



# CITY OF *Lincoln* COUNCIL

## **Tenancy Sustainment Procedure**

**Created:** December 2020

### **Purpose:**

To detail the process for the provision of advice, support, signposting and referral through the Tenancy Sustainment team.

### **1. Introduction**

This procedure describes the process and methods for use by the Tenancy Sustainment team (TST). The purpose of this team is to help Lincoln City Council tenants manage their money, pay their rent and ultimately sustain their tenancy.

Shortlisted applicants, new and existing tenants of CoLC managed properties are the target group, and it is unlikely that non-tenants would be signposted or referred to the TST, however if they were they would not be logged as referrals, but would be signposted to an appropriate advice service.

### **2. How tenants are referred to the Tenant Sustainment Team**

#### **2.1 Pre-tenancy**

Allocation Officers (AO) carry out shortlisting for available properties weekly and contact applicants to make a possible match. Where the applicant meets the criteria of the vulnerability assessment, the possible match is subject to attending a pre-tenancy interview with a Tenancy Sustainment Officer (TSO). The TSO is assigned on an active caseload basis.

AO's contact the successful applicant by telephone and book in the pre-tenancy interview with the TSO. The appointment is booked into the TSO diary on Outlook and an email is sent to the TSO to confirm the appointment. Where the property is ready to let and there are no available TSO appointments, the AO completes pre-agreed sections of the pre-tenancy interview form with the applicant by telephone.

At the pre-tenancy interview, the TSO introduces the support available through the TST, the importance of paying rent and completes the pre-tenancy interview form with the applicant; including, affordability check, and a summary sheet to

highlight support needs. The TSO will signpost the applicant to another advice organisation if additional advice is required prior to a tenancy commencing. The TSO then updates the AO to confirm a formal offer can proceed. If there are concerns about the appropriateness of an offer, the TSO will immediately inform the AO and Tenancy Sustainment Manager (TM) to discuss and confirm if the offer can proceed.

The completed pre-tenancy interview form will include confirmation of key information including the applicant's income and how rent will be paid. The pre-tenancy interview form is scanned into Workflow Manager.

## **2.2 New Tenancy**

TSO's as a minimum, check twice weekly for new tenancies in their assigned patches, these will always have been set up by Void Support Officers (VSO). Each Monday VSO's will send through a list of all new tenancies that were set up the previous week. The TM assigns a TSO on an active case basis. The TSO will then access the tenant's rent account on Universal Housing and input a diary note detailing all the income and rent payment details. The TSO will send out a rents welcome pack to the tenant. All new tenants must receive the rents welcome pack or personal contact from the TST within 5 working days of their tenancy starting.

Weekly, a 'lettings in the last 14 days' report is run to ensure all new tenancies have been captured by the relevant TSO.

Any Housing Benefit applications are reviewed, any missing information clarified with the tenant and forwarded to the Housing Benefit team. If the tenant is a Universal Credit claimant, the application is reviewed, the portal is checked to ensure that the claimant's details have been confirmed and that the claim is active. The initial Universal Credit interview form is completed by the TSO and outcome is inputted on Universal Housing.

The tenancy is signed off by the TSO if no support is required and two weeks have passed since the rents welcome pack sent, and either, payment commences, intention to pay confirmed or Housing Benefit/ Universal Credit is in payment. The TSO makes a record of the review on Universal Housing and records the tenant as assessed as not requiring further advice at this stage.

If a referral is received on this tenancy after it has been reviewed and closed, it is treated as a referral, rather than a new tenancy review.

## **2.3 Referrals to the Tenancy Sustainment Team**

Referrals are received from Housing Officers (HO), Area Housing Managers (AHM), Customer Service Officers, Neighbourhood Teams or any other Tenant related City of Lincoln staff. Referrals are made through the Tenancy Sustainment Team email inbox or a phone call to the TST. Each referral is logged on the TST referral log.

Tenants can self-refer either face to face Housing Offices, in meetings, by telephone or by email. Tenants are informed of the advice available in the rents welcome pack sent at the start of their tenancy and on the City of Lincoln Council website.

Between 9am and 5pm, if the TST phone was not answered by the TST team, the call would transfer to Customer Services, and a message would be taken by Customer Services and passed onto the TST team. Outside of these hours, the TST phone number has a message stating opening hours. There is no facility to leave a voicemail.

### **3. Referrals Management**

All referrals are recorded on Universal Housing and the TST referral log, whether they're made via the telephone, email, face to face or from a TSO, HO, AO's assessment of the tenancy.

#### **Conflict of interest-**

- If a TSO is referred a case of someone known to them personally, the case is referred to another TSO to acknowledge and address it.
- When a case is referred to court, the TSO will not assist customers with the completion of the court summons paperwork; they are advised instead to seek independent legal advice.
- Where there is a breakdown in a relationship and a joint tenancy agreement is in effect, we will provide impartial advice to both parties to seek legal advice regarding their new personal circumstance and the management of the tenancy.
- If the basis of an issue is dispute between neighbours, then the parties will be referred to the HO for the ASB procedures to be followed.
- There may be instances where the best advice to a tenant could be seen to be against the best interest of the City of Lincoln Council, in the case of this arising the client will be referred to a suitable independent approved advice provider.

Each TSO also uses a separate new tenancy weekly report and a referrals log spreadsheet to keep a record of all open referrals and the actions taken on each. The support required and advice given is also record on UH.

Certain documents are scanned into Workflow Manager, i.e. authority to disclose, documents referencing the customers income, disability and expenditure and subject to GDPR. All remaining documents are securely shredded after the case is concluded.

Telephone contact is made initially with each referral or new tenancy reviewed as requiring assistance. Identity is checked by asking customers to confirm their date of birth or national insurance number. The TSO establishes if assistance or support is required and what areas advice is required in.

If telephone contact is unsuccessful, the TSO will try text messages, letters and ad hoc home visit to contact the tenant. If no contact can be achieved, then the case is marked as no response/refusal to engage and closed.

If assistance is required in relation to budgeting, debts, benefits assessment, applying for benefits, help to acquire furniture, help to gain training or employment, improvement in reading/ writing English skills and maths, opening a bank account, sign up for home insurance, or health support advice assistance the TSO explains the advice support that the City of Lincoln Council can provide and how that could be provided.

The tenant and TSO determine if the advice and support can be provided totally by phone immediately or if a face to face meeting will be required.

If a phone discussion is determined as adequate to address any issues, the outcome of the meeting is recorded on Universal Housing with any actions agreed (and referral log when a referral) and carried out by the TSO as required. The TSO and tenant determine if a further follow up call is required or if the case should be closed.

Alternatively, or as a follow up to a phone discussion, a face to face meeting is arranged by the TSO with the tenant at City Hall or at their home as required.

At a face to face meeting the tenant is made aware of the scope of advice given by a TSO, the areas which the tenant requires support are identified and the relevant advice organisation we signpost and refer on to discussed.

For each area of support or advice the tenant is informed of the support and advice options available to them, and the cost implication of any options. The decision is made in agreement with the tenant on the further action to be take, and if a next review meeting is to be held with the TSO and if by phone or face to face.

Any documents of ongoing cases are kept in the TST locked filing cabinet, this is closed and locked outside of office working hours and keys are kept in a locked key safe. Only paperwork relevant to the tenant being met is taken out in a meeting, other tenants' information is kept in a zipped up bag at all times and not left unattended.

## **4. Action Outcomes**

### **4.1 TSO Continuing Support**

The TSO's have competency to provide advice in Welfare Benefits, Debt and Money advice and Housing.

The competency of a TSO is evidenced by successful completion of the planned induction training programme, with deficiencies identified and addressed at the end of the introductory period review. During their introductory period TSO's are

subjected to double the number of file reviews and more frequent one to one meetings.

Briefing emails are distributed to all TSO's about relevant changes and updates from relevant sources/ organisations deemed relevant by the TM or Tenancy Services Manager (TSM).

Advice and support are provided to the tenant, and then actions and a review period are agreed with the tenant. This may involve actions by the TSO or actions by the tenant.

At the review with the tenant the resolution or progress on identified issues is reviewed and documents. The tenant and TSO agree if further actions are required or would be beneficial, and if so actions and a review period are agreed again.

If the identified issues are resolved, and no other issues identified, the case is closed with agreement of the tenant.

Key dates are defined as 'external deadlines' which if missed would have a financial impact on a tenant. This could include a deadline to submit a benefit appeal. These deadlines are recorded in outlook as an appointment with the TSM, and clearly labelled. Calendars are then shared with the TSM and AHM's to ensure absences are covered. These key dates are minimal as cases requiring court date attendance or most benefit appeals would have been referred on to specialist advice organisations.

If actions lead to different outcomes than expected, the tenant will be told as soon as possible, rather than waiting until the next planned review date.

#### **4.2 Sign Posting and Referral**

Cases are signposted or referred to another advice organisation when it becomes clear that another provider or agency can offer more appropriate or specialist help or support than a TSO. Tenants are given the options of suitable service providers and choose for themselves. Personal information is not disclosed unless permission is given by the tenant.

The tenant is always informed when signposted or referred what continuing role the City of Lincoln Council will take if any, and the service to be expected from the new advice organisation, and any cost implication of the referred or sign posted advice organisation.

If a sign posting or referral is confirmed in writing to the tenant within 3 working days, with written details of the cost implications previously discussed, to ensure the tenant is aware and understands the implications.

Organisations reviewed and approved to sign post or refer to are listed on the Tenancy Sustainment Approved Advice Organisation list.

If an organisation is not on the approved list and is identified as a potential suitable organisation, it is reviewed and approved if appropriate by the TM or TSM.

TSO's would sign post or refer for debt, Hardship/poverty, additional needs, legal, benefits or employability.

## **5. Case Closure**

All tenants are informed that if a referral or signposting doesn't meet their needs or expectations, then they should call the TSO back as soon as possible.

When the TSO and tenant agree that the issues have been addressed or a signposting or referral has been made and accepted by the selected advice organisation, the file is closed on Universal Housing and on the referrals log.

If tenant wishes to formalise their feedback on the service, they can complete a feedback form which will be sent out when a case is closed.

If it is a complaint, it will follow the corporate complaints procedure and be passed to the TM or TSM to respond.