



Policy Outline

INCOME MANAGEMENT POLICY

OVERALL PURPOSE

To ensure that a service is in place for tenants to be able to pay their rent promptly by a variety of methods which reflect individual needs and circumstances.

To ensure that West North West Homes Leeds (WNWhL) operates a viable business with adequate recourse to financial resources to meet its current and future business and financial commitments in accordance with the Organisation's Business Plan's Objectives:

"Customers- We will demonstrate our commitment to customers by striving to get things "right first time" and by increasing customer satisfaction. We will tailor our services to meet the individual needs of customers, delivering excellence in service delivery to meet customers agreed expectations"

"Business & People- We will become an effective, efficient, economic and enterprising organisation, providing professional and expert advice and service and we will inspire staff to seek new and innovative ways to develop our business."

To ensure that all relevant procedures comply with the Organisation's mission statement :

" Putting Customers first"

To ensure the all relevant procedures comply with the organisation's **Vision:**
" To excel in delivering homes and services which are relevant to our customers, meet their aspirations and enhance communities"

INTRODUCTION

West North West Homes Leeds will ensure that:

- We advise new tenants of the importance of paying their rent on time and the different payment methods available.
- We inform tenants what help is available to them should they fall into arrears and the actions we will take to recover the debt.
- We will continually publicise the full range of payment methods available and adopt new methods as they are developed.
- Customers will be encouraged to claim Housing Benefit and will receive

support to maximise their income.

- Customers will be referred for independent debt counselling where appropriate.
- We will work to a suite of Performance Indicators and Service Standards – the latter has been agreed and will be reviewed annually with customers.
- We will produce a suite of information leaflets to keep customers informed, and all publicity / marketing information will be consistent with the Organisation's Cohesion and Diversity Strategy.
- Staff will receive training on Policies and Procedures, as well as a range of training which will place an emphasis on the needs of the customer.

Service Standards

1. We will give you 4 weeks notice in writing if there are any increases to rent.
2. We will send you rent statements at least 4 times a year in your preferred format.
3. We will provide choice and a wide range of payment options that enable you to pay your rent 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
4. We will visit you within 4 weeks of your tenancy starting to discuss your rent payments and offer advice and information.
5. When you sign up for your tenancy, we will provide you with information on how much rent you have to pay each week, how and where you can pay and how we can help.
6. We will contact you quickly by letter to offer help and advice if you owe 2 weeks rent and are a weekly payer or if you owe 5 weeks and you pay on a monthly basis.
7. We will measure your satisfaction with the service you are receiving from the Income Management team at least twice a year.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

We will monitor the implementation and delivery of services through this Policy through:

Performance Indicators:

BV66a – proportion of rent collected (%) Target	Target 97%
BV66b- proportion of rent arrears over 7 week (%)	Target 6.40%
BV66c- proportion of notices served for rent arrears (%)	Target 20.00%
BV66d – tenants evicted as a result of arrears (%)	Target 0.35%
HMA1 – rent arrears (%)	Target 3.40%
HMA8a – former tenant arrears as a% of the rent roll	Target 2.0%

HMA8b – average former tenant debt	Target £575.00
WNWhL agreed to set 5 local indicators as follows:	
IM1 – review service standards & user satisfaction through customer surveys.	Target - One Customer Survey to be held per year.
IM2 – frequency of Customer Sounding Boards.	Target - Hold 4 Customer Sounding Boards per year.
IM3 – internal quality control checks.	Target - carry out monthly 10% Quality Checks of arrears cases to check compliance against procedure.
IM4 – conduct take up campaigns for housing benefit.	Target - to conduct a minimum of 2 take-up campaigns per year.
IM5 – compliance with WNWhL complaints and compliments policy.	Target - respond to complaints and compliments within 10 day organisational target
<p>Performance against targets to be reported Board, Area Panels, the Customer Sounding Board and Strategic Landlord. Additionally, WNWhL will keep customers advised through the 'Buzz' newsletter and performance information will be displayed in our service outlets.</p> <p>We will use our performance and customer satisfaction information to inform the way we deliver our service.</p>	

Income Management Policy

1. Statement of Intent

1.1 WNWhL will ensure that the payment facilities for its tenants are easily accessible and that the range of options open for tenants to pay money to it reflects the whole range of needs of its tenants. It is recognised that it is essential that any income collection service complements other services provided by WNWhL. To this end, it will:

- Advise tenants, when they sign up for their tenancies, of all the different methods available for making rent payments, and inform them of the importance of meeting their obligations under section 2A of the tenancy agreement (Your Rent) to pay their rent and any other service charges on time and the consequences of non-payment.
- Provide tenants with regular, accurate information about their rent accounts, in the form of statements at least 4 times a year.
- Provide tenants with advice on their eligibility for housing benefit and hold housing benefit surgeries by appointment at Local Housing Offices in order to maximise welfare benefit take up.
- Ensure that payments received are promptly credited to individual accounts.
- Maintain customer confidentiality at all times in line with Data Protection legislation.
- On request, provide tenants with an up to date statement of their account;
- Provide a range of cost effective payment options that are convenient for

customers;

- Advise tenants how they can contact WNWhL to discuss their accounts, e.g. by telephone through Contact Leeds, or in person at our Neighbourhood Offices and via the internet through the WNWhL and Leeds City Council's website for a current rent account balance and last payment details.
- Inform tenants of the help available should they fall into arrears and signpost them to other organisations when necessary, e.g. Citizens Advice Bureau, National Debt Line.
- Arrange an appointment with our Citizen Advice Bureau Debt Outreach worker if a customer has multiple debts and has received a "Notice of Intent to Seek Possession" due to rent arrears.
- Contact customers quickly if they fall into arrears and inform tenants of the actions we will take to recover any rent arrears.

- 1.2 The security of tenants, staff and money are high in the priorities of WNWhL and payment facilities will be provided to ensure that any risks minimised.
- 1.3 Access and support of service users is paramount in considering the range of rent payment methods that WNWhL will provide for tenants. It will be mindful of its commitment to take account of the needs of different groups within communities. WNWhL will promote the use of direct debits and standing orders for the benefit of tenants, in particular to assist those who are vulnerable.
- 1.4 WNWhL is aware of the social stigma that can be attached where debt exists. Staff will deal with tenants in a professional, confidential and respectful manner at all times and will offer support to tenants who are experiencing difficulties in paying their rent. Further information is available in our Financial Inclusion Strategy and Current Arrears procedure which includes provision to signpost customers to support agencies including the Citizen Advice Bureau
- 1.5 WNWhL will embrace new information technology (IT) and seek ongoing enhancements/upgrades to its IT and other systems to support continuous improvement in its rent collection service, ensuring value for money is achieved and contributing to the organisation's Annual Efficiency Savings.
- 1.6 WNWhL will ensure that the appropriate level of resources is employed in the collection of rent and that staff are fully trained to deliver the service excellence required.
- 1.7 WNWhL will ensure in its accounting systems that rent, service charges, court costs and housing benefit payments are clearly and separately recorded.

2.0 Outline of Service

- 2.1 Leeds City Council is the major provider of rented housing in the Leeds area. Leeds City Council will review rents once per year in April, in line with the Government's Rent Restructuring Policy, where relevant, and rents will be calculated on a 48/*49 week basis with four 'rent free' weeks each year. WNWhL has produced a Customer Information Leaflet indicating the methodology for rent calculation and steps towards rent harmonisation.

*A 53 week rent year occurs every 6 years when it is necessary to collect rents over 49 weeks

Leeds City Council will attend West North West Homes Leeds' Income Management Customer Sounding Board to consult and provide information in relation to rent setting and rent increases/decreases.

- 2.2 To ensure that new tenants understand the commitments and responsibilities they are entering into, and to encourage positive behaviour from the outset, WNWhL will require the payment of 2 week's rent in advance at the tenancy commencement stage. Where tenants are claiming housing benefit they are asked to bring the proofs required to enable a claim to be made satisfactorily. These issues are explained in advance of the sign up by our Lettings staff, and the New Tenancy DVD stresses the need to maintain a clear rent account.
- 2.3 All tenants are responsible for making arrangements to pay their rent, whether they pay their rent themselves or have payments made on their behalf via housing benefit.
- 2.4 WNWhL will collect rents promptly and efficiently. Rent payments are due in advance on Monday on a weekly basis, unless:
- Prior arrangements are made, keeping the rent account in credit, or it has been agreed that payments will be accepted on a monthly basis via direct debit or standing order.
- 2.5 Methods of payment include:
- Post offices and Paypoint outlets;
 - Direct debit or standing order;
 - Deductions from salaries, where tenants are also employees of WNWhL or LCC
 - Deduction from salaries where tenants' employers agree to voluntary deductions;
 - Telephone and Internet Banking;
 - Internet payments via the WNWhL Website;
 - Direct payments from DSS;
 - Payment via Leeds City Credit Union.
- 2.6 The full range of payment methods will be continually publicised. The use of direct debits and standing orders will particularly be encouraged, since they facilitate a simple, efficient and reliable method of rent payment representing value for money. Bank mandates will be readily available at local offices to encourage the use of these methods of rent payment. WNWhL will offer bank mandates to tenants at all times, and advise them of the availability of this facility. These can also be downloaded from WNWhL website. WNWhL will automatically enter Direct Debit's or Standing Order's into a quarterly prize drawn to win one of four prizes each £250.
- 2.7 WNWhL will evaluate any new or innovative methods of rent payment or collection that become available that will improve business performance and customer choice, and will use Service Improvement Groups, and Customer Sounding Boards in this process.

- 2.8 Where appropriate WNWhL will work with other organisations to achieve value for money in the procurement of new services.
- 2.9 WNWhL will use information from its annual Customer Satisfaction Status Survey to improve service delivery and the prioritisation of resources.
- 2.10 Service charges and any other charges will be due at the same time as the rent.
- 2.11 WNWhL will ensure that rent and service charges are accurately calculated and raised, rent payment cards and rent statements are issued promptly and early action is taken for recovery where arrears occur. An instant temporary rent payment letter is issued immediately upon request by the Customer Accounts Team and the Customer Support Officers within the Local Housing Offices. This enables customers to pay immediately at a Post Office, Paypoint or Payzone point.
- 2.12 WNWhL will publish its rent collection performance statistics in its annual report to tenants, which will also be made available on its website. Additionally, performance information will be reported in the tenant newsletter 'Buzz' and will be displayed in our Neighbourhood Housing Offices.
- 2.13 In consultation with customers, WNWhL will produce a suite of information leaflets and make these available in other languages and formats and, in developing new services and systems, will take into account the diverse needs of its customers.

3.0 Specific Needs

- 3.1 WNWhL will take into account the specific needs, which may arise, of older and vulnerable people, people with disabilities, and Black and Minority Ethnic groups, in a manner that promotes equality and inclusiveness.
- 3.2 WNWhL will not discriminate against any person or other organisation on the grounds of race, ethnic origin, disability, nationality, gender, sexuality, age, class, appearance, religion, responsibility for dependants, unrelated criminal activities, being HIV positive or with AIDS, or any other matter which causes a person to be treated with injustice.
- 3.3 Victims of domestic violence or abuse would be treated sensitively as vulnerable customers in line with our procedures and WNWhL's Domestic Violence and Vulnerable People Policies.
- 3.4 WNWhL will take into account the needs of Vulnerable customers and should a debt arise, subject to an approved criteria then consideration will be given to minimise their debt and possibly write off the debt, if this is in the best interest of the customer.

4.0 Consultation

- 4.1 WNWhL will regularly seek the views of all stakeholders on this policy in a variety of different ways including the views of Area Panels, Customer Sounding Boards and Service Improvement Group.

5.0 Implementation

- 5.1 The Board, Chief Executive and members of Management Team at WNWhL, are responsible for ensuring that this policy is implemented.
- 5.2 Under the delegated authority contained within the Standing Orders of WNWhL it is the responsibility of all employees and those working on behalf of the Company to ensure that their work is carried out in line with this policy and any related procedures.
- 5.3 WNWhL is committed to the highest standards of customer care and will apply this policy in accordance with the standards published in its Customer Charter and Customer Care Policy. If customers are dissatisfied with the service that they have received or with the application of this policy then they should be encouraged to register their dissatisfaction within our Complaints and Compliments Policy.

6.0 Monitoring

- 6.1 The Board of WNWhL will receive regular monitoring reports to evaluate the effectiveness of this policy in meeting customer expectations.
- 6.2 WNWhL will undertake surveys to monitor the satisfaction of its tenants with the service provided and will publish the results. It will use the information gained from these surveys as a basis to improve its rent collection service. In particular we will proactively seek the views of customers who are, or have been, in arrears as it is accepted that these customers may not necessarily be represented on Customer Focus Groups.
- 6.3 Where relevant information is available WNWhL will benchmark its performance against other organisations to ensure the highest standards and value for money in the delivery of its services. It will target action at those areas where a weakness is shown.
- 6.4 WNWhL will use the Performance Indicators shown earlier to monitor the effectiveness of this policy and the associated procedures.

7.0 Review

In preparation for delivering this policy during 2009 West North West homes Leeds has reviewed and taken into account new or emerging government legislation and government and council policies.

As a result, this policy now fully reflects, and is inclusive of the issues arising from those policies and legislation, and considers the impacts arising.

- 7.1 WNWhL will undertake a review of this policy whenever there are any relevant changes to legislation, case law or good practice that would impact on this policy or in the light of any required service improvements identified through our Complaints and Compliments Policy. Equally, the Service

Improvement Group will meet regularly and will identify best practice which may influence the development of this Policy.

- 7.2 WNWhL will undertake regular reviews to ensure continuous improvements and value for money in the delivery of its services – the vehicle for this will be the Service Improvement Group.
- 7.3 The Board of WNWhL will be responsible for ensuring that reviews of this policy are carried out and that the policy contributes to, and complements, the strategic objectives of the organisation.
- 7.4 In carrying out any such review account will be taken of the organisation's commitment to Equality and Diversity. This Policy will be Impact Assessed in line with our E&D Strategy, and any subsequent actions will be fed into the annual Service Improvement Plan (SIP). Any review of this Policy will also include a further Impact Assessment.

8.0 Legislation

- 8.1 New or emerging policies for 2009 include:
- Rent Check Protocol for front line staff – February 2009
 - Leeds City Council Customer Services Rent Protocol for front line staff – July 2008
- 8.2 WNWhL supports the LCC Corporate Debt Policy, which has been developed to help meet the Council's Corporate Plan priorities, particularly in respect of the narrowing the gap theme, and is also part of a response to Central Government's agenda to provide solutions that have prevention and intervention as key drivers for public service delivery to local people.
- 8.3 The Corporate Debt Policy covers debts owed to the Council, including:
- Council Tax
 - Rents, both housing and others, e.g. garages and commercial
 - Benefit overpayments
 - Business Rates
 - General debtors, e.g. unpaid fees and charges
 - Legal costs
- 8.4 As part of the policy implementation, a referral is made when it is known a customer has multiple debts owed to LCC, and a working group meets quarterly to review procedural issues and develop the policy further. WNWhL are represented on the working group.
- 8.5 Where sundry debts are owed to WNWhL- such as rechargeable repairs – the recovery of these debts is outsourced to LCC Finance Department. An alternative method of collection would be for WNWhL to take recovery action itself, utilising the Customer Account Team. However the recommendation of the Finance Manager is to continue with current arrangements as this represents value for money and this was endorsed by the Income Management Service Improvement Group.

- 8.6 The performance of the LCC recovery team, balanced against costs will be reported into the Service Improvement Group and this will form the basis for review of the existing arrangements.
- 8.7 Equally the Service Improvement Group will receive updates relating to the LCC Corporate Debt Policy.

9.0 Risk

- 9.1 All risks that fall within the scope of this policy and its service areas have been identified and contained within WNWhL's Risk Assessment and Management Plan with controls in place to ensure that the risks are managed effectively.
- 9.2 When reviews of this policy are undertaken, checks will be made against the Risk Register Map and Management Plan to ensure that the policy takes account of and addresses any relevant risks. Where the policy review identifies a material risk that is not contained within the Risk Register Map and Management Plan the risk will be notified to the Risk and Audit Manager and appropriate controls put in place.

For further information please refer to our Risk Register Map and Management Plan.

10.0 Other relevant documents

- 10.1 The Board of WNWhL will ensure that this policy complies with all relevant legislation and takes account of current best practice:

Related Policies & documents:

- Cohesion and Diversity Policy
- Tenancy Management Policy
- Complaints and Compliments Policy
- Customer Care Policy
- Vulnerable People Policy
- Leeds City Council Corporate Debt Policy
- Financial Inclusion Strategy
- Income Management Strategy
- Rent Arrears Recovery Procedures
- Standing Order Procedures
- WNWhL / Leeds Benefits Service, Service Level Agreement
- WNWhL / Paralegal, Service Level Agreement
- WNWhL Annual Efficiency Statement & Incentive / Penalty Statement
- WNWhL Risk Register Map and Management Plan
- WNWhL Rent Check Protocol for front line staff – February 2009
- WNWhL Leeds City Council Customer Services Rent Protocol for front line staff – July 2008

Policy timeline

Draft completed – 30 June 2009

Final version completed – 8th July 2009

Impact Assessed – 30 June 2009
Approved at Customer Sounding Board- 22 May 2009
Approved at SERVICE IMPROVEMENT GROUP – 3 July 2009
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