

Site Visit to Nominations and Lettings Team 24 July 2024 - Notes

On 24 July Cllrs Jim Beall, Stefan Houghton, and Sylvia Walmsley visited the Nominations and Lettings Team to gain a customer insight into applying for affordable housing. Cllrs Richard Eglington and Hilary Vickers also visited the team on 29 July. The following information was obtained from the discussions with the Service Lead, Team Leader and Senior Officer and calls that members listened to.

Discussions

Duty

- Local Authorities have a statutory duty to hold the housing register for their area
- SBC also holds the housing register for Middlesbrough

Team

- The team is small with 4.5 posts.
- The team has been placed into the same service with homelessness and housing solutions teams and are currently based in Church Road but will be moving to Dunedin in August.
- They currently attend the care leaver hub once a month to speak to people on a face-to-face basis and have been offered space in the Thirteen hubs on a regular basis. It was felt that it was important to have these bases in the community.
- They have a direct telephone number, so calls do not come through the Council's contact centre
- Nomination and Lettings team do not allocate for extra care and will refer anyone contacting them for this to social care
- If the person registering is homeless they are referred to the housing solutions who will assist them in setting up an account and ensure they are on the appropriate banding. Those considered homeless could be living in private rent, with family or friends, or placed in temporary accommodation at a cost to the LA

The systems

- The team have moved over to a new IT system, Jigsaw, which is a well-respected name in the field used by other LA's and a huge improvement on reporting systems. The system used for calls is Netcall, and it allows for a 5 minute wrap-up after the end of each call.
- All calls are recorded and when a person rang the team it showed up on the system if they rang before, who they have spoken to, and what the calls were about
- The telephone system only allows for 10 people to be in the queue, after this the caller will be told that there are no operators to take the call and to call back later. There is a call back facility for those who are in the queue and all call backs are made
- Staff take calls on a rota basis, doing one half day on calls, with only one person from the team on calls at any one time. Calls are taken between 8.30am – 12noon and 1pm – 4pm. Call back is available 8.30am – 11am and 1pm – 3pm.

Properties

- Beyond Housing and North Star will offer the majority of their vacant properties via the TVHF site as they are a part of the TV Partnership

- Other Registered Providers (Thirteen etc) will offer at least 50%
- While the majority of allocations are made for Band 1, a number of new builds are offered to all Bands
- New builds cannot be adapted to meet needs due to the warranties placed on these properties

Housing Register Process

- A person who wishes to bid for a property are required to apply to be on the register, and need to provide ID, National Insurance number and proof of address. If the applicant has children living with them then proof of their identify and child benefit is also required
- Applications are made online or via telephone. If a person rings the team they are advised to complete the online registration and emailed information to assist. They also have the option to make a telephone appointment to complete the registration if they do not have internet access. There is a 1-2 week wait for telephone appointments
- If a person has a medical need they are sent a form to complete or make a telephone appointment.
- There is a 28 day target from registering to their account being activated, currently this target is not being met due to the number of people registering and the team are looking to identify how they can be more proactive. On 22 July there were 850 registrations waiting to be processed.
- If a person does not provide the documentation required on initial registration they go to the bottom of the list for processing once they have submitted this.
- The customer will receive an email to inform them that their account is live and the band they are in. The email will also include any medical requirements they may have
- If a person has housing debt, including rent arrears, any recharges, or court costs totalling £1500.00 or over, they are not eligible to join the housing register. They will be informed of their options from the team, including steps to become eligible e.g. contacting their previous landlord and agreeing a payment plan
- A person who has been evicted from a previous property may be eligible to register for the list, but it is the landlords discretion who they allow to let a property. Thirteen will not take someone who had previously been evicted.
- Officers are honest with those registering, explaining that it is not a quick process, especially if placed on bands 2/3/4.

Advert and bidding

- Adverts are open for 5 working days and list the essential criteria that those wishing to bid on a property must meet. The team checks every advert for a property before they go live on the system.
- Adverts are placed online for bids. Those who do not have access to the internet can ring up to bid on a property and as properties are added to the system at any time, are advised to ring on a Monday and Friday.
- Approximately 12 properties were advertised a week. This was much less than pre-Covid.
- Properties are let to need, not aspiration
- A customer can bid and accept offers on more than one property

- Landlords will inform those that have bid for a property if they have been successful, the nomination and lettings team only get involved if it is a new build
- Landlords can advertise properties before they are vacant, and following the property becoming vacant inspections need to take place and any repairs carried out. It can therefore take a considerable time for the successful bidder to be able to move in. The property may also be withdrawn if on inspection the repairs are going to take too long, or it is not suitable for those that have bid e.g. does not have the correct adaptations/facilities.
- It is up to the person which properties they wish to bid on, so can choose which areas they wish to bid for. If they don't like an area they won't bid on it. The exception to this is those who are registered homeless, where the housing options team will bid on properties for the individual
- If a person is offered a property and refuses it they are placed in Band 4 for 6 months before being allowed to apply for reassessment of their Band.

Other issues

- Discussed the reasons for properties being left empty, which include waiting for a house clearance if the property is empty due to death of a tenant or major repairs needed to the property before being re-let
- The demand for 4 bed properties has risen. When a person needed a 4 bed they were asked if they would consider a 3 bed with a separate room downstairs which could be used as a bedroom. This would make it quicker for the person to be housed.
- Under occupancy is not as common as it previously had been and reasons for this include the introduction of the 'bedroom tax', when many people living in housing with more bedrooms that met their need moved to smaller properties
- There has been an increase in people applying to the register from outside the area, particularly people from southern boroughs
- It was noted that 283 people are registered homeless in the borough and are on band 1. Approximately 60 – 65% will need a 1 bed property. Next biggest need is a 2 bed property, then 3 beds.

Calls

Call 1

Caller was wanting to look for properties, they were looking for a ground floor 3 bed property in the Middlesbrough area.

Officer checked the info on the account to make sure that the properties they search were suitable.

Officer informs the caller that there was a house in Hemlington but it was not saying if there was a downstairs toilet which was a need for the caller, and the caller decides not to put in for it. Officer explains that there are three other houses, but none were advertised as having a downstairs toilet. Caller asks the areas the properties were in and then decides not to put in an offer for those.

Caller asks if the houses on Cargo Lane were ready yet and informed that they were not.

Caller says will ring back at the end of the week to check what's available again.

Call 2

Caller was wanting to join Tees Valley Homefinder, officer checked whether they had access to the internet or needed help to complete the registration process. The caller requested help and was offered a telephone appointment, given an option of two dates. Caller confirmed which date and time they wanted, and the appointment was booked.

Caller explained that they were currently living outside the area and their tenancy was coming to an end, they wished to move to Teesside to be nearer family. Officer advised to also contact the Local Authority (LA) they were living in, as they were being made homeless, and the LA their family lived in, as they had family connections there. Caller informed that they had contacted their current LA who advised they couldn't help as had no family connections and not lived there long enough. The caller did not wish to live in the same LA as his family due to personal circumstances.

Caller informed that Thirteen had advised to look at private landlords and asked the officer for a list. Officer stated she would get a list of these in time for their appointment.

After the call it was explained that they don't currently have a list of private landlords as they have not been asked for this before. The officer agreed to get a list for the caller as they did not have access to the internet.

Call 3

Caller was checking that the evidence they had sent had been received.

During the conversation and checking the account it became clear that they had an appointment with the Housing Options team as they were going to be made homeless and had 4 children. The caller was currently living with a partner, who held the tenancy for the property they were being evicted from but had not included their partner on the Tees Valley Homefinder account.

The officer checked the account and could see that the documentation had been received but could not be opened, therefore advised how to retake the photograph of the evidence and resend. The officer said she would monitor the account to make sure it was attached in time for the appointment.

After the call, discussed possible options for the caller. They could take the landlord through the court system to fight the eviction, but their partner would have to do this as the tenancy was in their name and it would be costly. Alternatively, they could go into temporary accommodation until they were successful for a property, but her partner would not be able to go with them as they were not on the account.

Call 4

Caller wanted to change band. They were currently on band 4, pregnant, and living with a parent in Middlesbrough who was asking them to leave.

Officer explained that they would need to apply for homelessness in Middlesbrough, who would carry out an assessment, and gave the contact details.

Call 5

Caller had elderly disabled relative living in a Beyond Housing property in Guisborough who wanted to move to Middlesbrough to be nearer family. The local LA had assessed the relative several times and informed that they needed to register for Tees Valley Home Finder.

Officer informed that Beyond Housing would deal with their relatives account, the caller informed that they had not been advised of this. Officer double checked to see if the relative already had an account on Tees Valley Home Finder but they did not.

Caller was given Beyond Housing contact details who would be able to set up and look after the account.

Call 6

Caller wanted to change banding system, they were currently on a band 4. Explained that they were in a small 3 bedroom privately rented property with 4 children, one of which was an adult, one had behavioural problems, and one was sharing a bedroom with the caller and their partner.

Officer checked the account and informed that the callers partner and children was not on the account. The caller had sent documentation, but officer informed that their partner and children still needed to be added to the account. The officer would email over guidance on how to add people to the account and explained the documentation that was required.

After the call it was explained that the caller may be eligible for overcrowding.

Call 7

Caller wanted to know the progress of their application. Officer informed that they were waiting for information from the Occupational Therapist (OT) and had chased them that morning. Once the information had been received the caller would receive an email.

Caller asked how long it would take to receive the email and advised it would be approximately a week.

After the call the OT assessment was discussed, and officers informed that they don't receive many referrals from paediatric OT and that it would be useful to have a conversation with the team so that they understand the types of properties that are in the area and do not recommend housing that does not exist.