

Please note that these minutes are draft and subject to confirmation at the next meeting

Housing Sub-Committee

26 November 2018

Present: Councillor A Newman (Chair)
Councillors K Bolger, L Darke, John Hunter, J
Kirwin, P Mason, P Oliver, A Percy, S Phillips,
M Thirlaway and J Walker

HO13/11/18 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor M Reynolds.

HO14/11/18 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members reported.

HO15/11/18 Declarations of Interest

Cllr M Thirlaway declared a non-registerable personal interest in Item 6 – Construction Project – as his father worked for Kier North Tyneside.

HO16/11/18 Minutes

It was **agreed** that the minutes of the meeting on 24 September 2018 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

HO17/11/18 Lettings Policy

The sub-committee received a report which provided details on the proposed changes to North Tyneside Council's Lettings Policy 2018. North Tyneside Lettings Policy had last been reviewed in 2016, where some significant changes had been made. Members were informed that it was good practice to review the Lettings Policy every two years in order to respond to policy changes and the local housing market. The 2018 review was to refine the existing policy and take into account new legislation.

The sub-committee was informed that the aim of the Lettings Policy was to meet the housing needs of those people living in North Tyneside, promote equality and contribute to preventing anti-social behaviour and nuisance and promote neighbourhood sustainability. The Lettings Service was designed to provide well managed homes, allocated in a fair and transparent way; support and assist customers to understand how the service works; and make efficient use of resources.

As part of scoping the review, officers had reviewed other authorities' policies and sought best practice, looked at what needed improving in the current policy and consulted with the Cabinet Member responsible for Housing. There were five main proposed policy changes to emerge from the review relating to homelessness, equity, transfers (current tenants), responsible tenants and accepting offers/refusals.

In relation to homelessness, the Homelessness Reduction Act which came into force in April 2018, changed the way services were delivered to households who presented as homeless, at risk of homeless or in need of housing advice. The Lettings Policy would need to reflect the changes by allocating criteria and bands. The main proposed policy change in this area was to give anyone deemed priority homeless one direct offer of a property. The current policy gave priority homeless applicants four weeks to bid on properties. Officers informed the sub-committee that various organisations already took the approach of one direct offer and this facilitated getting people out of temporary accommodation and into a new home sooner.

Members expressed concern at the element of choice that was being removed by giving one direct offer as opposed to the current situation where those accepted as priority homeless could bid on properties for a four week period. Officers explained that this offer would be reasonable and that consultation would be undertaken in relation to location preference, proximity to schools (if children involved) and location of family networks. There would also be an appeal process for those who felt an offer made to them had not been reasonable and properties would need to pass the Decent Homes Standard before a tenant moved in. Whilst the sub-committee acknowledged that this proposed change could provide a quicker offer of permanent accommodation, concerns still remained that one direct offer restricted the choice of those accepted as priority homeless.

In relation to equity, it was highlighted that the review was trying to achieve a more robust, transparent and fair process for assessing whether applicants had enough funds to meet their own housing need, when applying for the housing register. The proposed changes in this area were that owner occupiers over the age of 60 would be allowed on the housing register if they had equity of £140,000 or less; owner occupiers under 60 would be excluded from the register if they had an annual income of over £50,000 and/or assets worth £100,000 or over; and applicants who had purchased their Council home would not be allowed on the housing register for a period of 5 years after the purchase.

During discussion on this issue, a Member expressed the view that the equity level of £140,000 was too high to allow someone onto the housing register; it was thought that properties could be sought within the borough at a lower level. It was clarified that this proposed level was in relation to sheltered accommodation, with access to a warden and communal area, and that information gathered from estate agents indicated that the lowest price for this type of accommodation in the borough was £130,000. It was noted that the Council did currently have properties, especially sheltered accommodation, that were less popular to let and currently people were prevented from going on the register due to their equity. It was also raised by a Member that they felt £100,000 equity was too low (for under 60's to be excluded from the register), as they felt £120,000 would be the lower end price range for purchasing a house, with £100,000 more likely to be the cost of a flat. In relation to the restriction on being on the housing register following the sale of a council property, it was suggested by a Member that 5 years was quite a short time and it was felt that this could be extended. Members were assured that each case would be looked at on its own merits and that a referral to Housing Advice would be made in such circumstances as a marital breakdown following the purchase of a Council house.

In relation to restricting transfers, it was noted that the existing policy allowed current tenants to apply for a transfer. It was proposed that a change be made that would restrict transfers where there is no housing need and promote mutual exchanges. There were 1060 transfer requests on the housing register, of which approximately 550 had no housing need. In 2017/18 141 transfers were completed where the tenant had no housing need, at a cost of approximately £5,000 per transfer. In response to the proposal, Members of the sub-committee expressed concern at the idea of restricting people from moving and the limitations that this could place on people in terms of life progression.

The sub-committee then went on to consider the last two areas for proposed change; responsible tenants and accepting offers and refusals. It was noted that responsible tenants were those that had lived in their current home for at least 10 years and were given an additional priority if they had complied with the Tenancy Agreement. There were 379 responsible tenants on the housing register and during 2017/18 only 3 had been re-housed. This showed that only a limited number of tenants were moving and did not reflect housing need across the borough. It was therefore proposed that this additional priority be removed. Whilst recognising that few people were being re-housed with the additional priority, Members expressed the view that they did not see why the priority should be removed and that people should be rewarded for proving they were a good tenant.

In relation to accepting offers and refusals, the sub-committee was informed that under the current policy, when an applicant had bid and been made an offer, they had 2 days to decide whether to accept the property. It was proposed to change this to 1 day. The same time frame also currently applied to when an applicant had viewed the property and it was also proposed to change this to 1 day. It was explained that at the point of viewing the applicant would have bid on the property around 4 weeks earlier and therefore would have had time to think about whether the property would be suitable.

In addition, if an applicant was at the top of more than 1 shortlist for a property, it was proposed that an officer would decide which home to allocate. The current policy gave the applicant the choice. It was explained that these changes had been proposed in order to provide a more efficient and effective way of letting homes, saving void turnaround times and increasing potential revenue. The final proposed change had been around refusals. Currently when an applicant had refused 3 offers of suitable accommodation (after they had bid on the properties), their application would be suspended for a period of three months. This had been introduced during the previous review of the lettings policy and had not proved much of a deterrent. These refusals led to extended void times, loss of potential revenue, extra officer time and delayed other people on the list getting much needed accommodation. On this basis, it was proposed to extend the suspension period to 12 months.

Members of the sub-committee were concerned at the proposed time restrictions on applicants following a property viewing, feeling it would be reasonable to have longer to make a decision having just seen the property one time. It was also questioned why an applicant should not continue to choose their preferred property if at the top of more than one shortlist. In general, the sub-committee was concerned with the proposals suggested and felt it would be beneficial to have more time to look at these at a future Housing sub-committee before they were submitted to Cabinet. It was explained that relevant officers would look at the timescales and see how this request could be accommodated.

It was **agreed** to note the report.

HO18/11/18 Construction Project

The sub-committee received a presentation which provided an update on the progress of the Construction Project. In September 2017 Cabinet had made the decision to not extend the Kier contract. As a result, the contract would come to an end on 31 March 2019 and the repairs service will be delivered in house. The sub-committee was reminded of the workstreams that formed the project: People, Technology, Logistics; Supply Chain; Accommodation; Design for non-housing construction work; Finance and Culture. A video was played to the sub-committee which illustrated the progress made to date. The

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presentation provided a follow up on a progress report previously delivered to the sub-committee in July 2018.

It was highlighted that work continued in relation to reviewing TUPE arrangements, consulting on draft structures and transferring services. It was noted that there was a range of back office staff, i.e. finance and communications officers that would be brought back in house, not just frontline trade staff. Whilst there would be some terms and conditions that may need to change, the majority would be transferred across. Trade Unions were being kept up to date and consulted on progress.

In relation to the new technology system that was required to log and manage repairs, Members were informed that a new system had been identified and work on configuring this system had begun. An order for all the ICT equipment required i.e. tablets, phones and laptops, had been placed. It was explained that the ICT would be supported by the Council's existing ICT support, delivered by Engie. It was suggested that a further update be provided to the sub-committee in relation to the ICT capabilities once the system had been developed further. This would allow Members to see the 'live' system.

It had been reported at a previous update that a decision had been made to procure a new fleet of vehicles. A decision had been made that these would be a mix of Citron and Ford vehicles, silver in colour. The new fleet would include some – around 10 – electric vehicles, which would be charged at the Killingworth Site. Progress had also been made around work wear, with a supplier identified and the colour of navy blue selected.

It was recognised that the culture of the workforce was an important aspect of bringing the repairs service back in house. Events continued to be held to engage staff and to communicate the expectations from the handover day, 1st April 2019. The repairs offer had been finalised with customers and existing documentation relating to Health, Safety and Environment had been purchased. Members identified that frustrations often reported with the repairs service were that jobs were not fully completed in the first instance and that operatives had to return. The importance of getting it right first time was highlighted as a key priority.

The sub-committee was informed that the next steps in delivering the construction project included completing the ICT configuration, the completion of the refurbishment of Block E and commencement of work on the office refurbishment of Block A (Killingworth Site), completion of an evaluation of the supply chain procurement and finalisation of the Induction Plan and Workforce Development Plan.

It was **agreed** to note the report and receive an update on the ICT at a future meeting.