

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 30 January 2014

PRESENT: Councillors Chris Weldon (Chair), Penny Baker (Deputy Chair), David Barker, Richard Crowther, Denise Fox, Qurban Hussain, Sioned-Mair Richards, Roy Munn, Keith Hill (Substitute Member) and Martin Lawton (Substitute Member)

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received and substitutes attended the meeting as follows:

Apology

Substitute

Councillor Simon Clement-Jones
Councillor Sheila Constance
Councillor Philip Wood

Councillor Keith Hill
Councillor Martin Lawton
No substitute nominated

2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the public and press.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 Councillor Penny Baker declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 9 (Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership) as she was a member of the Sheffield First Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership Board.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 28th November 2013, were approved as a correct record, subject to the inclusion of an apology for Councillor Denise Fox at Item 1 (Apologies for Absence).

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 There were no petitions received or public questions submitted.

6. THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM ON SHEFFIELD'S RESIDENTS - UPDATE JANUARY 2014

6.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of Policy, Performance and Communications, which provided Members with a summary of the key Welfare Reform changes, together with an analysis of the impact of these changes on Sheffield residents, an update on the work that the Council and its partners were

undertaking to support affected residents and an analysis of responses from other local authorities to Welfare Reform. Appended to the report was a table of Welfare Reform key changes and a series of case studies.

6.2 In attendance for this item were Councillor Mazher Iqbal, Cabinet Member for Communities and Inclusion, James Henderson, Director of Policy, Performance and Communications, Nicola Rees, Policy and Improvement Officer, Maxine Stavrianakos, Income Management Unit, and John Squire, Revenues and Benefits Client Team.

6.3 Members made various comments and asked a number of questions, to which responses were provided as follows:-

- 880 tenants across the City had been identified as being potentially affected by the exemption from the Under-Occupancy provisions (Bedroom Tax), which applied to tenants living in their property since 1990, with around 450 of these being Council tenants and the remainder being with social landlords. Work was ongoing to identify the actual numbers affected. It should be noted that the Department for Work and Pensions was looking to amend the regulations to remove this exemption.
- In 2015/16 the Local Assistance Scheme funding was to be included in the Revenue Support Grant.
- A Project Group had been established in the Council to prepare for the introduction of Universal Credit. One of the areas of concern about the introduction of Universal Credit was that payments would be made directly to residents, rather than landlords, so that individuals would have to manage their own budgets and take responsibility for paying their own rent.
- Nationally, pilots were showing that there were huge problems with the introduction of Universal Credit. The pilots had focused on tenants in receipt of benefits in social housing and there had been little work nationally on how the introduction of Universal Credit would affect private tenants. Any provisions which would safeguard payments to vulnerable tenants would be transferred across and so would also apply to private tenants.
- Steps were being taken in Sheffield to proactively help residents with budgeting, for example by enabling those who needed assistance with managing their finances to set up budgeting or 'jam jar' accounts.
- A network of Work Clubs operated across the City and a list of these would be sent to the Committee's Policy and Improvement Officer for circulation to Committee Members.
- The Council had been approached by a private company to set up a self-service website, like the one operated by Manchester City Council, which brought private landlords and people looking for a home together and enabled potential tenants to calculate their likely benefit entitlement to see

which properties they could afford, so they could then choose from a list of homes that matched their circumstances.

- Tenants in social housing were being encouraged to consider moving to private rented accommodation, as the Council did not have enough one-bedroomed properties.
- Approximately 30% of those in private rented accommodation now had their benefits paid directly to their landlord. This represented a big shift from the 90% figure in 2008.
- The Council helped to administer the Mortgage Rescue Scheme, which assisted households which were struggling to make their mortgage payments, by transferring ownership of the property to a Housing Association whilst allowing the resident(s) to continue living there. It was important to note that this scheme, which was a Government scheme, was due to cease at the end of March 2014.

6.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks the Cabinet Member and attending officers for their contribution to the meeting;
- (b) recognises the excellent work undertaken by the Revenues and Benefits Client Team in supporting Members with regard to this complex area of work;
- (c) notes the contents of the report and the responses to questions;
- (d) acknowledges the transition to Universal Credit and requests that the Committee be provided with a quarterly update on progress;
- (e) notes the aspects of good practice operating in Bristol and Manchester and requests that consideration be given to adopting these measures in Sheffield;
- (f) requests that the report be circulated to all Council Members and all Sheffield Members of Parliament, with a request for their comments;
- (g) agrees to wait for further information on the ending of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme before writing to the appropriate Government Minister in this regard; and
- (h) requests that a further report on the Impact of Welfare Reform on Sheffield's Residents, be presented to the Committee in 6 months' time.

7. SHEFFIELD'S PRIVATE RENTED HOUSING SECTOR

7.1 Michelle Slater, Service Manager, Private Housing Standards, gave a presentation

on Sheffield's Private Rented Housing Sector which provided an overview of this sector in Sheffield, highlighted the changing views involved, outlined issues for consideration, provided details of Council actions and celebrated some of the successes. The presentation was supported by a handout which was circulated to the Committee.

7.2 Members made various comments and asked a number of questions, to which responses were provided as follows:-

- The Council has established good contacts with the two landlord associations in the City which covered a large part of the private sector. There was not a lot of contact with letting agents apart from where problems arose. The focus was on developing relationships with landlords rather than letting agents and it should be noted that letting agents were not yet regulated.
- The importance of the work being undertaken by Council staff in this area had been recognised by the Courts as two custodial sentences had been imposed on landlords in the past year. It was felt that the Courts now had a better understanding of this work but problems were being experienced in recovering the Court costs of taking prosecutions.
- There were 8,000 houses in multiple occupation in the City, with about three quarters of these being occupied by students. Such properties containing five or more people needed to be licensed with the Council. The SNUG Partnership between the Council, the Sheffield Hallam University and the Hallam Union was aimed at improving the quality of student properties, with the Hallam University not accepting properties for their students unless they were registered with this partnership. The University of Sheffield had its own inspection regime but it didn't regulate up to minimum legislative standards. Student houses comprised one third of the private rented sector in Sheffield and one tenth of customer referrals were from students. SNUG properties were inspected by the Council and, once a property had been passed as being up to standard, it enabled officers to look at properties which were of more concern.
- It was noticeable that landlords had had to improve their standards due to the new modern blocks of flats which had been built in the City. The Council inspectors had a good picture of what was happening, with the aim being to eliminate the poor landlords and substandard properties from the market.
- 25% of referrals resulted in an ongoing case but most could be rectified almost immediately.
- Inspectors would pick up on tenants who were in difficulties, for instance with Housing Benefits. Where anti-social behaviour or cultural issues were a problem, the Council would negotiate with the landlords.
- The Council would not normally get involved where people were renting out

bedrooms in their own houses unless these were student related.

7.3 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks Michelle Slater for her contribution to the meeting;
- (b) notes the contents of the presentation and the responses to questions; and
- (c) requests that a report on the introduction of Selective Licensing in the Private Rented Sector be presented to the Committee in December 2014.

8. SAFER AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES PARTNERSHIP

8.1 The Committee received a report of the Interim Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods, which outlined how the co-ordinated work undertaken by the Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership was contributing to reducing the number of people experiencing crime and anti-social behaviour and helping to build stronger communities.

8.2 The report was supported by a presentation given by Sarah Banks, Head of Safer and Sustainable Communities, and Inspector Phil Shaw, South Yorkshire Police, which provided a background to the Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership, outlined its strategic priorities, reported on the annual Joint Strategic Intelligence Assessment and its priorities for 2013, gave details of performance and crime costs, made reference to the work of the Police and Crime Commissioner and highlighted other changes and challenges. Inspector Shaw provided up to date detailed information on Police Performance which showed an overall decrease in crime of 7.9% with 2,200 fewer victims than in the previous 12 months. Most areas of crime showed decreases, but specific mention was made of an increase in religiously or racially motivated crime which had increased by 30%, but it was emphasised that this involved very low numbers and that an increase in reporting could be a positive sign of increased confidence in the Police. Robbery and violent crime had shown an increase, but this was largely down to a series of robberies in one geographical area of the City. Historical figures showed that there had been reductions in most crimes continuously over the last 10 years.

8.3 Members made various comments and asked a number of questions, to which responses were provided as follows:-

- Any discussions with private security firms would be held at Chief Officer level within the South Yorkshire Police.
- The importance of the Police working with communities was emphasised.
- The long term trend in relation to burglaries was heading in the right direction.
- Further statistics would be obtained and sent to Councillor Keith Hill.

- The performance figures quoted were checked and audited appropriately and there was no reason to believe these were inaccurate. The Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership Board was presented with the performance statistics and any dramatic changes would be picked up there.

8.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks Sarah Banks and Inspector Shaw for their contribution to the meeting;
- (b) notes the contents of the report and the responses to questions; and
- (c) endorses the Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership Plan priorities for 2014/17 as set out in the report.

9. REVIEW OF THE PARTNER RESOURCE ALLOCATION MEETING (PRAM)

9.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the report on the Review of the Partner Resource Allocation Meeting (PRAM).

10. COUNCIL HOUSE SALES UNDER THE RIGHT TO BUY SCHEME

10.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the Update Report on Council House Sales under the Right to Buy Scheme.

11. WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14

11.1 The Committee received a report of the Policy and Improvement Officer which outlined the Committee's Work Programme for the remainder of the Municipal Year 2013/14.

11.2 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) approves the Work Programme as detailed in the report; and
- (b) notes that further information on the Mortgage Rescue Scheme was to be provided as part of the Welfare Reform briefing note to be circulated with the papers for the meeting of the Committee to be held on 27th March 2014.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

12.1 The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Thursday, 27th March 2014, at 2.00 pm in the Town Hall.