

SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 3 April 2012 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Davison (Chairman)
Cllr. Brown (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Abraham, Ball, Butler, Edwards-Winser, Mrs. George, Hogarth, Horwood, Mrs. Parkin, Pett, Piper, Raikes, Scholey, Towell and Walshe

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs. Mrs. Ayres and Firth

Cllrs. Mrs. Clark and Ramsay were also present

38. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Services Select Committee held on 31 January 2012 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

Cllr. Mrs. George declared a personal interest in that she worked closely with Deborah White from West Kent Housing Association.

Cllr. Mrs. Parkin declared a personal interest in matters relating to housing and benefits as she had relatives in both social housing and on benefits.

40. FORMAL RESPONSE FROM THE CABINET FOLLOWING MATTERS REFERRED BY THE COMMITTEE AND/OR REQUESTS FROM THE PERFORMANCE AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE (PLEASE REFER TO THE MINUTES AS INDICATED):

(a) Performance Monitoring (Referral from Performance and Governance Committee – 13 March 2012)

Members noted that it had not been possible to gather all of the information required for consideration at the meeting, but that it had been added to the work plan for June 2012, and would be reported along with the Human Resources Update report.

41. ACTIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

An amended version of the report was tabled as the printed copy had omitted Action 5.

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

With reference to financial contributions received in lieu of affordable housing, a Member queried whether there were any plans to spend the money yet and any plans to build more housing. In response, the Head of Housing and Communications advised that they had been working closely with the Planning Policy unit and that the Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Documents provided advice and guidance on a range of approaches, standards and mechanisms required to deliver a range of affordable housing to meet local needs which included building. The Planning Policy Manager reported that there was no scheme at the moment which stated where the money should be allocated. A Member advised that the Finance Advisory Board had on their Work Plan to look at the management of the fund and how the money was allocated.

All of the remaining actions from the previous meeting were noted.

42. IN DEPTH SCRUTINY OF UNDER-OCCUPATION OF SOCIAL HOUSING

Chairman's' Introduction

The Chairman welcomed the Panel to the meeting, and explained the questioning process he wished to follow.

Questions to the Panel (as tabled)

Members asked the Panel of speakers the pre-arranged questions and the following responses were received:

How can Planners help to improve down sizing of under occupied Social Housing?

(Alan Dyer – Planning Services Manager, Sevenoaks District Council)

There were two ways this could be achieved. Firstly by granting permission for more small dwellings to increase the stock of smaller dwellings that were available for tenants of larger properties to move into. Policy SP5 of the Core Strategy stated that the Council “will seek the inclusion of small units (less than three bedrooms) in new development schemes in suitable locations to increase the proportion of smaller units in the District housing stock.” Secondly, by using affordable housing financial contributions collected under Policy SP3 of the Core Strategy to support down sizing initiatives. The Core Strategy stated that financial contributions may be used to support initiatives to reduce under occupation of family housing in the social rented sector. The Affordable Housing SPD included supporting initiatives to make better use of the existing housing stock as one of five ways in which funds collected under the policy can be used. Those five ways were: Provision of new affordable housing in the District via a Registered Provider of social housing (including adding to provision on development sites, new stand alone schemes and existing property purchase); Initiatives to make better use of the existing stock (including tackling under occupation and fuel poverty where it enabled better

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

use to be made of the stock); Managing future needs for affordable housing, including homelessness prevention and benefit advisory services; Assisting those in housing need to access low cost home ownership; and Supporting the development of rural exception sites to meet rural housing

When asked the difference between 'social' and 'affordable' housing, the Planning Policy Manager responded that for planning purposes the definition of affordable housing was 'housing for people who cannot afford to buy or rent on the open market.' Social housing is one type of affordable housing but the definition also includes shared ownership. Low cost market housing does not count as affordable.

How many tenants do you assist to move from under occupied housing per annum, under the "Small is Beautiful" scheme?

(Deborah White – Housing and Communities Director, West Kent Housing Association)

The figure varied depending on demand and availability of suitable vacancies but was around eleven to twelve cases a year between 2009 and 2011 with a budget of £20,000 which included some funding from SDC. It would be possible to increase this if there a surge in demand. WKHA had moved six cases from a 3 bed to a 1 bed, three from a 2 bed to a 1 bed and one from a 6 bed to a three bed. The policy had changed in 2010 increasing the offer so expenditure was more appropriate though one less case was assisted. Also more people were downsizing from 3 beds to 1 bed. However the main issue was availability of suitable 1/2 bed properties, and it remained a challenge to negotiate, convince and support people to move.

In response to a further question, she replied that it was eleven/twelve cases assisted out of just under 4000 properties in the district but of course not all of those were under occupied. Under occupation points were provided through the Allocation policy and the new banding system would give some priority in the new Allocation policy which was currently being revised.

What percentage of the stock do Moat tenants currently under occupy in this district?

(Sam Jacobs – Housing Options Manager, MOAT)

The short answer was 26% though there was a range of under occupancy from 4 beds down.

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

In your opinion, do you think in the older people client group, that single or couples would rather have 2 bedrooms when downsizing?, if so for what reasons?

(Brian Horton – Strategic Housing Advisor, Kent County Council)

The answer was yes for various reasons. In his past experience as the Chief Executive of a Housing Association and Head of Housing at Thanet District Council before his position at Kent County Council, both singles and couples aspired to 2 bed properties. Most people wanted room for relatives to stay, or had health issues that required sleeping in separate bedrooms, room for overnight carers, space for hobbies/study and a strong desire to have space to keep items collected over a lifetime. He stated that aspirations had changed and downsizing for older people was different to how it had been in the past. Accommodation built in the 1960s/70s had shared facilities but now there were different expectations. If one were to invest capital it needed to be in the provision of homes people today would aspire to live in, in the future.

Which tenants will be affected by the welfare reform?

(Liz Crockford – Housing Enabling Officer, Sevenoaks District Council)

The Welfare Reforms would affect every tenant in receipt of benefits unless they were retired. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had carried out an impact assessment and on average, for every 1 bedroom which was under occupied, tenants would lose 14% of their housing benefit entitlement, every 2 bed under occupied – 25%. Within the South East 50,000 socially rented households would be affected. 35.55 % were under occupied under the DWP definition. The definition used was in the form of a matrix, as to who was suitable to have own bedroom and who needed to share. For example the age limit for children of different sexes to share a room was ten years old. There had recently been a lot of publicity with regards to those families who fostered, would not be able to keep a spare room. Nor did it account for custody visits of children from other relationships. Members queried whether it would affect disabled children who perhaps needed their own room. In response she advised that there were some exceptions such as the categories that fell under benefit caps or Personal Independent payments. It was not clear at the moment whether there would be guidance on room size.

What Kent wide schemes are in place to reduce under occupation?

(Lisa Webb – Housing Initiatives Officer, Sevenoaks District Council)

The 'Perfect Fit' scheme operated across a number of Local Authorities and Housing Associations in South East London, including two Local Authority areas in the Kent borders (Bromley and Bexley). It had been originally from CLG funding and was now funded by a contribution fee. The scheme worked well, providing hand-holding services and financial incentives such as paying for removal costs, disconnections/reconnections of white goods and

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

redirection of post etc. It was geared to getting people out of London, and it would be a good idea for this district to implement something similar.

Can the synergy between Planning and Housing be improved to reduce under occupation in the social sector?

(Alan Dyer – Planning Service Manager, Sevenoaks District Council)

Officers were always looking to improve, but in general the departments worked well together. For example at the moment they were working closely on commissioning research on housing issues relevant to Planning, including the Strategic Housing Market Assessment which provided the evidence of the scale of under occupation. Both teams had worked closely on the production of the affordable housing section in the Core Strategy and the Affordable Housing SPD, and Planning Policy had also contributed where relevant to the development of the Housing Strategy.

The issue of under occupation cut across many areas and by working together they had identified new opportunities to raise financial contributions from development sites too small to fund on-site affordable housing. Moving forward from policy development to implementation the teams were looking at options with regards to allocating funds to ensure the money was used appropriately. There was good cooperation but they were always looking to improve.

At the end of March 2012 contributions had been collected amounting to £206,144. The first of these had been received on 16 January 2012, nothing had been received up until then, and commitment to any initiatives had been avoided until there was money in the bank. Where legal agreements were currently in place there was a pledged amount of an additional £329, 516, and there were a number of other schemes where negotiations were taking place to finalise contribution amounts. This now meant that there was a sum, that would build up with the potential to make significant contributions subject to prioritisation.

In your opinion, what are the main solutions to reducing under occupation in West Kent Housing Association's stock?

(Deborah White – Housing and Communities Director, West Kent Housing Association)

A Resettlement Service had now been introduced for older people similar to the Perfect Fit scheme, for whom the thought of moving was very difficult. It was hoped that this would be expanded to everyone who was down-sizing, during the year. One way was to have more suitable properties that people would want to move to, as demonstrated by the Bonney Way redevelopment.

The welfare reforms would have an impact, but again it would be a question of having suitable properties, and it would not encourage the elderly or widows.

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

Encouraging mutual exchange, and having more bungalows would help but this was not achievable due to the larger footprint and lack of land available in the district. There was no one solution.

In response to a Members question that downsizing was proven more successful if carried out in your 60s rather than your 80s, and whether age was considered, she responded that they tried to speak to all those 55+ and encourage them to move, as yes it was more problematical if left too late. This had been backed by research.

In your opinion, what are the main solutions to reducing under occupation in the Moat stock?

(Sam Jacobs – Housing Options Manager, MOAT)

The incentive scheme Perfect Fit, part funded an officer and they had been trying to team up with Local Authorities to see if they could provide assistance. They had launched their own transfer list and had neighbourhood response teams. They were looking to fund an officer to work jointly and would be willing to help fund one.

Alan Dyer, Planning Policy Manager, confirmed in response to the Chairman, that Social Housing contributions could be used to fund an Officer as long as it fell within the remit of the activities covered.

How else could Kent County Council support us?

(Brian Horton – Strategic Housing Advisor, Kent County Council)

KCC worked with fourteen local authorities in Kent to support housing and were willing to work jointly. An Older Persons Accommodation Protocol, was currently being worked on as part of the Kent Housing Group and Joint Policy and Planning Board, and they were looking at what could be done with partners. They worked in Families and Social Care to look at extra care accommodation strategy. At the moment they were also looking at using County Council owned land, and he encouraged the Council to look at any owned assets such as garages in order to build bungalows. If mixed accommodation were available within communities people, could move with out changing the dynamics of that community. Mr Horton praised the Council for the pragmatic and innovative move with regards to the contributions, and he felt it was a unique opportunity to invest in some practical measures.

What type of housing do we need to build to improve down -sizing options?

(Liz Crockford – Housing Enabling Officer, Sevenoaks District Council)

A short answer would be bungalows. However there were two distinct client groups, those that needed encouragement to move such as older people, and

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

the forced movers i.e. those affected by the Welfare Reform Act. Work undertaken through the Kent-wide study into older persons housing had shown good quality and spacious 1/2-bed units, close to facilities and local amenities and safe such as Rockdale. Properties that were wheelchair adapted; lifetime homes; single-storey and/or lifts - homes that can sustain tenancies through all life stages.

One of the issues facing those forced to move because of the welfare reforms, would be that if there was not suitable housing stock locally they would be expected to look elsewhere. People may choose to take in lodgers to help with the shortfall but it may have repercussions on their entitlements.

Can we bid for any funding to reduce Under occupation in the social sector of this district?

(Lisa Webb – Housing Initiatives Officer, Sevenoaks District Council)

Although this was a Government objective, there did not appear to be any funding available at the moment. The only current source available for the Council was the s.106 planning gains. There had been a Kent wide bid to the Innovation Fund to fund an officer, but this had not progressed and had been unsuccessful. Although other elements of the bid were successful such as developing a section of the Kent Home choice website specifically for under occupation/downsizing.

In response to a question, Deborah White reported that it was difficult for the Housing Association to make charitable bids as it had a healthy balance sheet, however they did receive some charitable funding through West Kent Extra.

Can Planning gains be used to supplement the West Kent HA "Small is Beautiful" scheme?

Can Planning gains be used to match fund, with say two Housing Associations, a dedicated Under Occupation Support Officer?

(Alan Dyer – Planning Service Manager, Sevenoaks District Council)

Yes, provided they fell within the categories listed in the Affordable Housing SPD. The management of allocation of funding needed further discussion. If a legitimate scheme fell within the remit then it would be entitled to funding. He did not see that it would be necessary to evaluate every application but if something was funded that did not fall within the relevant categories the contracted party could request their money back.

What percentage of the total stock, do West Kent HA tenants under occupy?

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

(Deborah White – Housing and Communities Director, West Kent Housing Association)

It was estimated that 27% of tenants were under-occupying their home. They were allowing some older people to move into 2 bed properties in order to free up 3/4 bed properties. Part of the problem was keeping up with family changes, children returning after a relationship breakdown, consequences of the current economic climate/housing market etc. People were not obliged to inform them of a change in family circumstances, and they could only visit around 20% of households per annum so information gathering was therefore slow. Visits were cold call.

In response to a question as to whether short hold tenancies would solve this problem, she replied that it could, however it could only be applied to new tenants as existing tenants were protected. There was also a lack of suitable homes for people to move to.

Chairman's Closing Comments

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee, thanked the Panel for attending. He advised that written answers from Mr. John Clark Housing Services Manager, Places for People, who had not been able to attend, had been tabled and that the written responses from the Panel members would be made available in the Member's Room. He requested that if any Members had any supplementary questions they would like the Panel members to answer, that they should forward them to the Housing Policy Manager. He would be drawing up a draft Under Occupation Action Plan for the working group to consider before bring it to the Committee for consideration in June 2012. Once the Committee had agreed the action plan it would be referred, with recommendations, to Cabinet.

8.15pm The Committee adjourned for a comfort break.

8.22pm The Committee reconvened.

43. UNIVERSAL CREDIT INDEPTH SCRUTINY - UPDATE

In addition to the report presented by the Group Manager – Financial Services, the Committee received a presentation from the Vice Chairman of the Universal Credit Working Group. He reported that since the last meeting of the Committee they had appointed Cllr. Firth as Chairman and himself as Vice Chairman and had already held a number of meetings. He reported that the system would be rolled out from 1 April 2013, which only left a year to prepare. It was being brought in to address inadequacies in the current benefits system which appeared to penalise people for working and causing them to be better off by remaining on benefits. There were so many different benefits that could be claimed, and not everyone knew what they were entitled to and didn't always know how any wages may affect those benefits. However Universal Credit would automatically adjust this. There were potential problems though. Under the new system only the Department for

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

Work and Pensions (DWP) would administer the Universal Credit, but the Council would be responsible for the Council Tax Discount. The Working Group had received a presentation from the Benefits Manager which the representative attending from the DWP had asked to take away with him, so it appeared the Council's Officers were very clued up. Another potential problem was the 'digital by default' expectation that all applications would be carried out online. The target was 80%. The group had made enquiries as to whether the Job Centre would provide a worker in Edenbridge or Swanley to help people apply.

Universal Credit would be paid monthly in arrears, the idea was to make it like a salary. This would also have an impact, as many people would be used to budgeting fortnightly. There would also be penalties for under occupation, and tenants would receive the money for their rent directly with them responsible for paying the landlord which would be another learning curve for many people that could potentially cause some issues. A possible consequence would be people falling into arrears and as the Council was responsible for emergency accommodation this could have a cost impact. In response to a question asking whether many had bank accounts, he responded that 97-98% of those in receipt of unemployment benefit had bank accounts, but yes there was the issue of those without. Another potential issue was the fact that the money would only be paid to one individual within the household, giving one person ultimate power to administer the benefits within the household and the potential issues that could arise from that.

In response to a question, he replied that the DWP had not finalised a lot of the finer detail, but this was primary legislation and much of what he was reporting was unchangeable. There was also a potential issue of staffing within the Revenues and Benefits section. There would be no role for some of them once the DWP took over administration of the Universal Credit system. An issue the Council would have to face was how to use or retain staff, whether it would be possible to relocate them, how to keep enough staff in place during the transitions when they knew there would not be a job for them at the end of the process. The transition period was from 2013 to 2017.

The Director of Corporate Resources and Deputy Chief Executive reported that many staff already realised that they needed to make different career choices and some were leaving the organisation. With no prospects it would be even harder to recruit more staff and there was also the training issue, or cost implications of agency staff, and therefore this was already having a significant impact on the service provided. The DWP had made it clear early on that they would not consider TUPE arrangements.

A connected issue was the Council Tax Support Localisation policy which was a massive issue affecting all authorities. In essence the Government was taking a top slice of 10% from funding. There would be protected groups, including the elderly which made up 52% of claimants. Therefore the remainder would bear a reduction in support of about 30%.

Services Select Committee - Tuesday, 3 April 2012

It was agreed that there were a lot of unanswered questions but that the Council seemed to be ahead of the game in the fact that they were asking them. It was hoped that the Council would be able to participate in a pilot scheme.

The Chairman thanked Cllr. Horwood for an excellent presentation and for the excellent work the Working Group had carried out so far.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

44. FUTURE BUSINESS, THE WORK PLAN 2011/12 (ATTACHED) AND THE FORWARD PLAN.

Members noted the Work Plan. It was agreed that the Human Resources Update would be combined with the Performance Monitoring report on sickness absence and reported to the meeting in June 2012.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 9.07 pm

Chairman