

Date Issued	October 2011
Department	Corporate
Title	Information & Advice
Review Date	November 2021
Objective	To set out the parameters of our Housing 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	November 2026

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

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- 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 available on elha.com and in our offices
- All of our policies available to the public on request, with most available to download directly from elha.com
- Regular e-news, e-newsflashes and printed newsletters 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 prior to and 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.

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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, 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

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

On elha.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 in line with our Customer Service Charter.

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.

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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 Audit and Assurance Committee is responsible for monitoring our Information and Advice Service. To do this effectively, the 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

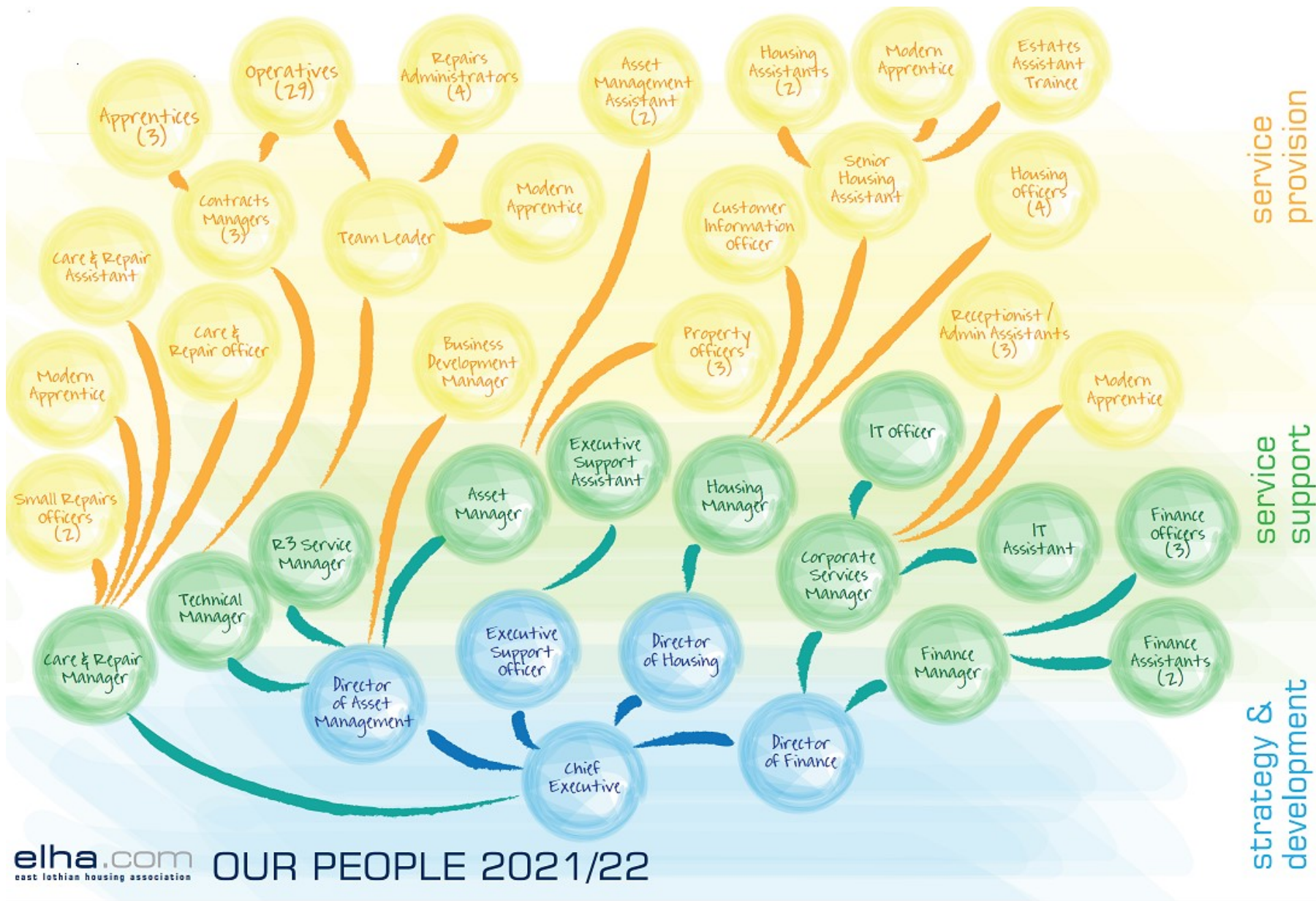
9.0 Policy Review

- 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 Audit and Assurance Committee for approval.

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 Housing 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 on elha.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, Estates 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, e-news and in our printed Newsletter, Talkback.

Remit / Purpose of the service

We provide general housing information and advice to our tenants, and to These Homes housing applicants.

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:

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Rent Arrears
Help with Rent and Council Tax
Council Tax Reduction
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 Snr Housing Assistant Housing Assistant Customer Information Officer	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.
Help with Rent and Council Tax	Senior Housing Asst Housing Assistant Estates Assistant	To understand the principles of Universal Credit (UC), Housing Benefit (HB), Discretionary Housing Payments, under occupancy charges and the benefit cap, and be able to explain these to customers. To 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 contact the DWP or local Housing Benefit Office in these circumstances, The client should always be advised of their

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Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
		responsibility to ensure their UC or HB claim is correct, and of their entitlement to appeal if they feel a determination to be incorrect.
Help with Rent and Council Tax	Housing Officer	<p>As above but also understands how HB is calculated, the eligibility rules for UC and can explain to clients. May include assistance with completing an application form and advice on applying for back dates / 2 homes payments.</p> <p>Understands rules relating to backdating and overpayments, including recovery and official error. Has more detailed knowledge of under-occupation, the benefit cap, LHA and other benefits.</p> <p>Has a basic understanding of means-tested benefits and the relationship with council tax reduction, eligibility rules and how to apply, backdating and overpayments</p>
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)	All Housing Advice Staff	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	As above, to be aware of issues, not to advise, but to advise of agencies

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Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
	Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Housing Assistant Admin Team	that can help.
Harassment and Illegal Eviction	Housing Officer Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Housing Assistants Customer Information Officer	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 –	Snr Housing Assistant Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Customer Information Officer Admin Team Housing Officer	Basic understanding of the definitions of homelessness, intentionality and local connection Knowledge of how this is dealt with in These Homes . Provide details of other support agencies. As above and has the ability to refer cases directly to East Lothian Council and to explain arrangements for temporary accommodation.
Mortgage Arrears	Housing Officer Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant 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 Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Housing Assistant Customer Information Officer 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 (), and estate agents only. Has an understanding of local

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Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
		RSL's and East Lothian Council's allocations policies, mobility schemes e.g. mutual exchanges and low-cost buying schemes for example, LIFT.
Housing Options: Private Rented and Owner Occupation	Housing Officer Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Housing Assistant Customer Information Officer Admin Team	Awareness of different types of tenure and tenancies used by private landlords. Provide contact information about local providers and estate agents only.
Eviction	Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Housing Assistant Housing Officer	Awareness of the different 'grounds' (mandatory and discretionary) for eviction actions across all tenancy types the Association uses. As above and has a knowledge of repossession procedures and post-possession remedies e.g., minute of recall and understands security of tenure and awareness of 'third party' rights e.g. Matrimonial Homes (Family Protection (Scotland) Act 1981
Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)	Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Housing Assistant Customer Information Officer Housing Officer	To have a full knowledge of the Association's Neighbour Nuisance and Anti-Social Behaviour Policy. Able to refer cases to other support services/agencies for assistance. Understands and is aware of the resources provided by East Lothian Council to deal with ASB. As above and is also aware of the non-court remedies available to deal with ASB e.g., mediation, acceptable behaviour contracts etc. and can explain this to tenants, both the perpetrator and those suffering. Also aware of the legal remedies available e.g., ASBO's. in the Anti-Social Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act

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Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
		2004. Able to work in partnership with East Lothian Council Safer Communities Team to tackle instances of ASB.
Relationship Breakdown	Housing Officer Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Housing Assistant Customer Information Officer	<p>To have a basic understanding of security of tenure, the law affecting relationships and the importance of specialist legal advice.</p> <p>For the Association's tenants to advise on occupancy rights, These Homes, our Allocations Policy and Domestic Abuse Policy if appropriate, and to offer a referral to East Lothian Council where homelessness is arising. In addition, to advise of support agencies and refer where appropriate, e.g. Women's Aid, and legal advisors.</p> <p>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.</p>
Rent: Private Sector	Housing Officer Snr Housing Assistant Estates Assistant Housing Assistant Customer Information Officer Admin Team	To advise of relevant agencies who can help and where to look for private rented accommodation.
Rent Arrears	Snr Housing Assistant Housing Assistant 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

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Area of Law	Staff Member	Required Competency
	Housing Officer	<p>on support services and legal advisors only. For non-tenants, advise of support agencies and legal advisors only.</p> <p>As above and has an understanding of legal procedures including Pre-Action Requirements, Section 11 notices and bankruptcy</p>
Statutory Tenancy Rights	All Housing Advice Staff	Understand and be aware of the different types of tenancies that the Association uses and specific rights in relation to these, e.g. assignation, succession to tenancy, right to carry out improvements and alterations, standard of repair etc.