

Housing Sub Committee

Monday, 11 October 2021

Present: Councillor A Newman (Chair)
Councillors L Darke, John Hunter, A Percy, J Walker,
E Parker-Leonard, M Green, J Mole, S Phillips and
Westwater

Apologies: Councillors M Thirlaway and K Barrie

HO11/21 Appointment of Substitute Members

There were no substitutes reported.

HO12/21 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest reported.

HO13/21 Minutes

Agreed that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 September 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

HO14/21 Lettings Policy Review

The sub-committee received a report in relation to the review of the Lettings Policy. The report provided an overview of the Lettings Policy, the relevant legislation and the context for the policy review. The current policy was appended to the report.

Members were informed that, as a social landlord, North Tyneside Council had to comply with relevant legislation. Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 related to lettings. North Tyneside's Council Lettings Policy was last reviewed in 2019. Best practice identified that the policy should be reviewed on a 2 yearly basis to ensure it remains fit for purpose and account for any changes in the sector. It was for this reason the policy was being reviewed.

It was highlighted that all housing applications were assessed in accordance with the Lettings Policy in order to confirm eligibility and identify priority. Empty homes in the Borough were also let via the policy. It was the Authority's aim to advertise as many homes as possible via Tyne and Wear Homes, a choice-based lettings system. Customers were given the opportunity to review available homes and express an interest in homes that match their needs and preferences. It was noted that in some circumstances the Authority would make a direct offer to a customer, which meant that a home would be allocated without advertising. The majority of direct lets occurred in relation to homeless applicants (where full duty had been accepted) or high-risk applicants in need of an urgent move.

The sub-committee was informed that the Lettings Policy included information relating to: applying for a home; eligibility to join the scheme; assessment criteria; bidding and shortlisting process and making offers of accommodation.

Members were informed of the key areas that had been considered as part of the review. These included:

- Domestic Abuse Act 2021 – the policy had been reviewed in light of the new legislation. Officers were satisfied that the current policy met the requirements to provide priority for rehousing.
- Rent Arrears – it was felt that the current policy offered a firm but fair approach to arrears, which enabled individual circumstances to be assessed, both in terms of housing need and suitability to be a tenant.
- Armed Forces – guidance was issued in 2020 to ‘Improve Access to Social Housing for Members of the Armed Forces’. This included additional requirements such as disregarding lump sum payments from Ministry of Defence when completing a financial assessment and awarding priority on more than one occasion within 5 years of leaving service.

Following consultation with Housing sub-committee, the review of the Lettings Policy would be referred to Legal Services to confirm wider consultation requirements. It was noted that the current policy was seen to be working well, positive recognition had been received from other organisations and nothing significant had been raised by officers, tenants, Members or other stakeholders. It was anticipated that the updated policy would be implemented for April 2022.

A member of the committee commented that sometimes the wording in the policy could be difficult to interpret and apply to the banding. It was highlighted that vulnerable people can get stressed filling out forms. It was explained that the wording of the policy was not intended to be mis-leading or complicated, rather it allowed room for discretion when considering cases on an individual basis. Procedural documents for use by officers provided additional information and guidance for assessing banding placement. It was noted that the review of the policy had identified some minor wording issues but that the amendments did not change the overall meaning of the policy.

Members discussed the coordination of lettings across Tyne and Wear. It was asked if those living close to the border would qualify for housing in North Tyneside. It was explained that all housing in North Tyneside was in high demand and that the Lettings Policy aimed to firstly meet the needs of those in the Borough. Local connection was taken into account, i.e. where family networks are located, but those living outside of the North Tyneside borders may have a lower priority compared with the priority they would have within the local authority area in which they already lived.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and for the information provided.

It was **agreed** to note the report.

