

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Access to Housing: Working Group

Notes of Meeting held on

28 October 2009

Present: Cllr S Watson and Cllr M Dixon

Also in attendance: Nigel Cummings (Scrutiny Officer), Pauline Blyth (Head of Business Support and Workforce Development), Peter Smith (Housing Advice Manager)

Members met with officers from the Health, Housing and Adult Services Directorate to discuss issues around housing allocations within the city as part of the evidence gathering for the policy review. The main points from this discussion were as follows:

- There has been confusion around access to accommodation and duplication in the city due to the number of application forms available to home seekers.
- Currently the councils own housing register provides nominations to housing associations and this would be from the top of the list.
- True Voids are properties that are vacated entirely either through the existing tenant moving, dying, being evicted or abandoning the property.
- The arguments around nominations to social housing providers would disappear through a Choice Based Lettings Scheme.
- By everyone working closer together on the same housing waiting list.
- There has been a dramatic change in the social housing landscape over the last few years and now difficult to let properties are in demand.
- Sunderland City Council currently has approximately 2,000 people on its own waiting list. It is important to note that most of these will also be on other housing provider lists in order to maximise chances.
- The ultimate aim is to have all properties advertised in the same way, with one application form for people to complete.
- In the North East it appears that everyone is waiting for 1 Local Authority to take the lead and develop this further.

- Important to 'mythbust' around allocations as there are a lot of misconceptions and people need to be kept up-to-date and informed around housing issues.
- Priority Banding needs to be clear and people need to understand this fully.
- Also need to look at eliminating jargon.
- Signposting is important and the council has worked with a number of agencies to improve this through training, literature, internet etc.
- The website is now more customer orientated and this is important as some people prefer to research housing for themselves.
- It is also important that advice given is consistent across the city.
- Also need to be mindful that something that may work and be successful in one area may not always be successful in another area. It is important that strategies and initiatives are tailored to suit the area and its particular profile.
- Look at the possibility of providing incentives for people to move.
- There is a perception around Excellent Customer Status that this gives you more chance of being housed. In fact only around 15% of people are housed through this scheme and it is not applied to every property.
- The housing team rely on good intelligence particularly in reducing homelessness and members have a crucial role to play as they can provide excellent intelligence in their frontline councillor role.
- There is still confusion around Gentoo and Sunderland City Council many people still see Gentoo as part of the council.