

Homeownership Management Policy

Housing Service

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Version 2.0



HOMEOWNERSHIP MANAGEMENT POLICY

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Approved by	Cabinet October 2023

1 Purpose of the Policy

- 1.1 To ensure Folkestone and Hythe District Council (hereafter referred to as ‘the Council’) provides a high-quality homeownership management service to its leaseholders and shared owners in line with legislation and best practice guidelines.

2 Policy objectives and scope

- 2.1 To ensure accuracy of service charges and ensure that income from tenants’ rent payments and other charges do not subsidise services provided to its leaseholders and shared owners.
- 2.2 To keep the level of service charge arrears to a minimum. To ensure that a consistent approach is taken to service charge arrears collection and that where necessary individual circumstances are considered.
- 2.3 To set out how the Council consults with leaseholders and other shared owners with regards to Section 20 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, as amended by Section 151 of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002.

3 Legal/Regulatory Framework

3.1 Internal:

- The property leases and title plans.

3.2 External:

- Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 (as amended)
- Housing and Urban Development Act 1993
- The Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002
- RICS Service charge residential management code
- The Service Charges (Consultation Requirements) (England) Regulations 2003.
- The Social Landlords Mandatory Reduction of Service Charges (England) Directions 2014
- The Social Landlords Discretionary Reduction of Service Charges (England) Directions 2014
- The Housing (Service Charge Loans) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2009
- Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Act 2022

4 Responsibility

- 4.1 The Leasehold Management Senior Specialist retains overall responsibility for the implementation of this policy.
- 4.2 The Leasehold Management Senior Specialist is responsible for the operational delivery of this policy and the associated procedures. This includes responsibility for monitoring and review, staff awareness and training, policy development, and communication to customers.

5 The Policy

5.1 Service Charges

- 5.1.1 The Council will provide accurate information to the homeowners about the services they receive, the costs of those services and any amounts due in payment. Information provided will be clear and transparent and conform to legislation and current best practice.
- 5.1.2 The day-to-day service charges are raised to cover a proportion of the expenditure in connection with maintaining and managing the properties and/or estates.
- 5.1.3 The service charges paid by the leaseholders and shared owners are variable and cover all elements of expenditure incurred by the Council in maintaining and managing the properties and/or estates. Elements of expenditure can include (but are not limited to):
- Costs for repairs to reserved parts of the building or estate
 - Lighting and electricity
 - Grounds maintenance and cleaning
 - Insurance
 - Management by the Council or it's appointed agent(s)

The service charges are variable and will differ from year to year.

- 5.1.4 Major works service charges are raised to cover a proportion of large scale works to the building and/or estate. Major works are defined as works which cost more than £250 to any one leaseholder or shared owner within the building and/or estate. Major works cover such items of expenditure as (but are not limited to):
- Roofing
 - External fabric
 - Decorations
 - Estate footpaths and roads
 - Doors and windows

5.1.5 In all cases, service charges must be reasonably incurred and any works or services that incur a cost must be to a reasonable standard.

5.2 **Ground rent**

5.2.1 Ground rent is a fixed £10 charge that is payable annually and is separate from general service charges. Ground rent is a condition of the lease. The Council must issue a separate formal written demand for payment. This demand will be included within the service charge invoicing pack.

5.2.2 Accordingly with the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Act 2022, all long leases after June 2022 will have ground rent set at one peppercorn (£nil).

5.2.3 The formal demand for ground rent will be made no less than 30 days, and no greater than 60 days before the ground rent is due for payment.

5.2.4 The due date for ground rent is set according to the date noted within the lease and must be paid in accordance with the terms contained within the formal written demand.

5.3 **Service charge invoicing**

5.3.1 The service charge year runs from April to March. Leaseholders and shared owners will receive two service charge demands in any given service charge year. An invoice for the estimated cost for the forthcoming year in March and a subsequent invoice in September for the previous year's final account.

5.3.2 An invoice will be issued to leaseholders and shared owners within 30 days before the start of the service charge year. The invoice issued will provide a clear breakdown of the charges estimated to be incurred during the coming service charge year (April to March) for which the estimate is based.

5.3.3 In September of each year the leaseholders and shared owners will receive a reconciliation invoice to reflect the actual cost from the previous service charge year (April to March). This will be the actual service charge invoice for the period.

5.3.4 Terms of payment for both estimated and actual service charges require charges to be paid in full within 21 days of the due date of the invoice. Payment in full may also mean that a payment agreement is to be made within the 21-day period.

5.4 ***Service charge limitations***

5.4.1 The Social Landlords Mandatory Reduction of Service Charges (England) Directions 2014, dictate that local authorities and other private registered social housing providers (PRPs) cannot recover through service charges the cost of repairs, maintenance, and improvement work in excess of £10,000 (outside of London) if the following apply:

- If the works are funded either in full or in part by Government or Homes England funding for the repair, maintenance, or improvement of social housing.
- The leaseholder occupies the property as their only or principal home.
- The leaseholder was the leaseholder at the time of the works.

5.4.2 The Social Landlords Discretionary Reduction of Service Charge (England) Directions 2014, permits the Council to reduce or waive service charges payable in the respect of repairs, maintenance, or improvement works undertaken to the building and/or estate, where the property is situated.

The Council will administer any discretionary reduction on a case-by-case basis. Basic eligibility criteria can be found within the service charge payment options procedure.

5.4.3 There are limits on the amount (and type of works) that can be charged to new leaseholders and freeholders with service charges who have bought under the Right to Buy. Section 125 of the Right to Buy lists potential works to be undertaken and the associated cost within an initial 5-year period. The Council cannot charge any additional sums above the limitations except for any increases to the estimated costs due to inflation.

5.5 ***Service charge overpayment/credits***

5.5.1 In some instances, the actual service charge invoice may be less than the estimated charges for the service charge year. Where this happens, the Council will apply the credit/account adjustment to the leasehold service charges account.

5.5.2 If the leaseholder requests a refund to be paid to them, the Council will refund the money within 30 days. However, if a debt is owed by the leaseholder for service charges or other charges, then any credit will be used to offset the debt before a refund is issued.

5.6 **Payment Methods**

5.6.1 The Council will accept payment for leasehold and shared ownership service charges through the following methods:

- One off payment by debit/credit card or cheque
- Direct Debit
- Standing Order

The preference for payment of service charges is by Direct Debit.

5.6.2 Leaseholders may be eligible for a loan to pay for service charges that have been undertaken and invoiced for.

5.7 **Section 20b**

5.7.1 Where the actual expenditure for a given service charge year is not known within 6 months of the end of the financial year, a notice as stipulated within the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 Section 20b, will be sent to all leaseholders and shared owners who are affected.

5.7.2 The Section 20b notice will inform the leaseholders of the costs incurred to date and all anticipated expenditure yet to be accounted for. This will allow the Council to recover the full costs for the specific period at a later date.

5.8 **Service charge arrears**

5.8.1 The service charge arrears collection process is based on 5 stages. The service charge arrears procedure sets out these stages in greater detail.

5.8.2 The Council aims to collect 100% of the service charges demanded.

5.8.3 Failure of the leaseholder or shared owner to pay service charges will result in arrears action being taken and may lead to forfeiture of their lease.

5.9 **Shared ownership rent and rent arrears.**

5.9.1 Shared owners are required to pay the Council rent on the proportion of the shared ownership property which the Council retains. The initial amount of rent the shared owner is required to pay is set at the time when the property is bought. The rent is subsequently adjusted annually with inflation or when the property is subject to staircasing.

5.9.2 The shared ownership rent arrears procedure sets out the process to be followed when a shared owner fails to pay their rent in accordance with their lease.

5.9.3 The failure of a shared owner to pay their rent may eventually lead to their eviction.

5.10 **Section 20 consultation**

5.10.1 It is the Council's intention to ensure all leaseholders and shared owners are consulted with accurately, fairly, and within the scope of the current legislation (Section 20 Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, as amended by the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002) and best practice.

5.10.2 Section 20 allows the Council to reclaim the full cost of works through the service charges, as all parties must adhere to the terms set out within the lease and relevant legal provision.

5.10.3 The major works/S20 procedure establishes:

- When consultation is required.
- How consultation will be sent to leaseholders
- How to address emergency works

5.11 **Access**

5.11.1 The Leaseholder has an obligation to allow access to the freeholder and/or the Council for inspection, or works purposes, as defined within their Leasehold Agreement. The following timescales will apply:

- For general access to undertake inspections and works, a minimum of 3 days notification is required.
- For emergency access, all reasonable attempts to contact the leaseholder will be made before gaining access to the property. Timescales will differ depending upon the urgency.

5.11.2 Forced entry may be necessary if access has not been granted by the resident. This may be for emergency purposes or when statutory and non-statutory works are required. However, forced entry to a property will be used as the last resort only.

5.11.3 The Council will follow its published 'Controlled Access' procedure for gaining entry to a property, which ensures all necessary and reasonable steps are taken to gain access before undertaking any forced entry.

5.11.4 Authorisation for a forced entry must include written confirmation either from a neighbourhood/planned works surveyor, compliance specialist, senior specialist, lead specialist/head of service, and/or service director.

6 Key controls and reporting

- 6.1 This policy applies to the Council's Leasehold Services team, and other associated teams in Assets & Development, Compliance, Income and Corporate Debt.
- 6.2 The policy also applies to all the Council's leaseholders, shared owners, and Recognised tenants' associations (RTAs).
- 6.3 The Leasehold Management Senior Specialist retains the overall responsibility for the implementation of this policy and is responsible for the operational delivery of this policy and the associated procedures. Responsibilities include:
- Monitoring and review of this policy including changes in legislation.
 - Staff awareness and training.
 - Policy development and communication to customers.

7 Associated Documents

- 7.1 The associated internal documents relating to this policy include:

(Internal):

- Service charge arrears procedure
- Leasehold, Shared Ownership and Commercial Property Service Charge Invoicing procedure
- Major works/S20 Consultation procedure
- Shared ownership arrears procedure
- Service charge payment options procedure
- Right to Buy Policy
- Shared Ownership Policy

8 Equality and Diversity

- 8.1 The Council recognises that different people and communities may have specific needs which require flexible approaches. It is the Council's intention that no group or individual should experience discrimination or disadvantage due to any protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. The Council believes that everyone should be treated with dignity, respect and fairness, regardless of their characteristics.
- 8.2 An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out on this policy which will be updated in line with policy reviews (see below) to ensure there is no discrimination, and opportunities to improve equality and access are maximised.

9 Review

- 9.1 This policy will be reviewed every 3 years by the Leasehold Management Senior Specialist and/or the author of the policy. If necessary, this policy will be reviewed sooner to incorporate legislative, regulatory, best practice developments, Council decisions or to address operational issues.