevant for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and could have a major impact on the HRA Business Plan.

6.0 RISK ASSESSMENT

- 6.1 The development of the Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy will mitigate against the loss of rental income to the HRA and changes brought about by Welfare Reform. These wider changes have been through a risk assessment process and are reported as a key risk to Cabinet.

Background Documents

There are no background documents (as defined in Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) to this Report.

Equality Impact Assessment

There is a direct impact on members of the public, employees, elected members and or stakeholders. Therefore an Equality Impact Assessment is required. A formal equality impact assessment is set out at appendix 3 to this report.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Council Tenants' Financial Inclusion Strategy
Appendix 2 – Consultation Groups
Appendix 3 - Equality Impact Assessment