

CABINET

13 OCTOBER 2014

Present: Mayor (Chair)
Councillors K Crout, S Johnson, I Sharpe and M Watkin

Also present: Councillors N Bell and B Mehta

Officers: Managing Director
Head of Community and Customer Services
Legal and Democratic Section Head
Housing Section Head
Democratic Services Manager

27 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Derek Scudder.

28 DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST (IF ANY)

There were no disclosures of interest

29 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 1st September 2014 were submitted and signed.

30 REVISED HOUSING NOMINATION POLICY FOR APPROVAL

Cabinet received a report from the Housing Section Head regarding the Housing Nomination Policy which set out who could apply for a housing association home in Watford and how housing applications would be assessed, prioritised and managed.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing introduced the report and explained that the policy had been discussed and developed over the last two years and that the Housing Policy Advisory Group had been instrumental in bringing the policy forward. There had been a consultation on the policy with residents, partners and officers.

The policy sought to ration a scarce resource to where it could make most impact within the community. It was an opportunity to prioritise local people for local homes as nearly half of current Band E applicants lived outside Watford.

The Portfolio Holder described how other local authorities within Hertfordshire had similar policies in place. The Council would still nominate to Herts Choice Homes vacancies and also continue to require affordable housing to be built in new developments.

The impact of the new policy would be to direct less officer time in registering housing applications and instead give more time for officers to assist residents in applying for the housing options most relevant to their needs.

The Council would continue to work with private landlords to improve standards and also to support voluntary sector partners to help rough sleepers. The Council was working to improve the temporary accommodation it could offer.

In response to a question from Councillor Watkin the Housing Section Head explained that there were a number of different ways to measure housing need nationally. Officers would encourage people to look at other housing options rather than spending time trying to improve their position on the housing list.

The Mayor commented that the previous policy had implied expectations which were unrealistic, the new policy would be more open and honest.

Councillor Bell asked a question regarding how Watford Borough Council's policy would compare to other neighbouring authorities. The Housing Section Head responded that other authorities made decisions about their policies based on local circumstances. In respect of the minimum amount of time required to have a residency connection, the 'five years' condition in the Watford policy was towards the upper end required in Hertfordshire. However, it was 10 years in Dacorum and in some London Boroughs. There was a need for a balance to be found between reasonable and practical. There had been a consensus on the five year residency connection by the cross party Housing Policy Advisory Group.

The Head of Community and Customer Services responded to a question from Councillor Bell by explaining that it would not be necessary to ask for further funding as the Council receives an annual Homelessness Grant which was £274,000 this year.

Following a question from the Mayor, the Housing Section Head described how Herts Choice Homes still had a strong role and benefits for the partnership. It provided cost savings and best practice and enabled a choice based system rather than direct lets. An arrangement was in place with registered providers who operated across multiple districts. Therefore, everyone applying should have the same experience across Hertfordshire. There was also a cross-party pool so that if a property was heavily adapted then it could be advertised across Boroughs to see whether another tenant could be found rather than removing the adaptations. The Herts Choice Homes would be actively under review and challenged by the board and its members.

The Housing Section Head confirmed that it was now a statutory duty to allow a residency connection exception for members of the armed forces.

Following a question by the Mayor, the Housing Section Head went onto explain, that the previous government's rationale for opening the housing register was to increase access to social housing and encourage movement around the country.

Councillor Sharpe commented that it was not possible to build the amount of units required to meet housing needs. It was necessary to house those who have the greatest need and also to manage the expectations of those who were not satisfied with their current circumstances.

Councillor Johnson outlined the timetable for the implementation of the policy:

November – writing to existing applicants to explain changes

January – writing to ask applicants to re-register

March – the housing register would close for validation, then the register would re-open to eligible applicants.

The Mayor reflected that the local authority was not responsible for meeting everyone's housing need. Social housing was about priority need and the policy would be reflecting that need.

Councillor Crout suggested that a Councillors' workshop would be useful so that Councillors were briefed on the options available for residents.

RESOLVED

That Cabinet:

approves the revised Housing Nomination Policy

whilst noting the target implementation date of 1 April 2015, Cabinet delegates authority for agreeing the detailed implementation plan and precise implementation date to the Head of Community and Customer Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.

notes that minor changes to the Policy may be deemed necessary during implementation and that the Council's Constitution delegates authority for these to be made by the Head of Community and Customer Services in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.

Mayor

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 7.30 pm