

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 23 July 2015

PRESENT: Councillors Tony Damms (Chair), Steve Ayriss (Deputy Chair), Penny Baker, David Barker, John Campbell, Richard Crowther, Keith Davis, Denise Fox, Aodan Marken, Roy Munn, Sioned-Mair Richards, Richard Shaw and Zoe Sykes

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sheila Constance and Tony Downing.

2. EXCLUSION OF THE 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 There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

4.1 The minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 26th March and 20th May 2015, were approved as correct records.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 Alan Kewley raised the following two questions:-

- (a) Could the Committee look into the issue regarding Local Area Partnerships on the grounds that, since they were established in October 2013, they had not operated in the format as agreed at that time and on the basis that they represented a very important role as part of the Council's engagement process?

Response – The Policy and Improvement Officer stated that the future of Local Area Partnerships was to be considered as part of a wider piece of work on how the Council aimed to work with neighbourhoods. The topic had been included on the Committee's Work Programme for 2015/16, and Members would, as part of its discussions on this item later in the meeting, be looking at whether this issue should be prioritised for consideration. The Chair added that Local Area Partnerships were viewed by Members as very important in terms of the Council's engagement process.

- (b) Could the Committee include a topic on its Work Programme for 2015/16 in

terms of overseeing the role of the Sheffield First Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership, particularly how the work of the Partnership tied in with the work of this Committee?

Response – The Policy and Improvement Officer confirmed that the issue of community safety was included as a topic on the Committee’s draft Work Programme for 2015/16, and Members would decide how they would prioritise this and all other suggested topics on the Programme later in the meeting.

5.2 Andy Shallice raised the following four questions:-

- (a) Do officers consider there to have been any improvements in Page Hall since the Selective Licensing Scheme was introduced, specifically relating to tenant management, state and condition of repair, overcrowding or other aspects of the local neighbourhood?
- (b) Has there been any noticeable change, or anecdotal evidence, of the mix of the private rented tenant population since the introduction of the Page Hall Selective Licensing Scheme, such as the proportion of tenants who were ‘economic migrants’, or EU migrants or Roma?
- (c) How many voluntary registrations of landlords has there been in the wider, coterminous neighbourhoods, around the Selective Licensing Scheme designated area?
- (d) When the officers used the phrase ‘they’re not displacing – they’re still arriving’ in the presentation planned to be made at the meeting on 26th March 2015, were they referring to landlords or tenants? If the reference was to tenants, was this suggesting that an ambition of Selective Licensing was to alter the composition of the local tenant population?

Response – The Chair stated that the questions would be referred to Michelle Houston, Private Housing Standards Service, with a request that she provides responses at the earliest possible opportunity.

6. OVERVIEW OF THE COMMITTEE'S ROLE AND REMIT

- 6.1 The Policy and Improvement Officer provided an overview of the role and remit of the Committee, indicating that, under the terms of reference, the Committee was responsible for overseeing five broad areas – Housing, Community Safety and Crime, Community Cohesion, Social Inclusion and Locality Management. He stated that the Committee had legislative powers in respect of Community Safety, in that it could scrutinise the Sheffield First Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership.
- 6.2 He added that the remits of Scrutiny Committees did not strictly follow the remit of the relevant Cabinet Member, therefore, when the Committee was considering cross cutting issues, Members from other Scrutiny Committees could be invited to some meetings.

6.3 The Chair added that where the Committee wished to discuss issues of considerable interest, it may be necessary to establish a Task and Finish Group, comprising a selected number of Members, with the Group reporting back to the Committee on completion of its work.

6.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the information now reported.

7. CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT IN THE HOUSING REPAIRS INSOURCING PROJECT

7.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods Service containing further information in connection with the Housing Repairs Insourcing Project, specifically the full costings of the ballot of tenants and leaseholders, together with details of consultation meetings that have taken place to obtain the views of tenants and leaseholders. The report also contained further details of a number of general repair issues, which had been considered by the Committee, at its meeting held on 26th March, 2015, as part of the call-in of the Cabinet decision on Future Options for the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service, and the Committee had requested the further information.

7.2 Present for this item were Janet Sharpe (Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods Service), Jason Siddall (Council Housing Service), John Kite (Tenants' representative) and Yulia Yushina (Leaseholders' Forum).

7.3 The report contained details on the financial implications of a full tenant and leaseholder ballot, the legal requirements for holding such a ballot, and other options for obtaining the views of tenants and leaseholders, including details of existing customer engagement and governance framework, additional repairs, specific consultation undertaken and customer engagement going forward. The report also contained a response to queries raised by the Committee with regard to various aspects of the Housing Repairs Contract and attached, as appendices, a detailed response to a question raised by a member of the public at the meeting on 26th March 2015, in terms of which tenant groups had been consulted, a chart showing the current structure of the Council's Housing Engagement/Governance structure, the Well-maintained Homes and Neighbourhoods Service Design Project Group's Vision Statement and a leaflet produced by Housing Services providing advice on how to prevent condensation in homes.

7.4 Members raised questions and the following responses were provided:-

- Whilst it was accepted that there would be major risks involved in terms of the insourcing project, including financial risks, there was an obligation on the Council to consult with all tenants and leaseholders, and the proposed ballot had been viewed as the most effective method of holding such consultation. A sub-group had been established to look at the best method of consultation. It was believed that the Council had an excellent structure in terms of consulting with its tenants and leaseholders, and that the method chosen would give everyone a better understanding of the process involved.

- The precise cost in terms of the full ballot of tenants and leaseholders would not be known until the work had been formally procured. The costs set out in the report represented an estimate.
- As part of the process, all tenants and leaseholders would be sent a ballot paper, and given the option of returning it in a number of different ways.
- The three housing areas which had chosen to have a bi-monthly Local Estates Services and Investment Forum (LESIF), in addition to the Local Area Housing Forums, were Central, East and South West. The decision to have the LESIFs had been taken by the Local Area Housing Forum.
- The suggestion to send ballot papers out with tenants' and leaseholders' annual rent demand letters would not be a possibility as these letters were sent out after the Council meeting in February, after the approval of the Housing Rent Account and rent levels, therefore there would be an issue in terms of timing and additional cost. John Kite, on behalf of the tenants, indicated that it was always difficult sending information out by letter as several people either would not receive it, read it or interpret it correctly, and this was highlighted by the low attendance at meetings of his local Tenants' and Residents' Association, despite several invitations being sent. Yulia Yushina, on behalf of the leaseholders, indicated that there were only around 2,500 leaseholders across the City, with the Leaseholders' Forum only holding meetings on a quarterly basis. Both the tenants' and leaseholders' representatives were of the opinion that tenants and leaseholders would not mind who delivered the service, as long as it was effective.

7.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the information now reported and the responses to the questions raised;
- (b) thanks Janet Sharpe, Jason Siddall, John Kite and Yulia Yushina for attending the meeting and responding to the questions raised; and
- (c) requests that the Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods Service considers the views and comments now raised by the Committee.

8. THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR IN SHEFFIELD

- 8.1 The Committee considered a report of the Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods Service containing an update on the private rented sector in Sheffield, setting out information in terms of the percentage of private sector accommodation, the effects of the increase in the number of people living in the private rented sector for the City, and details of the legislation the Council used to deal with any issues or problems with regard to the private rented sector. The report also attached, as appendices, a map highlighting the areas of the City or groups of customers, where private rented housing was dominant and the progress in terms of the Page Hall

Selective Licensing Scheme, which commenced a year ago with the aim of tackling the issues associated with the problematic private rented housing in that area.

8.2 Members raised questions and the following responses were provided:-

- One piece of legislation the Council could use in terms of enforcement action, with regard to problematic empty homes, was the Enforced Sale Procedure. The Council only used this procedure in extreme circumstances, with only four properties being sold using the legislation. In most cases, where works were required to a property, the Council would undertake such works, then charge the homeowner.
- The Buy to Let market was expanding despite rising property prices, as people still viewed property as a good investment. The Private Housing Standards Service produced self-help leaflets to assist potential landlords, as well as producing standard letters for them to use.
- Although there was no longer a Housing Aid Section in the Council, there were still officers who provided information in connection with tenancy support, and could make referrals for benefits.
- There was an increasing number of Roma migrants moving to the Page Hall area, several of whom were being forced to live in neighbouring areas, resulting in poor condition housing, absent landlords, irresponsible letting and overcrowding dispersing to a wider area.
- The Service would welcome, and benefit from, additional resources, particularly to take into account the growth of the sector and concurrent reductions in the Team.
- The action taken and legislation used by different local authorities in terms of their respective private rented sectors was dependent on a number of factors, including the number of such properties and student population. A number of major cities did not receive additional funding to deal with enforcement work, although some did.
- The Service would support the idea of establishing cross-border teams across South Yorkshire, to share information, as a number of landlords had properties across the region.
- Whilst the Council was not able to extend the boundary in respect of the Page Hall Selective Licensing Scheme in order to deal with the dispersal issues for legal reasons, they would be able to designate a new area using the Government criteria.
- A briefing document had been supplied to all Magistrates in the City, together with an offer to visit and discuss the legislation with them. Unfortunately, this offer was not taken up. It was not clear how seriously the Magistrates were taking the issue, but this would continue to be stressed in Court.

- All letting and managing agents were required to register with one of the three Government-approved redress schemes, which provided better protection for tenants. As well as this, the Service always encouraged tenants to contact officers if they were experiencing any problems so that all issues could be formally logged and used if any subsequent action was taken against a landlord.
- The Service supported shorter-term tenancies with the shortest tenancy in law being six months. This could be deemed as a probationary period where, if there were no problems during the initial six-month period, the landlord had the option of extending the tenancy.
- The number of additional staff required to enable the Service to be pro-active, as opposed to reactive, would depend on how far the Council wished to go in this regard. Two new Environmental Health Officers had recently been appointed within the Service, which had had a very positive effect on the level of action taken.
- All landlords of larger Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) which had five or more occupied bedrooms on three or more floors were legally required to apply to the Council for a licence. If they failed to do so, this was deemed a criminal offence. The term of the mandatory licence was for five years, after which landlord would need to apply for a new one.
- Under the HMO Management Regulations, landlords are required to maintain their gardens, ensuring that they are both safe and tidy, with bushes and hedges being cut properly, and no rubbish left.
- In terms of the details of legal proceedings during the first year of the Page Hall Selective Licensing Scheme, those landlords listed as 'Anon' was due to the fact that their cases were presently going through the Court process therefore, at this time, their names were not in the public domain.

8.3 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the information now reported and the responses provided to the questions raised;
- (b) thanks Michelle Houston for attending the meeting and responding to the questions raised; and
- (c) requests updates on the progress being made, every six months.

9. POLICE AND CRIME PANEL UPDATE

- 9.1 Councillor John Campbell reported on the proceedings of the meeting of the Police and Crime Panel held on 29th June 2015, as follows:-

- The Panel was looking to recruit a further independent member.
- Discussions were held in connection with the enquiry into the Hillsborough Disaster.
- Professor John Drew had been commissioned to draft an independent report on the Child Sexual Exploitation issues in Rotherham.
- There was a £10m reduction from 2014/15 in the South Yorkshire policing budget, resulting in very challenging times ahead.

9.2 In response to a question from a Member of the Committee, Councillor Campbell confirmed that the total budget for policing in South Yorkshire was £240m, therefore the £10m reduction represented a cut of approximately 4%.

9.3 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the information now reported.

10. WORK PROGRAMME 2015/16

10.1 The Policy and Improvement Officer submitted a report attaching the draft Work Programme for 2015/16. The draft Programme set out the details of a number of topics which the Committee would be requested to prioritise in terms of their consideration at future meetings. The Programme also contained details of written briefings which would be submitted to the Committee for information only.

10.2 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes and approves the draft Work Programme for 2015/16 now submitted, subject to the suggested changes now made by Members, and any further changes suggested by Members following this meeting, to be finalised by the Chair and Deputy Chair, in consultation with the Policy and Improvement Officer, and submitted to the next meeting.

11. WRITTEN RESPONSES TO PUBLIC QUESTIONS

11.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the report now submitted by the Policy and Improvement Officer, containing responses to questions raised by members of the public at the previous meetings of the Committee.

12. WELFARE REFORM - JULY 2015 - UPDATE

12.1 The Committee received and noted the contents of a report of the Director of Policy, Performance and Communications providing an update on Welfare Reform as at July 2015.

13. RIGHT TO BUY - UPDATE

13.1 The Committee received and noted a report of the Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods Service containing information on the sales receipts generated from Right to Buy sales.

14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 14.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on Thursday, 10th September 2015, at 4.00 pm, in the Town Hall.