

MINUTES

Community Services Scrutiny Panel

29th July, 2008

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

Also Present: Councillors Bell, Kellett, Kelly, Stoddart, Wilkes and Wolstenholme.

1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Walton.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 3rd June, 2008, were confirmed as a correct record.

3. Allocations Policy

Lynne Boyd, Housing Manager, and Nusrat Mohammad, Strategic Older Persons Manager, were in attendance for further discussion on the Allocations Policy, with particular emphasis on the medical need aspect of the Policy.

The Housing Application Form asked detailed questions relating to any disabilities applicants may have. Where applications were received, and all questions had been completed correctly, the information provided by the applicant was reviewed by the Strategic Older Persons Manager, a qualified occupational therapist. In cases where further information was required, applicants would be contacted either by telephone, or where appropriate, a home visit and if need be, contact could be made with their GP prior to a decision being taken on their medical needs.

When placing applicants into the various bands in accordance with the Policy, medical need was taken into account. An applicant who could not be discharged from hospital, or who had no access to a toilet, and whose current property was not suitable for adaptation for example would be allocated to Band A; applicants who were just about managing in their present accommodation, but perhaps had a medical condition which would cause their condition to deteriorate fairly quickly would be placed in Band B; applicants in Band C may have a property which was currently too large for them to easily manage, or have a need to move closer to their families; while those placed in Band D could, for example, suffer from conditions related to old age, or have difficulty in accessing local services, perhaps due to a hilly route between their home and local shops, doctors etc.

In October, 2007, due to the introduction of the new Policy, the retirement of the Council's previous occupational therapist, and prior to a permanent appointment being made to the post, there had been a backlog of about 300 applicants awaiting assessment under the medical need criteria. Through a combination of more admin support being provided to the Strategic Older Persons Manager, and more efficient ways of working being introduced, this figure had been dramatically reduced. On average 10-12 applications were being received per week which required assessment of the applicant's medical need. This was a manageable amount now that admin support was available.

In all cases, the need of the applicant was considered, prior to available properties being reviewed for their appropriateness.

Where applicants wished to appeal against decision to place them in a particular band, the request for an appeal had to be made in writing; there was currently no specific form for this purpose. It

was suggested that a form be introduced for use where applicants wished to lodge an appeal against their banding, however it was considered that this could delay the appeals process further, and create additional administration. It may be possible however for a form to be devised for those who wished to use it, but continue to accept written appeals depending on the preference of the applicant.

Each District in the County had an allocations policy, which was based upon Government guidance, however there were some differences in banding criteria between individual authorities. Work was ongoing between all the appropriate authorities to produce a new policy, which would be effective County-wide, to reflect the introduction of choice-based lettings. This work had begun prior to LGR, but now also came under the remit of the housing workstream at the County Council.

The choice-based lettings scheme was to come into effect next year, and there was a need to minimise disruption to applicants wherever possible during this process, and it was considered that an appropriate recommendation be made in the report on this topic.

The Panel considered whether any further information was required prior the draft report being produced, and agreed that the information provided by the Housing Manager and Strategic Older Persons Manager was most comprehensive and that the draft report should be brought to the next Meeting of the Panel. The Chairman thanked Lynne Boyd and Nusrat Mohammad for attending the Meeting, and the most helpful information they had provided.

4. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

The Meeting terminated at 5.50 pm

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

SCRUTINY OF THE ALLOCATIONS POLICY

1. Background

- 1.1 As the new Allocations Policy, which was introduced in August, 2007, was a need based Policy in contrast to the previous date-order system, it was felt that the new Policy should be scrutinised after having been in operation for six months, to allow the effects on all parties involved to be assessed.

2. Actions

- 2.1 Copies of the Allocations Policy and housing application form were circulated to Members and the Council's Housing Manager attended the Panel's meetings in June and July, 2008, to give Members an overview of the new Allocations Policy, details of why it had been introduced and explained how it operated.
- 2.2 The Strategic Older Persons Manager had also attended the July meeting to answer questions on how the medical need aspects of the Policy were dealt with, and how these impacted on an applicants options for housing.

3. Outcomes

- 3.1 The new Housing Allocations Policy was introduced in August, 2007, to ensure that the Council's Policy was compliant with current legislation, codes of practice and best practice.
- 3.2 The new Policy is based on the principle of reasonable preference as defined in the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002), and its introduction was timed to coincide with the introduction of the new housing management computer system. The new Policy is based on a band system and allocates properties to applicants based on their need, rather than the amount of time they had been on the waiting list as had happened previously.
- 3.3 All applicants on the waiting list at the time of the introduction of the new Policy were invited to re-apply and transitional arrangements were put in place to reflect the time they had spent on the waiting list.
- 3.4 Since the Policy was introduced in August, 2007, 3308 applications have been made and 3049 of them are currently live. There are approximately 3000 applicants on the list, a housing stock of around 6000 properties and 490 properties were re-let last year. Approximately 80 properties are in the turnover process and over the last two years, re-let times have been reduced from 73 days to 40 days.
- 3.5 Applicants are assessed on the basis of need and allocated to one of five bands, A – E, with A being for those in most urgent need.
- 3.6 To date, 3% of applicants have been allocated to band A, 15% to band B, 20% to band C, 22% to band D and 40% to Band E.
- 3.7 An allocation to band E does not mean that an applicant will not be offered a property, but this is dependant on the demand for an area, the type and size of property required and the number of applicants who are in higher bands. Housing Options Officers also assist

applicants in looking for other housing solutions such as housing association properties and private accommodation.

- 3.8 As properties become available, the Housing Management System produces a shortlist of eligible applicants for a particular home. This is based upon the information from the application form which is input into the system. The list of eligible applicants produced is considered by a Housing Officer before the property is offered.
- 3.9 Applicants have a right of appeal, prescribed in law, against certain decisions such as having their application to be added to the housing list disallowed, or being removed from the list other than at their own request.
- 3.10 There is also an opportunity for applicants to appeal the decision to allocate them to a particular band. Appeals are made in writing although there is no specific form for doing so. Were a form introduced for all appeals, this could actually cause further delays, but it may be possible to devise a form, but continue to accept written appeals depending on the preference of the applicant.
- 3.11 These appeals are considered by the Senior Housing Officer and of 170 appeals to date, about one third resulted in a change of band, although in some of these cases, the applicants circumstances have changed since the original decision. Details of the reason are recorded on the individual application form, but are not analysed overall.
- 3.12 There is some backlog in dealing with appeals due to the volume of work involved.
- 3.13 The housing application form also asks detailed questions relating to any disabilities applicants may have. Where this is the case, the Council's Strategic Older Persons Manager, qualified occupational therapist, reviews the application form and medical need is taken into account when allocating an applicant to a band. In some cases, further information is needed before a decision can be reached, and in these cases, the applicants could be telephoned, a home visit could be arranged, or further details could be requested from their GP.
- 3.14 In October, 2007, the Strategic Older Persons Manager had been faced with a backlog of about 300 applicants awaiting assessment. This had been caused by the introduction of the new Policy, and the retirement of the previous postholder and delay before a permanent appointment was made.
- 3.15 Additional admin support has been provided, and together with more efficient ways of working being introduced, this figure has now been dramatically reduced.
- 3.16 On average, 10-12 applications are received per week which require assessment of medical needs, and now that admin support is in place, this is a manageable figure considering the Strategic Older Persons Manager's other duties and responsibilities such as the aids and adaptations service.
- 3.17 Each District in the County has an allocations policy which was based on Government guidance, although there are some differences in the banding criteria.
- 3.18 Choice-based lettings are due to be introduced next year and work is underway to produce a new allocations policy which will be effective County-wide, and during this process, there is a need to minimise disruption to applicants wherever possible.

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 That where bandings are changed on appeal, the reasons for this be recorded and, the application form be amended should patterns emerge.

- 4.2 That extra/sufficient officer time be provided for dealing with appeals against bandings in a timely manner and in line with the needs of the Service.
- 4.3 That the reports and recommendations be passed to the new Unitary Authority in the context of the overarching Allocations Policy and Choice Based Lettings Policy.
- 4.4 That where any future changes in Policy occur, the need to minimise disruption for applicants wherever possible be taken into consideration.

Community Services Scrutiny Panel
September 2008

CITY OF DURHAM

COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL – 2ND SEPTEMBER 2008

REVIEW OF CHURCHYARDS

BRIEFING NOTE FROM TECHNICAL SUPPORT MANAGER
(ENVIRONMENT & LEISURE SERVICES)

As part of the Local Government Re-organisation process a number of Workstreams have been set up to look at the various functions / services / duties of the existing authorities and how these can be brought together under the new Unitary Council. The Streetscene Workstream is tasked with looking at all the services which come under the 'Cleaner, Greener, Safer' banner including street cleansing, grounds maintenance, management of parks / open spaces / cemeteries, neighbourhood wardens etc.

The Streetscene Workstream has not yet considered the issue of churchyard management in any great detail. However it is a statutory duty for Local Authorities to take on certain grounds maintenance responsibilities for churchyards once they become officially 'closed'. A Churchyard is designated as 'closed' when no further burials are able to take place and the site is formally handed over by the Church authorities to the local authority for it to carry out grounds maintenance in perpetuity. The new Unitary Council will therefore assume responsibility for this function from 1st April 2009. As far as I can see all existing grounds maintenance responsibilities (including headstone inspections) will continue to be carried out with no great change from current policy and practice (again because it is a statutory responsibility).

Andrew Jackson
Technical Support Manager
Environment & Leisure Services

