

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
HOUSING POLICY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
TUESDAY 18 MARCH, 2014 AT 4.00 P.M.
IN THE CIVIC CENTRE, BEECROFT ROAD, CANNOCK

PART 1

PRESENT: Councillors:

Kraujalis, J.T. (Chairman)

Dudson, A.
Molineux, G.N.

Toth, J.

By invitation: Councillor Mrs. M. A. Davies, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Leader

26. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Allt, Mrs. A; Grice, Mrs. D; Bernard, Mrs. A and Allen, F

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

No other declarations of interests were made in addition to those already confirmed by Members in the Register of Members' Interests.

28. Minutes

An update was received regarding the report on Photovoltaic Solar Panels that it would be going to Cabinet on 20 March 2014.

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 January, 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed.

29. Update of the Housing Implications of Welfare Reform

Consideration was given to the Head of Housing and Waste Management Report on the Housing Implications of Welfare Reform (Item 4.1 – 4.14).

The Head of Housing and Waste Management reported that there were three elements within the Welfare Reform that had a significant impact on the Housing Service.

- Social Sector Size Criteria
- Overall benefit cap

- Universal Credit

The impact from the social sector size criteria has not been as significant on the housing service as first forecast. In total 390 tenants had been affected with 320 tenants under occupying by one bedroom and 70 tenants by two bedrooms. This meant that the tenants benefits reduced which in effect meant that they had to find the surplus rent; £13.96 for under occupancy by one bedroom and £21.72 for under occupancy by two or more bedrooms.

There are a substantial number of tenants who wish to remain in their current property with a smaller proportion who want to downsize to a smaller property. From the report it can be seen that the just under half of the tenants affected have a clear rent account with slightly over half of the tenants having some level of arrears e.g. late payment or continuously missed payments. There has been a decrease in the number of rent arrears.

The Social Sector Size Criteria has reduced the demand for 3 bed houses due to the fact that the people on benefit do not meet the criteria imposed. The council housing stock contains fewer 2 bed houses than 3 bed houses which has put more of a strain on resources. This has resulted in difficulties in letting a small number of 3 bed properties on certain estates. It is proposed that this issue is addressed as part of a comprehensive review in September 2014 but during the interim period Cabinet on 20 March are being asked to consider interim measures.

The impact of the benefit cap has also not been significant on the housing service to the lower rents and housing benefit being the major element of a benefit claim being the big contributory factors in the Cannock area. It is estimated that at any one time there would be between 5 to 10 tenants affected by the benefit cap due to change in household situations resulting in benefit payments dipping above or below the cap.

It is understood that new universal credit will not be introduced to Cannock till 2016. There are a number of pilot areas that are trialling the universal credit and there are concessions emerging.

Members commented that it was a credit to the tenants paying their rents and were surprised how well Cannock Chase had fared. However, there was concern that people may be living off their savings and that the real impact could be felt in a few years time. Members were pleased that there had not been a significant impact on the Council's housing service.

Members questioned whether any research had been conducted to see if people were affording the increase in payments to the detriment of paying other bills including buying food. The officer commented that there was no research at the moment but this area would continue to be monitored.

RESOLVED:

The report was noted

30. Review of Property Conditions in the Private Sector

Consideration was given to the Head of Environmental Health on the report on the Review of Property Conditions in the Private Sector (Item 5.1-5.11).

The Council receive on average 500 request for service regarding private sector housing. Many of the enquiries are dealt with through advice from officers and a small percentage result in a notice under the Housing Act or Environmental Act eg. 15-30 enquiries.

However, some of the enquiries result in a Retaliatory Eviction or just a threat of this. These do not result in many evictions due to the legislation that has to be followed by serving a section 21 and then pursuing the tenant through court. The reason that it is called a retaliatory eviction is due to the fact that this is normally threatened after the tenant has sought advice from the council regarding their tenancy and the landlord. Many tenants withdraw their complaint about the landlord once threatened with eviction.

Cannock Chase Council advocate the use of a potential Rent Repayment Order for Landlords who either evict unlawfully or rent a property out that contains a serious hazard. However, the sanctions should be realistic and act as a deterrent to the Landlord. In addition there should be potential for a fixed penalty to be served on the Landlord for failure to obtain the relevant gas/electrical safety certificates and install smoke carbon monoxide detectors.

Members agreed that there should be tougher sanctions for the threat of Retaliatory Eviction. Officers explained that they work very closely with the tenant and the landlord to try to resolve any issues where possible.

Members queried the number of requests for service and what proportion related to the Private Sector. The Officer responded that 25% of the 500 service requests were related to difficulties with a landlord.

Members asked how many complaints had been received regarding asbestos. The Officer replies that there had been very few with approximately 3-4 in the last few years.

RESOLVED:

The report was noted

31. Promoting Mobility through Mutual Exchanges

Consideration was given to the Report of the Head of Housing and Waste Management (Item 6.1-6.9).

The DCLG have issued a guidance note on promoting mobility through mutual exchange and has drawn on the experience of 12 Local Authority pilots who tested the innovative and cost effective ways of supporting mobility through

mutual exchange. From this Cannock Chase District Council was able to benchmark current policies and procedures for mutual exchange against the seven key steps that can be used.

Cannock Chase District Council scores well against six of the seven steps.

The only step against which the Council did not score well is giving financial incentives to tenants. It is more cost effective if a mutual exchange takes place (approximately costing £1,000) with a transfer being more expensive (approximately costing £3,000). However, if the Council were to offer a financial incentive for people to move then it would need to be a significant sum of money (approximately £500).

This may increase mutual exchange rates but because the Council has already undertaken 54 exchanges this municipal year all of these would need to be paid £500 which would cost the Council £27,000. If the Council were to save money on this procedure then a further 14 mutual exchanges would need to take place. The Council could end up paying people to move with the incentive who would have moved anyway. It does not seem to be the financial aspect of a mutual exchange taking place but the availability of suitable properties.

RESOLVED:

The report was noted.

32. Review of Festival Courts Homelessness Flats

Consideration was given to the Report of the Head of Housing and Waste Management (Item 7.1-7.6).

There are two furnished flats which has reduced the number of families requiring bed and breakfast accommodation. From April 2012 – February 2013 there were fourteen families in bed and breakfast and during April 2013 to February 2014 there were 9 families requiring bed and breakfast accommodation with only 4 families staying longer than six weeks.

At the present time there are no families in bed and breakfast accommodation. With the reduction in the need for bed and breakfast accommodation there is not need for any further homelessness flats to be provided. However, this situation is fluid and will be kept under review.

Members were pleased with the progress report. They enquired why out of the 140 people applied 135 were classed as homeless why were the remaining 5 not classed this way. The Officer explained that these people had not met the homelessness criteria.

RESOLVED:

The report was noted.

33. Moss Road Estate Reema Flats Redevelopment Scheme – Project Update

The Chairman gave a verbal update on the Moss Road Estate Reema Flats Redevelopment Scheme – Project Update (Item8.1)

The Committee was advised that Keepmoat Homes Ltd had been selected as the Councils development partner for the scheme. The proposed scheme would promote 142 houses including 65 council houses for rent and 20 houses for shared ownership. The remaining houses would be for open market sale.

Members welcomed this good news and enquired when the work would be started. The Head of Housing and Waste Management stated that it was expected that the work would commence in the autumn.

RESOLVED

The report was noted.

34. Review of Work Programme – 2013-14 Municipal Year

Consideration was given to the Housing PDC Work Programme for 2013-14 (Item 9.1).

RESOLVED:

That the updated Housing PDC Work Programme for 2013-14 be noted.

The meeting closed at 4.50pm

CHAIRMAN