



Welfare Reform – Members' Good Practice Briefing  
Housing organisations approach in mitigating impact on their staff

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Welcome to the Northern Housing Consortium’s (NHC) seventh and final in this series of welfare reform good practice briefings for members. Through the work the NHC have been doing around tracking welfare reform and measuring the impact across the North, it is evident that housing providers and local authorities are all at very different stages in preparing for, and responding to the changes as welfare reform unfolds.

NHC has produced this series of briefings as the roll out of welfare reform continues to enable members to share their innovative approaches that they are adopting to lessen the impact across their business, tenants and communities, and providing the opportunity for members to share and learn from one another. The series of briefings have included:

- How organisations are communicating and raising awareness of the changes to their tenants and residents – **published in May 2013**
- What approaches the sector are adopting to tackle financial inclusion – **published in June 2013**
- New ways of working around new and existing partnerships – **published in September 2013**
- Helping residents and tenants get online and address issues around digital exclusion – **published in October 2013**
- Tackling Worklessness – **published in December 2013**
- Mitigating the impact of Poverty and Social Exclusion – **published in February 2014**
- Approaches organisations are taking to identify impact on staff as result of the welfare reform changes – **this edition**

You can download all the above briefings via the following link:

<http://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/welfarereform>

Since the introduction of the governments welfare reform flagship programme, we have seen and heard more around the impact the changes and cuts are having on social housing tenants and wider communities across the country, and the challenges they are faced with on a daily basis, as the changes are introduced and unfold.

The Northern Housing Consortium’s Real Life Reform research provides a further insight into the lives of ‘real’ families and individuals and the impact the changes are having on them, and the difficult decisions they have to make. Some of the headlines from the latest report published in March 2014 include:

- *Retained case studies have borrowed a further £670 each since October, averaging an increase in debt of £52 each week*
- *77% of households are in debt and the average debt is £3,503, a 54% increase since our last report*
- *£34.41 is the average weekly debt repayment, an increase of 58%*

## Welfare Reform – Members’ Good Practice Briefing

### Housing organisations approach in mitigating impact on their staff

- 18.5% of income is spent on fuel costs compared to the national average of 5.1%
- *69% of households spend less than £40 per week on food*
- *Nearly a third of households spend less than £20 per week on food*
- *Average spend per person per day on food is now £3.08 - up from £2.10 in December*
- *46% of participants report have nothing left each week to live on once rent and essentials such as food and bills have been paid*

For further information on the research and to view all the reports please click on the following link <http://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/reallifereform>

As different approaches are adopted by the housing sector in mitigating the impact of welfare reform on their tenants, we are also starting to hear further around the increasingly challenging and complex issues frontline housing staff are dealing with as a result of the impact on tenants and communities, as they face increasing financial and emotional pressures of the changes proposed, and general austerity, which as a result is leading to increasing workloads, and more challenging customer interactions as customers are more angry and upset.

Straightforward Consultancy, a business working to developing great organisations, carried out a piece of research in 2013 ‘**Impact of Welfare Reform on Housing Employees**’ in partnership with Northern Housing Consortium.

Straightforward worked with ten housing organisations across the North West of England, exploring the challenges and issues that frontline housing, income and welfare staff is facing as part of their day to day roles. The research surveyed 700 employees, and also included face to face interviews and focus groups with over 300 staff members.

The research asked questions which included their experiences, how they were coping, how has it changed, what support they have and how they were managing.

#### **Summary of the findings**

- *77% said that customer interactions was more challenging than six months ago, welfare reform, increased workload and customers being a lot more angry and frustrated was stated as the main reasons*
- *42% felt only slightly/moderately equipped to cope with the increased challenge*
- *90% have found their customers to be in more financial difficulty than six months ago*
- *58% have seen an increase in mental health issues amongst their customers*
- *45% have experienced their customers making suicide threats, with only 25% feeling well equipped to deal with this*

## Welfare Reform – Members’ Good Practice Briefing

### Housing organisations approach in mitigating impact on their staff

- *45% feel extremely/well supported at work, with 55% feeling unsupported to moderately supported*
- *55% reported feeling stressed at work, due to increased workload and dealing with more ‘emotionally charged’ customers*

The research findings have given the ten participating organisations an insight into staff impact as a result of welfare reform, an opportunity to review internal policies, culture of the organisation, management/leadership style and their approach.

The full research findings report can be found at <http://www.straight-forward.co.uk/impact-welfare-reform-housing-employees/> for more information around the work of Straightforward and if your organisation would like to be involved in this work please contact [Charlotte@straight-forward.co.uk](mailto:Charlotte@straight-forward.co.uk)

The following good practice examples showcase some of the approaches northern housing providers are adopting in supporting and training frontline staff, to make them more resilient and so they are better equipped to help tenants over this very difficult time. These are just a few examples that have been shared with the NHC, and we are aware that members have been, and are continuously working hard in supporting their staff and tenants.

## **New Charter**

Over the past 12 months, New Charter have become aware of the increasing challenges that their front line people are facing across their neighbourhoods and recognise how tough it is out there with interactions with tenants become more 'challenging' in the past six months as a direct result of welfare reform.

In view of this realisation that the roles were becoming much more difficult, when the organisation was approached by Straightforward to take part in a research project, they jumped at the chance.

They were one of ten housing organisations in the North of England to take part in the research with Straightforward which involved visits, questionnaires, one-to-one interviews and group sessions with employees.

Frontline employees at the New Charter Housing Trust Group which owns over 19,500 homes in Tameside, Oldham and Nottingham have been put through this extra training after hearing the feedback from the research pilot.

The training follows independent research carried out by Straightforward which found that 22% of front line Neighbourhood and Revenues teams at New Charter (Tameside) and Aksa Homes (Oldham) were dealing with 'significantly more challenging' issues compared to those six months ago.

The research also informed the organisation that their staff needed to feel valued and wanted to have external training to make them more resilient and better equipped to help tenants through difficult times.

Their people told them that the increased number of suicide threats was most alarming and that this was down to a number of things including 'welfare reform, more people in financial pressures and increased mental health issues' among tenants.

Almost 41% of their Neighbourhood and Revenues teams said they were seeing 'many more' tenants in financial difficulty since April last year. A total of 57% said they had experienced threats of suicide from tenants.

On receipt of the feedback from the research, New Charter acted immediately and developed an action plan to collate all actions across the business to help their staff become more resilient.

New Charter launched S.O.S (Shield of Support) which is their branded name for all action relating to resilience.

They made the decision to invest in their people as the organisation sees them as their greatest asset and commissioned Straight Forward to deliver the specialist training to around 400 of their people in neighbourhoods and revenues.

The training has also been rolled out across their contact centre team who are managing more difficult interactions over the phone and to their Tenancy and Support Services team who work with troubled families and higher level anti-social behaviour.

## Welfare Reform – Members' Good Practice Briefing

### Housing organisations approach in mitigating impact on their staff

The developing resilience training is just one part of New Charter's wider S.O.S toolkit to address the issue.

Welfare reform has had a huge impact on their tenants, with over 1,600 of their most vulnerable customers affected by the Bedroom Tax across Tameside and Oldham. New Charter have had to respond to this by offering more support to tenants as well as looking at the business needs and the effect welfare reform is having on employees who work with tenants every day.

The feedback from the training has been quite staggering with their people feeling more equipped to manage challenging situations, the do's and don'ts of managing a customer threatening suicide and developing techniques for creating positive outcomes. We found that most of their people tended to use sympathy where actually empathy is much more productive.

The staff have also benefitted from further training on managing stress and working with mental health, which challenge them on a daily basis.

The organisation has a focus on health and well-being and staff who understand the connection between being healthier and more active in terms of resilience.

Overall the organisation has a more resilient team of front line people equipped to manage the most difficult of situations.

For further information please contact Emma Wilson, Director of Neighbourhoods,  
[Emma.Wilson@newcharter.co.uk](mailto:Emma.Wilson@newcharter.co.uk)

## **The effects of Welfare Reform on Yorkshire Coast Homes (YCH) Officers**

The programme of welfare reform introduced by this government has had a profound effect upon the housing sector in general and upon their communities, tenants and staff in particular. No housing associations can be left untouched by the changing legislation and all must respond in the manner that they deem to be most effective in catering for the operation of their organisations and the support of their customers.

In March 2013, with the spectre of Welfare Reform and the “bedroom tax” casting an early shadow, Yorkshire Coast Homes took a first proactive step towards offering some shelter from the approaching storm.

Andy Lord and Tom Price were both unemployed YCH tenants living at opposite ends of one of the association’s larger estates and both had attracted the company’s attention with their proven knowledge, interest and commitment to their community.

Andy was already combining the role of a YCH tenant representative with his chairmanship of the estate’s resident’s association while Tom was confirming his understanding of what was to come with a series of perceptive and informative social media posts. The YCH leadership team recognised the potential benefits that the duo could offer and the two men were thrown together for the first time at the beginning of an intensive two-week welfare reform training period.

It was very much a case of “in at the deep end” as Tom and Andy began breaking the bad news to a steadily rising number of people who would soon be adversely affected by the new rulings.

Around 600 tenants were already slipping into arrears, having received no indication from the housing benefit office that they would be affected, and the two newly appointed Welfare Reform Officers found it initially distressing to be perceived as “the bad guys” when offering themselves as the first point of contact in regard to the horrors of the “bedroom tax”.

The fact that the pair managed to learn fast enough to turn these early attitudes around is a reflection on their strength of character and their belief in the work that they were undertaking. Their shared positive attitude, approachability, empathy and no-nonsense myth-busting style led to a growing acceptance within their community and a rising awareness that they were there to help. Word of mouth testimonials led to more and more tenants getting in touch to ask for help and advice, while their workloads began to grow in line with the steadily rising reform-related poverty issues that were now springing up around them.

Referrals to food banks were now on the rise, and the two officers were often being called upon to coax some of the hardest pressed souls back from the edge of despair as the impact of rising debt and falling benefits took hold. With Andy and Tom’s knowledge and expertise in the welfare reform field now at a level where the majority of options, possibilities and potential outcomes can be effectively explored, the

## Welfare Reform – Members’ Good Practice Briefing

### Housing organisations approach in mitigating impact on their staff

impact of the closely related hardship and outright poverty issues can be placed within the remit of the YCH Money Management Officers.

It’s not surprising to hear that Money Management Officer Vicki Bayes’ workload has also risen dramatically. Vicki and her two colleagues have dealt with 177 money management cases since October 2013 as opposed to 101 for the same period in the previous year and she finds that she is keeping cases longer because they are becoming more complex, with factors like debt, bedroom tax, benefit overpayments and sanctions all needing to be unravelled and resolved. Prioritising has never been more important.

Vicki and her fellow Money Management Officer’s have to work faster now as more and more people are coming in with extreme poverty issues; they are consistently dealing with people overcome by the speed at which circumstances have overtaken them. Creditors are quicker to take action these days, often choosing to take direct deductions from benefits or adopting more unfriendly, assertive or even aggressive debt collection techniques. Access to public funding is getting much harder, with charities tightening up and DWP hardship payments becoming harder to get.

Despite rising workloads the money management officers at YCH are totally committed to their task and they are in no doubt as to the importance of the service that they are providing. *“Before welfare reform I felt that I had the ability to consistently resolve issues,”* says Vicki Bayes, *“but these days we are sometimes just fire-fighting, solving problems in the short term but finding it more difficult to apply the long term solutions. I understand that I’m sometimes required to broaden my approach to embrace a more counselling-styled role. We’ve all been faced with clients under extreme distress and anxiety, even threatening suicide, but we have a network in place to deal with this and we can always make referrals to the appropriate support agency. We have good relationships with our partner agencies and it’s now more important than ever that we work together”*.

There’s no doubt that Welfare Reform has had a dramatic impact upon the workload of frontline housing staff, and also upon the precise nature of the roles that they are called upon to fulfil. Extreme circumstances will always require extreme measures to deal with them and nobody could have expected the introduction of such legislation to be problem free. However, by anticipating these problems and the needs of the community in dealing with them, Yorkshire Coast Homes has initiated and developed a grass roots strategy that has effectively supported the worst affected of their tenants and also lessened the potentially damaging impact upon the staff who are directly involved with them.

The positive approach continues with the introduction of home swapping events like “Room To Move” which have been well attended and have provided real, cost effective and easily accessible options for resolving “bedroom tax” issues. YCH is also looking towards the introduction of Universal Credit by exploring the most effective ways to provide digital access and engagement throughout the tenant communities, together with providing the essential knowledge and support that will enable people to cope with the emerging system.



Welfare Reform – Members’ Good Practice Briefing  
Housing organisations approach in mitigating impact on their staff

From the staff perspective the YCH approach to the first year of welfare reform has proved to be positive. Welfare Reform Officer Andy Lord has spoken of surprisingly optimistic outcomes arising from the initial despair brought on by the “bedroom tax” such as tenants who have welcomed the active YCH support and used it as a springboard to make the basic changes that will take them to improved lifestyles.

Yorkshire Coast Homes staff, are now under no illusions as to the extent of the issues that have been initiated or worsened by the welfare reform legislation but with the benefit of a year’s hindsight they are now well placed to judge the success of the strategy that their company has developed. Andy Lord summed up his view by saying, ***“It is a hard, demanding, and sometimes distressing job but I know we’re part of a successful strategy. I’m proud to work for a company where the duty of care is focused so strongly upon the tenants”.***

For further information please contact Sarah Bird, Assistant Director of Communities,  
[sarah.bird@ych.org.uk](mailto:sarah.bird@ych.org.uk)

## **Suicide prevention training with the Samaritans – Riverside Housing**

Staff at Riverside’s award-winning Customer Service Centre (CSC) have been trained by suicide prevention experts from emotional support charity Samaritans in how to handle calls from residents on the brink.

Based at Riverside’s head office in Liverpool, the CSC operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Around 100 staff takes calls from Riverside’s 55,000 homes from Irvine to Ipswich. In addition they manage calls for three other organisations out of office hours.

On average the CSC takes 40,000 calls a month. Calls can range from reporting anti-social behaviour or requesting repairs, to checking rent accounts or general enquiries regarding tenancies.

A few months prior to the introduction of welfare reforms, staff reported an increase in the number of callers expressing suicidal thoughts. Suicidal calls are now coming in at a rate of around three per week.

Staff raised concerns about how to handle these emotionally challenging conversations, and following workplace training from the Samaritans, they are now equipped with the skills and confidence to talk to those at risk of suicide.

### **The Project**

Anna Bishop, Riverside’s Director of Customer Service, said: *“As austerity measures continue to affect many social housing tenants, we are finding more and more people literally at the end of their tether. Job losses, cuts in benefits and homelessness are just some of the issues that are leading people towards feelings of desperation so severe, that they are sharing suicidal feelings with our staff.”*

Media reports continue to confirm that people are taking drastic action when the impacts of welfare reform cuts hit hard, highlighting the issue of how money worries may contribute to suicidal feelings.

Rachel Kirby-Rider, Samaritans’ Executive Director of Fundraising and Communications, said: *“Many of Riverside’s callers are vulnerable, and it’s to their credit that they’re making a real effort to provide these people with the support they need. Riverside is one of the few housing associations providing this training for their staff. Samaritans has 60 years of experience in dealing with those unable to cope and we’re glad to be able to help Riverside provide a better service.”*

Anna Bishop added: *“Our customer service centre colleagues now have a greater understanding of how to manage crucial conversations with people in severe distress. They are also being encouraged to speak to the Samaritans directly if they need support after taking this type of distressing call.”*

### **The Impact**

Anna Bishop said: *“One of our advisors took a call from a man who wanted to cancel repairs because he was going away. The advisor asked if he could rearrange the repairs to when the man was back, but he said ‘I’m not coming back. I’m walking into the sea tonight. I’ve heard when your lungs fill up with water it doesn’t hurt anymore.’”*

*“The advisor called the police and the caller’s life was saved. The next day he wrote in to thank the advisor for ‘caring more than his own family’.”*

Due to its success, Samaritans training has become a rolling programme within the CSC, and also being taken up by other front line areas within Riverside.

### **Janette’s story**

*I have worked for Riverside in the Customer Service Centre for 16 years.*

*Over the past few years the calls have become more in-depth, demanding and at times quite stressful and upsetting.*

*Those without jobs are finding it harder to get work and learning how to cope living on benefits. Following recent changes to the welfare benefits system, more people are calling us upset, worried, angry and extremely stressed, because they don’t know how they are going to manage.*

*I have dealt with some very extreme cases - only last week I spoke to a lady who had found her neighbour dead in the property. Remaining calm and expressing empathy and understanding is really important at times like these.*

*Sometimes speaking to people with suicidal feelings during my nightshift, has at times left me wondering whether I could have done more, or handled conversations differently.*

*The training session with the Samaritans really helped me. We were encouraged to take part in role play to see how we would deal with different situations. Recognising triggers, which at the time seem inconsequential, may in fact signify the last straw for someone. Our role as first point of contact frequently means that we take the full force of a caller’s anger and frustration. We learned that the way we initially react is important and that giving short words of encouragement can be helpful in difficult situations.*

*During the training we learned about appropriate and inappropriate anger and how to avoid taking it personally. It is important to listen to an angry caller, so that they can let off steam and not to interrupt, as this could make them even angrier - better to remain calm and express empathy. There was also a focus on the importance of our own welfare and well-being. If, as an advisor, we feel uptight and stressed we cannot effectively help those experiencing the same or similar feelings. We were encouraged to talk to someone like the Samaritans, following a difficult call. This can help relieve stress and avoid taking work problems home with us.*

*I found the training invaluable and have been able to put into practice most of the skills and tips we learned. I feel more confident when presented with extremely challenging calls and more able to help people who are severely distressed.*

For further information please contact Carl Mitchell, Assistant Director of Operations, Riverside North Division, [carl.mitchell@riverside.org.uk](mailto:carl.mitchell@riverside.org.uk)

## Gentoo – Staff Impact

Gentoo is situated in the North East of England and is a people, property, planet business that invests any profit for social purpose. As a result, this offers many real benefits to people, communities and society as well the environment.

The Group have come up with a wide range of initiatives, all of which are aimed at enriching and adding value to their customers’ lives and improving their ‘art of living’.

As a result of the rising cost of living, the cuts and particularly welfare reform, the environment for their customers has got tougher, with some of them having to choose whether to eat or heat. This has been very challenging for their staff to deal with as they are faced with more complex issues than ever before. Gentoo have recognised the potentially detrimental effect this could have on the health and well-being of their staff and have therefore instigated a number of initiatives, such as:

- Comprehensive staff briefing and training – Business Club Briefings to their Leadership Group of senior managers within the organisation, to make them aware of the impact welfare reform could have on their part of the business. Front line and back office support staff training, bespoke to that part of the business, so that staff are kept up to date with latest developments and confident in giving appropriate advice and support to customers.
- Communications programme – regular updates in staff newsletter, hints and tips hand out for staff to refer to, and a bespoke newsletter ‘BenGen’ giving the latest developments around welfare benefits for staff.
- Specialist training – one to one coaching programme for income management staff, mental health and suicide awareness training and Discretionary Housing Payment training for front-line staff.
- Skills matching – use of Belbin profiling to analyse staff and ‘match’ them to a particular role within income management.
- Wider initiatives – Gentoo have a staff health and well being programme ‘*happy, healthy and here*’, which has included everything from competitive sport with other organisations to regular mini-health MOTs, weight management and exercise classes. We were recently awarded the ‘better health at work’ Gold Award, are now 19<sup>th</sup> in the Top Times 100 Companies and were placed first this year in the Stonewall Work Equality Index. Gentoo are also members of PPC, an employee assistance programme that provides staff with free advice and support, for example counselling, debt management, legal advice. The Group have built a close relationship with a local Chaplain, who visits all offices regularly to talk to any staff who wish to.

## Welfare Reform – Members’ Good Practice Briefing

### Housing organisations approach in mitigating impact on their staff

- Managers of front line staff facing the most difficult of customer situations are encouraged to support their staff through informal interventions (such as simply just ‘checking in’ with colleagues regularly or getting to know their staff well so that they can recognise when staff may be feeling under pressure).
- Gentoos have also invested in a number of senior managers throughout the organisation to obtain an externally recognised qualification in Coaching and Mentoring skills. It is our intention to use these staff in future to offer a more formal intervention where staff are feeling under pressure through the use of ‘resilience coaching’ techniques. To that end, the organisation have recruited a member of staff to their Learning & Development Team who will be specifically responsible for managing programmes of this nature and their coaching programmes in general.

For further information please contact Samantha Humble, Head of Operations,  
[samantha.humble@gentoogroup.com](mailto:samantha.humble@gentoogroup.com)

## **Supporting front line staff at Helena Partnerships**

Helena Partnership is a registered provider based in St Helens, Merseyside with approximately 12,500 stock and nearly 600 employees.

As an established IIP Gold employer, IIP champion and holder of the Customer Excellence Award Helena takes its responsibilities as a service provider and employer seriously.

Helena took early measures to prepare itself for welfare reform and recognised that its front line staff in the customer service centre, neighbourhoods, rents and older peoples’ service teams were key and needed to feel confident and well-supported, given that they could be handling very difficult and sensitive customer interactions.

Early measures included contacting or visiting all tenants who were due to be impacted by the bedroom tax. By early communication Helena sought to reduce the shock or sense of surprise to tenants, which would make further support easier to manage, staff were asked for feedback and suggestions about what would help in terms of support.

### **Suicide awareness training**

One idea was to provide suicide awareness training. Whilst this might sound extreme one or two staff reported that they had received such a call and said how inadequate they felt when unsure how to respond to this situation. The responsibility of saying the wrong thing was a source of anxiety which Helena quickly recognised. A series of fully funded suicide awareness training sessions were arranged for all front line staff by the Bridgewater NHS Trust, over 130 staff have attended these sessions.

***“The trainer was great and made what we thought would be a dark session really interesting. It changed our pre-conceptions about the subject and gave those of us in the customer contact centre useful signs to identify customers at risk. We now have a comprehensive list of support agencies we can signpost people to.”*** Ben Cooper – One Call Advisor

### **Mental health first aid training**

A further measure which Helena has introduced is a team of mental health first aiders (MHFA). Helena was an early adopter which led to a roll out to many front line staff. Feedback from staff was that as well as helping them to support their colleagues, this training was really useful for working with and supporting clients with poor mental health. The innovative use of the course led to Helena being entered for the third MHFA Annual Awards in Feb 2013 and winning the category for organisations that have shown exemplary commitment to increasing mental health literacy through working with and utilising MHFA. About 8% of Helena staff are now MHFA trained and are distributed across all departments and levels of staff.

As well as the full MHFA course, smaller training elements can be delivered as MHFA Lite. Helena has partnered with MerseyTrain to deliver specialist bereavement training to Scheme managers and customised mental health awareness training to operatives who work in tenants’ homes.

Paul Turner, Plasterer from Helena Propertycare is a mental health first aider ***“I want to raise awareness with other operatives that we all have mental health issues from time to time and some of us can control it better than others. Men particularly are not very good at opening up to other men. To help get peoples’ attention I am doing a sponsored bungee jump in the summer and will be wearing a mental health T shirt and raising money for the Food Bank which is a good local cause. I definitely think it is a good service to provide.”***

### **Stress awareness**

Helena has an established wellbeing policy and provides stress awareness and resilience training at all levels in the organisation. Helena will shortly pilot an innovative new programme, underpinned by the HSE stress management standards ‘Promoting positive management behaviour’. Aimed at managers this programme will raise awareness of the impact they can have on their team and also provide tools to help them identify and deal with staff that may be experiencing stress.

### **Wider staff engagement**

As part of business transformation of front line services, leaders at Helena Partnerships have invested heavily in staff engagement to learn about blockages and barriers to providing customer service excellence. An innovative programme has fostered high levels of involvement and empowerment including:

- a welly wall in the customer service centre where staff could put up their issue on a welly shaped post-it; all contributions were acknowledged and divided into ‘yes we can’, ‘not we can’t’ and the reasons why and ‘perhaps’ but we need to assess further
- introduction of Yammer so front line staff could engage with colleagues during a busy day and share ideas and suggestions
- mini-conferences with front line staff so they could get involved in break out groups and identify measures to make their job easier and the service more effective
- a series of ‘sweet sixteen’ projects identified from the conference feedback e.g. how we can get our customers online, make it easier for customers to pay, find new markets for our homes by using private sector techniques, identify ways to reduce repairs, make better use of IT and make every contact count. These projects were led and delivered by staff members.
- results were shared with colleagues at creative mini-conferences, featuring family fortunes quiz on repairs, blind date on housing providers and a digital den, to promote staff and customer engagement
- a comprehensive staff survey was rolled out in summer 2013. Discussion about results gave further insights about how staff were feeling and what else would help
- participation in the NHC welfare reform project gave staff the opportunity to speak to an independent person about how welfare reform has impacted them. The report has been shared with managers to help identify further actions to address staff wellbeing.

***“I feel 100% supported now that the way the Customer Service Centre is structured, with all the relevant teams on the same floor and we have a member of the Rents team hot desk with us every day so we can learn from each other. We definitely have more of a one team approach. The mini conferences gave us confidence that issues will be taken forward and that we will continue to get support in the future.”***

Lesley Lennon Vaughan – One Call Advisor

### **Workplace facilities**

Over the last few years Helena has encouraged agile working and over a third have remote access facilities. As well as the opportunity to flex their hours of work many staff can work from home before and after appointments or book working from home days. This can help minimise stress and give staff more control over how, where and when they work.

Helena has a strong wellbeing agenda with a range of facilities and activities on offer including: zumba, yoga, running, badminton, discount on gym membership, cycle to work scheme, telephone or face to face counselling.

For further details please contact Penny Aspden, Director of Organisational Development, [penny.aspden@HelenaPartnership.co.uk](mailto:penny.aspden@HelenaPartnership.co.uk)



## Welfare Reform – Members’ Good Practice Briefing

### Housing organisations approach in mitigating impact on their staff

Frontline housing staff are dealing with more and more challenging and difficult enquiries from their tenants, through their day to day interactions, all as a result of the impact of the government flagship welfare reform programme and general austerity. Tenants are really struggling and have to make some real difficult choices, which are having an adverse effect on their health and wellbeing. This in turn is having an impact on the wellbeing of employees.

The case studies showcased in this briefing are just some of the approaches housing providers are taking around supporting their staff, through these difficult times.

The report published by ***Straight Forward***, recommends some areas for housing providers to consider:

#### **Overall direction**

- What is the organisation’s position around ‘rent first’ and customer wellbeing?
- How well has this been translated in to key messages?
- How well has this been communicated to all staff – including what it means for them in their role?
- How does this impact resourcing?
- Is the balance right between revenue teams/customer support teams?

#### **Role clarity**

- How well defined are the roles within the Neighbourhood/Revenue teams? What are the expectations of each role?
- How well have you defined the boundaries of each role?
- How well have you communicated this to all staff?
- How equipped are your staff to effectively carry out these roles?

#### **Training**

What areas should you be investing in:

- Suicide/mental health awareness
- Managing challenging/difficult customer situations training
- Negotiating – collecting rent
- Resilience
- Welfare reform/benefits

#### **Support**

- How much focus do you place on performance targets?
- How balanced is your approach in terms of the need to deliver against targets and the provision of support, encouragement and feedback for team members?
- What mechanisms do you have in place to provide staff with the time/support they need?
- How well equipped are your managers to coach/guide and support their teams?

NHC would like to thank all those who have contributed to this briefing and Straight Forward for supporting the work of the NHC, if your organisation would like to hear further around the work of Straight Forward please get in touch with [Charlotte@straight-forward.co.uk](mailto:Charlotte@straight-forward.co.uk)