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| Rental Income  Policy |  |
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Useful Definitions:

**The Councils** – Refers to the South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council.

**Landlord** – This will be the named Landlord on the Tenancy Agreement and will be either South Oxfordshire District Council **OR** Vale of White Horse District Council

**The Service Provider –** This means the appointed sub-contractor for the Councils who will implement the terms of the Policy. As of 30 October 2023, this will be Soha Housing.

**Tenant/s –** Person/s who occupy the property which is owned or leased by the Landlord.

Rental Income Policy

**Policy Statement**

1. This policy sets out how The Councils manage tenants’ rent accounts. This policy does not cover income from former tenant arrears, garages and sundry accounts.

**Aim of the Policy**

1. The Service Provider aims to maximise rent income collection. This is crucial, in terms of increasing the resources available to maintain our stock and to provide excellent services to residents. In managing rent arrears, The Service Provider will adopt a supportive approach and work with tenants to maximise income, enable better budgeting, and offer support into work where appropriate. These measures will precede any formal, legal arrears action.
2. Rent is due to The Service Provider in advance, on the due date set out in the tenancy agreement. Most tenants want to pay their rent promptly and many will benefit from a Financial Inclusion service & Tenancy Sustainment Assessment.
3. The Service Provider will fully use Information & Communication Technology (ICT to) streamline the arrears process and ensure consistency in case management. Efficiencies from this approach will be used to offer a one-to-one, financially inclusive service for our more challenging cases.
4. The Service Provider aims to help tenants keep a clear rent account and we will emphasise this in all relevant procedures. A major element of The Service Providers policy for controlling arrears is to provide all tenants with advice and assistance on claiming benefits entitlements.
5. The Service Provider offers a Tenancy Support Service for our vulnerable tenants to help them avoid eviction, as well as support with claiming Discretionary Housing Payments, access to The Service Provider’s Tenancy Sustainment Fund, Hardship Fund, and Launchpad employment service.
6. The Service Provider manages the impact of Welfare Reforms through management of arrears cases affected by Universal Credit, Bedroom Tax, Benefit Caps, and Local Housing Allowance.
7. Where a tenant is in arrears, The Service Provider will take a firm and fair approach to recovering rent arrears, water and service charges, and will place a particular emphasis on early identification of debt and early settlement from the tenant rather than escalating legal action.
8. The Service Provider will contact tenants with unpaid rent promptly to set clear expectations that rent payments should be made on time and to offer advice services where there is financial difficulty. Officers will use a flexible approach with the goal always being a cleared or reducing rent account. All tenants are offered a Tenancy Sustainment Assessment, prior to formal arrears action, in order to maximise income and support with budgeting and employment opportunities.
9. In cases of persistent rent arrears or where repayment arrangements are not kept, The Councils will take firm action, including legal action to secure full payment or repossess the property. The Councils do not use distraint (seizure of property) in arrears recovery but may pursue other legal remedies such as attachment of earnings where possession is inappropriate.
10. The Service Provider and The Councils will work with partnership agencies to promote financial inclusion as part of our work in tackling poverty and deprivation and helping our tenants to budget. In particular, we will profile groups, such as the Under 35 age group, to tailor our approach and engage as many tenants as possible to prevent arrears accruing.
11. The Councils and The Service Provider will apply this policy consistently and fairly and will not discriminate against any customer on grounds of their race, colour, ethnic or national origins, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender, age or any other matter which may cause a person to be treated with injustice.

**Implementation**

1. The Service Provider will offer a range of payment methods, having regard to Value for Money, to make it as convenient as possible for residents to pay their rent and other charges. Our preferred payment method is direct debit.
2. The Service Provider will have consistent and clear procedures in place to collect income, giving full details of action to be taken if a tenant is in rent arrears and a timetable for action, including:
   * Rent arrears recovery, emphasising the need for personal contact to be made at an early stage and maintained throughout the debt recovery process. Procedures will follow the Pre- Action Protocol (Civil Procedure Rules), taking reasonable steps to ensure that the tenant understands any information given;
   * Continuing access to The Service Provider’s Tenancy Sustainment service;
   * Procedures setting out when and how payments will be switched -back to landlord for tenants who have arrears (APA or Alternative Payment Arrangement, as well as TPDs or Third-Party Deductions from the Department for Work & Pensions);
   * In cases where repossession is being considered, The Service Provider will work in partnership, where appropriate, with relevant support agencies.
3. The Service Provider has specific procedures to deal with impact of the Welfare Reforms (bedroom tax, LHA cap, Universal Credit & benefits cap) which include:

* Offering advice and possible options to help tenants manage the impact of welfare reforms;
* Using discretion when taking action over related arrears if a tenant is proactive and has engaged with The Service Provider to agree an Action Plan to limit the impact of welfare reforms;
* Working in partnership with appropriate agencies to limit the impact of welfare reform and to provide training to our tenants to help them cope with this.
* The Service Provider will use APAs as appropriate to secure rent payments, clear arrears and avoid legal action and additional costs for our tenants. When using an APA, The Service Provider will also refer tenants to their Tenancy Support Service or partner support agencies for additional budgeting and financial inclusion support.

**Support and Financial Inclusion**

1. The Service Provider will signpost our vulnerable tenants to their Tenancy Support Service or specialist partner support services to offer advice on money management, support to make housing related benefit claims and managing the impact of welfare reform.
2. The Service Provider will have procedures in place to maintain landlord payments for vulnerable tenants, as set out in Government guidance.
3. The Service Provider will work with tenants to support them with Universal Credit and other welfare reforms and to help them to budget and to pay their rent.

**Monitoring/Responsibility**

1. The Councils have set The Service Provider clear targets for collecting rent and will report performance to The Councils on a monthly basis.
2. The Councils has delegated responsibility for successfully implementing this policy to The Service Provider.