



**Report To:** Housing Portfolio Holder  
**Lead Officer:** Director of Housing

27 January 2016

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## Sheltered Housing Alarm System and Charging Review

### Purpose

1. The report seeks to inform the Housing Portfolio Holder on the need to upgrade the current emergency alarm systems and the changes to the funding of the hardwired alarm systems in the designated sheltered housing schemes. Decisions on both aspects of the report are required.
2. This is a key decision as it;
  - a. Incurs significant expenditure to support the existing alarm charging mechanism and to bring the failing alarm systems up to date.
  - b. It will impact on all the Councils 43 sheltered housing schemes, 14 tenants remaining on the group alarm schemes and all residents of the sheltered properties, including leaseholders.

Permission has been given by the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee to present this report.

### Recommendations

3. It is recommended that the Portfolio Holder approves options A, E, F, G and I in paragraph 20.

### Reasons for Recommendations

4. The hardwired emergency alarm systems currently installed in the schemes are failing, and do not meet the needs of increasingly frail residents or their aspiration to have a flexible system. The subsidy received from Cambridgeshire County Council for the provision of an alarm service for tenants who are in receipt of housing benefit will cease in April 2016. To continue to subsidise the alarm charge will incur a charge to the HRA of in excess of £126,000 annually

### Background

5. In April 2016 the subsidy which is a legacy from the Governments Supporting People Fund will cease. This funding is currently provided to help support tenants meet the cost of the alarm system on schemes that are in receipt of housing benefit. This was a cost met previously in whole by the Supporting People scheme.

6. Since April 2014, the contribution from the Supporting People Fund has been set by Cambridgeshire County Council at £00.50 per week per tenant. The total received was based on an estimate of the percentage at any given time of residents that were likely to be in receipt of any level of housing benefit. The HRA is currently subsidising the cost of the alarms by approximately £126,000 annually which has been fully budgeted for.
7. Recent Government changes that will impact on the HRA mean that any further subsidies could be at the detriment of core services.
8. Residents, including leaseholders, not in receipt of housing benefit in sheltered schemes pay £3 (£3.58 for Group Alarms) per week for the hard wired alarm system. This charge in schemes has recently been reviewed and is deemed to be a realistic charge based on the actual costs of provision of the alarm service.
9. Lifeline is an alarm service run by the Council on a commercial basis. The charges are £4.43 per week and £20 for the initial installation. The cost of purchasing one system is £122 and £115 each if orders in excess of 500 are placed. The Keysafe which is an essential part of the service is required to enable access in the event of an emergency. Currently all sheltered housing properties have Keysafes fitted.
10. The alarm systems in the sheltered schemes were surveyed in 2013 by Tunstall. All systems, with the exception of Elm Court, Over which is excluded from this report, are old and failing. In order to continue to provide an alarm service when the hardwired system has failed Lifeline systems have been installed. To date three hard wired alarm systems have completely failed.

### **Considerations**

11. A survey of all tenants on sheltered schemes has been undertaken. Out of 1307 surveys sent out 1082 (83%) were returned. In summary the majority of tenants contact their Estates Officer by telephone; the alarms are predominantly used to call for help in emergencies and providing a sense of safety and reassurance. 86% of respondents said they would have a Lifeline Alarm system if the current system was not in place. Nearly half of respondents felt it was important to have a choice as to whether they had the alarm service. Significantly over half of those who responded would not be willing to pay for an upgraded alarm system.
12. The Tenants Scrutiny Review of Sheltered Housing highlighted that the profile of sheltered housing residents has changed over time with many residents being more active and some still working. They recommended that the alarm systems in sheltered housing were reviewed as tenants object to paying for an alarm system that they neither need nor want.
13. The cost of upgrading all the hardwired schemes is approximately £500k. A new hardwired system would meet all the tenants needs and have greater functionality than the present system such as fall detectors, movement sensors etc., but it would not enable tenants and leaseholders of sheltered schemes a choice of whether they have it or not.
14. The cost of installing Lifeline alarms will cost in the region of £135,000 based on 80% of all sheltered housing residents signing up to have an Lifeline alarm system. There will be an expected minimal cost of installing telephone lines to those properties without a telephone line. A survey of all residents will be undertaken to ascertain how many will be installed.

15. Whatever option is selected the upgrading of systems either through hardwired systems or Lifeline it will have to be phased in over 2016/17. It will take approximately one year based on converting a scheme per week on average, using existing staff, to change systems from hardwired to Lifeline Alarms.
16. As of April 2016 there will be no funding for the alarms and the service has no recourse to be paid for other than by tenants and leaseholders in sheltered schemes. It is not an eligible charge under housing benefit regulations.
17. A £3 per week charge to tenants currently in receipt of housing benefit may be difficult for some tenants to pay. There is a risk therefore that some residents who need an alarm system would be unwilling to have one and pay for it. The Estates Officers would be aware of these people and work with them to ensure they have all the benefits they are entitled to and refer them to support services where appropriate.
18. Some tenants do not have a telephone line which is required for the Lifeline system. To date the Council has undertaken to install the phone line and bear that expense unless the resident wants to use the line for personal telephone calls. If this is the case they take over the responsibility for the line rental.
19. A Lifeline system will require a smoke alarm linked to the Contact Centre. Should residents opt not to have a Lifeline system there will be a hardwired alarm but like all mainstream properties it will be an alarm that will sound but will not be linked to a contact centre.

### **Options**

20. The options for considerations for the alarms:
  - A. To change the alarm systems to the Lifeline system. The Lifeline system is less expensive than the hard wired option delivers value for money and is sufficiently flexible to meet tenant's needs and wishes. Upgrades can be installed as technology advances.
  - B. To upgrade the hardwired system. This is more costly than the Lifeline systems and does not provide the flexibility that tenants are seeking. The current systems last for approximately 20 years but with the advances in technology maybe obsolete in 5 years.
  - C. Not to upgrade the hard wired system but to change them to Lifeline alarms as they fail. The systems vary from good to poor from the survey but can breakdown at any time with no warning thus leaving tenants vulnerable in the event of an emergency.

The options for consideration for during the transition phase starting 1 April 2016:

- D. To advise residents of the change to the funding but opt to continue to support tenants from 1 April 2016 by not charging the £3 per week for the alarm system pending the upgrade of the system. This will however have a significant impact on the HRA budget.
- E. To advise residents that from 1 April 2016 all will be liable to pay £3 per week for the alarm service whether they are on benefits or not.

Upgraded Scheme options:

- F. Give residents the option of not having an alarm and therefore not having to pay a system unless they opt for a Lifeline alarm.
- G. Where the resident has no telephone line for the Council to bear the cost of installing the line and either adding a weekly charge to the alarm charge or passing responsibility to the tenant if they wish to use the line for any other reason than the alarm system.
- H. Charge the Lifeline market cost of £4.43 per week to sheltered residents
- I. Charge sheltered residents £3 per week to encourage take up and ensure the scheme remains as a designated sheltered housing scheme..

## **Implications**

### ***Financial***

- 21. There are significant financial implications for expenditure which is in the current budget. To upgrade the alarms through a hardwired system would cost approximately £500,000. To upgrade using Lifeline Alarms will cost in the region of £135,000 based on approximately 80% of sheltered housing residents taking up the offer of a Lifeline system. The cost of subsidising the alarm system in 2016/17 for those on housing benefit will cost the HRA approximately £126,000. This will decrease as the upgrade programme progresses throughout the year.

### ***Legal***

- 22. The Council's leases state that the landlord must provide an alarm system for the use of a leaseholder but does not stipulate what type of alarm this must be.

### ***Staffing***

- 23. There are no significant implications

### ***Risk Management***

- 24. There is a risk that tenants who need an alarm will be unwilling to have one and pay for it. Where the alarm system is not hardwired and the full market charge of Lifeline is levied, the scheme may be a risk of de-designation and thus exposed to the Right to Buy legislation.

### ***Equality and Diversity***

- 25. None

### ***Climate Change***

- 26. None

## **Consultation responses (including from the Youth Council)**

- 27. A survey of sheltered housing tenant's preferences has been carried out and reflected in this report. Further consultation will be carried out before the implementation of the decision taken by the Portfolio Holder.

## **Effect on Strategic Aims**

### **Aim 1 - C**

28. We will make sure South Cambridgeshire continues to offer an outstanding quality of life for our residents

**Report Author:** Anita Goddard – Head of Housing and Property Services  
Telephone: (01954) 713040