

Financial Inclusion; How whg aim to make it a win, win.

Walsall housing group knew that money management and debt were major issues for its tenants, and having a Financial Inclusion Strategy was good for business as well as for the community. With the help and advice of the CIH, it developed this strategy and if implemented correctly it could be a win, win for whg as well as for the customer.

The aim of whg's financial inclusion strategy was to offer good quality financial advice and support for residents in Walsall, to prevent rent arrears, sustain tenancies and create healthy communities.

Financial exclusion and indebtedness can cause an increase in crime and anti-social behaviour, by taking steps to improve the life of families we may break the cycle of deprivation. Rent arrears have a detrimental effect on housing associations business; evictions are an expense, especially when you add the cost of repairing and re-letting.

To improve performance whg had to develop a way to reduce arrears while preventing their occurrence.

whg took a holistic as well as strategic approach .Effective financial inclusion would involve bringing together outside organisations as well as whg in house services

Jaz Kaur Income advice manager demonstrated whg's coordinated approach by mobilising partner organisations and other housing associations under one banner of Walsall in Credit (Wincred). Wincred allowed them to exchange good practice ideas and services for the benefit of the community. Service level agreements were drawn up to enable swift referrals to CAB, Walsave, a local credit union and local authority Housing benefit Service.

An example of reciprocal benefits of this way of working is whg's and Walsall council collaborating to ensure homeless applicants are able to clear any outstanding former tenancy debts to whg. Walsall Council pay the first 1/3rd, the customer pays the 2nd 1/3rd. by way of a credit union loan with whg writing off the final 1/3rd. The customer benefits from clearing this debt and starting to save for future through the credit union.

Publicity included, promoting welfare advice, loan shark service, incentive schemes for clear rent accounts through addition to whg rent statements, rent arrears advice on posters and on buses. Promoting financial help and assistance in resident's magazines, local press, whg website and community benefit days whg also formulated a strategy for implementation, with the aim of bringing

financial inclusion to the front line.

whg's Arrears Prevention Team Manager Joy Baker was tasked with making the financial inclusion strategy a reality for its customers. All incoming applicants to whg who have been allocated a property are contacted and invited to attend a "pre tenancy interview." .Examples of the services offered are

- Home contents insurance
- Cost of running your home information leaflet
- Signposting customers to credit union, Walsave for customers & ability to complete applications for customers
- Quick referral service for debt advice
- Income maximisation help via in house Welfare benefit advisors
- In house Floating support service, if vulnerabilities are identified a referral can be made
- Energy saving advice & booklet.

"The benefit is that the customers are aware of what services whg offer to support them if they accept the property at the same time as being informed of their obligations to pay their rent and be a good tenant. When the tenancy starts, housing officers have detailed information to enable them to act to prevent tenancy and arrears issues arising and escalating. "These services are also available to existing customers.

Early intervention has benefited the customer, led to fewer evictions and abandonment's on new tenancies, as result more stable communities. Arrears are reducing and the principal productivity costs frees up time and money to be utilised elsewhere.