

People Select Committee

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday, 14th December, 2015.

Present: Cllr Mrs Jean O'Donnell(Chairman), Cllr Eileen Johnson(Vice-Chairman), Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Lisa Grainge, Cllr Di Hewitt, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Barbara Inman, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

Officers: Julie Higgins (Service Manager - Benefits), Peter Kelly (Director of Public Health), Peter Acheson (Consultant in Public Health), Caroline Wood (Housing Options Manager), Peter Mennear (Scrutiny Officer), Jenna McDonald (Governance Officer)

Also in attendance: Julie McNaughton (Thirteen Group), Peter Kelly (Director of Public Health)

Apologies:

**PEO
36/15** **Evacuation Procedure**

The evacuation procedure was noted.

**PEO
37/15** **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Kevin Faulks declared a personal non-prejudicial interest as a Member of the Tees Credit Union.

AGREED that the declaration be noted.

**PEO
38/15** **Minutes for signature - 19 October 2015**

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2015 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

AGREED that the minutes were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**PEO
39/15** **Draft Minutes - 16 November 2015**

Consideration was given to the draft minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2015.

AGREED that the minutes be approved.

**PEO
40/15** **Monitoring the Impact of Previously Agreed Recommendations**

The Committee gave consideration to the Action Plan following the Choice Based Lettings review.

Key points were highlighted as follows:

- Thirteen Group were currently updating all customers applications to include areas of choice and suitable property types

- Training had taken place within the neighbourhood teams of Thirteen Group to ensure that adverts contained accurate information and additional photographs if appropriate. Several teams were involved in adding adverts to the system and consistent guidance had been developed. An ICT system was introduced

which allowed for photographs to be stored against properties for future adverts, and floor plans would be added in future.

- Issues existed around 3 bed properties across the Borough. It was noted that pending an assessment, it was possible to under-occupy. Work was being carried out to update the wording based on under occupancy in order to inform people that households that could afford to under-occupy would be considered to do so.
- It was heard that Thirteen Group would hold stalls in the Castlegate Centre to advertise and promote available properties
- A Scrutiny Panel was in place to ensure that the bidding system remained user friendly and in line with customer needs and expectations. Thirteen Group worked with the Communications Team to improve literature on advertisements and the application document had been streamlined.
- It was highlighted that concerns were raised around the consistency of the advertisement of property incentives. Members heard that while incentives were promoted, they were not detailed and were agreed at time of viewing.
- The Housing Options Manager outlined the actions that the service would take in relation to recommendation 4. They would continue to work closely with Compass partners to ensure all allocations were transparent and in line with the allocations policy. The service would undertake an audit roll to assess whether the policy was adhered to.

It was agreed that the following areas would be reviewed:

- The journey of a void property
- The wording of advertisements
- The activity at the close of the bidding cycle
- The shortlisting procedure
- The decision making procedure for voids advertised with a shortened cycle

Members raised the following points/questions:

- It was asked whether a system was in place which allowed people to challenge decisions which were made. In response, Members heard that Thirteen Group had a complaints process in place which was adhered to at all times. If a decision was challenged relating to an allocation believed to be unfair, this would be dealt with by the Governance Team.
- Members suggested that Anti Social Behaviour figures be displayed on the Compass system in order to avoid negative rumours and incorrect reputations of areas. It was noted the system did link to police websites.
- The Committee asked whether basic maintenance was carried out on a property before being let in order to ensure they were attractive. It was heard that in most situations, basic maintenance was carried out before the property was let however, some customers opted to view the property while works were being carried out and move in before decoration took place and choose their own decoration. It was highlighted that when a property was viewed, a list of

works completed and to be carried out was presented to the possible tenant. Members noted that giving timescales on any expected work would be helpful for tenants.

- Members agreed that available incentives should be promoted from the beginning of the process in order to encourage, in response, it was noted that incentives could be made more prominent to create awareness . Incentives in relation to decoration were mainly in the form of £300 vouchers.

-Members noted that delays in relation to repairs and decoration was due to the volume of work.

AGREED that the Action Plan be approved.

PEO Welfare Reform Update **41/15**

The Committee was presented with a report which detailed the outcomes/impacts of Welfare Reform.

Key points and emerging issues were highlighted together as follows:

- The most significant change which took place during the year to date was the implementation of the Back on Track Scheme

- The Back on Track service was now provided by Housing Benefits in-house and benefitted from links which existed with other services that were extremely useful. It enabled a greater focus on prevention.

- In previous years, services had been offered to tenants such as the supply of brand new white goods. A new initiative had been implemented during Q2 where pre owned white goods were offered as cost saving measure. Members were informed that while many tenants were complimentary and appreciative of the pre owned goods, many were disappointed. It was also noted that all goods whether pre owned or brand new, were of a very high standard

- The Committee noted that on 7 December 2015, Stockton went live with Universal Credit which was also rolled out nationally. Training was being carried out with library staff who would provide an assisted online claims service when required for those applying for Universal Credit. Personal budget support would also be provided along with an on call service for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

- Referring to the Benefit Cap, it was heard that a date was awaited for which benefits would be capped, Members heard that once a clear date was known, customers would be informed at the earliest opportunity in order to prepare

Members raised the following points/questions:

- It was highlighted that Tristar Homes displayed information on Universal Credit on their Facebook page which was very useful and informative.

- The Committee raised concerns around tenants not prioritising paying their rent which could have led to eviction. It was noted that where tenants were

vulnerable and did not prioritise rent, an alternative payment arrangement could be applied for as a safety net and personal budgeting support was also available. Eight weeks of arrears needed to be built up before they would be considered. It was noted that Alternative Payment Arrangements were only temporary and would be reviewed, and could not be put in place for all.

- It was highlighted that while personal budgeting support was offered to tenants by Thirteen Group, tenants did not receive this support from private landlords. It was agreed that ensuring that all tenants, particularly the more vulnerable, did not face eviction due to lack of budgeting support was important.

- Members discussed the Targeted Benefit Take up Campaign and asked whether this included disabled adaptations. Members were informed that the current focus of this was Attendance Allowance but other support was signposted on an individual basis.

- Concerns were raised around the frequency of payments of Universal Credit. It was asked whether claimants were required to consent to direct payments before implemented, in response it was heard that direct payments did require consent.

-Members were informed Stockton Council was monitoring the impact and that a meeting would take place with the monthly DWP Operational Group where concerns/issues could be raised, and the quarterly Strategic Group.

- The Committee were keen to understand the process of accessing a Credit Union and were informed that this was not a difficult process and a document detailing the process could be circulated to Members.

AGREED that the information be noted.

PEO 42/15 **Scrutiny Review of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)**

The Committee was presented with a report on the Scrutiny Review of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

Key points were highlighted as follows:

- FASD was a term given for a range of disabilities that could be caused when a developing baby in the womb was exposed to alcohol, this could include physical disabilities, learning difficulties and behavioural problems

- FASD was difficult to diagnose and was a permanent disorder which could not be cured

- Limited research on FASD in the UK meant that the current incidents of FASD in the UK was not known

- If 1% of children in Stockton-On-Tees were affected by FASD, this would equate to a numeric figure of 476 children and 25 born each year with the disorder

- 'No alcohol in pregnancy' was a focus for the Public Health team, one which

was a key public health challenge that had a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of the population

- In order to raise awareness of the Stockton Public Health messages relating to alcohol and pregnancy, training, educational materials and public awareness raising campaigns were introduced. It was heard that professionals that participated in the training programme were from groups such as; Voluntary Sector Organisations, Social Work and both primary and secondary schools

The Committee was presented with posters, leaflets and a short video which detailed FASD.

Members raised the following points/questions:

- Concerns were raised around a figure detailed within a leaflet provided to the committee - '50% of pregnancies are unplanned so women who drink socially can harm their baby before they realise they are pregnant'. In response to Members concerns, it was noted that if this was the case, midwifery advice and guidance should be sought, but the message would also be reviewed to ensure clarity.

- The Committee were keen to understand whether certain socio cultural groups were identified as being more likely to consume alcohol during pregnancy. It was heard that no such medical evidence existed. It was noted that, in general, the recorded levels of drinking would suggest that levels of FASD may be underreported.

- The Director of Public Health informed Members that those who did not take note of advice on alcohol during pregnancy were not likely to take note of advice on smoking during pregnancy. It was highlighted that 18-19% of mothers that gave birth at North Tees University Hospital, were still smoking at time of birth. Members asked whether advice leaflets were provided at family planning sessions and heard that this could be investigated.

- It was asked whether awareness days took place focusing on smoking, drugs and alcohol during pregnancy. It was noted that midwives covered these areas during routine visits however, such awareness events could be an additional opportunity for raising awareness.

- As Corporate Parents, Members suggested supporting Looked After Children across the Borough by educating on the implications of the consumption of drugs, alcohol and smoking during pregnancy.

- The Committee raised questions based on teenage pregnancy across the Borough. It was highlighted that those who fall pregnant while attending school, received support and guidance from an education support programme. The teenage pregnancy rate in Stockton was currently 35 per 1000, with mothers aged mostly between 15 and 17.

Members agreed that the focus of the review should be on prevention.

AGREED that the information be noted.

PEO **Work Programme 2015-16**

43/15

The Committee gave consideration to the work programme 2015-16.

AGREED that the work programme be noted and the Scope and Project Plan be agreed.

PEO **Chair's Update**

44/15

The Chair provided no update.