

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

Housing Sub-Committee

30 November 2015

Present: Councillor S Cox (Chair)
Councillors A Arkle, L Darke, M Green, John Hunter, P Oliver, M Thirlaway.

H027/11/15 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Austin, D Drummond and Pat Oliver.

H028/11/15 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members appointed.

H029/10/15 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.

HO30/11/15 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2015 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

H031/11/15 Tenant Engagement

The sub-committee received a report and presentation detailing recent changes to the corporate engagement approach and how this would change the way in which the housing service involves its tenants – and councillors – in shaping improvements to services. In developing the new engagement approach North Tyneside Council continued its commitment to being a ‘listening’ council that delivers for its residents and communities by involving them in decision making.

As part of the Authority’s Creating a Brighter Future programme, teams involved in engagement were brought together into Corporate Strategy during April 2015. This provided an opportunity to review how the Authority engaged with its residents and how improvements could be made. The new Corporate Engagement Strategy (appended to the report) sought to address the key outcomes of the review by providing a single corporate framework. This set out how the Authority would engage across all of its services to improve overall engagement outcomes and to provide a more co-ordinated and consistent approach that is easily understood by residents and service users. The Strategy established a wide two-way communications approach, between the Authority, its residents and other stakeholders, which would be delivered through a range of easily accessible opportunities.

It was noted that North Tyneside had seen its number of homes, and therefore tenants, reduce from 30,000 to 15,000 properties. Many tenants had taken up the right to buy and the former traditional estates made up of all council tenants were no longer the case.

Neighbourhoods now comprised of cross tenure mix – including tenants, leaseholders, private tenants and home owners. This meant that some changes were needed to the way in which the Authority engaged with its tenants. The commitment to involve tenants remained, but the pool of tenants available was reduced and ageing. In recent years the involvement had generally been with a cohort of 80-100 tenants. The aim was to continue for these involved tenants to be able to help shape the authority's service but to also widen the programme of engagement to encourage other tenants to have their say and to focus activities to drive service improvement in challenging financial circumstances. It was reiterated that the new approach would comply with the legal requirements on the housing service and the wider Authority.

Members were informed that the new housing involvement approach would reflect the Corporate Engagement Strategy by offering different levels of activities, enabling tenants to get involved as much, or as little as they wish. The different tiers of the engagement strategy were informing, consultation, involvement and collaboration. A forward plan of engagement activities would form the foundation of the programme, informing and promoting all opportunities to tenants. It was noted that where there was a requirement for feedback on a specific issue the consultation approach would utilise a mix of activities, some of which may be through digital feedback. It was recognised that where there was an issue relevant to a number of people that there needed to be opportunities for wider involvement from residents, including tenants. A new approach would be developed for community activities to involve residents in addressing local issues. This would replace the current programme of Estate Walkabouts and Have Your Say Days. The collaboration element of the engagement programme was built around Service Development Groups, various changes to which had been proposed to ensure they have a clear annual work programme which would attract interest from tenants.

It was noted that Members had an important role in housing involvement activities and needed to be kept informed of the work undertaken by tenants. It was proposed that to achieve this, reports of activities being considered by tenants would be reported back to Members via the Members Newsletter and Members would be informed of all community involvement activities. It was also highlighted that Housing Sub-committee members would be invited to get involved in at least one Task and Finish Group with tenants per year. Following the presentation, members of the sub-committee were invited to ask questions and feedback any suggestions for future closer working between Members and involved tenants.

Members highlighted the proposals to make greater use of digital methods to engage with tenants/residents and following a query were given assurance that there would be a range of alternative methods to engage for those not comfortable accessing the digital world. It was also noted that greater use of social media such as twitter should be coupled with setting expectations of when messages could be responded too, acknowledging that a 24/7 service would not be achievable. The sub-committee asked if any targets had been set for a percentage of tenants to be engaged once all the proposed changes had been actioned. It was explained that targets had not yet been set, but this would be done by looking at benchmark information and previous up-take. Members suggested that a long term improvement target could be considered, whereby there was a gradual yearly increase in the numbers of tenants engaged at various levels. The sub-committee welcomed the opportunity to work jointly with tenants via Task and Finish Groups to address some of the priority issues impacting on the housing service.

It was **agreed** to note the report and consider future opportunities to work collaboratively with tenants.

H032/11/15 Letting Policy Review Consultation

The sub-committee received a briefing note and presentation in relation to the review of North Tyneside Council's Letting Policy. Members were informed that it was best practice to review the Lettings Policy every 2 years. The last review had taken place in 2013 and a review was therefore timely, particularly due to the rapidly changing policy context, including the Localism Act which allowed for greater control over the suitability of prospective tenants, Welfare Reform and the Strategic Direction of the Council (Creating a Brighter Future). Officers from the housing service informed the sub-committee that 5 main changes were being proposed to the policy and that Members views were being sought on these as part of the consultation process. The final proposed changes would be reported to Cabinet at its meeting in March 2016 for approval.

The sub-committee was informed that the Lettings Service was designed to offer as much choice as possible to applicants; provide a fair and transparent system in which people receive the correct priority for housing and create more sustainable communities, as people who exercise choice over where they want to live are more likely to want to stay there. The 5 main issues that the review was looking to address were: Local Connection; Community Contribution; Owner Occupiers; Affordability and Restricting. Details of all these proposals were set out in the presentation.

In relation to local connection, it was noted that North Tyneside Homes were in high demand, therefore options had been explored which would allow the Council to give greater priority to those with a local connection to the Borough, while keeping an open housing register and supporting the sub-regional choice based lettings scheme. This could be achieved by revisiting the local connection criteria and changing the way local connection is used to prioritise applicants. The current local connection criteria included in the policy was an individual being normally resident in the borough in the last 5 years. Residence was considered as occupying a property in the Borough for at least 6 months out of the last 12 or 3 years out of the last 5. The proposals sought to change the criteria to applicants being resident in the borough for at least the last 2 years. Changes were also proposed to tightening the definition of a family member which formed part of the local connection criteria.

The proposed change to the way local connection is used to prioritise applicants was to create a new banding system which would give those with a local connection a higher band than those without. The current approach allowed applicants with a local connection greater priority within their band. It was noted that at present around 7% of applicants on the register had no local connection and that once placed in a band a notification letter would be sent, which outlined a right to appeal the banding decision. Members supported the principle of prioritising homes for those with a local connection and felt the change to 2 years residency helped clarify the criteria. However, concern was raised that if the changes applied to those currently on the register, it would be unfair to change the goalposts for applicants who may have already met the existing residency criteria. Officers undertook to discuss this with colleagues in legal to establish whether the change would apply to all on the register or new applicants only. Overall the sub-committee supported the proposed approach to strengthening local connections.

In relation to community contribution, it was noted that the Localism Act allowed provision for giving priority to those who make a positive contribution to the local area, for instance through working or volunteering in the borough. Officers were seeking views as to whether this was something Members and the public would like to see introduced. This would be done through prioritising those who make a positive contribution to the North Tyneside community. Community Contribution would only be awarded if the applicant met a 'current positive tenancy test'. It was noted that this would sit within a band as a tie-breaker rather

than putting an applicant in a higher band. Whilst it was noted that it would be a positive step to reward genuine community contributions, Members expressed concern that this could be open to abuse with people volunteering for short periods of time in order to access the priority awarded. It was also felt that it could be difficult to administer. The sub-committee felt that, without further details on criteria and restrictions, this proposal was too vague to be included in the policy.

In relation to owner occupiers, the review of the policy was aiming to achieve a more robust, transparent and fair process for assessing whether such applicants 'have equity' but which facilitates home owners moving into North Tyneside Living Schemes and/or bungalows. This would be done by setting a qualification threshold, whereby those with equity and/or savings over this amount wouldn't qualify unless they were over 60 years old moving to older persons accommodation, at risk of homelessness or financial hardship or had other exceptional circumstances. An applicant's priority would be reduced by one band unless the equity and/or savings were under a specified amount. The sub-committee supported the principle that applicants with equity should be accepted onto the register on a lower band. However, it was also felt that more work would need to be done on the equity level thresholds before this could be included in the policy.

In relation to affordability, it was noted that, as part of the authority's commitment to tenancy sustainment and to meet the challenges of Welfare Reform, the review was seeking to introduce an affordability test. Following an affordability test, where a property was deemed to be unaffordable, the authority would not be minded to allocate the home and alternative housing options would be discussed. Members felt that this proposal was an important addition to the policy, highlighting that it would be unfair to allocate a home knowing it was not sustainable for the tenant. The sub-committee stressed that where homes are not allocated on the basis of the outcome of an affordability test, strong advice and support would need to be in place to find an alternative solution for the tenant.

In relation to restricting refusals, Members were informed that around 53% of all offers made are refused by applicants, placing significant pressure on resources. As part of the review, the possibility of introducing a 'penalty' where an applicant refuses a number of properties within a period of time was being explored. This would be done by either reducing an applicants priority or by removing their 'time on the list' once they hit a threshold, i.e. 3 refusals in 6 or 12 months. It was explained that full information was listed on the homefinder website as to location and type of property, but that refusals were often made on the basis of location or number of bedrooms. A high number of refusals were also made without viewing the property. This impacted on void performance and the proposed change was intended to tighten up the process and reduce the percentage of refusals. Members were concerned that the high refusal rate could be down to mis-reading information and applicants' ability to navigate the website. It was felt that administering a penalty system could be resource intensive and Members suggested that some changes could be made to the website, i.e prompt box to check if applicant wants to bid on property, prior to a restriction being included.

Officers thanked Members for their views on the proposed changes and suggested that a report be brought back to the sub-committee detailing the additional information on owner occupier thresholds and feedback from consultation undertaken with tenants on the proposed changes.

It was **agreed** to note the information provided and to receive a further report detailing the outcome of the tenant consultation undertaken in relation to the Lettings Policy Review.