

SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 19 July 2012

PRESENT: Councillors Chris Weldon (Chair), Penny Baker (Deputy Chair), David Barker, Nikki Bond, Shelia Constance, Richard Crowther, Denise Fox, Martin Lawton, Shaffaq Mohammed, Peter Rippon and Chris Rosling-Josephs

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1. WELCOME AND HOUSEKEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

1.1 The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting and outlined basic housekeeping and fire safety arrangements.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2.1 An apology for absence was received from Councillor Simon Clement-Jones.

3. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

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

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

- Councillor Denise Fox – Member of the Sheffield Homes South East Area Board
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- Councillor Chris Rosling-Josephs – Member of the Sheffield Homes South East Area Board
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- Councillor Richard Crowther – Member of the Sheffield Homes North West Area Board.

5. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

5.1 The minutes of the meetings of the (a) Scrutiny Committee held on 8th March 2012, and (b) Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee held on 16th May 2012, were approved as correct records.

6. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

6.1 Martin Brighton raised a number of questions and responses were provided as follows:-

- (a) Will this Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee please ensure that there is a separate complaints process for dealing with errant personnel?

The Chair requested that this question be referred by this Committee for consideration by the Sheffield Homes Board.

- (b) Will this Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee “get a grip” on the issues raised, as it has in the past, and to its credit, that it is perfectly capable of doing?

The Chair requested the Scrutiny Policy Officer forward the question to the relevant officer to provide a response.

- (c) Will this Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee please ask for the evidence to prove that the citizens of Batemoor wanted:-
(i) refurbishment of the drying areas; and
(ii) the demolition of garages?

The Chair requested the Scrutiny Policy Officer forward the question to the relevant officer to provide a response.

- (d) Will this Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee please ensure that the issue of truthful recording of representation also includes the Sheffield Homes South West Area Board meeting of last January?

The Chair requested that this question be referred by this Committee for consideration by the Sheffield Homes Board.

7. LETTINGS POLICY REVIEW

- 7.1 The Chair introduced the report on the interim findings and recommendations of the Lettings Policy Review, indicating that officers had highlighted five areas of major work required in connection with the Review, two of which had already been considered and dealt with by the Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Group – Banding and Registration, including Housing Register Management. He referred to the report now submitted, which contained details regarding the five key challenge areas for policy development, specifically a summary of the interim recommendations, issues with the current policy, the research undertaken, advantages and disadvantages of the various options, together with an officer recommendation on each of the areas.

7.2 Bedroom Eligibility

- 7.2.1 Sharon Schonborn, Allocation Policy Review Manager, Communities Portfolio, gave a presentation on the subject of Bedroom Eligibility Criteria.

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

If the officer-recommended Option 3, as detailed in the report, was the preferred option for this Committee, it had been suggested that these arrangements be implemented before the full review of the policy in order to give officers more time to look at what measures could be put in place to ensure that tenants would not suffer financial hardship as a result of under-occupation. The Council also supported tenants in a number of other ways and there were a number of options open to them in terms of what they could choose to do, such as encouraging people to downsize if they choose to do so and giving priority to those tenants with bigger properties if they wish to downsize.

If the officer-recommended Option 3 was the preferred option for this Committee, the Council would want to consult with groups that would be affected by the changes, such as looking at the alternatives open to single parents, who have overnight access rights and would, as a consequence, only be eligible for a one-bedroom property.

Those tenants wishing to downsize would be provided with information on what this will mean for them. A specialised team had been established and operated up to 30th June 2012, to provide support for such people, and this provision now formed part of Sheffield Homes' standard work. Staff also had links to various charities who were willing to accept any furniture or other belongings they would not be able to fit in their new properties and were willing to give up.

The officer-recommended Option 3 provided mechanisms to relax the criteria in certain circumstances and officers would have to work up the detail on this in terms of the criteria and what situations would be covered.

A report on the criteria in terms of older and disabled persons, as part of the process for the review of the Lettings Policy, would be submitted to a future meeting of this Committee for further discussion.

In terms of teenage pregnancies, it would not be suitable to place young mothers in properties that they could not afford and consequently, be at risk of eviction. There was a need to look at what the Council had in terms of available accommodation for such tenants. One option could be to look at supported accommodation.

Tenants would be encouraged, where suitable, and by way of financial assistance, to downsize.

In terms of keeping tenants up to date, officers had contacted affected tenants to inform them of the implications of the Welfare Reform Act. Information on the implications was also provided on various newsletters distributed or made available to new and prospective tenants.

- 7.2.3 RESOLVED: That the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee:-
- (a) notes the information contained in the paper now submitted, together with the information reported as part of the presentation and the responses provided to the questions raised; and
 - (b) requests officers to pursue Option 3 – Allocation tightened to reflect current supply shortage in line with Welfare Reforms with relaxed criteria for specified circumstances, and for officers to commence work on developing this option with immediate effect.

7.3 **Age Designation**

7.3.1 Sharon Schonborn gave a presentation on Age Designation, indicating why age banding had originally been introduced, the relationship between banding and housing supply, possible alternatives if there was no age designation, results of consultation on age designation and details of the possible options for Members to give a steer on.

- 7.3.2 RESOLVED: That the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee:-
- (a) notes the information contained in the paper now submitted and the information as part of the presentation; and
 - (b) requests officers to pursue Option 3 – Remove all 40+ age designations and reduce 60+ age designations to only specified properties identified through comprehensive review, with the manner in how the age designations are arranged to be determined by Members in consultation with relevant officers.

8. **POLICY UPDATE**

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

9. **DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME 2012/13**

- 9.1 The Scrutiny Policy Officer submitted a report containing a Draft Work Programme for the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee for 2012/13.
- 9.2 RESOLVED: That the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee notes (a) the contents of the report now submitted and (b) that the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee, in consultation with the Scrutiny Policy Officer, would compile a more detailed Work Programme for submission and discussion at the Committee's next meeting.

10. **CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE**

10.1 The Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee received a report on the outcome of a scrutiny review into the Sheffield Homes customer complaints

procedure. The Sheffield Homes Board had approved the establishment of a Customer Scrutiny Panel, whose main purpose was to examine the customer service delivery of Sheffield Homes in relation to the level of customer satisfaction of complaints handling and to review whether this met its expectations. Recruitment to the Panel had been open to tenants, leaseholders and customers of Sheffield Homes, and the Community Engagement Team, with independent support and advice from the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS), along with a steering group of tenants and other customers, had successfully recruited 15 scrutineers. The project itself had been completed with six scrutineers, four of whom were in attendance at this meeting. The Panel had been allocated a budget of £5,000 from Sheffield Homes for the duration of the project.

10.2 In support of the scrutiny report, Ian Alexander, a representative of the scrutineers, gave a presentation on the review.

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

- The scrutineers attended a staff forum to meet with those staff who handled complaints in the Contact Centre, housing offices and within New Bank House. The staff interviewed as part of the review were selected by the Sheffield Homes Customer Care and Communications Team.
- It had been found that, on some occasions, the incorrect operator would be sent out to a property as there had been a lack of clarity as to the precise nature of the problem reported. It had been determined, as part of the review, that this was most likely due to the fact that there were two separate call centres – one for Sheffield Homes and one for Kier – and it was often the case that the caller had contacted the wrong Call Centre. Call handlers received regular training in terms of acquiring the relevant knowledge to be able to ensure that they were fully aware of the issue and that they were in a position to send the correct operator to the caller's property. The fact that the incorrect operator was sent to a property was sometimes due to the fault of the caller, who provided incorrect information on the precise nature of the problem.
- The overall review process had taken approximately six months to complete, and the scrutineers had met for approximately two hours, once a fortnight.
- In terms of future, similar projects, the scrutineers had just commenced a similar process in terms of grass cutting on Sheffield Homes land.

10.4 Alison Woods, Customer Care and Communications Team, Sheffield Homes, stated that Sheffield Homes had been very satisfied with the quality of the work undertaken as part of the Challenge for Change project, and that the findings and recommendations were in line with Sheffield Homes' own findings. The report on the review should be considered by the

Sheffield Homes Board in November 2012, in conjunction with proposals for the implementation of a new complaints process by April 2013. She stated that it was hoped that, following the implementation of the new complaints process, all the issues and concerns raised as part of the Challenge for Change project would be addressed.

10.5 RESOLVED: That the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee:-

- (a) notes the information contained in the Challenge for Change scrutiny report now submitted, the information provided as part of the presentation and the responses provided to the questions raised; and
- (b) expresses its thanks and appreciation for the excellent work undertaken by the scrutineers, as part of the review, and extends to them its best wishes for any similar future work.

11. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

11.1 It was noted that future meetings of the Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee would be held on Tuesday, 11th September and Thursday, 8th November 2012, and Thursdays, 10th January and 14th March 2013, at 2.00 pm in the Town Hall.