

MINUTES

Community Services Scrutiny Panel

3rd June 2008

Present: Councillors Howarth (in the Chair), Cowper, Crooks, Laverick, Lightley, McDonnell, Mavin, Norman, Robinson, D Smith, Taylor, Walton and Young.

Also Present: Councillors Bell, Kellett, Kelly, Marsden, Simpson, Stoddart, Thomson and Wilkes.

1. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence, all Members of the Panel being present.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 7th May, 2008, were confirmed as a correct record.

3. Decent Homes Standard

The Head of Property Services had attended the Panel's Meeting in May 2008, to update Members with progress made on achieving the Decent Homes Standard.

A draft report had been prepared, and subject to the undermentioned amendment to recommendation 3.1, it was agreed that the report be forwarded to the Scrutiny Committee for their consideration.

- 3.1 That the necessary funding be put in place to allow *Durham City Council and the new Unitary Authority* to achieve DHS on target *and continue to refurbish properties to the 'Durham Standard'.*

4. Allocations Policy

Lynne Boyd, Housing Manager, and Councillor Les Thomson, Portfolio Holder for Communities were in attendance to answer the Panel's questions on the new Allocations Policy, copies of which had previously been circulated.

The new Policy had been introduced in August, 2007, to ensure that the Council's Allocations Policy complied with current legislation, codes of practice and best practice. It was based on the principle of reasonable preference as defined in the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002), and its introduction had been timed to coincide with the introduction of the new Housing Management computer system. The Policy was band-based and allocated properties on the basis of the housing need of the applicant, as opposed to the previous arrangements which were based on the amount of time applicants had spent on the waiting list.

Since August, 2007, 3308 applications had been made, and 3049 of these were currently live. There were approximately 3000 applicants on the list, and a housing stock of around 6000 properties. 490 properties had been re-let last year. At any one time, around 80 properties are at some stage of the turnover process, and re-let times had been reduced from 73 days to 40 days over the last 2 years.

All applicants on the housing list at the time of the introduction of the new Policy had been invited to re-apply, and transitional arrangements had been put in place to reflect the time that they had already spent on the waiting list under the old arrangements.

All applicants were assessed on the basis on need, and allocated to one of 5 bands, A – E, with A being for those in the most urgent need. An allocation to band E, however, did not mean that an applicant would never be offered a property, but this would be dependant on the demand for an area, the type and size of property required and the number of applicants in higher bands.

Housing Options Officers were also able to assist applicants to look at other housing solutions such as housing associations and privately rented properties as well as making an application for Council housing.

To date, 3% of applicants had been allocated to band A, 15% to band B, 20% to band C, 22% to band D and the remaining 40% to band E.

Where properties became available, the Housing Management system was able to produce a shortlist of eligible applicants for a particular home. This was based on the information from the application form which had been inputted into the system. This list produced by the system was then considered by a Housing Officer to carry out the necessary checks before offering the property.

Members were advised that if a constituent enquired about their place on the allocations list or the estimated waiting time for a property they should be advised to refer their enquiry to the Housing Section where an Officer would be able to explain the system and their position to them.

Note: *Councillor Kellett left the Meeting at 6.25pm.*

Note: *Councillors Bell and Robinson left the Meeting at 6.30pm.*

Applicants had a right of appeal prescribed in law against certain decisions, such as having their application to be added to the housing register disallowed, or where they were removed from the list other than at their own request. Applicants also had an opportunity to appeal against the decision to allocate them to a particular band. These appeals were considered by the Senior Housing Officer and of 170 appeals to date, approximately 1/3 had resulted in a change of band. Of these however, some were due to a change in the applicant's circumstances. Details of the specific reasons for allowing an appeal were recorded on the individual application but were not analysed overall. There was some backlog in dealing with the appeals due to the volume of work involved.

Note: *Councillor Walton left the Meeting at 6.45pm*

Note: *Councillor McDonnell left the Meeting at 6.55pm.*

Applicants in medical need of rehousing were reviewed by the Council's Strategic Older Persons' Manager who was an occupational therapist. Her main role was in the aids and adaptations services, and, due to the large workload, this sometimes caused a delay in the assessing of applicants. There were occasions where applicants misunderstood the medical criteria, and the fact that an applicant had a medical condition did not necessarily put them in housing need. The situation where properties were only allocated to applicants with medical conditions therefore did not arise, and other circumstances, such as demolition, overcrowding, domestic violence etc could also allow applicants to move up the list.

Some suggested outcomes for consideration when drafting the report were:

1. That in future when allocation banding was changed at appeal the reason should be noted. Over time this could indicate any amendment of the Application Form that may help reduce similar occurrence.
2. That increased staffing-time to deal with appeal assessments should be a recommendation.

3. That the Report and Recommendations should be viewed by the New Authority in the context of an overarching Policy on Allocations and any future Policy on Choice Based Lettings.

It was agreed that the Strategic Older Persons' Manager be invited to the next Meeting, and the Chairman also requested Members to give consideration to the outcomes required of the Scrutiny for discussion.

5. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

The Meeting terminated at 7.05 pm