SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE   17th NOVEMBER, 2009

ACCESS TO HOUSING POLICY REVIEW 2009/10: PROGRESS REPORT

LINK TO WORK PROGRAMME: POLICY DEVELOPMENT & REVIEW

Report of the Chief Executive

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: SP1: Prosperous City; P5: Attractive and Inclusive City

CORPORATE PRIORITIES: CIO1: Delivering Customer Focused Services, CIO4: Improving Partnership Working to Deliver 'One City'.

1.   Purpose of Report

1.1   The purpose of this report is to provide members with a progress report on the policy review – Access to Housing.

2.   Background

2.1   An initial scoping document providing several options for detailed focus was presented to the Committee on 14th July 2009 and looking at access to housing in Sunderland was agreed as the focus. At the committee's meeting held on 22nd September 2009 that added further structure to the review and further focuses the subject area to look at the various ways local people access housing in the city and how this can be streamlined.

3.   Current Position

3.1   The first meeting of the Access to Housing working group took place on Wednesday 28 October 2009 with officers from Health, Housing and Adult Services. The aim of this initial meeting was to provide members of the working group with an overview to the current situation in relation to allocation policies. The meeting will also include themes around Choice Based Lettings and the Fair and Flexible guidance. Some of the key points raised during discussions were as follows:

- There is confusion around access to accommodation in the city and there are a number of different application forms for the various housing providers.

- There are approximately 2,000 people on the council's own housing waiting list and most of these people will also be on a number of other waiting lists to maximise their chances.

- Important to 'myth bust' around people's perceptions of housing allocations and explain in a clear manner.

- There is often too much use of jargon which can lead to confusion.

- Signposting is important and the council has worked with a number of agencies to improve this through training, literature, internet etc.

- 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.

- There is still confusion around Gentoo and Sunderland City Council many people still see Gentoo as part of the council.

   Appendix 1 of this report provides a full report of the working group meeting for member's information.

3.2   Councillor Dixon, on behalf of the committee and working group, attended a conference on Fairness and Flexibility in local housing. The conference provided useful evidence on the latest thinking in relation to housing allocations policy and practice. Some of the main points from this conference were as follows:

- Important to tackle the myths and misperceptions around housing allocation

- Inform communities about the allocations scheme and who is getting housing

- Importance of landlords working closely with local authorities

- Confusion over how social housing is allocated

- Housing waiting lists are increasing – but figures can be misleading due to a variety of factors.

3.3   Another benefit from this conference is that contact has been made with Coventry City Council and Stephen Rudge, Head of Housing, as agreed in principal to come to Sunderland and discuss and exchange views and opinions on allocations policy. Coventry Council and housing associations have teamed up to offer a new service called Coventry Homefinder. Coventry Homefinder will provide a single application route for all available property in the city. Arrangements are currently being undertaken for this visit and as soon as further information is available the committee will be informed.

3.4   Following on from the first focus group, a second has been arranged for Thursday 12 November 2009 for members of the working group. A number of housing providers from across the city have been invited to attend and provide evidence for the policy review.

3.5   The updated policy review timetable is attached as an appendix to this report for member's information.

3.5   Also attached for members information is a research document from the Centre for Research and Market Intelligence (CRMI) which provides some useful background information on regional demand for affordable housing. The research looks at

regional differences in the demand for affordable housing and the profile of those who live there. There are many historical reasons why differences exist among the regions in the level of demand for affordable housing, the type of housing in most demand, the profile of households, and among potential applicants to social housing. Social housing has developed in different ways over time to fill different needs. Some areas have an older stock of properties in urban centres, whilst others have a higher proportion of peripheral housing estates. These were often built in the post-war building boom of the 1950s and 60s.

4.   Next Steps

4.1   To hold the policy review working group with housing providers across the city which will provide members with further evidence for the policy review.

4.2   Arrange a number of focus groups with stakeholder groups to gather further evidence for the policy review through the working group.

4.3   To look at arranging the visit of Stephen Rudge from Coventry City Council as part of the evidence gathering for the review.

4.4   To look at organising good practice visits for the working group with other local authorities.

5.   Recommendations

5.1   That members note the information contained in the report.

Background Papers

- Regional Demand for Affordable Housing – Centre for Research and Market Intelligence (Housing Corporation)

Contact Officer: Nigel Cummings (0191 561 1006)
nigel.cummings@sunderland.gov.uk