

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 6 April 2017

PRESENT: Councillors Tony Damms (Chair), Sue Auckland, Richard Crowther, Dawn Dale, Tony Downing, Mark Jones, George Lindars-Hammond, Magid Magid, Richard Shaw (Deputy Chair), Zoe Sykes and Roger Davison (Substitute Member)

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Nasima Akther, Michelle Cook, Anne Murphy, Keith Davis and Adam Hanrahan, with Councillor Roger Davison attending as Councillor Hanrahan's substitute.

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 There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16th February 2017, were approved as a correct record.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 The Chair, Councillor Tony Damms, indicated that a written response would be provided to public questions which were asked at the meeting, relating to the following:-

(a) The timetable for the introduction of the seeking of written permission from asylum seekers to live in accommodation with shared bedrooms. (Asked by Manuchehr Dizaji)

(b) The condition of properties provided by G4S for asylum seekers. (Asked by Manuchehr Dizaji)

(c) The appropriateness of the Ventilation Specification sections (specifically Sections 3.10 & 9.2) of the proposed new Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Standards. (Asked by Ron Frost, Institute of Specialist Surveyors and Engineers)

5.2 The Chair added that these responses would be circulated with the agenda for the next Committee meeting.

6. CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE: VACANTS PROPERTY SERVICE

6.1 The Committee received a report of the Challenge for Change (C4C) Tenant Scrutiny Group, which provided a progress update on the recommendations made by the Group in its report on Vacant Property Services, which had been presented to the Committee in July 2015.

6.2 In attendance for this item were Jason Siddall (Repairs and Maintenance Manager), Suzanne Allen (Head of Citywide Neighbourhood Services), Tina Gilbert (Assistant Manager, Communities) and Linda Moxon and Max Richardson (C4C representatives).

6.3 Jason Siddall and Suzanne Allen took the Committee through the report, which was presented in the form of a table providing an update on progress in relation to each of the recommendations.

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

- The Council used a turnaround time, covering the period of a property becoming vacant to the new tenant moving in, of 55 days. This period took everything into consideration, including any major works. However, the overriding aim was to re-let properties as soon as possible.
- Properties were repaired to a minimum standard which was published, and in some cases a decoration allowance may be offered. In all cases properties should be fit for let, but it should be recognised that people had different aspirations, particularly in relation to decor.
- Any replaced locks were of the anti-snap type.
- Whilst there was no minimum handback standard, it was expected that properties would be in a reasonable condition. Attempts were always made to try and conduct an inspection prior to handback and officers would work with tenants to resolve any issues. It was also possible to recharge outgoing tenants.
- The 55 day turnaround period was well understood and was felt to be an open and honest time estimate.
- Environmental issues such as litter and the condition of gardens were important in the less popular areas of the City.
- Pictures of properties on the Council website only showed the outside, but consideration was being given to also showing internal images.

- In relation to tenant modifications, anything advantageous to a new tenant would be retained, such as a new kitchen or bathroom. Tenants would initially need permission to modify the property and in some cases compensation may be payable.
- Properties which had been adapted for disabled tenants would be advertised as such and it was expected that such properties would be in more demand due to the ageing population. Purpose-built accommodation was now being built for disabled tenants.
- Whilst there was always a minimum lettable standard, some properties in high demand locations would only be brought up to a health and safety standard. In less popular areas, the standard may be tailored to make the property more attractive and this could be done on an estate or street level.
- It was possible to address situations where vulnerable individuals did not have adequate furniture through the use of charities, grants and furnished tenancies.
- Officers worked with tenants in relation to the removal of rubbish from gardens and the introduction of Housing+ would ensure a more tailored approach in this regard.
- Carpets would only be included in the let as an exception.
- Officers decided on the different cleaning standards which would apply to individual properties.
- There was provision for identifying sensitive lets, for instance in the case of vulnerable individuals who may be given advice to contact other agencies and in extreme circumstances bids may be bypassed where it was felt that a particular property or area was unsuitable for the prospective tenant.
- People were asked for their reasons for refusal of a property one week after their decision, to allow a period of reflection and consequently obtain more genuine responses. Officers tried to be realistic in terms of tenants' future opportunities and it was recognised that some had higher expectations.

6.5 The C4C representatives commented that they would have been put off by the defects in some of the properties they had inspected as part of their C4C work and expressed concern at the length of time that properties were left vacant, with the consequent loss of rent.

6.6 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks those attending for their contribution to the meeting, particularly the Challenge for Change representatives;
- (b) notes the contents of the report, comments made and responses to

questions; and

- (c) requests that a copy of the minimum letting standards be sent to the Policy and Improvement Officer for circulation to Committee Members.

7. HOUSING + UPDATE

7.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services which provided an update on the progress of the implementation of the new Housing+ approach to Council housing management. This update had been requested by the Committee to coincide with Committee Members' recent visits to, and the work-shadowing of staff in, the Neighbourhood Teams.

7.2 In attendance for this item were Janet Sharpe (Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services) and Bev Mullooly (Head of Neighbourhood Services).

7.3 The report was supported by a presentation given by Janet Sharpe which provided information on the implementation of Housing+, a reminder of what it involved, how it supported the Council's ways of working, the journey so far and next steps.

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

- It was recognised that more officer visibility and targeted communications may be advisable in order to increase tenants' understanding of Housing+ and that Councillors and Tenants' and Residents' Associations could also be of assistance in this regard.
- There was to be a 12 month review of the implementation of Housing+ and by that time it was expected that the majority of officers would be happy with the new approach.
- Customer satisfaction feedback would be part of the study being conducted by the University of Sheffield to measure the health and wellbeing impact of Housing+, and it was hoped to identify individuals requiring support at an early stage in order to prevent future costs. Tenant representatives were also working with officers in connection with this study.
- An officer training programme had been introduced, which placed an emphasis on identifying vulnerable individuals. In addition, work was being undertaken with the South Yorkshire Police, Community Safety Teams and Probation Service to share intelligence and bring all services together.

7.5 Members also commented on how Housing and Neighbourhood Services would work with other Council departments in relation to Housing+ and the misuse of properties. They also shared their views on how Housing+ was working for tenants and officers, with the general impression being that it was working well, particularly in relation to tenants being put at ease and the team spirit of the officers. The Chair, Councillor Tony Damms, suggested that the aim to visit each tenant every

year might be changed to an intention, so that efforts could be concentrated where they were needed most. He also suggested that Committee Members may wish to consider repeat visits to the Neighbourhood Teams.

7.6 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks Janet Sharpe and Bev Mullooly for their contribution to the meeting; and
- (b) notes the contents of the report and presentation, the responses to questions and Members' comments.

8. **CALL-IN OF CABINET MEMBER DECISION: APPROVAL OF NEW HOUSES IN MULTIPLE OCCUPANCY (HMO) LICENSING STANDARDS**

8.1 The Committee considered the decision of the Cabinet Member for Housing, made on 23rd February 2017:-

- (i) to approve the revised Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Standards as set out in Appendix A of the report, to come into effect on 6th April 2017; and
- (ii) to authorise the Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods Service to approve amendments to the Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Standards.

8.2 Signatories

The Lead Signatory to the call-in was Councillor Richard Shaw, and the other signatories were Councillors Adam Hanrahan, Penny Baker, Andrew Sangar and Steve Ayris.

8.3 Reasons for the Call-in

The signatories had confirmed that they wished to further scrutinize the decision to determine whether it was clear enough for tenants and landlords and robust enough to be enforced and that there were sufficient Council resources to do so.

8.4 Attendees

- Councillor Jayne Dunn (Cabinet Member for Housing)
- Janet Sharpe (Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services)
- Maxine Stavrianakos (Head of Neighbourhood Intervention and Tenant Support)
- Angela Greenwood (Locality Manager - Cohesion)

8.5 Councillor Richard Shaw, addressing the Committee as Lead Signatory, explained that the purpose of the call-in was to ensure that standards were robust, that the consultation with interested parties had been adequate, that resources to

implement were adequate and to clarify some technical issues.

- 8.6 In response, Councillor Jayne Dunn directed the Committee to the 'Reasons for Decision' set out in the Individual Cabinet Member Decision Record and explained that the purpose was to champion improving standards and address issues such as rogue landlords and shared accommodation. She added that arrangements could be made for any Member to have a briefing session with officers, as the technical aspects were much more within their remit. In conclusion, she indicated that the aim was to have some of the best accommodation and landlords and squeeze out any bad landlords.
- 8.7 Maxine Stavrianakos repeated the offer of briefings to Members and explained that there were 1,800 premises presently licensed as HMOs, but that the law was changing so that another 1,000 properties would be included. The last standards were approved in 2004/5, and a review of these in 2009 revealed aspects which required improvement, including issues on room sharing for asylum seekers. Whilst there was no statutory responsibility to carry out consultation, this had been done with landlords, the Universities, the Fire and Rescue Service, G4S and asylum seekers. The feedback from this consultation had resulted in these standards, which actually contained fairly minor changes apart from provisions on shared rooms.
- 8.8 The two landlords' representatives present confirmed that they understood and were happy with the standards and that it would be possible to implement them.
- 8.9 Questions from Members of the Committee

Members, including the Lead Signatory to the call-in, made various comments and asked a number of questions, to which responses were provided as follows:-

- The insulation standards had been made advisory rather than compulsory as a result of the consultation, as it was felt that these should not be prescriptive if they didn't need to be.
- Feedback from wider groups, such as Tenants' and Residents' Associations, community meetings and the Sheffield Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership, had been taken into consideration in developing the standards, as had the comments of the private rented sector.
- There was no legal obligation to provide a Carbon Monoxide Detector, apart from where the property contained a wood burning stove. However, these standards required any property with a gas or solid fuel fire, boiler or gas oven/hob to have one, which was above the Government standard. There was also a requirement for these to be checked every 12 months.
- Accommodation for asylum seekers was managed by G4S and, following concerns raised by the South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG), the standards proposed that all single persons sharing rooms would have to agree to this in writing. This would apply to all new asylum

seekers and discussions were taking place with G4S with regard to those who were already in such accommodation. If a written permission was not signed, then it would not be expected that they would be housed in shared accommodation. The provision of accommodation for asylum seekers was monitored by the Home Office and SYMAAG, and Council officers worked closely with the Home Office in this regard. It should be noted that the Chinese community showed a preference for sharing accommodation and the Private Rented Sector team were working with that community in this connection.

- With regard to the approval of amendments to the standards, most changes would be minor and briefing sessions would be held for Members if any major changes were proposed.
- The Council was a leader in the country on best practice with regard to rogue landlords and legislation.
- In connection with Estate Agents taking upfront deposits from students, the Council operated a Deposit Support Scheme and was generally looking to raise tenants' rights awareness. Different legislation operated for Estate Agents and was regulated by the Government. It should also be noted that Sheffield was the only City to have a SNUG scheme, which was a property inspection standard approved by the Council and both Universities in the City and involved inspections with landlords.

8.10 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report together with the comments made and the responses provided;
- (b) notes the decision of the Cabinet Member for Housing, taken on 23rd February 2017,
 - (i) to approve the revised Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Standards as set out in Appendix A of the report, to come into effect on 6th April 2017; and
 - (ii) to authorise the Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods Service to approve amendments to the HMO Licensing Standards; and
- (c) recommends that no action be taken in relation to the called-in decision.

(NOTE: Prior to the passing of the above resolution, an alternative motion, moved by Councillor Richard Shaw and seconded by Councillor Roger Davison, namely to 'refer the decision back to the Cabinet Member for Housing for reconsideration in the light of recommendations from the Committee', was put to the vote and negated.)

9. THE WORK OF THE POLICE AND CRIME PANEL

9.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the Work of the Police and Crime Panel report.

10. HATE CRIME AND HATE INCIDENTS 1ST MARCH 2015 - 28TH FEBRUARY 2017

10.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the Hate Crime and Hate Incidents 1st March 2015 - 28th February 2017 report.

11. SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2016-17 DRAFT CONTENT AND WORK PROGRAMME 2017-18

11.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the Scrutiny Annual Report 2016-17 Draft Content and Work Programme 2017-18 report.

12. WRITTEN RESPONSES TO PUBLIC QUESTIONS

12.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the Written Responses to Public Questions report.

13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

13.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on a date to be arranged in the Municipal Year 2017/18.