

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing

SPEECH CALL UNITS AND LIFELINE SERVICE1. Purpose of Report

To seek Cabinet approval to begin a project to consider an alternative solution for Speech Call Units and the Lifeline Service.

2. Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to RESOLVE that a project to investigate alternatives to the current arrangements for Speech Call Units and Lifeline Services be approved.

3. Detail

Tunstall Healthcare have supplied speech call units for the Council for over 20 years. These units are hard wired in each of the Council's 1,100 Independent Living properties. Tunstall Healthcare also provide the monitoring service. If a tenant has a problem, they can pull a cord or press a pendant and are connected to a service centre where a call centre operative has the tenant's details and is able to deal with the issue. This could include contacting emergency services, contacting a next of kin or providing reassurance or advice. Each tenant pays a contribution towards the cost, the remainder is paid by the Housing Revenue Account.

In addition to the service provided to our tenants, the Council also sells units to private customers, through our Lifeline Service. This service is managed by a full time Lifeline Co-ordinator who takes initial enquiries, visits properties to fit equipment and deals with any queries or concerns.

As at 31 August 2023, there are 801 private customers with Lifeline units fitted by the Council. Private customers are charged the full amount of the service. The current charge for a speech call unit is £3.93 per week. The Council also offer a Lifeline Plus service, which includes a falls detector for £5.90 per week. Only a small number of customers pay for this additional service. Once the employee and admin costs are deducted, annual profit is approximately £22,000. Income is paid into the General Fund.

The housing service has worked with the Commercial Manager and Communications team to increase the promotion of the Lifeline service with an aim to increase the number of customers and income for the General Fund. Research of competitors that has been undertaken has shown that the Council's current Lifeline offering is limited and expensive compared to others.

Historically there was little competition on the market. Within the social housing sector, most landlords had Tunstall Healthcare equipment fitted within their properties. However, over the last few years, new alternative products and services have become available. Many of these involve using portable units, similar to a tablet, rather than hard-wired equipment. Some landlords have changed to using these services and report good results.

There are many possibilities for improving the service offered to our tenants and private customers and also to ensure that the service to private customers is financially viable going forward. Some of the new services allow customers to use their pendants outside of the home. As these do not rely on hard-wired technology, customers can contact the service centre whenever they require assistance. In comparison our current service only works within the home. There are also additional services, such as monitoring of customer activity and mobility, which allows the service centre to identify a potential issue rather than wait for the customer to report it.

In addition to this there is also the opportunity for the Council to consider offering a visiting service to private customers, similar to our Independent Living Service for housing tenants. Initial research has found that although there are other landlords working on similar services, this is not something which is currently available locally.

There have been many examples where the use of this service has ensured the emergency services have been called. There are also many residents that contact Tunstall to help them outside of office hours and are reliant on the service. Therefore, any move away from the current arrangement to a new provider needs to be carefully considered and managed.

The work required to move to a new provider will be significant. This will include removal of hard wired equipment and installation of new equipment in 1,100 properties; procurement of a new contract; identifying and resolving any Data Protection Act 2018 issues with the sharing of personal information with a new provider; communication with tenants and their families and support for tenants to use the new system. It is likely that at an appropriate time the Council will need to employ a temporary project manager to undertake the work required.

If Cabinet approve the proposal to begin this project, further reports will be brought to Cabinet for approval as the project progresses and decisions are required.

4. Financial Implications

The comments from the Head of Finance Services were as follows:

There are no additional financial implications to consider at this stage. The Lifeline service currently generates an annual net income of £22,000 into the

General Fund. Any significant budget implications to be considered as part of the option appraisal, over and above virement limits, would require approval by Cabinet.

5. Legal Implications

The comments from the Monitoring Officer / Head of Legal Services were as follows:

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

6. Human Resources Implications

The comments from the Human Resources Manager were as follows:
Not applicable

7. Union Comments

The Union comments were as follows:
Not applicable

8. Climate Change Implications

There were no comments.

9. Data Protection Compliance Implications

This report does not contain any [OFFICIAL (SENSITIVE)] information and there are no data protection issues in relation to this report.

10. Equality Impact Assessment

Not applicable

11. Background Papers

Nil