



Foreword

Ipswich Borough Council prides itself in providing a top-quality service to tenants. In the case of Housing Income Management, the Council has achieved an external accreditation for its service. This is an acknowledgement of the skill and dedication of the staff who are providing the service. Hopefully, it will reassure the tenants that the Council is working with them on making sure rents and service charges are paid on time.

Rent Matters. It is important that tenants pay their rent at the right time. If rents are not paid, it puts the whole housing service at risk. The Council provides help for tenants so they can pay on time and is supporting people as they move to Universal Credit.

Having good quality income services allows delivery of a good quality housing service, which everyone benefits from.



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Housing Portfolio Holder

Contents

- 4) Introduction
- 6) Background
- 7) Purpose and Scope
 - Vision
 - Approach
- 8) Achievements
- 9) The Priorities
- 10) Priority 1: Support tenants and sustain tenancies
- 12) Priority 2: Identify and Manage Risk
- 13) Priority 3: Maximise income and minimise debt
- 14) Priority 4: Use Tenant Insight to Improve Service
- 15) Monitoring & Governance

Introduction

Income management is a key business area for Housing Services. The Council manage 7,300 general needs properties and 550 sheltered properties and are responsible for the collection of £46 million of rent and service charges per year. In addition to this, the Council manages over 400 leasehold properties.

In December 2017, Housing Services successfully achieved accreditation from the Housing Quality Network (HQN) for its income management service. An accreditation mark is a visible sign that the services not only meet or exceed good practice standards but that the Council is proud to offer a best-in-class service to tenants. This Strategy has been informed by the review of the service by HQN.

Effective income management ensures that the Council can continue to deliver a good housing service and develop and maintain homes. It contributes to the financial strength of the Council so that it is able to provide the financial resources to deliver the priorities set out in the Corporate Plan "Proud of Ipswich" in particular:

- Meeting the housing needs of our community and,
- A financially sustainable council providing good quality services.

The overall aim is to maximise income and prevent tenancies from failing and this strategy sets out the continued commitment and plans to protect the income stream and help sustain tenancies.



Background

The Council is operating in an increasingly challenging financial environment and so maximising income collection is more important than ever before.

In 2012, the Government implemented a programme of Welfare Reform resulting in substantial changes to the benefits system. The majority of the reforms have now been implemented.

The effects from the Covid -19 pandemic and inflation have had significant impacts on household income and the ability of some tenants to manage their rent payments.

The Council is committed to helping tenants pay their rent or charges on time with those needing help and financial support receiving this. Our procedures are designed to maximise the attempts at contact the Council has with a tenant in order to sustain tenancies. If a tenant does fall into debt through financial difficulty, the Council will ensure the tenant has had adequate opportunity and support to put things right before enforcement action is considered. Tenancy sustainment is a key component of this strategy.

The delivery and success of this Strategy will therefore, to an extent, be affected by external factors. The Council has effective partnerships in place with agencies to provide information, advice, and support to tenants to maintain their tenancies. The Council recognises strong successful partnership working, particularly in supporting tenants, will play an integral role in the success of our priorities.

Purpose and Scope

The Housing Income Management Strategy sets out the overall approach to income management and defines the vision and priorities. It aims to mitigate the impact of welfare reforms and financial pressures on the tenants and income. It will also help to deliver the objectives of the Tenancy Services Operational Plan to maximise income and sustain tenancies.

This strategy is specifically focused on the Housing Revenue Account income sources, which include but are not limited to:

- ✓ Current and former tenants' rents and debts
- ✓ Leaseholder charges
- ✓ Service charges
- ✓ Sundry accounts including court costs and benefit overpayments
- ✓ Garage rents and debts

Vision

The vision is to provide an efficient and effective income management service that maximises the income, sustains tenancies and enables the Council to provide quality homes and services.

Approach

To help the Council promote a positive payment culture, a 'Rent Matters' approach has been adopted to help tenants understand the importance of paying their rent and to make the required payment at the required time. Making rent payment a priority is especially important with Universal Credit. 'Rent Matters' will also ensure that tenants understand the link between income collected and the ongoing ability to deliver a good service.

Achievements

Over the last three years of the Housing Income Management Strategy 2022-2024 a number of achievements have been made. Some of the headlines are:



Establishment of a focused Income Management Team.



Introduction of the "Ready steady rent" initiative – a training programme for new and prospective tenants.



Promotion of Rent payments in advance.



Review of processes to improve efficiency of service delivery.



A reduction to 1.65% rent debit. Achieved in April 2024 against the end of year target of 2% rent debit.



Money Advice Service extended.



The use of the Household Support fund to support 114 tenants in 2023/24 to maintain their tenancies.



The priorities

The priorities for this Strategy have been developed following the review of the achievement of the desired outcomes set out in the Income Management Strategy 2022-24 and the interim assessment by HQN of our accreditation for Maximising Income; sustaining tenancies in August 2024. Our priorities are:

01 Support tenants and sustain tenancies

02 Identify and Manage Risks

03 Maximise income and minimise debt

04 Use Tenant Insight to Improve Service

10 **Priority 1:** **Support tenants and sustain tenancies**

Our objectives are:

- **To help tenants to pay on time and to manage their accounts successfully.**
- **To promote and incorporate a positive payment culture through all stages of the income collection.**
- **To collect with care.**
- **Monitor the impact of rent and service charges increases on its customers.**

Collecting rent is at the core of all the services we provide as a landlord and our ability to build new homes. Promoting a positive payment culture is achieved by making clear the connection between the tenants rent payment and the Council's ability to build and provide high quality homes and services and to fund improvement and maintenance programmes. There is a balance to be achieved however and we recognise that there are many reasons why someone may fall behind with their rent and the importance of taking a supportive approach. The Council does not evict anyone from their home as a result of financial hardship where they are working with us to get their payments back on track.

We will:

- Consider the wellbeing and vulnerability of tenants throughout each stage of the rent debts process.
- Work to understand our tenant profile better so that we can offer a number of ways of engagement for support and financial wellbeing.
- Ensure that staff are well trained and knowledgeable in procedures, pre court protocol and welfare benefits.
- Offer and promote a variety of payment methods.
- Encourage and publicise a 'rent matters' message.
- Further develop Housing Online.
- Extend the Money Advice Service.
- Signpost tenants to appropriate support Agencies.



12 **Priority 2:** **Identify and Manage Risk**

Our objectives are:

- **To understand the effects on the Service from:**
 - **Government policy.**
 - **Economic conditions.**
 - **Service demand.**

We will:

- Improve performance monitoring.
- Be proactive in our horizon scanning of potential threats.
- We will analyse service demand. This, together with listening to tenants and officers, will enable us to identify gaps, respond promptly to developments and challenges and to allocate resources accordingly.



Priority 3: **Maximise income and minimise debt**

13

Our objectives are:

- **Promote a positive payment culture – rent in advance. Tailoring support to individuals circumstances.**
- **To resolve financial issues by preventing debts from arising in the first place, intervening as early as possible and supporting our tenants to maximise their income.**
- **To provide targeted support to tenants who are in rent debts or in risk of getting into rent debts.**
- **To ensure debt and money management advice is clearly available and accessible to all tenants.**
- **To fully recover service charge debt.**

To maximise our income, we must ensure that we do all we can to collect rent and other charges when they are due, and where possible collect this in advance. This requires both a proactive and preventative approach to income management. Working within an increasingly challenging financial environment means new skills and techniques are required to collect the rent and support tenants facing difficult situations.

We will:

- Ensure procedures are consistently applied
- Carry out regular quality checks on case management
- Monitor our Performance and take remedial action where needed
- Implement new software to improve collection and reduce tenant debts
- Develop a training programme for staff to include resilience, negotiation skills and mental health awareness (suicide and mental health training)
- Adopt the introduction of Flexible rents
- Keep up to date with any legislative changes and make adaptations to processes where applicable
- Carry out a review of fees, service charge accounting and income collection processes
- Produce new income collection procedures
- Establish new performance measures
- Implement new housing management software to improve processes and case management
- Implement the plan to reduce rent loss from voids.

14 **Priority 4:** **Use Tenant Insight to Improve Service**

We recognise that there is scope for further tenant involvement in service design and development.

Our objective:

- **To develop engagement with tenants and use data to develop the service.**

We will:

- Analyse Tenant data to identify vulnerable groups who may need more assistance.
- Survey tenant views and experiences of the effectiveness of interventions, eg: signposting to other agencies, independent Money Advice Service.
- Invite Scrutiny and recommendations for improvement from engaged tenants.



15

Monitoring & Governance

Performance indicators are already in place and monitored at individual, team, and management level.

A Housing Income Management Strategy Action Plan is in place and has been based upon the four priorities. It captures the planned improvements related to income management.

Progress against the strategy will be monitored through regular Housing Income Management action plan meetings and reported regularly to tenants Customer Engagement Panel and the Council's Housing Working Group.

The regular monitoring of the national and local context will also form part of the monitoring and governance process and will also feed into the ongoing development of the Action Plan. This process will ensure that the Action Plan remains current and relevant.



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