



<u>Committee and Date</u>
Environment and Services Scrutiny Committee
24 March 2014

<u>Item</u>
3
Public

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 18 NOVEMBER 2013

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Present: Councillors P Adams, J E Clarke, N Hartin, V Hunt [**Chairman**], C Lea, P Moseley, K Roberts [**Vice Chairman**] and A Walpole.

Also in attendance: M Price, Portfolio Holder for Housing

22. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Hughes and D Tremellen.

23. DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

Interests were declared and noted, as follows:

N Hartin – Tenant of a Housing Association

M Price – Severnside Housing, Board member

V Hunt – Shropshire Towns and Rural Housing, Board member

24. MINUTES – 7 OCTOBER 2013

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Environment and Services Scrutiny Committee held on 7 October 2013 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

25. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from members of the public.

26. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Members' questions.

27. DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S [DCLG] CONSULTATION DOCUMENT ON 'PROVIDING SOCIAL HOUSING FOR LOCAL PEOPLE: STRENGTHENING STATUTORY GUIDANCE ON SOCIAL HOUSING ALLOCATIONS'

The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager presented the main issues within the DCLG's consultation document entitled, 'Providing Social Housing for Local People: Strengthening Statutory Guidance on Social Housing Allocations'. She referred to the Council's former Protecting and Enhancing the Environment (PEE) Scrutiny Committee's establishment of a Task and Finish Group, to review the Council's existing Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme in the context of the Localism Act. This had resulted in recommendations being brought forward to inform the drafting of a revised Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme. Members noted that the new Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme had been adopted by the Council in April 2013 and would be implemented in April 2014 following implementation of a new interactive Housing Options and Housing Register IT delivery model.

The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager drew attention to the five main areas highlighted in the consultation document, as follows:

1. Strongly encourage all local authorities to adopt a two year residency test as part of their qualification criteria.
2. Encourage local authorities to consider adopting other qualification criteria alongside a residency test so that people who are able to demonstrate a strong association to the local area are not disadvantaged.

Referring to points 1 and 2 above, the Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager explained that the Shropshire scheme enabled a number of local connections to be flexibly interpreted to ensure that those with a reasonable connection were not excluded if they failed to meet one rigid qualification criterion. She added that preference for people with local connection was required within housing allocation policies but criteria for local connection should be determined through consultation at a local level.

Members agreed that Guidance requiring all local authorities to adopt a 2-year residence test as part of the qualification criteria would be too rigid, would not reflect local conditions and needs and may affect the development of diverse local communities.

3. Expect local authorities to consider the wider needs of the Armed Forces community

The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager commented that members of the Armed Forces with a local connection to the county and a minimum of 4 years' service would be accommodated within 5 years' of discharge. Members noted that the existing Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme already recognised the needs of member of the

Armed Forces. The new Allocation Scheme further refined this provision and provided a target of 5% (minimum) of total allocations.

4. Remind local authorities of the need to provide for appropriate exceptions.

The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager made reference to the work of the Task and Finish Group that had considered balancing targeted accommodation against specific criteria and the need to meet the housing needs of those people in the 'reasonable preference' groups. Consideration had also been given to the administrative impacts of two different approaches: assume inclusion and assess 'out' at the point of let; or assume exclusion and assess 'in' at the point of application.

The former approach was adopted as the most cost-effective and pragmatic, recognising that as household circumstances change, each change could represent a new application which would require assessment. The numbers of people registering on the Housing Register can be managed through the Housing Advice/ Housing Options process, to reduce the number of inappropriate registrations being made.

5. Remind local authorities of the desirability of operating a housing options approach alongside a restricted waiting list.

The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager drew Members' attention to the implementation of the new interactive IT-based approach to delivery of housing options, and access to the Countywide Housing Register. From April 2014, households wishing to register for affordable housing would complete an on-line Housing Options evaluation and guidance 'form', which would provide personalised information and advice about how best to address, and meet, their housing needs. Where households had little prospect of securing social-rented housing in their preferred areas, rather than automatically registering on the Housing Register and 'waiting' to be rehoused, they would be directed to a range of self-help and supported options in housing.

Members were pleased that this new approach would trigger alerts with respect to potential/actual homelessness, vulnerability, property condition and so on, and would ensure those with a reasonable prospect of achieving rehousing through the social housing register would be able to register. The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager stressed that the aim was to better direct customers towards appropriate and achievable housing options in view of their individual circumstances, rather than using the Housing Register as a 'default option' and 'waiting' to be rehoused without a realistic prospect of being so.

6. Expect local authorities to have a clear policy about the collection and publication of waiting list and lettings information and to ensure the policy is published on the website.

Members noted that the Council's Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme was published on the Council website, and paper copies were made available at customer service points.

The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager explained that the Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme was delivered through the Shropshire HomePoint choice-based letting scheme with all available affordable social housing, including low cost home ownership options, being advertised on a weekly basis. Members further noted that all properties were advertised to maximise transparency and accountability. Details of the allocations were also provided on the Shropshire HomePoint website insofar as provision of the band and registration date of successful applicants.

Members supported the strong preference for reference to be made to a Housing Register rather than a Waiting List. The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager added that housing was allocated against a range of factors, including local connection, relative need, vulnerability, community contribution and so on, rather than length of time waiting. It was agreed that Guidance requiring publication of housing allocation policies and schemes, and clarity with respect to housing register information and letting would be welcomed.

The Committee Chairman commented that the Task and finish Group sponsored by the former Protecting and Enhancing our Environment Scrutiny Committee had undertaken a wealth of work that had influenced the Council's new Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme. He anticipated that the Committee's consideration of the DCLG consultation document would add weight and gravitas to the Council's consultation response that had to be submitted by 22 November 2013.

In supporting the observations detailed above, the Portfolio Holder for Housing welcomed to the meeting the Director of Severnside Housing and the Chief Executive of Shropshire Rural Housing. Both were willing to work with the revised Policy from April 2014 and suggested that its efficacy could be monitored in 12 months' time.

The Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager and the Portfolio Holder answered a range of general questions from members of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- i) That, in consultation with the Committee Chairman, the Housing, Health and Wellbeing Service Manager compile the Council's response to the DCLG consultation paper, 'Providing Social Housing for Local People: Strengthening Statutory Guidance on Social Housing Allocations' in the light of the comments and observations made during the meeting, as detailed above.
- ii) That the response include details of the Council's Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme and explains its fundamental merits and benefits to illustrate how the Council is 'ahead of the game'.

28. DATE/TIME OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the Committee's next meeting would be held at 2.00pm on Monday 27 January 2014.

The meeting closed at 3.15pm p.m.

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....