

These minutes are draft subject to approval at the next meeting of the sub-committee

Housing Sub-Committee

28 September 2015

Present: Councillor S Cox (Chair)
Councillors A Arkle, L Darke, D Drummond,
John Hunter, A Newman, P Oliver, M
Thirlaway and J Walker.

H014/09/15 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Austin and P Mason.

H015/09/15 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members appointed.

H016/09/15 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.

H017/09/15 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 July 2015 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

H018/09/15 Empty Homes

The sub-committee received a report and presentation in relation to the Empty Homes Standard. Officers, Members and Tenants had made significant progress over recent years to improve the re-let performance across empty homes, reducing from 70.45 days in 2009/10 to 35.71 days in 2011/12. Customer satisfaction had increased across this period from 6.74 (out of 10) to 7.51. It was noted that approximately 1,200 properties become vacant and are advertised, repaired and re-let each year. The cost of the repairs was currently at £2.64m, which comparatively was a high level of spend.

Members were informed that a number of reviews had been carried out over recent years in order to help improve performance. In 2011 a business process and re-engineering project had been implemented across the Empty Homes service to review all steps in the letting and repairs process. The review identified several improvements including introduction of a tenant welcome pack, 100% post inspections carried out by Kier North Tyneside and 20% random selection of post inspections carried out by North Tyneside Council.

A service review was undertaken by Members and tenants in 2011 due to low satisfaction/negative feedback from new tenants about their homes and the relet times, which were still bottom quartile of comparable housing organisations. The group benchmarked performance information relating to the Empty Homes process, visited empty properties and consulted with tenants who had moved into their new home. The group had identified 10 main areas of concern with 42 recommendations for improvement which

included an improved level of cleanliness, clear understanding for new tenants of any follow up repairs required and improvements to the recharge process.

Following the comprehensive service review, officers from Housing committed to undertaking annual reviews with tenants to ensure services continued to improve. During 2014/15 the average time to relet a property continued to reduce to 30.41 calendar days; however concerns were raised by the group that customer satisfaction was not improving as expected. The group analysed the Customer Satisfaction survey result to determine the root causes of the low satisfaction. The data suggested that in the majority of cases the levels of low satisfaction were linked to other areas of Council services, rather than with the quality of the property at point of allocation. As a result some changes were made to the way in which the Council communicates with tenants including a direct telephone number for the Kier void team to report repairs within the first 4 weeks of the tenancy and tenants being contacted more regularly through the lettings process.

The implemented changes had resulted in an increased customer satisfaction rating and the sub-committee was informed that work was continuing to improve satisfaction by contacting new tenants who had not returned a customer satisfaction survey to enquire about their experience. It was noted that it would be useful and beneficial for Members to work alongside the current working group reviewing the customer satisfaction results. The Chair thanked the officers for their presentation and opened up the meeting to questions from Members.

The sub-committee enquired as to why the repair costs had increased and were comparatively high. It was explained that some tenants don't always report repairs when in a property (especially if they are coming to the end of a tenancy) which can increase the cost to getting the property, once vacant, to the Moving in Standard. A further cause was that some tenants may refuse updates to the property during large scale improvement schemes, i.e. the fitting of new kitchens and boilers. Once the tenant vacates the property these improvement works would need to take place for the new tenant but the cost of a one-off job would be higher than if undertaken during a wider scheme. It was noted that, unless necessary on the grounds of health and safety, no tenant would be forced to have replacement/refurbishment works undertaken.

It was noted that the level of dissatisfaction within the new tenant survey was often around the state of repair of the property and the level of cleanliness. Members highlighted examples of issues brought to their attention by new tenants where the state of the property was not up to the standard they had expected. The sub-committee was informed that arrangements had been made to ensure hot water was available when properties were being cleaned in order to raise the level of cleanliness. At present the expectations of prospective tenants were not being managed in relation to the potential decorating work that may need to be undertaken once they have moved in but that this would be introduced in the near future. It was also noted that prior to the tenant signing off the property they were shown around by an Empty Homes Officer to make sure the Moving in Standard had been met and to note any additional repairs that needed to be undertaken.

The sub-committee asked whether there was any incentive for tenants moving out to clear all items, as this would provide the benefit of less time and expenditure spent on disposing of unwanted items. It was noted that this incentive had been available in the past but that following a review of the scheme it had been withdrawn as it was expensive to administer and therefore did not provide value for money. The sub-committee also discussed the performance of Kier in relation to carrying out repairs to the Moving in Standard and stressed the importance of achieving set targets in order to help improve the void process and customer satisfaction.

It was **agreed** to note the information provided and continue to monitor tenant satisfaction levels.

H019/09/15 Tenancy sustainment – customer journey mapping

The sub-committee received a report which informed Members of the Tenancy Sustainment project. The project was designed to ensure that homes were allocated to people who needed them, could afford them, were able to manage their bills and could look after themselves, their household and property. This would help ensure that North Tyneside Home tenants could live in their home for as long as they wanted to.

It was acknowledged that some applicants, and existing tenants, especially those on low incomes, were not equipped to cope with the demands of sustaining a tenancy on their own and needed some form of help and support. There needed to be a reduction in the number of tenancies that were failing and an increase in sustained tenancies. This would bring an improvement to the lives of tenants and create greater stability within communities whilst reducing costs and making efficiency savings.

Members were informed that there was no longer certainty that all tenants could afford to pay the rent for their property. The eligibility criteria, earnings thresholds and tapers within the housing benefits regulations had reduced the proportion of rental debt covered by housing benefit. Consequently more money had to be collected from tenants who found themselves in increasingly difficult financial circumstances. It was noted that since 2009/10 arrears had increased by £472k. This had partly been due to the increasing numbers of tenants, particularly new tenants, who were struggling from the start to sustain their tenancy and comply with their tenancy conditions.

In order to tackle the issues identified more time was needed to assess applicants' circumstances prior to starting their tenancies, so that an understanding could be gained of their needs. It was explained that to achieve this staff resources had been realigned, with three teams brought together to create a Sustainable Tenancies Team. A toolkit had been developed to assess prospective tenants' needs and to signpost appropriate support. The Homefinder team would carry out an initial 'triage' assessment to identify those applicants who would not require an in-depth assessment of their circumstances and needs. This stage would be completed within 3 working days of the short listing process. Those applicants assessed as being at risk of not being able to sustain a tenancy would be required to meet with a member of the Tenancy Sustainment Team to discuss their circumstances and receive a referral to services that could meet their needs. Attached to the report as Appendix A was a comparison of the existing process and the new process.

It was acknowledged that the new system would be likely to increase the time taken to process an allocation for applicants with complex circumstances and/or complex needs by an average of 5 days. This would increase rent loss due to empty properties but it would mean that all new tenants were given the best possible start to a tenancy. The Chair thanked the officer for the presentation and information delivered.

A Member asked whether a high risk applicant could be refused a property. It was explained that the Council could not refuse an applicant if they were in need of a property and that the new process was not meant to be a barrier to people, it was meant to ensure appropriate support. Concern was raised that 63% of new tenants (less than 12 months) were in rent arrears and it was asked if when people exit a tenancy officers discuss the reasons with them. It was noted that these discussions did take place and that a multitude of factors can contribute to a tenant being in arrears and terminating the tenancy.

The sub-committee were pleased to see the 'triage' element of the new process that would help identify those applicants with greater needs. It was highlighted that this pre-assessment stage would involve discussions around sensitive and personal issues and Members sought assurance that this information would be treated with the highest of confidentiality. Assurance was given that all information gathered from these pre-assessments would only be logged on a secure, password protected database. In relation to resources, a Member asked whether there was enough staff to cover the demand there would be for extra support. Officers informed that there would be sufficient capacity to deal with the anticipated number of allocations that would come through needing greater assessment and signposting for support (around 15-18%).

The sub-committee was informed that over the following 6 weeks the Tenancy Sustainment Team 'pilot' would test the new procedures, templates, forms and recording mechanisms. The pilot would concentrate on the new properties being built on the Blandford Road site. Once the pilot had been completed (end of October 2015), the Tenancy Sustainment team would start working with all applicants pre-offered a home. It was believed that the new approach would significantly help new tenants and in time reduce the number of failed or unsustainable tenancies. This in turn would reduce the arrears levels amongst new tenants, reduce the number of empty (void) properties, reduce admin costs for the authority and generally lead to a better service for tenants. The sub-committee suggested revisiting this topic in the future to evaluate how successful the new processes have been.

It was **agreed** to note the information provided and to evaluate the success of this project in the future.

HO20/09/15 Review of the Tenancy Agreement

The sub-committee received a report with information on the proposed changes as a result of a review of the Council's tenancy agreement. Members were asked to consider the proposed changes and comment as appropriate.

The Council's secure and introductory tenancy agreement was fully updated in 2010 to take into account legislative changes and best practice. A further update took place in 2013 following provisions in the Localism Act 2011. A 2015 review had been conducted of the existing tenancy agreement and a number of changes were required to take into account best practice and legislative changes. Other changes came from recommendations of the tenant, resident and Member led review of low level anti-social behaviour and the need to remove ambiguity and strengthen some of the clauses within the tenancy agreement. The proposed changes were as follows:

- Remove ambiguity over the right of succession
- Strengthen the right to improve in relation to permission
- Remove ambiguity in relation to the rights of joint tenants
- Change the rent payment frequency to 52 weeks instead of 50 weeks due to the introduction of Universal Credit
- Amend clauses relating to damage to property following the review of the rechargeable repairs policy
- Amend access for emergency situations
- Strengthen some of the clauses in respect of anti-social behaviour as a result of the tenant and member led review of low level anti-social behaviour
- Update the clause in respect of discrimination following the Equality Act 2010
- Clarify the clause in respect to dogs barking

The consultation process for the review included discussions with Legal Services, the Mayor and Cabinet Member for Housing, Senior Leadership Team and the Estates and Tenancy Services Scrutiny Group. Cabinet, as a future meeting, would be asked to agree the amendments to the tenancy agreement and give approval to consult with all Council tenants on the proposed changes. The officer in attendance explained each of the proposed changes as set out in the report. The Chair acknowledged that the meeting had over run and there was little time to discuss the changes in great detail. It was suggested that if Members had any specific comments in relation to the proposed changes they refer them to the Democratic Support Officer.

It was **agreed** to note the proposed changes to the Tenancy Agreement.