

Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee

Access to Housing Working Group

12 November 2009

Present: Cllrs S Watson, A Wilson and M Dixon

Judith Tagg (Home Group), Maria Vipsal (Anchor Trust), Kathryn West (Anchor Trust), David Smith (Sunderland City Council), Geoff Leask (Gentoo), Leanne Toal (Gentoo), Claire Foster (Sunderland City Council), Christine McCardle (Co-op Housing in Partnership), Michael Ashley (Nomad E5 Housing), Carolyn Wood (Home Group), Peter Smith (Sunderland City Council), Alan Caddick (Sunderland City Council), Nigel Cummings (Sunderland City Council).

Members met with some of the city's social housing providers 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:

Question: What is your experience of people trying to access housing across the city?

- Access to housing is difficult in the city due to factors including the lack of turnover of properties and the reducing housing stock.
- Each housing provider has its own register and this can be difficult.
- There is a lack of quality literature for customers. Each provider will have their own leaflets etc and this can be confusing for people. What is needed is one piece of literature which provides the full list of opportunities.
- Housing Co-operatives tend to rely on word of mouth as not many people are familiar with the organisations.
- Many of the RSL's present agreed that a common list would be beneficial and provide a consistent approach across the city.
- Although some of the more specialist providers were concerned that this would be problematic.

Question: How far down the line is the 'banding model'?

- There has been a lot of work done within the sub-region and the council has worked closely with Gentoo around the practicalities and marketing of

such a model. Certain elements within the scheme still need to be refined. The detail behind the banding system is huge.

- From a Gentoo point the system is not far away and delays have been around the installation of a new IT system to support the banding model.
- The banding model will not be hierarchical but based on need.

Question: Are people aware of the different housing providers in the city?

- Those actively seeking accommodation are aware of the various lists – especially of the bigger housing providers.
- The Local Authority produces a directory which provides contact details for all the housing providers in the city.
- Again the issue around the quantity of literature and leaflets available to people was raised and the confusion this can cause.
- There is also confusion around Gentoo and Sunderland City Council as many people believe they are one and the same. This is a difficult perception to overcome.

Question: Do you offer advice and signposting to people looking for housing?

- If we are unable to help people then will provide signposting.
- Any homeless cases are signposted to the local authority for further advice, guidance and help.

Question: How do people get on your waiting lists?

- There are a variety of ways in which people can access the waiting lists. People can register on-line.
- There is no feedback for those on the waiting list. Once a person is registered there is little information on progress and chances of getting housed.
- Important issue around managing expectations. It is important that in providing a service that peoples expectations are managed and awareness is raised to the length of waiting lists and estimated length of time a person can expect to wait before receiving an offer of accommodation.
- It is often difficult to manage expectations as different housing policies can reflect different positions on different lists.

Question: What do you think of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme?

- Choice Based Lettings is an open and transparent system but is there a better system available?

Question: Can a single route into housing be achieved?

- Important that any housing service helps those with the greatest need and a common policy across Sunderland can improve this service to people.
- It is difficult to change policy when this is set nationally and could not be changed just for Sunderland. Anchor Trust does not have an allocations policy and allocations are not operated on a need basis.
- Anchor Trust has opted out of Choice Based Lettings, the trust has taken a view not to participate. The reason being that they have piloted this in Northumberland with 30 properties advertised only received 1 bid. Choice Based Lettings does not generate applicants for Anchor Trust.
- It is not that Anchor Trust is against the system but needs to meet their client group and be mutually beneficial.
- Delays exist around advertising properties which ultimately increases the void times.
- Home Housing introduced a Choice Based Lettings Scheme in Newcastle. A number of strategic meetings were held and this has worked really well.
- Also need to explore how the old and vulnerable can access such a scheme.

Question: What is the current supply and demand in the city?

- On a waiting list of approximately 24,000 there are around 6,000 active applicants with a turnover of 2,300 properties a year. (Gentoo).
- Anchor Trust work closely with the homeless team and currently have 14 schemes in Sunderland where some have vacancies and others have long waiting lists.

Final Comments were as follows:

- The licensing scheme for private landlords will help and improve or remove bad landlords and/or tenants. This is a good opportunity for the local authority to impose standards on landlords.
- There was a note of caution around the licensing scheme in the fact that a 'safety net' will need to be put in place as there is the potential for some tenants to be made homeless.