Support for Vulnerable Residents Strategy 2012 -14

Responsible Officer: Director of the Gateway Team

Statement of intent or Aim of the Strategy

Phoenix Community Housing is the first Community Gateway in London, and the only partial stock transfer of any of the four community gateways in England. As a Community Gateway, residents are at the heart of everything we do as a social landlord and in our local engagement. PCH is committed to providing suitable homes, maintaining independence, tackling social exclusion and empowering people to have a better quality of life. We believe that assessment of need and appropriate support are the key to sustaining an individual within their community. This supports the wider strategic objective of PCH to 'enhance the quality of life and environment for our community' by facilitating settled and sustainable communities.

This Strategy's scope is broad and flexible there is no one size fits all. PCH’s strategic approach sets out key steps that will help to identify potential vulnerability and ensure that appropriate advice and assistance can be provided. Whilst there will continue to be an emphasis on improved performance in key areas such as rent arrears collection and tenancy and estate management, it is essential that service provision is tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable residents. In addition PCH cannot deliver outcomes in isolation and it is essential that we work in partnership with colleagues in the statutory benefits agencies, London Borough of Lewisham, local health agencies and the voluntary and independent sectors.

The aim of this strategy is to:

- Provide a strategic approach to the housing, management and support of vulnerable residents.
- Establish a policy framework and ensure it supports this strategy.
- To develop a Welfare Reform Group internally that covers all aspects of the business
- Develop and start to implement a comprehensive action plan that delivers the aims of the strategy over the next year.
- Ensure that effective mechanisms are in place to support residents who are vulnerable to help sustain tenancies in a systematic and consistent way.
- Assist PCH to meet its Safeguarding obligations.
- Identify potential service developments which could improve the provision of housing management support to vulnerable people, promoting independence, social inclusion and working to prevent homelessness.
- Improve the well-being of residents by increasing participation in healthy and active lifestyles.
- Contribute towards the delivery of value for money across all services.
- Provide ongoing training and support for staff, residents and Board members to meet changing needs.

We will implement the Strategy over a number of years and in number of phases commencing in 2012.
2012/13

- We will develop the service delivery methods within our support and housing management services.
- We will implement phase 1 of the agreed action plan.

2013/14

- We will continue developing and improving service delivery.
- We will deliver phase 2 of the action plan.
- We will develop and implement an in house awareness training programme.
- At the end of 2014 we will start to review the Strategy.

Background and Context

There are growing numbers of vulnerable people with support needs living in the social housing sector. This is partly due to increasing demand as well as existing tenants growing older and living longer. Disability, illness and poor health are not inevitable as people age, but their likelihood increases. PCH needs to plan strategically to work towards meeting the needs of all residents and work to help sustain tenancies. Appendix 1 shows our existing profile of residents.

Current political policy presents both opportunities and some challenges to PCH and our residents. The Coalition Government’s concept of the ‘Big Society’ is expected to encourage people to take an active role in the community and supports the work of the voluntary sector. This shift in policy accompanied by financial pressures and the climate of public sector cuts makes it essential that PCH has a clear strategic view to respond to the needs of its vulnerable residents.

The new Localism Act seeks to devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods giving local communities control over housing and planning decisions. There is renewed focus on making better use of existing social housing, ensuring that support is targeted where it is most needed. Specific proposals include:

- Setting up new services for local residents or working with partners to serve people over a wider area than is currently the case to help – helping to save money and enhance services available.
- The Regulatory Framework, (in place since April 2012) puts local people in control of driving up standards of social housing and resolving most failings. Only issues that are of “serious detriment” are considered by the Social Housing Regulator. This means that PCH needs to work even more closely with residents to ensure that services continue to be of a high standard and of a type that residents want and need to receive.
- The changes to social housing waiting lists limit availability to the most needy, plus groups councils choose to add. Although this has reduced the number of people on lists it may over time residualise social housing further, filtering people with the most difficult lives into this tenure. Consequently the sector will be managing an increasing number of vulnerable new tenants in need of support to help sustain their tenancy.
• The Localism Act also enables registered social housing providers to grant social tenancies on a fixed term, as long as this is agreed by their Board and the local Authority in a lettings Strategy. There is a risk that this proposal may change the way residents think about their homes and communities. If social tenancies are seen as short temporary accommodation residents are less likely to invest time and money in property, friendships, and community activities.

The tenancy proposals do not affect existing tenants whose rights will be unaffected, even if they move.

Changes to the way that housing related support services are funded may provide further challenges. The Supporting People Programme was established in 2003 and provided the funding together with the monitoring and review processes for housing related support services. That funding is no longer a ring fenced component of Area Based Grant for local authorities. This means that there are risks that this source of funding could under the current economic climate be used to fund other services. Currently PCH only receives a limited amount of supporting people funding for the link line service; although this may change in the future. We also work with other organisations to provide support who are reliant on this form of funding and do refer vulnerable residents for additional support who receive it.

Alongside the localism agenda the Coalition Government are carrying out major Welfare Reforms. The Welfare Reform Act was passed in parliament in February 2011 with changes expected to be introduced in October 2013. The major proposal for reform is the introduction of a new benefit, known as universal credit (UC), which will replace a range of existing in and out of work benefits. There are a number of proposals that could have an impact on PCH and our residents. These include areas such as:

• Breaking the link between benefit entitlement and actual rents. It has announced plans to introduce, through regulations, cuts to the amount of benefit that working-age tenants can receive
  o Residents who are under occupying their home may face reduced housing benefit payments, which would have an impact on some vulnerable residents. Some 670,000 households across Great Britain would lose an average of £676 per year. Two-thirds of those affected (450,000) are disabled and the National Housing Federation estimates 100,000 live in social homes that have been adapted to be accessible for people with disabilities. PCH estimates that 34% of residents are under occupying their home by at least 1 bedroom.
  o From January 2012 single people aged between 25 and 34 will only be able to claim housing benefit based on the cost of a room in shared house, rather than a modest one bed flat. People who have lived in homeless hostels for at least three months will be exempt from the changes.

• Housing costs are dealt with under the Act as part of UC, and these will determine the calculation of housing costs over the lifetime of UC. The clause is drafted in terms which permit the Secretary of State to determine the basis of the amount to be paid in respect of housing costs. It does not provide for benefit entitlement to be related to actual rents in the locality, as does the existing legislation governing
housing benefit. This potentially could have a significant impact on vulnerable residents and their families.

- One of the options presented substantially reducing the cap on maximum eligible childcare costs. The new cap could be as low as £100 for one child and £150 for two or more children. This potentially may increase financial pressures on low income working residents.

- Some family and friends carers will be affected by conditionality requirements included in the Act. For example, carers now have to be available to work when a child is 5 years old rather than 7 years old (this is currently being phased in). In addition, the increase in the state pension age for women means that many older carers will in future be affected by conditionality requirements. This is likely to have an impact on a number of PCH residents.

- The possible abolition of the Discretionary Social Fund will effectively abolish the provision of crisis loans which are often used by vulnerable new tenants to help set up their new home. Proposals expect local authorities to devise their own schemes for emergency support from April 2013. In the current economic climate, it is likely that adequate funds may not be available. This is a concern as the lack of available funding through the benefits system is very likely to drive more people to use high-cost or even illegal lenders.

- Changes to the welfare benefits system can create significant increases in demand for advice, as can job losses due to recession. Vulnerable residents who often need welfare benefit support are often least able to manage such changes. It is likely that PCH will see significant demand in the need for welfare benefit and money advice among our residents.

**Definition of vulnerability**

Our definition of vulnerability is a resident or member of their household who is experiencing difficulties with day to day living due to health, learning, language, behavioural, family, financial, social or other circumstances or a combination of these circumstances. In terms of identifying vulnerable groups who access or who need to access to our services the following list gives possible examples. It is not intended to be exhaustive but illustrative. Each case should be considered on its own merit.

- Anyone known to have a social worker, CPN or other mental health support, drug or alcohol worker
- Anyone known to have a Community Support Worker
- Women under 19 who are pregnant
- Anyone known to have a probation officer or YOT worker
- Refugees
- People leaving hospital, prison or care
- People with known drug or alcohol problems
- People whose learning disability makes them vulnerable
- People whose physical or sensory impairment makes them vulnerable
- People who are frail due to old age
- Survivors of domestic violence
- Lone parents under 25 taking up their first tenancy
• Anyone accepted as statutory homeless in the last 2 years
• Anyone leaving a supported housing project or care

The Safeguarding agenda
PCH is committed to working in partnership with the London Borough of Lewisham Adult and Children’s safeguarding authorities to ensure PCH staff are trained and are aware of how to report cases of suspected neglect and abuse. This might involve circumstances such as children or vulnerable adults living in unhygienic or dangerous conditions or other indicators of neglect such as being unkempt, severely underweight, or children found at home or left at home to deal with contractors. An area of specific relevance to PCH is Elder Abuse. This includes many different kinds of harm to older people such as intending to harm, harming without intent and the neglect that leads to harm. A useful website in this area is http://www.elderabuse.org.uk/About%20Abuse/What_is_abuse%20define.htm

How to report any of the above concerns are set out in the vulnerability procedure. PCH have both a legal and moral obligation to ensure that we implement procedures which protect vulnerable children and adults living in PCH homes from abuse and neglect.

Tenancy requirements
There are requirements made on every tenant through their tenancy agreement which places upon them a number of responsibilities, including the payment of rent, keeping their property in a good condition, having respect for neighbours and maintaining any garden. Vulnerable or potentially vulnerable residents are not exempt from these or any other tenant responsibilities. However, PCH recognises that some residents will need support to enable them to meet their obligations in light of individual needs and difficulties often faced by vulnerable people.

Financial inclusion and Value for Money
Many PCH tenants face a number of challenges in the current economic climate and financial uncertainty can increase vulnerability. Official statistics show that Lewisham is amongst the most deprived local authority areas in England; placed in the worst 20% per cent. Wards in the Phoenix area have some of the highest concentrations of deprivation, in the country. For PCH and our residents there are value for money benefits to helping residents sustain their tenancy. A failure to communicate or recognise the ‘triggers’ that could alert staff to potential vulnerability may contribute to tenancy breakdown or early failure with all the associated costs to both the tenant and PCH. This affects areas such as:
• Rates of evictions – for both ASB and rent arrears.
• Tenancy abandonment.
• Introductory Tenancies terminated in the first 12 months.
• Tenancy Sustainment.
• Enhancing peoples lifestyles through choice, control and the chance to live independently and safely.

PCH Money Matters Strategy sets out in further detail how we help residents with money management, financial capability which in turn promotes personal well being. Many vulnerable residents are unable to access basic financial support and products leading to
financial exclusion. PCH work in partnership with a range of agencies to provide money advice to residents; provide a range of flexible payment methods, low cost home contents insurance and work with the Lewisham Credit Union.

Arrangements for customers to pay off arrears are made taking into account their ability to pay and their personal and financial circumstances. Customers can get independent advice from our partners including the Citizens Advice Bureau and Lewisham Credit Union. Our Income Management Team also offers residents basic debt and welfare benefit advice.

What do we want to achieve?
We want to help people achieve as much independence as possible and allow them to make informed choices. This is done by providing advice on a variety of issues associated with the tenants related needs. We can help tenant’s access specialist support services including those supporting individuals and families around domestic violence issues, floating support physical health difficulties and financial pressures. We liaise regularly with services that provide short and long-term support, thus ensuring consistency and quality of service from providers. We also need to ensure that we are more proactive in the early stages of a tenancy to identify any possible vulnerability triggers and systematically shape services to help sustain the tenancy.

How will we achieve our aims?
We will work to identify and agree a champion for Vulnerability at Board and PRG levels. These roles will provide leadership and help to promote and raise the profile of the work we do to support vulnerable tenants across the organisation.

PCH expect managers to
- Ensure that there is a structured process in place to identify and respond to the needs of vulnerable residents in respect of their service and that their staff are aware of the processes and understand how to operate them.
- Monitor and take corrective action.
- Identify and share good practice.

PCH expect all staff to
- Consider each case on its merits and tailor the service to meet resident needs
- Treat residents with respect.
- Focus on positive outcomes for each resident.
- Refer residents requiring additional support and work with support and advice agencies to meet individual resident needs.

The needs of vulnerable residents or members of their household will vary regarding the delivery of services to ensure equality of provision and promote tenancy sustainment. Once identified, vulnerable and potentially vulnerable customers will be offered appropriate support and individual support plans will be agreed with the resident’s full co-operation. Support may be delivered by PCH in the form of practical assistance or by partner agencies.
Shaping services to help support vulnerable residents

Customer profile information:
Through tenant profiling PCH is working to put in place steps to identify potential vulnerability. We are building up a profile of our residents and use this information to help inform the way services are delivered. To help us we ask all residents to provide some basic information about their support needs (if any) at tenancy sign up. We are also carrying out home visits or telephone calls, every week, called “Cause for Concern Visits” to tenants who have not been in touch for some time- to check everything is ok.

We are planning tenancy audits and will link in with the major works programme. This approach helps to ensure that we deliver services that residents need and improve the services that we currently offer. Providing personal information is optional but all information is only used for the purposes it is collected and in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

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In addition we will work with our gas servicing contractor to ensure that when the engineer gains access to residents’ homes PCH record and act upon any concerns that are identified concerning the tenancy, the resident or their family.

Accessing services
PCH will provide a range of ways to access our services so that vulnerable residents are not disadvantaged. These include

- Disabled friendly accessible offices and resident resource centres (e.g. Disability Discrimination Act compliant).
- Fax.
- Typetalk / minicom.
- Language Line.
- Provision to provide literature in specified alternative language and formats including easy read.
- Text Messaging.
- Accessible websites for disabled users.
- Using information held on our housing management system to inform the way staff engage with vulnerable residents.

Barriers to services or unique communication methods will be identified through customer profiling. Any issued will be recorded on the housing management system All staff who have contact with residents must be aware and understand the concept of vulnerability and how access to services should be provided.

Resident Involvement
PCH’s Community Empowerment Strategy sets out our commitment to provide a range of accessible opportunities for residents to become involved and influence service development. However PCH recognises that there can sometimes be an additional challenge involving vulnerable residents effectively. We will continue to
develop a range of involvement options to enable vulnerable residents to influence and shape the way services are delivered.

Gaining access to vulnerable residents' homes
Where we need to access a property to carry out repairs, improvements or safety checks we will take into account the needs of our vulnerable customers. Unless there is a reason for not doing so, such as investigating a tenancy issue or emergency situations, we will contact the resident to arrange a mutually convenient time to call and give the tenant the opportunity to arrange for support to be available. If we find it difficult to gain access we will work with partner agencies and use information held on the housing management system to facilitate the visit. If access is not provided we may take legal action if necessary.

Decent Homes, repairs and maintenance services
The Decent Homes Team works with Local Authority Occupational Therapists and has Resident Liaison Officers to assess the needs of vulnerable residents. Staff work closely with the LB Lewisham’s Social Services to ensure that all residents' needs are met. While construction works are carried out, PCH provide a respite facility for residents. This could be daytime or overnight, depending on residents assessed needs.

PCH contact centre staff are trained to prioritise repair requests using published criteria and taking in to account residents’ individual circumstances. Where it is identified that a repair is impacting directly on the residents’ health, well being or security PCH will work flexibly and in some circumstances may carry out the repair sooner.

PCH provide some additional practical services for residents who experience difficulty maintaining their home in the form of gardening, internal decorating service handyperson scheme and minor adaptations.

Partnership Working
We work in partnership with a range of partners. A key partner is the Local Strategic Partnership that works to deliver high level strategic partnership aims. At an operational level we make referrals to appropriate support services where a need is identified for individuals or household experiencing difficulties with everyday living. A corporate support directory has been put together and is currently maintained on PCH’s intranet listing contact with referral details. PCH also works in partnership across the organisation. We operate a Vulnerability Panel where key officers from across all relevant services meet to agree joint actions required to provide PCH tailored services to vulnerable residents on an individual basis.

Living Independently
Tenants whose homes are no longer suitable for them to remain in because of their vulnerability will be helped, where appropriate, by:

- Providing minor adaptation work though PCH own funds.
• Assisting residents to access funds for major adaptations through local authority disabled facilities grant.
• Signposting customers to obtain disability aids from social services and other agencies.
• Referring residents to agencies that can provide appropriate support or care services.
• Providing alternative suitable housing if possible or referring them to other suitable landlords.

**Insurance Claims**
PCH staff will ensure that any vulnerable customers making a potential claim against the low cost home contents insurance policy are adequately supported through what could be a traumatic and stressful period. We will assess residents’ needs and situation, and wherever possible support any claim in such a way as to cause the minimum stress and discomfort.

**Staff and contractor training**
All newly appointed and existing staff will be briefed on this strategy and will receive training in understanding and responding to vulnerability as well as safeguarding. Refresher training will be made available on an annual basis and at any point of change of the terms of the strategy. Active promotion of the types of intervention available for use to help sustain tenancies is important in raising awareness among staff, contractors and residents.

PCH contractors will provide to all operatives toolbox training on safeguarding and identifying vulnerability concerns and how to report them to PCH.

**Monitoring and Scrutiny**
It is important to have processes in place to periodically review support mechanisms as vulnerability is not necessarily a permanent state and personal circumstances may change at any time. The Support co-ordinator or Area Team Manager will review all cases that have been referred for additional support on a monthly basis and update outcomes to the Vulnerability Panel.

The Performance and Quality team will monitor outcomes through Customer Satisfaction Surveys, Mystery Shopper Surveys, analysis of customer complaints and reality checking. In order to find out the most accurate performance information, we will develop our key performance indicators and break them down into more specific fields with a stronger focus on outcomes.

The Performance and Quality Team will undertake timetabled, audits and tests to ensure the strategy is being complied with, across every directorate and service. In addition outcomes against key performance indicators will be reported to all relevant management and Board meetings on a quarterly basis.

Residents will be provided with a range of opportunities to monitor and scrutinise the service including but not limited to surveys, information and performance monitoring, mystery shopping and learning from complaints.
Falsely Declaring Vulnerability
A small number of customers may either falsely declare vulnerability or exaggerate their vulnerability in order to receive services that either would not otherwise be provided or would be provided at a different level/in a different time frame. Should this occur, Phoenix would consider what action, in response, would be appropriate - for example in the case of the repairs service a recharge may be considered.

Reference to other documents and associated policies and procedures
Corporate Plan
Value for Money Strategy
ASB Strategy and Policy
Allocations policy

Definitions
Safeguarding means supporting and looking after vulnerable people (adults and children). The Council has a responsibility for all residents in the Borough of Lewisham and Bromley and they have a statutory duty to put in place mechanisms to identify and deal with risk. PCH has signed a protocol with the Council to support them in this process.

Domestic Abuse/ violence is any abuse that takes place in a personal or family relationship. It can happen to anyone, and in all kinds of relationships - heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). People suffer domestic abuse/violence regardless of their social group, class, age, race, disability, sexual orientation or lifestyle.

Monitoring is a term used here to refer to the process of collecting information to use in evaluating services.

Mystery shopping is the use of employees or agents to visit a store or use a service anonymously and assess its quality. Mystery shopping is used to assess such factors as the quality of customer service, including general and technical efficiency, and friendliness of staff, layout, and appearance of the premises, and quality and variety of goods or services on offer.

Key Performance Indicators are quantifiable measurements, agreed to beforehand, that reflect the critical success factors of an organisation. They will differ depending on the organisation. A Customer Service Department may have as one of its Key Performance Indicators, in line with overall company KPIs, percentage of customer calls answered in the first minute. A Key Performance Indicator for a social service organisation might be number of clients assisted.

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<td>Resident</td>
<td>includes Tenants, Freeholders and Leaseholders</td>
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Appendix 1
Resident profile 2011-12

Partnerships
As set out in the PCH Community Empowerment Strategy we have developed good working relationships with many agencies including:
Local Primary Schools (e.g. Heseltine School with Phoenix Diversity Day) and Bellingham Nursery
Two Secondary Schools (e.g. Sedgehill School and the Phoenix Green Proposal)
Bellingham Community Project
SAGE Educational Trust
Youth Service
Children & Young People Directorate: London Borough of Lewisham
Millwall Community Football
Ward Assemblies
Local Strategic Partnership
Downham Nutrition Project
Children Centres Area 3&4
Voluntary Action Lewisham
Community Education Lewisham
Police – Safer Neighbourhood Teams
Community Wardens
Housing Associations Charitable Trust Reach-in Project
North Downham Training Project
Local Faith Groups

The domestic violence procedures will also set out useful contracts and support networks for residents who are surviving domestic violence.

Action Plan
All areas for improvement relating to the Vulnerability Strategy will be included in the 2012–14 Vulnerability action Plan

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<td>Director of the Gateway Team</td>
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