

**AGENDA ITEM NO. 15(F)**

**WARWICK DISTRICT COUNCIL**

TO: HOUSING COMMITTEE - 25<sup>th</sup> JANUARY, 2000  
SUBJECT: ILLEGAL OCCUPATION OF COUNCIL PROPERTIES  
FROM: HOUSING

1. **Purpose of Report**

1.1 To advise members of a project undertaken during January, 1999 and for members to approve the proposals for the better detection of illegal occupation.

2. **Background**

2.1 Protecting empty properties from illegal occupation forms part of the Housing Business Unit's Service Plan 1999/2000.

2.2 Whilst emphasis is placed on protecting empty properties from illegal occupation, properties that are allocated but not occupied by the legal tenant also need protecting. It is these properties that may go undetected as the property looks occupied and in most circumstances rent is paid either by the illegal occupant or fraudulently claimed by the tenant that is no longer in occupation.

2.3 When properties are identified as not occupied by the legal tenant, the existing abandoned properties procedure is followed to obtain possession of the property at the earliest opportunity. However, this is not just a question of instantly changing the locks!

2.4 In January, 1999, a project was undertaken, for a fixed term, to identify illegal occupation in Council owned properties. During visits undertaken by the Housing Officers, across the district, the tenants were asked to provide details of other household members. This information was cross checked with information held on the property file and that held by the Housing Benefit Section. The information obtained in 95% of the visits was confirmed as true. The remaining 5% were forwarded to the Benefit Investigating Officer within the Finance Business Unit. However, no Housing Benefit was fraudulently being claimed. In all cases the property was occupied by the legal tenant.

3. **Proposals**

3.1 It is probably correct that the incidence of illegal occupancy in Council owned property is low. However, we must not be complacent.

3.2 There are various ways of increasing methods of detecting illegally occupied properties, the following three proposals are recommended for further investigation.

**Photographs**

3.3 As part of the tenancy agreement review, which started in December, 1999, consideration is being given to all new tenants being required to provide a passport size

photograph. The photograph would help Officers know the true identity of tenants and would be particularly useful on sites which benefit from an Estate Supervisor.

- 3.4 The photograph may also assist the Housing Benefit Section to process housing benefit applications as applicants are now required to provide proof of identity before a claim can be assessed.
- 3.5 It is recommended the option is explored by the Tenancy Agreement Working Group and a recommendation will be made in the report to Housing Committee with the re-draft of the Tenancy Agreement. This is time tabled for June, 2000.

#### "Phone and Tell" Campaign

- 3.6 It is proposed a confidential line be set up where members of the public can inform the Council of people they believe are occupying a property illegally or where people are the legal tenants but are residing elsewhere.
- 3.7 It is recommend the option is explored with other relevant Business Units within the next 3 months.

#### Improved Technology with Personal Access Control Key Fobs

- 3.8 Members may be aware that the majority of our flats with shared access have intercom links via the PAC system. Technology has progressed where equipment can be purchased that will identify dates and times an individual key fob is used. Therefore, if a key fob is not used for a period of time, further enquiries would show if a property is not occupied.
- 3.9 It will not, of course, identify properties that are illegally occupied as the legal tenant may have given their key fob to the occupant. However, in conjunction with the photograph initiative the illegal occupant could easily be identified.
- 3.10 It is recommended the option is explored within the next 3 months, assisted by Property Business Unit.

#### 4. Key Issues Strategy

There is no direct relevance.

#### 5. Recommendations

- 5.1 The Committee is requested to approve the proposals set out in 3 above.

Amanda Ball  
Estates Officer

#### **Background Papers**

Nil

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**Areas in District  
Affected:**

All