



Anti-Poverty Strategy

Contents

1.0 Executive Summary

2.0 Introduction

3.0 Context

4.0 What is Financial Exclusion?

5.0 What are the implications of Financial Exclusion?

6.0 Multi-agency Working

7.0 Endeavour and Teesdale's Current Financial Inclusion Activity

7.1 Stockton District Information and Advice Service

7.2 Rent Arrears Policy

7.3 Signposting and Referrals to Specialised Agencies

7.4 Promote Access to Affordable Credit

7.5 Helping Hands Savings and Loan Scheme with Darlington Building Society

7.6 Furnished Tenancy Scheme

7.7 Home Contents Insurance Scheme

7.8 Customer Care Visits

7.9 Enterprise Fund

7.10 WORKSTEPS

7.11 Energy Efficiency

8.0 What further action will Endeavour and Teesdale take?

8.1 Maximising Benefits

8.2 Preventative Work

8.3 Affordable Credit

8.4 Building Financial Capability and Awareness

8.5 Energy Efficiency

8.6 What further action will North Star Housing Group take?

9.0 How will the Strategy be delivered?

10.0 Monitoring and Evaluation

11.0 Appendixes

11.1 Financial Inclusion Action Plan

1.0 Executive Summary

Financial exclusion is closely associated with low income and poverty and an inability to access appropriate financial services to get out and stay out of poverty.

Financial stability and economic wellbeing are essential for people to live comfortably within their neighbourhood.

Research shows financial exclusion is widespread in Britain particularly amongst social housing residents.

Financial inclusion is therefore about ensuring everyone has the opportunity to access the financial services products needed to participate fully in modern day society and economy.

2.0 Introduction

This is Endeavour and Teesdale's first financial inclusion strategy and it builds upon our success in tackling financial exclusion and sustained performance and efficiency in collecting rent arrears. We recognise as a key partner and responsible landlord we have a role to play in tackling financial exclusion and providing support to our customers who are facing financial difficulties.

The Government set out its Strategy to tackle financial exclusion in "Promoting Financial Inclusion", published alongside the 2004 Budget report. The Financial Inclusion action plan for 2008-2012 was launched by the Treasury December 2007. The Financial Inclusion Taskforce is responsible for overseeing implementation and delivery. In the comprehensive spending review in October 2008, the Government announced a further £130 million of funding to help services invest in support for customers.

The headlines for the Governments Action Plan are summarised as:

- Promote basic banking and money management accounts/advice.
- Promote affordable credit in the Third sector by making responsible and affordable loans available.
- Provide low cost home insurance for customers in the rented sector.
- Promote access to and take up of savings.
- Promote the "now lets talk money campaign" to improve access and availability of support and free face-to-face advice.
- Improving financial capability and confidence in choosing financial products.
- Tackling financial distress experienced as a result of hardship by providing outreach advice, projects tackling illegal money lending projects and promoting a national approach to generic financial advice.

We recognise that we can not achieve this on our own and this strategy is to ensure a holistic approach is taken and is developed with our partners.

Endeavour and Teesdale are therefore well placed to tackle financial exclusion and our policies and procedures support the balance between the interests of our customers with the broader aim of supporting sustainable communities in areas where we have properties as well as the need to maximise income collection.

At Endeavour and Teesdale we aim to meet more than peoples housing needs. We take a proactive approach towards attaining financial inclusion for all of our customers to improve both their quality of life and the quality of our services.

3.0 Context

Against a national background of a poor economic situation, both Endeavour and Teesdale face major challenges in supporting our customers with financial difficulties.

Increasing levels of unemployment, unstable house prices, difficulties in acquiring affordable credit and more people experiencing fuel poverty is placing further pressure on already stretched advice services.

The Governments objectives of national return to work and child poverty combined with the economic downturn presents the organisations with new challenges.

In response to these issues, this Financial Inclusion Strategy 2010–2012 has been developed by both Endeavour and Teesdale in partnership with other organisations to improve financial inclusion within our communities.

Financial inclusion is therefore ensuring all of our customers can access the appropriate financial products to get out and stay out of poverty.

The key objectives for this strategy are:

- Engaging customers in the Financial Inclusion agenda
- To continue working with our partners to ensure all of our customers have access to affordable credit as well as access to debt, money and welfare benefit advice
- Promotion of home contents insurance scheme
- Promote measures to tackle fuel poverty and increase energy efficiency
- Maximising funding and opportunities for delivery of financial inclusion through partnership work
- Working in partnership to address Financial Exclusion in our communities

4.0 What is Financial Exclusion?

Financial exclusion is about the inability to access appropriate financial services to get out and stay out of poverty. Financial exclusion can mean that our customers often pay more for services and products that can result in more debt such as an increase in rent arrears.

“Many people, particularly those living on low incomes, cannot access mainstream financial products such as bank accounts and low cost loans. This financial exclusion imposes real costs on individuals and their families – often the most vulnerable people in our society. It also has costs for the communities in which they live” (financialinclusion-taskforce.org.uk)

Households on low incomes are more likely to experience financial problems and are viewed more as a risk by banks and financial product retailers. Consequently, people on a low income experience more difficulties in opening bank accounts, obtaining affordable credit and have problems paying fuel bills. The lack of financial capability can result in high levels of debt including rent arrears. Many customers facing financial exclusion are more likely to have limited access to welfare advice and may not have the skills and knowledge to maximise their income. This can be exacerbated by poor literacy and numeracy skills, poor financial awareness and little or no budgeting skills.

It is not just those with low incomes who experience financial exclusion. People who are suffering from a long-term illness or disability: those with no formal education, minority ethnic groups, older people and young people are also vulnerable. There is evidence that lone parents, some black and minority ethnic groups, those in social housing and households in densely populated areas are also affected by financial exclusion.

5.0 What are the Implications of Financial Exclusion?

Financial exclusion is a dynamic process which can affect individuals and communities in different ways.

The issues may not only impact on household income, they may affect the ability to access basic necessities and potentially affect a person's health through anxiety associated with debts.

The lack of insurance or savings can hinder the people's ability to cope with unexpected events and can lead to poverty.

6.0 Multi-agency Working

Endeavour and Teesdale recognise that partnership working is the key to successfully addressing financial exclusion and we recognise that partnership working and learning from others will best meet the needs of our communities.

We work with all local authorities where we have properties as well as the following partners to provide advice and support to our tenants as well as maximising our income effectively and efficiently:

Citizens Advice Bureau
Five Lamps
Stockton Financial Inclusion Forum
Middlesbrough Financial Inclusion Forum
Christians against Poverty
Illegal Money Lending Team
Department of Work and Pensions Financial Inclusion Champions
North East Regional Income Management Benchmarking Club
North East Financial Inclusion Practitioners Group
Stockton District Advice and Information Service
Darlington Building Society

7.0 Endeavour and Teesdale's Current Financial Inclusion Activity

7.1 Stockton District Advice and Information Services

Endeavour has a formal referral process in place with SDAIS to provide tenants who are in financial difficulties to access independent expert financial/debt management advice.

7.2 Rent Arrears Policy

Endeavour Housing Association and Teesdale Housing Association both operate a firm but fair Rent Arrears Policy which offers early advice and assistance to those who fall into arrears. If arrears continue to accrue, tenants are visited by a member of staff, or invited to an office interview. Payments are accepted by instalments and agreements to repay the arrears are based on the circumstance of each case. If the agreement is complied to, no further action will be taken however default on any arrangement may result in legal action being taken by the Association. Before taking legal action, every effort will be made to ensure that the Association has exhausted all other avenues including referrals to the relevant agencies for debt management, income maximisation and welfare benefit advice.

To ensure no one is excluded we have provided a number of ways for tenants to pay their rent. This includes:

- Direct debit or standing order direct from a bank account
- Using a debit card either over the telephone, via internet or calling into our office
- Using a rent swipe card tenants can make payments by cash, cheque or debit card at any Post Office
- By cash or debit card at any outlet displaying the PayPoint logo

We issue rent statements every 6 months and on request can provide information on:

- how rent is calculated
- what has been paid
- what is owed

7.3 Signposting and Direct Referrals to Specialised Agencies

Debt advice organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau are currently promoted in rent arrears letters. If Housing Officers discover that customers are experiencing financial difficulties, protocols are now in place for customers to be directly referred to the relevant specialised agency. These agencies include:

Citizens Advice Bureau
Stockton District Advice and Information Service
Christians against Poverty
West View Centre, Hartlepool
Shelter

7.4 Promote Access to Affordable Credit

Endeavour and Teesdale recognise that it is important for our tenants to take responsibility and make informed decisions on their finances including being able to access low cost loans.

Endeavour has developed partnership working with Tees Credit Union, based in Stockton and Pioneer Credit Union, based in Middlesbrough to promote and encourage our tenants to save and borrow with these low cost alternatives. We also work with the Illegal Money Lending Team to promote the loan shark helpline which has resulted in a number of convictions within our area.

7.5 Helping Hands Savings and Loan Scheme with Darlington Building Society

Endeavour in partnership with Darlington Building Society provides all residents with access to basic bank accounts through the Helping Hands Savings scheme as well as providing access to affordable credit through their Loan Scheme.

7.6 Furnished Tenancy Scheme

Both Endeavour and Teesdale recognise that setting up a home can be very expensive and to assist tenants in starting up their home as well as giving them every opportunity to pay their rent, this scheme is available for tenants who maybe at risk of their tenancy failing. The scheme can be flexible to meet the needs of the tenants and can be used for providing furniture, flooring etc. A service charge for the cost of this is charged on the rent account and can be paid back over an agreed period of time as part of their rent. This scheme has proved successful as tenants take pride in their home as well as it reducing the risk of failed tenancies in their infancy.

7.7 Home Contents Insurance Scheme

Endeavour and Teesdale recognise that many tenants face problems in getting home contents insurance. Many household contents schemes available are not practical for our tenants, as the policies may have high minimum sums insured, require an annual payment, insist on a bank account or not cover in certain areas. In order to give our tenants peace of mind, we promote a contents insurance scheme with Marsh insurer procured through the Northern Housing Consortium providing discounted premiums appropriate for the needs of our tenants. This scheme allows tenants to choose cover to meet their needs which includes no excess for any claims as well as being available to all tenants regardless of where they live. Premiums can be paid on a weekly basis and bank accounts are not required. The promotion of this scheme also ensure that tenants are covered for any emergencies and are less likely to get into rent arrears should they have an emergency such as fire/flood, etc.

7.8 Customer Care Visits

Customer care visits were introduced to continue the positive relationship between the tenant and the housing officer following the comprehensive sign up they have completed when moving into one of our properties as well as ensuring that the organisation is aware of the needs of the tenant. As part of the visit, the housing officer can signpost the tenant to other agencies to provide specialised advice on areas of financial exclusion including debt management advice, maximising income etc.

7.9 Enterprise Fund

The Enterprise Fund has been developed by Endeavour to support tenants and service users with costs associated with starting and seeking education, employment or training. The Enterprise Fund will cover any legitimate and verified costs when all other avenues have been exhausted. This fund which is funded by the organisations are promoted by staff as well as on the website.

7.10 WORKSTEPS

Endeavour has joined other housing providers and agencies in a joint initiative to look at Worklessness in the Stockton area. As a housing provider, we have a direct link to households at an individual level thus allowing advisors and support staff from other agencies to better connect with those who have been identified as potentially benefitting from the fund in tackling Worklessness. Building on the existing strong relationship between ourselves and our tenants the objective is to deliver an effective and customised service to households and individuals with the aim to assist people to improve their skills and secure work.

7.11 Energy Efficiency

- Band A efficiency boilers are fitted as part of our planned maintenance programme with thermostatic radiator control reducing fuel costs for many of our customers.
- A range of other products are available too our tenants who are in receipt of benefits including cavity wall insulation and loft insulation top ups to.
- Energy efficient light bulbs are provided too new tenants.

8.0 What further action will Endeavour and Teesdale take?

8.1 Maximising Benefits

Dawn advice are a not for profit voluntary organisation who offer an impartial advice service on money and benefits.

Through DAWN advice we will:

- Offer all customers a full financial health check.
- Develop Workshops and open days in communities where we have properties.
- Assist our customers in claiming benefits and making backdate requests as appropriate.
- Provide a dedicated telephone line for all our customers in maximising income.

We will work with our partners to promote benefit take up campaigns for all communities.

8.2 Preventative Work

- Provide information on the cost of renting a property from both organisations including information on energy bills, insurance, etc.
- Carry out analysis into the profile of failed tenancies including tenancy terminations to ensure that advice is tailored to those groups most at risk.
- Cover financial inclusion information in the next STATUS survey.

8.3 Affordable Credit

- Create stronger links with the credit unions to support them to operate more widely particularly in terms of promotion of their services.
- Continue to work with relevant partners and agencies to engage with local banks to set up partnership agreement around offering basic bank accounts to customers.

8.4 Building Financial Capability and Awareness

- Both Endeavour and Teesdale will continue working with various Financial Inclusion Forums to share good practice as well as exploring joining other forums in communities affected by Financial Exclusion.
- Actively seek funding from external sources for addressing Financial Exclusion.

8.5 Energy Efficiency

- Explore partnership working with affordable energy suppliers to provide cheaper energy prices when purchased through partnership and provide advice to our customers on this.
- Arrange for relevant organisations such as Energy Savings Trust to attend customer events to give free advice.

8.6 What further action will be taken?

- Promote financial inclusion through a range of methods and ensuring vulnerable customers can access services.
- Ensure all front line staff are fully trained in Financial Inclusion.

9.0 How will the Strategy be delivered?

The implementation of this strategy cannot be delivered without strong working partnerships between Endeavour and Teesdale and a variety of other organisations.

Both organisations already engage in a wide range of partnerships in all areas of the business that can be utilised to promote financial inclusion to our customers and the wider community.

The key for delivering this strategy is:

- Engaging customers in the delivery of the Financial Inclusion Agenda
- Delivering financial inclusion awareness to both staff and customers
- Increasing access to debt, money and welfare benefit advice
- Promotion of contents insurance scheme
- Highlighting fuel poverty and increasing energy efficiency
- Working in partnership to address financial exclusion

It is essential that customers themselves are engaged in shaping Endeavour and Teesdale's approach to tackling financial inclusion. This will be developed by engaging with customers through established customer involvement methods such as Tenants Advisory Panel, Tenants Voice, etc. Further consultation will be developed by using road shows, newsletters and website articles as well as through our various partnerships.

The majority of this strategy can be delivered from existing resources however both organisations will continue to access external funding to develop the objectives of this strategy.

10.0 Monitoring and Evaluation

This strategy will be reviewed every two years to ensure it meets both the needs of the customers and the organisation in a rapidly changing environment.

The Housing Services Manager will monitor performance against the action plan and the strategy will be regularly updated to meet the objectives of the organisations.

The strategy will be launched by a partnership event and will be promoted at team meetings and on the intranet. It will also be available to our customers on the website.

Staff will receive regularly briefings and training on this strategy and their role in delivering it.

11.0 Appendix

11.1 Financial Inclusion Action Plan

Actions	Outcome	Responsible Officer	Target Date
Development Partnership with Dawn Advice.	Increase welfare benefits take up and maximise income.	HSM	July 2010
Carry out Financial Inclusion Road Shows.	Raise awareness of Financial Inclusion.	HSM	September 2010
Set Targets to increase take up of Contents Insurance.	Reduce number of rechargeable repairs and maximise income collection.	HSM	April 2010
Deliver Financial Inclusion to tenants groups.	Raise awareness of Financial Inclusion.	Head of Housing/ HSM	September 2010
Produce a Cost of Living Leaflet.	Reduce number of failed tenancies.	HSM	December 2010
Carry out an analysis of failed tenancies to deliver bespoke sign ups & meet needs of clients at risk of failure.	Reduce number of failed tenancies.	HSM	December 2010
Explore joining other Financial Inclusion Forums.	Deliver best practice.	HSM	December 2010
Develop Partnerships with Credit Unison.	Promote affordable credit.	HSM	December 2010
Set targets to increase take up of Helping Hands Savings and Loan scheme.	Improves access to financial services and promotes affordable credit.	HSM	December 2010
Ensure all front line staff are trained in Financial Inclusion	Improve Customer Service	HSM	September 2010
Develop the Intranet to provide staff access to appropriate information and organisations.	Improve Customer Service.	HSM	February 2011
Explore alternative funding and develop actions of strategy.	Increase resources to deliver further services.	HSM	
Explore partnership working with affordable energy supplier to provide cheaper energy prices.	Reduce fuel poverty.	HSM	November 2010