

Report to Stronger Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 14 January 2021

**Portfolio: Housing and Community Services
Councillor H Whitbread**



Subject: Operational Changes at Broadway Housing Office

Officer contact for further information: Rachel Smith – Team Manager (Estate and Land Management)

Democratic Services Officer: R Perrin (01992 564532)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Communities Select Committee recommends operational changes at the Broadway Housing Office, that will ensure best use of resources and delivery of a customer centric service.

1. To retain the Broadway Satellite Office to enable customers to access the Council's cash desk.
2. To reduce the hours that the Broadway Housing advice counter is open from 5 days a week to 2 days a week.
3. To repurpose the Broadway Housing Office, by bringing together a range of internal and external partners to provide a range of services on the days that the office is open.

Report:

Background

1. Historically, Housing Management services have been delivered generically from three Council Offices; the Civic Offices, the Limes Farm Centre and the Broadway Housing Office.
2. During the Council's recent restructure, with effect from 3rd February 2020 Housing Management was split into three specialist teams; Income Recovery, Neighbourhoods and Estate & Land Management.
 - a. **Income recovery Income team.** Supported by a Team Manager, the team comprises 5.5 full time equivalent staff, a Lead Officer and Housing Support Officer who focus on maximising income to the Housing Revenue Account.
 - b. **Neighbourhoods.** Supported by a Team Manager, the team comprises 4 full time equivalent staff, responsible for tenancy management, tenancy enforcement and anti-social behaviour.
 - c. **Estate and Land Management.** Supported by a Team Manager, the team comprises 4 full time equivalent Estate and Land Officers, 1 Resident Involvement Officer and 1 Housing Support Officer. The team is responsible for the day to day management of, regularisation and some enforcement actions relating to the use and / or misuse of the councils housing land (land acquired under Housing Act powers), as well as resident involvement. The team ensure that housing estates are regularly inspected to help sustain attractive, clean, safe, open spaces and communal areas. From April 2021,

Officers will also undertake a programme of tenancy audits to support the work of the wider service area, with a focus on tenancy sustainment, property condition & repair, identifying hoarding, safeguarding concerns and the detection & prevention of fraud.

3. Following the restructure, Income Recovery has been based at the Civic Offices, Neighbourhoods at the Limes Centre, and Estate & Land Management at Broadway Housing Office. The Broadway Housing Office also accommodates the Council's last remaining cash desk.
4. Historically, each office has routinely accommodated unannounced "drop ins" from customers seeking housing management advice and assistance. However, despite being a Housing Office, run by Housing Management staff, the Broadway and Limes Farm satellite offices have tended to be used by customers seeking access to advice and assistance on a range of other Council business matters unrelated to Housing Management.
5. In 2019, the Council's Property & Housing Service commissioned Acuity, to facilitate its tenant satisfaction survey. The survey, which was conducted between February - March 2020, found high levels of satisfaction from Tenants across the Service, however there were emerging themes of dissatisfaction. Whilst the findings show satisfaction with the neighbourhood is high at 87%, just 59% of respondents felt that the Housing Service makes a positive contribution to the neighbourhood. Responses show that the neighbourhood environment is important to our tenants.
6. It was apparent that during the Housing Management review, Officers were finding it increasingly difficult to find time to leave the Office to get out onto our housing estates and into our customers' homes. One key reason cited were the restrictions placed on Officers to maintain an Office presence to support the housing advice desks. This was particularly compounded in the Broadway Housing Office whose team was small and where at least two members of Housing Staff must be in the Office at any one time for security reasons, chiefly on account of the Office accommodating the cash desk.
7. Between September 2019 – March 2020, Housing Management began a process of implementing a 'visiting by default' approach to housing management services. To facilitate this, housing management customers visiting the 3 main offices were requested to arrange an appointment to see their Housing Management Officer in advance. Customers who turned up expecting to see a Housing Officer immediately were advised that an Officer would contact them within 24 hours to offer a home or office appointment. Since Officers could undertake some preliminary work before calling the customer back and / or before the meeting, Officers found that they were able to facilitate a more thorough and satisfactory meeting once was convened.
8. The Housing Management Service received few complaints and the operational adjustments enabled the service to reach out into the community and increase home visiting. On the few urgent occasions where customers presented themselves and it was not possible to rearrange the visit, the teams accommodated these individuals.

Current Position

9. In April 2020, in response to Government direction relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, all staff were required to work from home with immediate effect and all three of the offices closed to the public. The Civic Offices and Limes Farm remain closed.

10. From 10th August 2020, the Broadway cash facility has reopened on Mondays and Tuesdays each week between the hours of 10am and 2pm. The Cashiers have been supported by members of the Income Recovery Team on those days for health and safety reasons, but the counter service has remained closed. Income Recovery Officers have benefited from this arrangement, as they have been able to carry out pre-arranged office interviews with some of their customers within the screened interview room which is Covid-19 compliant. The Estate and Land Team continue to control the office on Wednesdays to Fridays when it remains completely closed to the public.

Proposal

11. It is proposed that following the Civic Office refurbishment, the Income Recovery Team repositions itself alongside the Estate and Land Team at Debden Broadway and that the Broadway Office is reinvented as a drop in hub on Mondays and Tuesdays alongside the cash office, offering both a cash office and the opportunity for residents to engage with a range of services such as the Rehousing Team, Housing Benefit, Council Tax, Citizens Advice Bureau and Peabody Trust. In addition, there is potential for the drop in hub to be used to provide digital upskilling by Digital Buddies to our 21,000 residents who currently do not use social media. In this way, the Council would continue to support the High Street, offer a cash collection service which enjoys enduring popularity amongst residents and offer a wider range of services on the two days the office is open to the public. However, to provide the requisite flexibility for Officers to have an active presence on our estates, that the Office remain closed to the public on the remainder of the week.

Reason for decision:

To enable the Housing Management function to continue to increase its presence within the Community both on estates and within our residents' homes, whilst diversifying the offer of the range of services available to residents from the Broadway Office, achieved within existing resource.

Options considered and rejected:

To permanently close the Debden Broadway Office to the public.

Consultation undertaken:

The Tenant and Leaseholder Panel have been consulted and comments received were broadly supportive of the changes proposed, one of which stated that the new operational model appeared to offer a reasonable compromise of time and staff allocation.

Background Papers: N/A