

Cabinet

17 September 2012

Present: Mayor Thornhill (Mayor)
Councillor D. Scudder (Deputy Mayor)
Councillors Crout, Sharpe, and Watkin.

Also present:
Councillors Bell, Dhindsa, Johnson, Meerabux and Mills

21 CHOICE BASED LETTINGS SCRUTINY REVIEW

Call-in and Performance Scrutiny Committee carried out a review of Choice Based Lettings during two meetings in October and November 2010. The final report incorporating the Scrutiny Committee's recommendations and the responses of officers had been agreed at the meeting held on 3 February 2011. At that meeting Call-in and Performance Scrutiny Committee resolved that the final report should be forwarded to the Portfolio Holder and then on to Cabinet.

Cabinet's responses to the recommendations were contained in the report. Councillor Rackett (Green), who had chaired the Call-in & Performance Committee at the time, had confirmed that he was happy with Cabinet's responses.

Councillor Johnson (Conservative) referred to the issue of appeals and how the 56 day deadline could be extended by an additional 28 days in some cases due to the backlog of cases. The Mayor suggested that he took this up with the Housing Policy Group.

Councillor Bell (Labour) welcomed the responses to the recommendations. He added however, that there was still a need for the Choice Based Lettings scheme to be monitored.

The Mayor said that, whilst it was important to establish issues about which residents were not happy, they also needed to be reminded of the situation prior to the Choice Based Lettings scheme when they had very limited say over house choices.

RESOLVED

that Overview and Scrutiny Committee be informed of Cabinet's responses as follows:

Recommendation 1

Training courses for long term non-bidders especially relation to IT.

Cabinet Response

Accepted. Housing already contact people in housing need who were not bidding to find out the reasons for this and they could be assisted by staff in the CSC or Housing officers. Officers also ran regular training for support agencies e.g. hostel providers so that they could support their clients.

Recommendation 2

Explanations and education for bidders and potential bidders about the banding system.

Cabinet response

Accepted. Details of the scheme was provided on Herts Choice Homes website to which the Council's website had a link.

Recommendation 3

Provide information about and ensure access to the appeals procedure.

Cabinet Response

Accepted. This was included in the nomination policy. It would be considered as part of the review of the Council's web pages.

Recommendation 4

A spot check on a sample of applicants to ensure they were in the correct band and provide feedback on results to the scrutiny committee.

Cabinet Response

Accepted. This would be incorporated into new procedures and would come under the remit of the Housing Casework Co-ordinator and also be part of the audit plan being developed with internal audit.

Recommendation 5

Tailored letters should be initiated and also 'follow-ups' for unsuccessful bidders.

Cabinet Response

Not accepted. Feedback was already available via Herts Choice Homes. Tailored letters would not be possible to resource.

Recommendation 6

Investigate the schemes on Freeview and Wii pioneered by Kirklees Council.

Cabinet Response

Not accepted. Freeview was not compatible with the process, only packages that clients would need to pay for. It was not considered to be a priority for the service at this time.

Recommendation 7

Council Tax cost to be displayed with house information on property listings This had been requested and was with housing providers to arrange. We were working with WCHT on this.

Cabinet Response

Accepted and still in progress. Whilst the Housing Service fully supported inclusion of Council Tax information and had been pursuing this recommendation it was not something that was within their gift to compel.

The Council had received confirmation from Watford Community Housing Trust that they had arranged access to Council Tax information and would be including this on their property adverts - within the next month. Other registered providers were also rolling this out and therefore progress was expected to be made in the near future.

It was the housing providers who put together the adverts and sent them to the Housing Service on extremely tight timescales before publication. Due to the amount of essential information officers had to check in a short space of time, officers did require providers to put forward all the relevant information. There was not the opportunity for the officer to liaise with Council Tax once they knew the exact property addresses coming forward for the advert as this could be a matter of only an hour or two before the information needed to be submitted.

Recommendation 8

Obtain feedback from successful and unsuccessful bidders.

Cabinet Response

Accepted. There was a user group which included people who were still waiting to be rehoused

Recommendation 9

More work to be focussed on the benefits of moving from under occupied properties (for example smaller utility bills).

Cabinet Response

Accepted. Under occupation was a priority and our nomination policy had been revised to give additional priority to those under occupied by one bedroom (on a par with those in larger properties). We were also working with our RSL partners on initiatives they could bring forward to address this.

Recommendation 10

Staff to be alert to people who may have difficulty in filling in the forms.

Cabinet Response

Accepted. This was already part of the Service's daily working practice