

People Select Committee

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday, 13th July, 2015.

Present: Cllr Mrs Jean O'Donnell(Chairman), Cllr Eileen Johnson(Vice-Chairman), Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Michael Clark (vice Cllr Lisa Grainge), Cllr Di Hewitt, Cllr Ben Houchen, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Barbara Inman

Officers: Caroline Wood (SBC Housing), Julie Nixon (SBC Housing), Peter Mennear (Scrutiny), Daniel Childs (DSU)

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr Lisa Grainge, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

1 Evacuation Procedure

2 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Kevin Faulks stated a personal non-prejudicial interest in that he was a Member of Tees Credit Union.

3 Scrutiny Review of Choice Based Lettings (CBL)

Members received a presentation relating to the Scrutiny Review of Choice Based Lettings (CBL). Officers provided background information, an overview of the housing bidding process and a summary of changes which would affect CBL provision.

Information which supplemented the scrutiny review was also provided, this information could be summarised as follows:-

- The current provision system - Compass - had been in operation from 2009. Choice based lettings had increased transparency in the allocations system however the current system needed to be reviewed in light of the changing housing market and subsequent pressures on Registered Housing Providers policy. Representatives of Thirteen would attend the Committee meeting in September to inform Members about changes to the system and future plans.
- There was misunderstanding surrounding the Removal of Spare Room Subsidy. Some believed that they were no longer eligible to apply for social housing that would include an extra or spare bedroom, relative to the number of occupants. However, clients could still apply for a house with any number of bedrooms, but they would not receive financial support for any rooms that were deemed additional to the need of the householders. The situation was different in the private rental market where recipients of Housing Benefit were eligible to receive a certain amount of money towards housing costs, which was based on a fixed amount for a type of property in a given area.
- The private rental market in Stockton was quite diversified. The market ranged from a number of 'accidental' landlords through to those with substantial portfolios, and it was increasingly seen as being more flexible and offered a lot of choice to residents, including furnishings not always provided in social housing. Officer stated that demand for housing varied across the borough, and added that both social housing and private rental suppliers found it difficult to let

larger properties in the borough.

-Void properties were increasingly an issue for Registered Providers, and there was increasing competition from the private sector. The system needed increased flexibility to respond to changing needs and aspirations.

- The business plans of Registered Providers would be affected by the national government's Budget. The Budget contained a 1% reduction in rent rates for RSLs, whereas the RSLs' business plans had been based on an assumption of a 1% increase in rental rates.

- Moves to extend Right to Buy to would also have an impact upon housing stock. Officers stated that it was expected that Providers would seek to replace depleted stock, where possible.

- Local authorities were responsible for Allocations Policies and the Registered Providers operated the CBL scheme including leading on marketing. A joint Steering Group oversaw the operation of the scheme as a whole. The Tees valley had been able to operate a Common Allocations Policy across the area and this was unusual compared to other regional CBL schemes.

Following the presentation Members asked questions and a discussion took place, the contents of which could be summarised as below:-

- The CBL system had a four band priority system with people in Band 1 having the most housing needs. The majority of housing lets were now being made to Band 4 customers (ie. no identified 'needs').

- Homelessness was increasingly being tackled by using a preventative approach, however if someone was statutorily homeless they would receive a Band 1 priority. Band 1+ was the highest possible priority and was allocated to people decanting from regeneration schemes.

- Members asked how the withdrawal of Housing Benefits to under 21s would affect the local housing market. Officers stated that Young Adults would have difficulty finding adequate, affordable housing as there was little one bed accommodation provision. It was also noted that the future definition of what constituted 'vulnerability' would affect re-housing of young adults.

- Members asked how residents who were not computer literate could access the system. They were informed that support staff were available to assist in accessing the system.

- Members suggested that the system would be improved by giving members of the public access to further information and by increasing their ability to filter properties on the system. Members asked if gathering extra information for publication would be time consuming. Members were informed that the data was already gathered. Members stated that the new system ought to take an approach to information and the application process that was more akin to that of an estate agent.

The Committee then considered and agreed its scope for the review. The review would report to Cabinet on proposed change to the CBL system by

October to feed into the wider Tees Valley discussions.

AGREED that:

1. the information be noted.
2. the scope be agreed
3. the following information be provided:

- current Local Housing Allowance Rates
- breakdown of social housing stock in Borough
- the Quarterly CBL Performance Report

4 Welfare Reform Update

Members were presented with a Welfare Reform Update for information. The following supplementary information was presented at the meeting:

- The national government's recent Budget had been published since the update was written and Officers had not been able to review all the implications prior to the meeting. An update which reflected the implications of the Budget would be presented to Members at a subsequent meeting.
- Officers had held three discussions with representatives of the DWP regarding Universal Credit. Officers had been informed a partial roll-out of Universal Credit in the Borough would begin on 07/12/2015. The initial roll-out would apply to new claimants who were single, and numbers were expected to be quite low; Universal Credit had been rolled-out in Hartlepool in February 2015 and there were roughly 100 recipients at the time of the meeting. Subsequent to the initial roll-out, the client groups would evolve over a number of years and Universal Credit would apply to a more diverse range of clients.
- Officers noted the complexity of the Universal Credit would necessitate the use of advanced computer systems and analysis of complex, real-time data.
- Following complete roll-out of Universal Credit, it was estimated that the Council would retain 60% its caseload. Officers would have to investigate changes to the Housing Department in response to the changes.
- Members asked if the Council would incur significant costs readying new systems. Officers stated that the cost would not be excessive, but that the process of data migration would require significant labour resources. DWP had committed to provide the Council with resources to provide the Universal Support service to help people with Universal Credit.

Officers stated that costs had lowered in the Back on Track Crisis scheme because residents were now being given second hand white goods, whereas they had previously been given brand new goods.

- Members enquired as to whether the reduction in applications to the Back on Track welfare assistance scheme and decreases in crisis support meant that residents were being left in need. Officers noted that the criteria generally had been tightened up. Young adults were at a disadvantage when applying for such assistance as supporting other groups was a priority.

- Members suggested that awareness of the Back on Track scheme had previously been lacking. Officers stated that work had been undertaken with the customer service section and that staff had received training which included noticing triggers and signposting residents to relevant services. Member organisations of the Stockton Welfare Advice Network (SWAN) had all been briefed on the Back on Track scheme.

- Members noted Stockton and District Advice and Information Service (SDAIS) had dealt with fewer enquiries than in previous years, and that this was due to limited resources rather than a reduction in demand. Officers stated that this was the case, adding that the Council received a great amount of data from SDAIS, but that what was required was less, more targeted data and smarter analysis.

- Members asked whether SDAIS relied on volunteers. They were told this was the case.

- Members asked whether Welfare Rights still played a lobbying role and asked Officers to invite Welfare Rights representatives to give a talk/presentation.

- Members were informed that Welfare Rights focussed on income maximisation, particular from internal referrals within the Council, whereas SDAIS had a much broader advice role. It was hoped that the Advice and Information Review would lead to better joint working between Welfare Rights and SDAIS.

AGREED that:

1) The report be noted;

2) Welfare Rights be invited to give a presentation to the Committee.

5 Work Programme

Consideration was given to the project plan and it was noted that the following items would be presented at future meetings:

Representatives of Thirteen Group would attend in September to inform review of CBL and there would be a Welfare Reform Update - including update on universal credit from DWP- in October.

6 Chairs Update

The Chair did not provide an update.