

**Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee**

**Meeting held 8 November 2012**

**PRESENT:** Councillors Chris Weldon (Chair), David Barker, Nikki Bond, Simon Clement-Jones, Shelia Constance, Richard Crowther, Jayne Dunn, Denise Fox, Martin Lawton, Peter Rippon, Chris Rosling-Josephs and Diana Stimely (Substitute Member)

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**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Penny Baker and Shaffaq Mohammed, and Councillor Diana Stimely attended as a substitute Member.

**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 Members declared the following personal interests in Item 7 on the agenda – Lettings Policy Review:-

- Councillor Martin Lawton – Member of the Local Management Board of Acis Group Limited;
- Councillor Peter Rippon – Member of Shiregreen Community Homes;
- Councillor Richard Crowther – Member of the Sheffield Homes North West Area Board;
- Councillor Denise Fox – Member of the Sheffield Homes South East Area Board; and
- Councillor Jayne Dunn – Member of the Sheffield Homes North West Area Board.

**4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee held 11<sup>th</sup> September 2012, were approved as a correct record.

**5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS**

5.1 Mick Watts questioned what assurances Members could give to ensure that the projected underspend in the Housing Revenue Account was fully allocated.

Richard Palmer stated that now the Council had a self-financing Housing Revenue Account, resulting in the Council holding all risks, there was a need to maintain a substantial reserve to mitigate any such risks or problems that may arise and therefore, a large proportion of the underspend might need to be placed in reserves. A reserves strategy was under development, to establish the size of the reserve required. A particular risk was the potential impact of welfare benefits reform on the ability of tenants to pay their rent. Initially, any unallocated underspend at year end would be carried over into reserves at the year end and would not be lost to the Housing Revenue Account. The Cabinet would be making a decision on this issue at its meeting to be held in February 2013. Councillor Harry Harpham, Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods, attending as an observer, confirmed that the Council needed to be aware of the risks involved in terms of the transfer of the Housing Revenue Account, stressing the need for robust plans in terms of any uncertainties, hence the need for considerable reserves. He stated that it was the aim of the Council to have a high quality housing service therefore, reserves would not be maintained at a higher level than needed and any surplus would be reinvested into housing services.

## **6. DRAFT LETTINGS POLICY REVIEW**

6.1 Sharon Schonborn, Allocations Policy Review Manager, Communities, gave a presentation on the draft Lettings Policy Review, reporting on why the review had been undertaken, the work undertaken so far as part of the review, the draft Allocations Policy, the Housing Register and how the Council would be deciding between the various housing needs. She referred to all the various aspects in terms of the proposed procedures relating to looking for a property and offers of accommodation and concluded by reporting on the next steps, including the deadlines in terms of the adoption of the Policy, and subsequent implementation. In terms of the next steps, it was reported that consultation on the Policy would be held during November and December 2012, there would be an analysis of the consultation and the final Policy document produced in January 2013, which would be submitted to the Cabinet for approval on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

6.2 Members of the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee raised questions and the following responses were provided:-

- Those people suffering financial hardship in terms of reduced benefit payments following a requirement to downsize would not be deemed to have critical needs. Only those in serious danger and therefore, requiring to move immediately, would be included in the critical band and granted priority. Any tenants suffering financial hardship would have the opportunity of applying for discretionary housing payments in the short-term.
- There were safeguards in place to ensure that applicants were not able to bid for properties that they were not entitled to. The new IT system would ensure that applicants were only able to access details of those properties in accordance with their individual eligibility. In those situations where applicants were assisted by Tenants' and Residents' Associations (TARAs) or other similar organisations, such organisations would be able to receive a

print-out of all available properties, but the application would have to be made by the tenant, who would only be able to apply for properties they were eligible for.

- In terms of equality of opportunity implications, officers had looked at any barriers facing applicants, and how such barriers could be overcome. Action Plans had been devised in terms of barriers and what could be put in place to help applicants overcome these barriers. Targetted consultation was being carried out with those groups adversely affected by the tightened bedroom eligibility criteria, such as those with overnight access to children who don't live with them all of the time and people with health issues, and requiring an additional bedroom.
- There were a number of safety nets in place to deal with those situations where people were experiencing delays in being rehoused and were either not receiving any benefit or were in receipt of a reduced amount of benefit. In some cases, tenants would be able to apply for discretionary housing payments in the short-term. All cases would be handled very sensitively and there was a considerable amount of flexibility in the Policy to ensure tenants were assisted.
- It was not likely that people who put their name on the Council waiting list when they got married sometime ago, would still be on the list as regular rolling reviews of the waiting list were undertaken and under the new Policy, applicants would have to register on the waiting list annually.
- If people intentionally made themselves homeless by failing to pay their rent, they would not get priority for Council housing. A review of an applicant's five-year address history would be considered as part of any applications.

6.3 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, the information reported as part of the presentation and the responses to the questions now raised;
- (b) expresses its thanks and appreciation to all the Officers and Members, including those Members of the former Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee, for all the excellent work undertaken in connection with the Lettings Policy Review; and
- (c) requests that a report on the draft Lettings Policy be submitted to its meeting to be held on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2013.

**7. HOMELESSNESS PERFORMANCE UPDATE**

- 7.1 The Executive Director, Communities, submitted a report containing details of key performance issues regarding homelessness in the City.
- 7.2 Jan Sutton, Housing Solutions Manager, introduced the report and referred to bed and breakfast and temporary accommodation use, homelessness preventions,

projected increases in the number of homeless over the next few years and details of the key challenges facing the Council in respect of homelessness.

7.3 Members of the Committee raised questions and the following responses were provided:-

- An Officer Working Group had been established specifically to work with private landlords, with the aim of discussing levels of rent and negotiating, where possible, reduction in rents, particularly for larger families where there was no suitable Council accommodation available.
- Officers would look at the criteria with regard to the possibility of obtaining Government funding to undertake refurbishment works required to bring vacant properties back to such a condition so as to be able to house homeless people.
- It is unlikely that the target of zero households in bed and breakfast accommodation will be achieved unless the Supported Accommodation Pathway can be implemented. The Pathway has not been implemented because the required funding of £300,000 for the necessary ICT was not approved. Alternative funding was being considered through the Capital Programme.
- A certain proportion of beds were held at St Ann's Hostel for Housing Solutions customers, which meant that they would not have to go into bed and breakfast. Assistance and support was provided in order to make sure homeless or vulnerable people gained the necessary ability and skills to enable them to live on their own in a Council tenancy.
- Partners were still taking a role in ensuring that they took their fair share of presentations in terms of homeless and/or vulnerable people who required accommodation.
- There was a very strict protocol in respect of the standard of accommodation offered by bed and breakfast providers. There were only four bed and breakfast providers that the Council used on a regular basis and all these properties were checked regularly in terms of standards of cleanliness.

7.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the responses provided to the questions raised; and
- (b) requests that (i) a further report on homelessness performance be submitted to a meeting of the Committee in six month's time and (ii) the report be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee, (A) with a request that Members look at the possibility of implementing cross-cutting measures to deal with the problems of homelessness in the City and (B) highlighting the fact that the Homelessness Service was operating under pressure and requesting that such pressures could be alleviated where

possible.

**8. POLICY UPDATE**

- 8.1 The Committee received and noted a report of the Scrutiny Policy Officer providing an update on policy changes introduced by the Government during September and October 2012.

**9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- 9.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on Thursday, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2013, at 2.00 pm in the Town Hall.

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