

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 10 January 2013

PRESENT: Councillors Chris Weldon (Chair), Penny Baker (Deputy Chair), David Barker, Simon Clement-Jones, Richard Crowther, Jayne Dunn, Denise Fox, Martin Lawton, Peter Rippon and Chris Rosling-Josephs

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Nikki Bond, Sheila Constance and Shaffaq Mohammed.

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 6 – Allocations Policy Review – Welfare Reform Consultation Results and Item 7 – The Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2013/14 - Update:-

- 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 Chris Rosling-Josephs – Member of the Sheffield Homes South East Area Board.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8th November 2012, were approved as a correct record, subject to the amendment of Item 3 – Declarations of Interest, by the substitution of the words “Councillor Chris Rosling-Josephs – Member of the Sheffield Homes South East Area Board” for the words “Councillor Jayne Dunn – Member of the Sheffield Homes North West Area Board”.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 There were no petitions submitted or questions raised by members of the public.

6. ALLOCATIONS POLICY REVIEW - WELFARE REFORM CONSULTATION RESULTS

6.1 The Head of Housing Commissioning, Communities Portfolio, submitted a report containing details on the findings of the third and final phase of consultation on the draft Allocations Policy.

6.2 Sharon Schonborn, Allocations Policy Review Manager, Communities Portfolio, gave a presentation on the findings of the final phase of consultation, and referred to a number of officer recommendations. Reference was also made to additional documentation, sent out prior to the meeting, which included Version 15 of the draft Allocations Policy, together with details of the changes made to that version, and details of the proposed action in response to the receipt of a petition on 5th December, 2012, requesting the Council to give priority to households with young people for ground floor accommodation.

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

- Whilst it was very difficult for officers to predict how many people would be affected by the restrictions in bedroom eligibility, it was envisaged that families with more children were more likely to be affected. Officers would only be able to assess precisely how many people would be affected following implementation of the Policy.
- In terms of the recommendation to specifically include in the Policy, the ability to award an extra bedroom to applicants who have a disability and are assessed as having the need for an additional room (subject to affordability of a larger property award), the current legal position on this indicates that where applicants with a disability required an additional bedroom for a family member or their carer, such applicants would not attract an additional bedroom tax. However, the Department for Work and Pension (DWP) were presently appealing this, so the position regarding this was not clear at the present time.
- Pregnant women were deemed as a priority need for homelessness, but would only be entitled to benefit for a one-bedroom property until the birth of the child. This could mean multiple moves in a short space of time.
- Applicants who were forced to pay the bedroom tax would be able to apply for discretionary housing benefit payments and successful applicants would receive such payments for a limited period. However, each application would be determined on their individual merits, based on criteria provided by the DWP, as there would be limited funds available.
- On the basis that there were no major problems at the present time, there were no plans to introduce a priority for children at height. When

accommodation was advertised, there was no reference to what level it was on but if requested, this was something that could be included in future adverts. It was accepted that it would be helpful for families if they had all the relevant information, including the level of the accommodation, so that they could be fully informed when making their choice. Under the Council's Homelessness Policy, tenants had the right of a review in terms of the suitability of the offer of accommodation made to them.

- The age limit in terms of determining whether young people who had been continually registered on their parents/guardians' application should have applications considered in their own right, was set at 25 as this was considered to be the age when the majority of such people had made the decision as to where they wanted to live.

6.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, the information contained in the additional papers circulated prior to the meeting, and the responses to the questions now raised; and
- (b) approves the draft Allocations Policy, as set out in Version 15 of the draft circulated prior to the meeting, for submission to the Cabinet, subject to the additional recommendations as follows:-
 - (i) that the Policy allows applicants to re-apply within two years if their bedroom eligibility is going to be affected during that time;
 - (ii) that the Policy specifically includes the ability to award an extra bedroom to applicants who have a disability and are assessed as having the need for an additional room (subject to affordability of a larger property award);
 - (iii) that an applicant who is pregnant be considered for additional bedroom eligibility three months prior to their due date subject to affordability;
 - (iv) that the Policy be amended to be compliant with the new regulations, meaning that Armed Forces applicants would be given additional priority if they fall within one or more of the statutory priority groups, with such priority being backdated to the date they joined up;
 - (v) that a priority for children at height be not introduced, but (A) adverts for properties should contain information as to what floor any high rise accommodation is located on, (B) consideration must be given to the individual circumstances of applicants to ensure that any high rise offer is appropriate and (C) applicants given offers of high rise accommodation as their final offer be informed of their right to review the suitability of the offer; and
 - (vi) that an exception to the one application rule per applicant, for young people who have been continually registered on their parents/guardians' application, and who had still not left the family home, be written into the

Policy.

7. THE HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2013/14 - UPDATE

7.1 The Executive Director, Communities Portfolio, submitted a report providing a summary of the key changes influencing the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan update for 2013/14 and focusing on welfare reform as a key risk to the Business Plan. In attendance for this item were Liam Duggan, Council Housing Client Team Manager, Communities Portfolio, and Maxine Stavrianakos, Sheffield Homes.

7.2 Member of the Committee raised questions and the following responses were provided:-

- This Committee had agreed, at a previous meeting, to extend priority rehousing to tenants under-occupying two-bedroom dwellings.
- At the present time, the rules set out in the Rent Arrears Policy, agreed in 2001, still applied. Working practices had changed to enable tenants to be paid benefit on a monthly basis, but the official changes would be implemented in early April 2013. Following on under the Universal Credit system, people would be entitled to receive benefit payments any day of the month, but there was likely to be a period of change until the new arrangements were in place. This was likely to be in 2017. Support would be provided where required, and tenants would be able to apply for assistance from the hardship fund. This fund would not comprise a financial payout, but would involve the writing off of arrears.
- If tenants had genuine rent arrears, and were deemed to be genuinely struggling financially, they would be granted an affordability priority.
- There would be changes to the computer-generated letters. Prior to June/July 2012, the first letter was sent out three weeks in arrears, whereas now they were sent out five weeks in arrears. The plan was to find out which day each tenant received their benefit.
- The Council had undertaken a huge amount of work in terms of communicating the changes to tenants, which had included leaflets and information on letters sent to tenants and posters in Area Housing Offices and other public venues, as well as on buses and other modes of transport. Additional staff had been employed specifically to visit, and provide basic advice to, those tenants who were likely to be affected by a benefit cap or under-occupancy. A number of tenants had requested advice, and had been referred to the Debt Advice Service or other independent debt workers, including the Citizens' Advice Bureau. A number of tenants had been interested in downsizing properties, and had been provided with the relevant advice.
- If people were wanting to downsize, and they had genuine rent arrears, they would not be penalised. In fact, it would assist the Council if people wanted to

downsize. Despite this, it was highly likely that, due to the changes, the number of evictions would ultimately increase.

- Officers would assess all cases of rent arrears, and those tenants deemed to have genuine arrears would not be penalised.
- It was likely that there would be huge pressure on Sheffield Credit Union and officers were looking at how the Council could support the Union. It was likely that the Union would have to levy a small charge for its services.

7.3 RESOLVED: That this Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the responses to the questions raised;
- (b) thanks Liam Duggan and Maxine Stavrianakos for responding to the questions now raised; and
- (c) requests that a detailed report on the effects of welfare reform, to include a full analysis of the numbers of people who have moved, or wanted to move, following the changes, be submitted to its meeting in September 2013.

8. HOUSING STRATEGY 2013 TO 2023

8.1 The Executive Director, Place Portfolio, submitted a report on the Council's Housing Strategy 2013-2023. The report attached, as appendices, the Draft Housing Strategy 2013-2023, the Draft Action Plan 2013-2016, which would be refreshed every three years to make it responsive to the local and national housing landscape, and Housing Strategy Performance Indicators.

8.2 Derek Martin, Director of Housing, Enterprise and Regeneration, introduced the report, inviting comments from the Committee prior to the submission of the report to the Cabinet for final approval.

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

- A small team of officers in Development Services was working with developers in order to encourage them to construct more properties in the City, advising them on what the Council would like to see in terms of development in the City, and stressing the importance of providing both affordable and quality accommodation.
- The Council was aware of the fact that people needed a choice in terms of properties they wished to move to, and that they shouldn't be forced to move out of the area in which they lived to get such a choice. On this basis, there was a need to review the types of accommodation in each area of the City to ensure, where possible, that there was a reasonable mix of accommodation in each area.

- All owners of long-term empty properties in the City have been contacted and requested, where relevant, to take any necessary steps to bring their properties back into use. They have also been provided with advice in terms of re-letting their properties, including details whereby the Council or Housing Associations could sub-let the properties.

8.4 RESOLVED: That this Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the responses to the questions raised;
- (b) thanks Derek Martin and his colleagues for the work involved in drafting the Housing Strategy and for responding to the questions now raised; and
- (c) requests that any further views and comments on the housing priorities identified in the Housing Strategy be referred to Derek Martin prior to submission of the Strategy to the Cabinet for final approval.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

9.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on Thursday, 14th March 2013, at 2.00 pm in the Town Hall.