

**SUBJECT: SUSTAINMENT REPORT**

**DIRECTORATE: HOUSING AND INVESTMENT**

**REPORT AUTHOR: KEELEY JOHNSON, TENANCY SERVICES MANAGER**

## **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To advise Members of the current position regarding the sustainment of tenancies.
- 1.2 Tenancy sustainment continues to be a key priority for City of Lincoln Council (CoLC) and this year has seen an increased need to provide tenants with the essential support and guidance in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 There has been a continued reduction in income for many tenants with the ongoing reductions in welfare benefits and an increase in zero hours contracts meaning those who are not only unemployed but in low paid employment are facing significant challenges when trying to sustain a tenancy. With the added financial difficulties of Covid-19 sustaining tenancies, it has been a challenging period for tenants and residents of Lincoln.

At the start of the pandemic we made a very clear promise that no tenant would be evicted due to Covid-19 where an individual was engaging. This was prior to the national ban on evictions. Eviction had already halved in the 2019/2020 financial year with a significant emphasis placed on multi-agency working to keep tenants in their homes.

## **3. Current Position**

### **3.1 Key Figures**

- Current tenancies – 7,617
- Annual rent debit - £28,283,203
- % in receipt of HB (partial and full) – 42.58%
- No. affected by under-occupancy charge - 347
- Live UC cases – 2,009 and the average balance across these cases being £309.40

No. of tenants affected by the benefit cap – 18

## 3.2 ***Universal Credit***

Lincoln saw the rollout of Universal Credit in March 2018 and CoLC currently has 2,009 tenants claiming Universal Credit with £246,000 arrears over these cases. The current Personal Budgeting Support and Assisted Digital Support contracts paid for by the DWP to support Universal Credit Claimants has been awarded to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). The Welfare Advice Team also work closely with Tenancy Services in providing essential support to tenants in need of any additional support.

Housing Assistants currently verify the Universal Credit claims daily on the Landlord Portal followed by a 30-minute interview with a Housing Officer within three working days. This ensures a payment arrangement is made at the earliest possible opportunity with any other issues identified to maximise income to the tenant, authority and provide essential support that reduces the risk of tenancy failure. Tenants are guided through their entitlement, payment options and Housing Officers become a vital point of contact for new Universal Credit claimants.

The following government support measures have been put into place and have provided an essential financial safety net for many of our tenants.

### ***General***

- Job Retention Scheme provides a grant to employers to enable them to pay the wages of their workforce who remain on payroll but are temporarily not working during the coronavirus outbreak.
- Job Centres remain open and continue to support people who need it.

### ***Statutory Sick Pay***

- Payable from day 1 of sickness (rather than day 4)
- As getting a fit note could be problematic, employers are urged to use their discretion about what evidence, if any, they ask for
- A system is now in operation whereby claimants who need one can get an 'isolation note' from the NHS 111 Online service.

### ***New-Style Employment and Support Allowance***

- Payable from day 1 of sickness (rather than day 8)
- Not required to produce a 'fit note' or 'isolation note'
- Treated as incapable for work

### ***Universal Credit***

- Standard Allowance increase by £20 a week for 12 months- the main purpose behind this appears to be to give self-employed claimants the same basic level of income as SSP.
- Local Housing Allowance (LHA) changes from 1st April 2020 – pay for at least 30% of market

- Minimum Income Floor (MIF) suspended for everyone affected by the economic impacts of coronavirus
- Not be required to produce a 'fit note' or 'isolation note' if affected by Coronavirus.
- Those who have contracted Coronavirus or are self-isolating are treated as having a Limited Capability for Work (LCW)
- Claimants will not be required to attend the Job Centre
- Claimants can receive Advance Payment without having to physically attend a Job Centre

### 3.3 **Tax Credits**

- Standard rate to increase by £20 a week

Since the start of the pandemic several measures have been put into place as a local authority to support tenants.

#### **Rent Free Weeks**

We took the decision to move the rent-free weeks for the 2020/2021 financial year. The rent-free weeks were on 6 and 13 April 2020 instead of having the two free weeks at Christmas. Many tenants were facing uncertainty with their income and by bringing the rent-free weeks forward, our tenants were given more opportunity to access much needed financial support. Moving the rent-free weeks was received very positively by tenants facing huge uncertainty.

#### **Discretionary Rental Hardship Payment Fund**

In April 2020 we set up a Discretionary Rental Hardship Payment Fund to support tenants whose income has been directly affected by the Coronavirus outbreak and would therefore struggle to meet their rental obligations.

The Rental Hardship Payments are a one-off payment made directly to tenant's rent accounts. This has not replaced the Discretionary Housing Payments which are available for all tenants to apply for who are facing financial hardship and have a shortfall in their rent entitlement.

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- 266 full applications received
- 182 applications approved
- 41 applications refused
- 27 applications cancelled as the applicant failed to provide the requested documents
- 9 non eligible applications (private residents or other authorities)
- 7 applicants put their application on hold
- £48,270.91 awarded

The Rental Hardship Fund has been relaunched in January 2021 to support tenants further affected by the third national lockdown.

### ***Befriending Service***

The City Council launched a befriending service to support tenants and residents. This service offered a friendly chat with those tenants who would like to have a conversation and perhaps gain a little reassurance at this very worrying time for many. It ensured that early intervention was taken to identify anyone struggling to manage their finances and the necessary referrals made. These essential referrals enabled Tenancy Services to contact tenants who may have been struggling financially to offer support and advice.

### ***Community Helpline***

If tenants or residents were in need of help and/or need general advice about the types of community support in place which were on offer, they can access the newly launched community help-line which is open Monday to Friday 8am to 4pm and staffed by the city council. This again has given tenants the opportunity to access much needed support prior to them falling into debt or general hardship.

### ***Early Intervention***

Tenancy Services are currently ensuring all tenants in difficulty are contacted weekly to discuss rent arrears and offer tailored support and advice which is relevant to the tenant's circumstances. A letter was sent out to all tenants outlining the types of support available and have been urged to make contact if necessary.

### ***Communications***

Communications to tenants have been clear and efficient to ensure tenants have been given the necessary information at the earliest possible opportunity. A range of platforms has been used including regular social media updates, telephone, text, email, radio and letters. We will continue to work with the communications team to ensure key messages are communicated promptly to tenants.

## **4. Future Action**

The development of the Sustainment Team has been approved and the attached pre-tenancy process completed in preparation for the team recruitment. Allocations, Voids and Tenancy have been working to develop a streamlined and effective support mechanism to help tenants particularly in the first three months of their tenancies. At present Housing Officers provide this support to tenants in conjunction with the Welfare Advice Team. The Housing Officers cannot give the level of support required on many of their cases and hence why the Tenancy Sustainment Team has been deemed as essential.

The team will be comprised of two Tenancy Sustainment Officers and a Tenancy Sustainment Team Leader on two-year fixed term contracts to initially pilot offering an in-house, intensive advice service. The provision of social housing has changed significantly over the past ten years with a need to provide more intensive support for tenants to navigate the often-daunting task of managing their own tenancy, often for the first time.

We are also in the process of working with external agencies to provide a furniture donation service.

We are committed to tenancy sustainment and are hopefully in the next six months we can have the team in place and fully operational to provide the pre-tenancy support.

**5. Recommendation**

5.1 That members note the actions taken to support tenants in order to improve levels of tenancy sustainment

**Is this a key decision?** No

**Do the exempt information categories apply?** No

**Does Rule 15 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules (call-in and urgency) apply?** No

**How many appendices does the report contain?** 1

**List of Background Papers:** None

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