

Date Issued	October 2011
Department	Corporate
Title	Information & Advice
Review Date	October 2016
Objective	To set out the parameters of our information and advice service; the expectations placed on staff providing information and advice and to ensure that our service is accessible to all customers
Responsible	Director of Housing
Next Review Date	October 2021

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 We aim to provide high quality information and advice to everyone using our services. We want to ensure that customers understand their housing rights, responsibilities and options and will provide information, practical assistance and support where appropriate. **Appendix 1** sets out the responsibilities of staff members for the provision of information and advice. The remit for our Housing Information and Advice Service and the type of information and advice we will provide is attached at **Appendix 2**.
- 1.2 We believe that bad advice, however well intentioned, is the worst possible advice therefore it is essential that our staff are supported by access to good information and training.
- 1.3 We recognise that advice must be timely and available when it is needed, not when it is convenient for us to provide it. It is also critical that staff fully understand when and where *not* to advise, to prevent them from feeling obliged to give advice on a subject they may not be fully conversant with. Staff must have up to date information on other appropriate advice providers and support agencies, and wherever possible have referral arrangements with key agencies.

2.0 Aims and Objectives

- 2.1 This policy aims to:
 - Comply with the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers and Good Practice Guidance
 - Ensure that our service is accessible to all client groups

- Set out the expectations placed on staff in relation to the provision of information and advice
- Ensure that advisers receive sufficient and appropriate training in order to demonstrate competency

3.0 Principle and Structure of Housing Advice Provision

- 3.1 The Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers is a quality assurance framework for agencies involved in the provision of information and advice and incorporates performance indicators, competences for advisers and good practice guidance.
- 3.2 Where information is requested, staff will advise in accordance with the Staff Competency Table attached at **Appendix 3**, and provide details of other potential advisors, or make a referral, as detailed in the Staff Competency Table.
- 3.3 We will inform our customers about our own services in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to:
- A range of service and policy related leaflets
 - All of our policies available to the public on request, with most available to download directly from elha.com
 - Our Tenants Handbook available on elha.com
 - Quarterly newsletter given to all tenants and members
 - Via elha.com
 - Via tenants' My Home accounts
 - Formal / informal tenant group meetings
 - Information and promotional events in the community
 - Comprehensive information for new tenants at the commencement of the tenancy

Our Tenant Participation Strategy sets out the ways that our tenants can become involved in our work.

4.0 Access to Information and Advice

- 4.1 Housing advice and information is available through our office, via elha.com or, where a request is reasonable, through home visits from staff.
- 4.2 Because of the wide variety of information we publish or may have enquiries about, it is not practical to provide copies of all our documents in alternate formats such as large print, audio cassette / CD or foreign languages. However, where the need arises, we will endeavour to provide information in whatever format is necessary. We currently:
- Provide our newsletters in CD format

Approved by Housing & Property Services Sub-Committee 24/11/16

- Are members of Happy to Translate and subscribe to Language Line, which enables us to access instant translation services from any telephone, 24 hours a day

Onelha.com, we:

- Subscribe to Browsealoud for those who are visually impaired or have literacy problems
- Provide a text re-size function for those with vision impairment
- Subscribe to Google Translate for translations of text
- Operate Live Person, where customers can 'chat' with staff on-line

4.3 We aim to deal with all requests for advice at the point of contact. If the advice required is not within the competency of the staff member dealing with the customer, they will try to get a suitably trained staff member to deal with the request. If no-one is available, the customer will be offered the option of making an appointment to come back when a suitably qualified staff member is available. Where the required advice falls out-with our overall competency we will try to signpost an appropriate agency for the customer.

5.0 Service Standards

5.1 Where information or advice is requested online, in the office or by telephone, the customer can expect instant advice (in accordance with the Staff Competency Table). Where the advice or information requested is beyond the competency of the advisor, the customer will be provided with appropriate passive information (leaflets, contact details of other agencies etc). If the customer requires further active information we will arrange an appointment at the earliest opportunity with a competent advisor.

5.2 Where information or advice is requested in writing we will respond within one week.

5.3 All customers will be made aware that private interview facilities are available and that home visits can be arranged where it is reasonable and practical to do so. Home visits will be carried out within 10 working days of the request.

6.0 Resources & Training

6.1 We recognise that effective information and advice provision cannot take place without a commitment of resources, both financial and human. We make provision in our budgets and in our staffing resources for publicity, promotional activities, tenant involvement and staff training.

6.2 We review staff training requirements annually, as part of the Appraisal Process and plan for appropriate training. All staff expected to provide

information and advice will undertake the appropriate Scottish National Standards training modules in that area of law.

7.0 Monitoring Satisfaction

- 7.1 We carry out a range of surveys to measure satisfaction with the information and advice provided to tenants and other customers and will continually review these.
- 7.2 Many of the requests we receive for information and advice will not be from tenants and will not therefore be covered by our satisfaction surveys. They may well be one off visits or enquiries, which may mean we only have one contact with such customers.
- 7.3 We would not want to make customers feel that they have to give their name and address details in order to access our services, nor is it reasonable to expect staff who advise to ask the customer about their satisfaction with the service they have just received.
- 7.4 We will, however ensure that passive information (as a minimum) is available to customers, and the range of advice leaflets and other material that we produce will aim to encourage feedback about the service provided.
- 7.5 Additionally, the take up of leaflets will be monitored, and where there is greater demand, we will seek to build referral pathways into related services in order to improve our service to customers.

8.0 Monitoring of Service

- 8.1 The Housing & Property Services Sub Committee is responsible for monitoring our Information and Advice Service. To do this effectively, the Sub Committee will be provided with:
- Quarterly reports on service use and activity
 - An Annual Service Review; looking at the work; i.e. service delivery and administrative systems for the past year

9.0 Policy Review

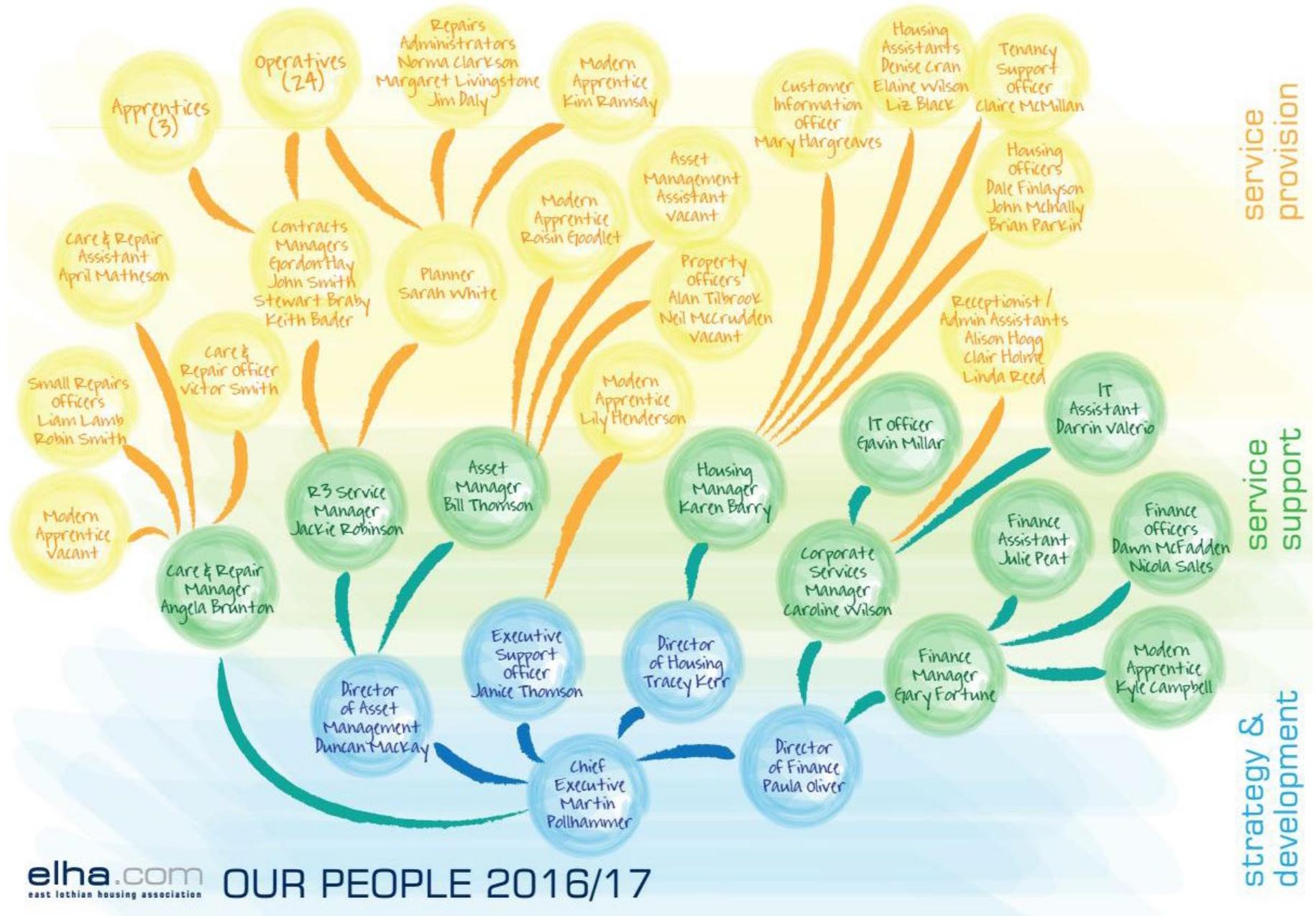
- 9.1 The Director of Housing is responsible for reviewing this policy every five years or sooner if events, including customer feedback, require an earlier revision. Any changes recommended will be submitted to the Housing & Property Services Sub-Committee for approval.

Appendix 1

Responsibilities for the Provision of Our Information and Advice Service

A staff structure chart is attached. The members of staff with responsibility for the provision of our information and advice service are shown in colour. Their particular roles are described below. Staff responsible for offering advice to customers will refer to the competency table attached at **Appendix 3**.

Senior Management Team (SMT)	The SMT has overall responsibility for ensuring that the information and advice service (the service) is adequately resourced, managed and risk assessed. They must ensure that the quality of the service is effectively monitored. This is achieved primarily through the production of the Business Plan and annual budgets.
Housing, Asset and Corporate Services Managers	These are line managers to the staff who provide information and advice to customers. They provide support to staff in their individual roles and must ensure that their staff are adequately trained and have access to up to date and reliable information. Managers are also responsible for ensuring that adequate and accurate records are kept to inform the review of the service and allow effective performance monitoring.
Housing and Customer Information Officers	These are the front line staff who visit customers at home and are responsible for most of the face to face contact we have with customers out-with our office. The Housing and Customer Information Officers also offer advice through our live chat facility onelha.com. They must be aware of trends in the type of advice they are being asked for and ensure that their Managers are aware of any information or training gaps so that these can be filled. They will be trained at Type 2 level of the information and advice standards.
Property and Housing Assistants	Respond to telephone and internet enquiries from our customers and members of the public and have a wide knowledge of our services and other services available locally. They will be trained at Type 1 level.
Property Officers	Our Property Officers are primarily concerned with the maintenance of our housing stock. The advice that they offer is mainly in relation to technical matters. However, since they are part of the “public face” of ELHA it is important that they are able to accurately signpost customers to the right place for help. They will be trained at Type 1 level.
Admin Team	Is the first point of contact for everyone who phones or visits our office and deals with as many issues as possible to avoid having to pass the customer on. Working in a public area constrains their ability to offer in depth advice. They are trained at Type 1 level.



East Lothian Housing Association

Housing Advice Service Remit

Type of Service : Housing Advice

Our staff will actively work with you to identify the specific housing issues that you want help with. They will discuss your options and agree a course of action with you. They will provide practical assistance according to your needs. If it is necessary and appropriate they will refer you to another agency that is better able to take action on your behalf.

Location

The service is provided from the East Lothian Housing Association's office at 18 -20 Market Street, Haddington, East Lothian.

Methods of delivery

We provide passive advice online at elha.com 24-hours a day. During office hours, our online Live Help service provides our full advice service.

The service is also available by telephoning or calling in person to our office during our normal office opening hours;

Monday	9.00am – 4.30pm
Tuesday	10.00am – 4.30pm
Wednesday	9.00am – 4.30pm
Thursday	9.00am – 4.30pm
Friday	9.00am – 4.00pm

If none of these methods suit, a home visit can be arranged. We also provide general information by leaflet, and in our Newsletter, Talkback.

Remit / Purpose of the service

We provide general housing information and advice to our tenants, and to housing applicants (both for our properties and those belonging to Homes for Life Housing Partnership).

We aim to ensure that our customers understand their housing rights, responsibilities and options. Our staff provides information and advice on housing issues and our Housing team can provide practical assistance including explaining decisions, writing letters and completing forms.

Information and advice is available on the following issues.

Rent Arrears

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

Disrepair in Rented housing

Discrimination in Housing

Eviction: Anti Social Behaviour

Homelessness: Relationship Breakdown

Security of Tenure: Statutory Tenancy Rights

If you need more help than we can offer our staff will, wherever possible, refer you to another agency which has the expertise to help.

East Lothian Housing Association

- Provides the service free of charge
- Processes all data held in line with Data Protection legislation
- Complies with all Health and Safety and Human Rights legislation
 - Ensures the officer providing the advice will not discriminate between clients on the grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage & civil partnership, pregnancy & maternity, race, religion or belief, sex & sexual orientation.
- Will make information available in different formats, or provide appropriate translation services, if you need them
- Ensures we clearly explain the remit, boundaries and limitations of the advice service
- Has a complaints procedure in place and makes all customers aware of this

Staff Competency Table for Housing Information and Advice

This table is for staff to use and is designed to give guidance on how to respond to enquiries. It details the areas of housing law where they can give advice and also when they should signpost or refer the customer to a more appropriate agency.

It is also a guide to be used by staff and their line managers to assess any skills shortfall and consequent training requirement.

We will ensure that all members of staff expected to act as advisors undertake the appropriate Scottish National Standards training modules in that area of law, for most staff to 'Type One Provider' level. Some staff will be trained to Type Two to give them a wider appreciation of the issues and to assist them with dealing with other agencies on the customer's behalf, but we are a Type 1 Advice Provider.

Please note: Our reception staff are usually the first point of contact within the Association. Where they do not have the required competency, they will facilitate an appointment, interview or telephone call with a member of staff who does, wherever possible, on the same working day and/or provide the customer with passive information, such as a leaflet (if one is available),.

Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
Security of Tenure	Housing Officer Housing Assistant	Knowledge of all tenancies in common use, and advice on rights of tenant in repossession action. Offer referral to East Lothian Council where homelessness may arise. Advise on support agencies and legal advisors in all other situations.
Housing Benefit	Housing Assistant	To understand the principles of Housing Benefit, be able to read and understand a determination letter, and to advise how to make a claim. No advice should be given on the likely success (or otherwise) of any claim, or in response to any detailed or technical request. The claimant should be directed to the local Housing Benefit Office in these circumstances, The client should always be advised of their responsibility to ensure their Housing Benefit claim is correct, and of their entitlement to appeal if they feel a determination to be incorrect.

Approved by Housing & Property Services Sub-Committee 24/11/16

Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
Housing Benefit (continued)	Housing Officer	As above but may include assistance with completing an application form and advice on applying for back dates / 2 homes payments.
Discrimination in housing	All Housing Advice staff	To understand and comply with the Association's Equality and Diversity Policy. To understand how discrimination may occur. In terms of a complaint or allegation, if it is about the Association, the customer should be encouraged to use our Complaints Policy, but if not, advised of support agencies or legal advisors.
Disrepair (ELHA)	Housing Officer Housing Assistant Property Officer Property Assistant Admin team	To be aware of our policies and responsibilities as a Landlord, and to arrange such work as is necessary. In terms of any other landlord, not to advise, but to advise of agencies that can help.
Disrepair (Other Landlords)	Property Officer Housing Officer Housing Assistant Admin Team	As above, to be aware of issues, not to advise, but to advise of agencies that can help.
Harassment and Illegal Eviction	Housing Officer Housing Assistants	Understanding of the different types of tenancy and the definitions of harassment and illegal eviction. General advice about the rights of tenants in such circumstances. Advice about relevant support agencies and legal advisors should be given, except in the case of a homelessness situation, where a direct referral to East Lothian Council should be offered.
Homelessness –	Housing Assistant Admin team	Basic understanding of the definitions of homelessness, , intentionality and local connection

Approved by Housing & Property Services Sub-Committee 24/11/16

Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
	Housing Officer	<p>Knowledge of how this is dealt with in homehunt. Provide details of other support agencies.</p> <p>Ability to refer cases directly to East Lothian Council and to explain arrangements for temporary accommodation.</p>
Mobility and Transfer	Housing Officer Housing Assistant	To have full knowledge of the Association's allocation and transfer policy.
Mortgage Arrears	Housing Officer Housing Assistant	Basic understanding of how arrears arise and rights of the mortgagee in possession proceedings. Check that the lender has been contacted. Provide details of agencies that can assist and advise.
Housing Options: General	Housing Officer Housing Assistant Admin team	Awareness of different types of tenure and of tenancies used. Arguments for/against owner occupation. Provide contact information about East Lothian Council's Housing Options advice, local providers (Homes for Life Housing Partnership, Castle Rock Edinvar), and estate agents only.
Housing Options: Private Rented and Owner Occupation	Housing Officer Housing Assistant Admin Team	Awareness of different types of tenure and tenancies used by private landlords. Provide contact information about local providers and estate agents only.
Relationship Breakdown	Housing Officer Housing Assistant	For the Association's tenants to advise on occupancy rights, homehunt and our Allocations Policy and to offer referral to East Lothian Council where homelessness is arising. In addition,

Approved by Housing & Property Services Sub-Committee 24/11/16

Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
		to advise of support agencies and legal advisors. In the case of non-tenants, to offer referral to East Lothian Council where homelessness is arising, and in addition, to advise of support agencies and legal advisors.
Rent: Private Sector	Housing Officer Housing Assistant Admin Team	To advise of relevant agencies who can help and where to look for private rented accommodation.
Rent Arrears	Housing Officer Housing Assistant	For current tenants, a full understanding of the Association's arrears recovery policy and ability to advise appropriately. Understanding of causes, and solutions other than legal action. Offer referral to Financial Inclusion Service. Provide advice on other support agencies. As a matter of practice, once legal action has commenced, offer advice on support services and legal advisors only. For non-tenants, advise of support agencies and legal advisors only.