

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

Housing Sub-Committee

25 July 2016

Present: Councillor S Cox (Chair)
Councillors A Arkle, K Bolger, L Darke, D
Drummond, N Huscroft and A Newman

HO08/07/16 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Madden, P Mason and M Rankin

HO09/07/16 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members appointed.

HO10/07/16 Declarations of Interest

Cllr K Bolger declared a registerable personal interest in relation to Minute HO13/07/16 Kier North Tyneside Performance, as she worked for partner ENGIE and served customers on housing related issues including repairs and programmed works.

HO11/07/16 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 June 2016 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

HO12/07/16 Housing Strategy 2016-21

The Chair informed members of the sub-committee that it had been necessary to defer the Housing Strategy 2016-21 to the September meeting. This was due to a delay in the consultation process and to allow more time to examine the emerging housing issues contained in the Planning and Housing Act 2016.

It was **agreed** to add the Housing Strategy 2016-21 to the agenda for the September meeting of the sub-committee.

HO13/07/16 Sustainable Tenancies

The sub-committee received a report which provided an update on the tenancy sustainment project and suggested timescales for the Members to carry out an in-depth investigation into this area. The Council's Welfare Reform and Income Manager was in attendance to present the report.

Members were informed that, in order for people to be able to live in their homes for as long as they wanted to, the Council had to allocate properties to people who needed them, could afford them, were able to manage their bills and look after themselves, their household and their property. To help facilitate this, new procedures were developed to enable housing staff to identify applicants who may be potentially vulnerable (financially, socially, digitally)

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at an earlier stage in the allocation process. A new team, the Tenancy Sustainment Team, was set up as part of the restructure of Housing Services in March 2015.

The key to the new approach was ensuring that the needs of customers could be accurately assessed and having a clear understanding of what could be put in place for each potential assessment outcome. The process therefore needed an initial 'triage' assessment to be undertaken by the Homefinder Team, which would identify applicants that needed a more in depth assessment of their needs.

The sub-committee was informed that a pilot of the new process was undertaken during October 2015, linked to the new build properties in Blandford Road. This involved the tenancy sustainment team carrying out 33 Sustainability Assessments for applicants who were matched to the properties. Of the 33 completed assessments, 30 were assessed as being able to afford the property and 3 were assessed as not being able to afford the property on their income at that point. Due to imminent changes in circumstances, 2 of these 3 were allowed to proceed, with 1 applicant being told the offer of the property was being withdrawn on the basis they could not afford to live there. It was highlighted that, of the 32 properties let during October 2015, 31 were still tenants. As of 1st June 2016 the total arrears for the Blandford Road tenants was £1875.49, an average of £60.49 per tenant which was significantly lower than the average arrears for all other tenants who had started their tenancies since October 2015 (£83.78).

Members of the sub-committee asked why, if the tenants had been assessed as being able to afford the rent, there were any arrears on the account. It was explained that much of this would be down to 'technical arrears', as some tenants paid on a weekly or fortnightly basis, meaning when an arrears report was ran it would show debts but these would be cleared in full on the next rent day.

The sub-committee was informed that, since October 2015, there had been further changes to the Housing structure which had an impact on the ability to roll out the new processes following the pilot. The most recent Environment, Housing and Leisure restructure resulted in the Tenancy Sustainment Team being split and the Tenancy Sustainment Officer was incorporated into the new Neighbourhood Housing Team. This was to enable closer working relationships and collaborative working with Neighbourhood Housing Officers to ensure those tenants in most need of support were identified and provided with the help appropriate to their needs.

The restructure had also impacted on the implementation of the tenancy sustainment triage assessment process. During the restructure a number of officers in the Homefinder team had secured alternative employment and until presently the service had not been able to recruit, due to vacant posts being held to minimise compulsory redundancies. This staffing issue had created a backlog of housing applications and as a result the implementation of the tenancy sustainment triage could not be prioritised.

Members were informed that, whilst the triage system had not been fully rolled out, Tenancy Sustainment Officers continued to work with applicants to identify those who needed help and support. This included discussing the applicants financial circumstances, signposting them to support around the maximisation of welfare benefits, managing their budgets and accessing help and support with digital exclusion when appropriate. It was noted that during 2014-15 the proportion of tenancies that had failed during the first 12 months accounted for 4.98% of all terminated tenancies. During 2015-16, as a result of the increased help and support, this had reduced to 4.19%.

Members highlighted that, whilst first and foremost it was important to see if a tenant could afford the property, it was also important to include in the assessment if they could manage

the property. It was noted that a holistic overview of individuals circumstances was considered, as it was acknowledged that some individuals did not have the skills required to sustain a tenancy, i.e. not having any cooking skills and spending on takeaways. In such circumstances the individual would be put in touch with some voluntary groups/colleges where they could acquire necessary skills. A requirement to gain these skills would form part of the tenant commitment and the Neighbourhood Officers would review to ensure that this was being met.

It was expected that the new Homefinder Officers would be in place by August 2016. Once these officers were in place and had been trained, the team would have the capacity to deliver the full processes and procedures, with the service being fully up and running by the end of September 2016.

At its meeting in November 2015, the sub-committee received a report detailing the plans for improving the number of sustainable tenancies and agreed to review the impact of the newly implemented processes at the beginning of the 2016/17 municipal year. However in light of the delays in implementing the new process, it was suggested that this work be delayed until Quarter 4 of the 2016/17 municipal year. This would allow a reasonable amount of time to have lapsed to identify the level of change attributed to the new processes and any improvements that could be made to the services provided by tenants.

It was **agreed** that (1) the report be noted and (2) a sub-group of the sub-committee be established in Quarter 4 of the 2016/17 municipal year to evaluate the impact of the sustainable tenancies process.