

**At a meeting of the SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on TUESDAY, 14<sup>th</sup> JUNE, 2011 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor S. Watson in the Chair

Councillors Errington, Foster, Kay, McClennan and Rolph

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor Maddison

**Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee held on 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2011**

Mr. Alan Caddick, Head of Housing, referred to page 3 of the minutes regarding the information around Council mortgages and the BME community and advised that he had circulated a handout to Members on Shariah Mortgages which are products that comply with Islamic religious law.

Ms. Joanne Stewart, Governance Support Officer, also apologised to Councillor McClennan as she had referred to her throughout the minutes as Councillor MacKnight, and it was:-

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2011 be confirmed as a correct record, subject to the amendment of Councillor MacKnight being changed to Councillor McClennan throughout.

**Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

**Annual Work Programme and Policy Review 2011-12**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) asking Members to determine the Annual Work Programme for the Committee during the 2011-12 municipal year, including the main theme for a detailed policy review.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Helen Lancaster, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report advising that the Scrutiny Committee were responsible for setting its own work programme within its remit to consider issues relating to sustainability and key city projects, and maintain an overview of each of the Sunderland Partnership's cross cutting priorities. The draft work programme for the year was an appendix to the report and would be populated with items agreed by Members and amended during the year as required.

With regards to the policy review topic for the year, Ms. Lancaster advised that the following topics had been selected as a shortlist following discussions that had been held between Members, Officers and Partners at the Annual Scrutiny Conference on 19 May, 2011:-

- Building a Sustainable and Lasting Legacy in Sport and Physical Activity;
- Sunderland's Cultural Strategy;
- Volunteering Strategy; and
- The Private Rented Sector.

Discussions ensued between Members and Officers around the benefits of each of the short listed topics and whether each of the topics were being undertaken by reviews already planned within the Council and its Directorates as it was paramount that the Committee did not duplicate work that was already to be carried out. It was suggested that Building a Sustainable and Lasting Legacy in Sport and Physical Activity could be the main policy review topic with a smaller review being undertaken on the Private Rented Sector as it had been a topic of considerable interest that had been discussed thoroughly at the Annual Scrutiny Conference.

Councillor Watson thanked all Members and Officers for their input, and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that:-

- the draft Annual Work Programme for 2011-12 be received and agreed; and
- Building a Sustainable and Lasting Legacy in Sport and Physical Activity be the topic of the main review and a smaller review be carried out on the Private Rented Sector.

## **Housing Allocations Policy**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) following a request from the Committee for further information on the Housing Allocations Policy.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Alan Caddick, Head of Housing and Mr. Peter Smith, Housing Advice Manager, gave a presentation to the Committee that recapped on the previous sessions that had been held and the key issues raised by Members, as well as the Scrutiny Review Recommendations that had been made in 2010 and the feedback from meeting with the registered providers. Mr. Caddick also went on to outline the main

elements of the new policy and how the banding system was intended to work. He also explained the other elements for consideration by the Committee such as the Strategic Tenancy policies and affordable rents and flexible tenancies which were to be introduced.

Councillor Errington thanked the Officers and service for the work that had been and was continuing to be carried out and in response to a question from him regarding publicising, Mr. Caddick advised that they would be using a range of ways to support people through the new allocations policy. It was important Members understood what was happening also so they could advise constituents when asked for help and advice.

With regards to under occupancy in the city and houses being left vacant by gentoo and landlords, Mr. Caddick informed the Committee that a Vacancy Chain Analysis had recently been undertaken for those taking up Extra Care and that he would circulate this to the Committee in due course. He also stated the need to look at the issue to improve it and better communicate with Members so they were always up to date with relevant information. There was a need to manage to situation in a sympathetic manner whilst having viable options to deal with issues as they arose.

Councillor Foster commented that he understood gentoo were moving away from the Choice Based Lettings Scheme and was advised that the scheme was adapting toward a new policy.

Councillor Foster also wished to congratulate the service on the work carried out to date and with regards to a query regarding the gentoo waiting list for homes was informed that it was not the best indicator of people waiting for homes. Mr. Caddick advised that as part of the regeneration works being carried out gentoo had contacted everyone on the list to confirm their status. The waiting list for houses needed to be current and they were looking at how best to manage the information in the future. Mr. Caddick explained that the service needed to make sure they more fully understood individual's issues in the future and that they were taken into account when appropriate in placing them on a waiting list or allocating properties.

Councillor Howe asked if there was a time limit for individuals to respond to the letter or if it would simply be the case that if they did not respond they would be removed from the waiting list and was advised that they would be given ample time to respond which would give the service the opportunity to review current lists and have them ready and available for other agencies and partners should they be required.

Councillor McClennan referred to hostels and asked if they would be included and if not, why not and was advised that there was the need to gather further information about the people using hostels as most individuals would be considered as homeless and would need to be considered as part of the new allocations policy. He also stated that a report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee which would cover this issue.

In response to a further query from Councillor McClennan, Mr. Caddick advised that at a sub-regional level each Local Authority had similar issues, regarding protecting their own residents, and ensuring that there was the need to meet the requirements of residents in the city so that they had the opportunity to work and live within

Sunderland. Issues around residents in the city who worked in neighbouring authorities had been longstanding and there was a need to deal with the problem from the source and understand why this was happening.

With regards to concerns raised around applicants bidding on properties as they arose, Mr. Caddick advised that there would be a general consensus that everyone would work towards one consistent approach for all and in doing so they would be able to protect those people who were unable to bid for themselves. A trigger would be activated which would alert staff who could then help an applicant navigate around the bidding process that was to be introduced.

In response to comments from Councillor Rolph regarding the registered providers, Mr. Caddick advised that all of the registered providers had signed up to the policy now which was a big 'tick' for the Tyne and Wear region. They had also written to all housing associations who would be obliged to share their performance with the Council. There was a need to understand how they could all work together better and develop stronger relationships so that there was a consistent engagement between providers and it would allow better management in future.

Councillor Kaye commented that it was undoubtedly a good thing to look at the issue at a regional level to help in tackling common issues that all authorities must suffer but commented that the strategic approach taken by the likes of Newcastle could be fundamentally different to those of Sunderland.

He also raised concerns over the re-registration of everyone on the housing list as some social landlords may use it as an opportunity to 'clear the decks' of tenants they may not want. Mr. Caddick advised that the re-registration would only affect those on the waiting list and not those who already had a tenancy. It would be literally just to advise those on the waiting list of the changes to the allocation policy that were imminent.

Councillor Kaye commented that this report was more of a situation report as it did not offer the finer detail of the full policy that was to be introduced. Mr. Caddick advised that there was still some work to do in pulling the final policy together and that over the next few weeks they were hoping to address all issues that had been raised and hone down the finer detail of the policy. He stated he was happy to share the policy with Committee Members prior to it being submitted to Cabinet in September.

With regards to the issue of affordable rents as raised by Councillor Kaye, Mr. Caddick commented that they would be up to 80% of the current market rent but that they were also looking at the housing benefit reforms to see how they may be affected in the future also.

In response to a further query from Councillor Kaye regarding the social housing supply, Mr. Caddick commented that at present if a person was deemed to be homeless and needed a property the Council had to get permission for them to stay there whereas in the future there would be the opportunity to offer them a private rented property if it was felt more appropriate. He also advised that the housing support scheme had helped support around 60 individuals in properties that without

it may have been placed in Bed and Breakfasts so this was an area that needed to be built upon to work in all areas.

The Chairman thanked the Officers for their informative presentation, and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the presentation and report be received and noted in advance of the Housing Allocations Policy being considered by Cabinet in September.

**Forward Plan – Key Decisions for the Period 1<sup>st</sup> June, 2011 – 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2011**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Forward Plan for the period 1<sup>st</sup> June to 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2011 which related to the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

4. RESOLVED that the contents of the Forward Plan be noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked everyone for their attendance and input.

(Signed) S. WATSON,  
Chairman.