

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
HOUSING POLICY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 23 NOVEMBER, 2011 AT 4.00 P.M.
IN THE CIVIC CENTRE, BEECROFT ROAD, CANNOCK
PART 1

PRESENT: Councillors:

Holder, M.J. (Chairman)
Bernard, J.D. (Vice-Chairman)

Allen, F.W.C. Williams, Mrs. P.
Jones, Ms. J.L.

(Also in attendance at the invitation of the Chairman – Councillor J.T. Kraujalis)

22. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J. Beddows, M.R. Grocott and B. Williams and Chief Inspector Carl Ratcliffe.

23. Declarations of Interests of Members in Contracts and Other Matters and Restriction on Voting by Members

None declared.

24. Minutes

AGREED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 October, 2011 be approved as a correct record.

The Head of Housing advised that with regard to Minute No. 19 Members would be receiving a letter inviting them to Christmas tea with residents of the Grace Moore Court Sheltered Housing Scheme nearer the date.

25. The Provision of Affordable Housing

The Chairman advised that the Government had published a revised national Housing Strategy entitled "Laying the foundations: A Housing Strategy for England" He advised the Committee that the Strategy included a number of new policies, including changes to Right to Buy discount rates and these had significant implications for the Council. The Head of Housing confirmed that the Committee would receive a report on the Strategy and the implications for the Council in due

course.

The Chairman then welcomed Ursula Bennion, Director of Business Development, Housing Plus to the meeting. She circulated a summary from an article that had appeared in the Guardian newspaper on 22 November which outlined the key points of the National Housing Strategy. She then provided the Committee with a presentation which covered the implications for Local Authorities.

She explained that there was to be a £400m investment in new development, supporting house builders in need of development finance and a Mortgage Indemnity Scheme which offered 95% loan to value mortgages. There was to be consultation on proposals which would require Local Authorities to re-think s106 Agreements signed before April 2010 in areas where development had stalled. In terms of Social Housing it was explained that new tenancies for affordable rented properties could be offered on fixed term tenancies and new “for-profit” housing providers were to offer social housing. Right to Buy owners would be offered a discount of as much as half the value of their homes. With properties sold through RTB being matched by new homes developed for affordable rent. Local Authorities would be granted additional freedoms to allocate stock in a way they saw fit, including giving priority to working households. In particular Council’s would no longer be obligated to have open waiting lists and housing providers would be able to charge market rent from tenants earning “very high salaries”.

With regard to the private rented sector, the Government would work with Local Authorities to tackle the worst properties – but no further details were available on how this would work. Service personnel would be placed at the top of the list of all government supported home ownership schemes. Additionally, all new homes would need to meet zero carbon homes standard by 2016 and there would be a review of Building Regulations to improve energy efficiency and carbon emission standards for new buildings.

She then provided Members with information regarding the provision of Affordable Housing. Members were advised that affordable rented homes would be made available to tenants at up to a maximum of 80% of market rent but would be allocated in the same way as social housing at present. Providers would be able to offer affordable rent homes on flexible tenancies. She confirmed that the rationale for affordable rent was to provide the ability to charge higher rent on new homes and reduce the need for grant. Social Housing Providers were also allowed to change a proportion of social rent properties to affordable rent levels (at re-let stage), to reduce the need for grant. These properties would then be re-let on flexible tenancies.

She then outlined the impact of affordable rent and gave comparisons of affordable and social rent in both high and low value areas for Members information. She explained that high value properties generated a subsidy to reduce grant but it may be unaffordable to local people. No subsidy would be generated to reduce the grant for low value properties but this would be more affordable. It would impact upon the Housing Benefit bill – up to 80% market rent on new homes and re-lets.

She then outlined the key points with regard to the Affordable Homes Programme 2011-15, as follows:

- Localism was a key driver – increased importance of Local Authorities;
- Any new schemes, with or without grant, at Affordable Rent basis need Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) approval (does not apply to social rent);

- Grant only received at completion; no “start on site” tranche;
- Funding was based on “firm schemes” and “general allocations”. No firm schemes in the Cannock Chase District. Uncertainty over allocations during the next four years.

Members were then provided with information on what Cannock Chase Council could expect over the next four years. Value for Money would continue to be a key driver but the Council could “top up” the grant to convert to social rent. Any complex scheme would be at risk due to March 2015 being the deadline for completion and no grant was guaranteed after this date. There was an expectation of “slippage” elsewhere in the Midlands and nationally and there was a need to be ready to soak up funding with “deliverable schemes”.

In order to maximise the delivery of Affordable Housing in the District she outlined the following key issues for consideration:

- Consider true affordability of new homes (social versus affordable rent), plus the Local Authorities ability to “top up”
- S106 “developer led” sites – consideration to ensuring social rent is part of the requirement
- Ensure new developments “fit for the future” in terms of design and space standards (consider the impact of the Welfare Reform)
- “Deliverable schemes” to maximise any future grant availability – consider Local Authority owned sites and existing satisfactory dwelling (ESD) purchases on appropriate sites.

Following the presentation, Members were offered the opportunity to ask questions. The Chairman made reference to the development of 450 new homes in Norton Canes and asked whether consideration had been given to requiring a s106 contribution towards “social rent” rather than “affordable rent”. Louise Tandy, Principal Housing Strategy Officer confirmed that she had recently received the application to comment on and no decision had been made.

Councillor Williams asked how social rent was determined. The Head of Housing advised that there was a Government Formula for setting all rents and he would let Members have a copy for information.

Members discussed the proposed amendments to the “Right to Buy” scheme. The Head of Housing agreed to provide Members with the “Right to Buy” booklet based on the current scheme.

The Head of Housing advised Members that the Committee would be receiving a report on the Welfare Reform Bill at their meeting on 10 January 2011.

He asked the Director of Business Development, Housing Plus how the Council could take advantage of any national “slippage” and be sure they were in a position to benefit from any spare funding that was available. She advised that the Council should ensure schemes were in a position so they were ready to go (with planning permission in place) and be included in the Local Delivery Plan. Any Registered Provider would then be in a position to proceed quickly.

The Chairman, on behalf of Members, thanked the Director of Business Development, Housing Plus for attending the meeting and providing the Committee with the presentation.

AGREED:

- (A) That the presentation on the provision of Affordable Housing be noted.
- (B) That Members be provided with a copy of the Government Formula for setting rents.
- (C) That Members be provided with the “Right to Buy” booklet based on the current scheme.

26. Exclusion of the Public

RESOLVED:

That the public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting because of the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1 and 2, Part 1, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

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PART 2

27. Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour on the Council's Housing Estates

Consideration was given to the Not for Publication report of the Head of Housing (Enclosure 6.1 – 6.30 of the Official Minutes of the Council). The report aimed to review the Council's policies and actions and the role of the Police in tackling anti-social behaviour on the Council's housing estates.

Members discussed the issue of excluding certain households from the housing register. The Tenancy Services Manager advised that in exceptional circumstances, i.e. if a tenant had committed current unreasonable behaviour, they could be excluded from the housing register. The Head of Housing confirmed that there was no national tenant database between Local Housing Authorities. Local Authorities relied on housing applicant's being truthful on their application forms with regard to declaring previous tenancies and convictions.

Members then discussed the implications for introducing Police checks on all housing applicants. The Head of Housing stated that there were currently over 1800 households on the housing register with some 180 new applicants applying each month. It was explained that there would be cost and resources implications for introducing Police checks for all housing applicants. Additionally, there may be potential equality issues or complaints if, for example, a 70 year old was required to be Police checked.

Councillor Kraujalis raised concern regarding the rise in anti social behaviour incidents within his Ward. He had concern for the decent tenants and residents living in the Ward and considered that the troublemakers should be removed.

Councillor Jones made reference to 26 recent neighbour related incidents of anti social behaviour which had been reported to the Council whereby there had allegedly been no communication with the complainant following the matter being reported. However, she confirmed that these incidents had been dealt with satisfactorily once the local Member of Parliament office had become involved.

The Anti Social Behaviour Officer confirmed that the Police took action regarding any anti social behaviour complaints. Complainants were kept fully informed and any witnesses were provided with support.

The Head of Housing advised Members that the remit for the Committee was to look at anti social behaviour in relation to the Council's housing stock. He circulated an Anti Social Behaviour Action

Plan which was given to each complainant. It was explained that there was weekly/fortnightly contact with the complainant who would be asked to complete diary sheets of any incidents. The person causing the anti social behaviour was advised that they were being monitored but they were not informed of who had complained.

Members asked whether complainants were kept informed during the process and what happened once the diary sheets had been submitted. The Chairman considered that if a resident had taken the time to complain they must feel that their complaint is justified. It was important that they be kept fully informed throughout the process. The Tenancy Services Manager explained that complainants were kept informed during the process by the Estate Management Officer who was allocated to deal with the complaint. They were advised by letter if no action could be taken in a particular case.

The Anti Social Behaviour Officer considered that complainants disliked completing diary sheets and felt it may be beneficial for Officers to meet with the complainants to explain what was expected of them. The Head of Housing stated that in view of Members concerns about the diary sheet process and "feedback" to complainants the Council's procedures would be reviewed.

Councillor Kraujalis asked whether Members could be kept informed of any anti social behaviour issues affecting their Wards. The Tenancy Services Manager explained that Members could be provided with this information should they request it. It would be useful if Members were aware of the process for dealing with anti social behaviour complaints as they would then be able to advise any complainants that approached them.

The Head of Housing confirmed anti social behaviour issues occurred on virtually all of the Council's housing estates. Tenants were provided with support and advice on how to become better tenants before action was taken to seek possession. However, if this action failed legal action was taken to tackle these problem tenants. He referred Members to the legal action which had been taken during the last four years, as detailed at paragraph 4.9 of the report.

The Head of Housing then referred Members to Enclosure 6.5, paragraph 4.16 (a), (b) and (c) of the report. He explained that the "improved" toolkit had not yet been published by the Home Office and suggested that when it was received a representative from Legal Services attend the Committee to "take Members through it" from a legal perspective.

However, in the absence of this document, Members were asked to identify areas of the current housing related anti-social behaviour policy where potential changes and improvements could be made. In particular Members were asked to discuss and consider the issues detailed in paragraph 4.16 (a), (b) and (c) of the report.

Arising from the discussions Members raised the issue of housing younger households next to older people. The Head of Housing explained that the Council operated a choice based lettings scheme. Housing applicant's had a choice where they wished to be housed provided they were eligible for the property type. They could not be discriminated against because of their age or for any other reason. However, he advised that that there were a small number of flats which had been designated as "mature blocks" where allocations were restricted to households aged over 40.

Members were advised that Police checks, where necessary, were currently done once a housing offer had been made. There were a number of implications for police checking all housing applicants and it was agreed that further work be undertaken having particular regard to

timescales and costing and this be reported to the meeting in January.

The Head of Housing advised that he expected the Department for Communities and Local Government to issue further guidance in respect of Fixed Term tenancies and it would be more appropriate to discuss this issue at the meeting in March rather than in January as detailed in the Committee's Work Programme.

Members were advised that Local Lettings Policies (LLP's) were reported to Cabinet prior to implementation. LLP's enable Local Authorities to let properties to particular categories of household to ensure sustainable communities. LLP's were currently only used on new housing schemes but consideration could be given to extending these to existing estates. Further information regarding the use of LLP's would be submitted to the meeting in March.

It was then AGREED:

That the Committee, having reviewed the Council's housing related anti-social behaviour policies and actions, considered that the following potential changes and improvements could be made and requested:

- (A) That a further report be submitted to the meeting on 10 January 2012 with regard to introducing "Police Checks" for all housing applicants prior to the allocation of accommodation.
- (B) That the procedures regarding the use of diary sheets and the provision of "feedback" to complainants be reviewed to ensure all complainants are fully aware of the action which is being taken by the Council.
- (C) That the revised toolkit of powers to tackle anti-social behaviour be considered by the Committee following its publication by the Home Office.
- (D) That the use of Fixed Term tenancies for some or all new applicants be considered at the meeting on 20 March 2012.
- (E) That further information on the use of Local Lettings Policies be submitted to the meeting on 20 March 2012.

CHAIRMAN

(The meeting closed at 6.20p.m.)