

MEETING OF THE COMMUNITIES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP

THURSDAY, 10 JANUARY 2013 2.30 PM



GROUP MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Kelham Cooke
Councillor Breda Griffin
Councillor Charmaine Morgan
Councillor John Nicholson (Chairman)

Councillor Mrs Jean Taylor
Councillor Jeff Thompson (Vice-
Chairman)
Councillor Raymond Wooten

PORTFOLIO HOLDER

Councillor Teri Bryant (Portfolio Holder: Good Housing)

OFFICERS

Head of Housing and Neighbourhoods (Ian Richardson)
Head of Legal and Democratic Services (Lucy Youles)
Housing Options Team Leader (May Read)
Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer (Carol Drury)
Principal Democracy Officer (Jo Toomey)

51. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Mrs Cartwright (Economic Development – Grow the Economy Portfolio Holder) and Councillor John Smith (Green, Healthy and Arts Portfolio Holder).

52. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

No pecuniary interests were disclosed.

53. ACTION NOTES FROM THE MEETING HELD ON 13 DECEMBER 2012

The action notes from the meeting held on 13 December 2012 were noted.

54. FEEDBACK FROM THE EXECUTIVE

The Good Housing Portfolio Holder reported improvements to parking in Stamford since the introduction of Civilian Parking Enforcement and interim arrangements for residents' parking. This was echoed by another Stamford Councillor.

At its meeting on 7 January 2013, Cabinet agreed the Tenancy Strategy, which the PDG helped develop at its meeting on 13 December 2012. The Good Housing Portfolio Holder advised members that key considerations for the Cabinet in taking the decision included the PDG's deliberations and a minority report produced by the Labour group. He explained that he was not recommending use of fixed-term tenancies in the Council's housing stock. One Councillor expressed disappointment that this removed an opportunity for ejecting tenants responsible for anti-social behaviour. Councillors were assured that no difference would be made to enforcement and that early intervention in instances of anti-social behaviour would be a priority.

55. HOUSING PROGRAMME OF WORK

The Head of Housing and Neighbourhoods explained that members of the PDG were being invited to make comments and recommendations to assist the development of the Council's Housing Strategy and Allocations Policy.

Housing Strategy

It was proposed that the Housing Strategy should be developed around three key priorities:

1. High quality new affordable homes available to buy or rent
2. Improved housing standards across all neighbourhoods
3. Access to housing and wellbeing services

Mr Richardson explained the sustainable neighbourhoods project mentioned as a potential solution in support of priority 2 and added that it was not material to the strategy. He gave a brief summary of the project, explaining it was a national project which was a diagnostic tool to improve viability and regeneration, which supported sustainability.

Councillors discussed each proposed priority (summarised in the bullet points below) and made recommendations. Any recommendations are shown within the bullet points as bold italics.

1. High quality affordable homes available to buy or rent
 - Despite changes to the way targets were put together, Councils were still required to project affordable housing need and make plans to meet that need.

- The affordable housing need for the district was estimated at 667 new homes per year. This was not prescribed and would be delivered in partnership with housing associations.
- The Council had a duty to deliver against priority 1.
- It was hoped that this priority would be supported by deterring owners from leaving properties empty through reduced council tax discounts.
- Vacant properties brought back into use could attract New Homes Bonus, which could then be used to bring further vacant properties back into use.
- There were a number of technical definitions for 'affordable housing': 1) local authority: rented housing or access to shared ownership housing. 2) Government: a new build funding programme which provided a subsidy to developers who in turn would charge 80% market rate.
- There was no planned government funding to support the delivery of new affordable housing beyond 2015, which would mean stretching the capacity of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and looking for new funding opportunities.
- ***A comment should be included about ensuring that affordable housing should reflect local need*** (the make-up of affordable housing should reflect household sizes across the district).

2. Improved housing standards across all neighbourhoods

- The intention of the priority was to raise standards across the district regardless of neighbourhood or tenure.
- It was difficult to define the terms 'neighbourhood' and 'community' in the context of the priority.
- ***The priority should be amended to read "Improved housing standards across the district and all tenures"***.
- ***To support developing neighbourhoods that work, a fourth priority was proposed: Promotion of sustainable neighbourhoods and communities.***
- Reports about the condition of properties in the private-rented sector were usually received from a concerned party however inspections were reliant on landlords granting officers permission to enter a property.
- The Council budgeted for 500 voids each year. A significant amount of work had been done to minimise voids and keep the number below the budgeted level.
- The Standard Assessment Process (SAP) was a standardised test to determine the thermal efficiency rating of a property. This was put into bands.
- To improve the banding of properties residents could apply through the Green Deal, a national scheme which provided loans

to improve the energy efficiency of properties, which were paid back through savings in energy bills.

- In 2012 the Council spent £1m putting secondary cladding onto some of the properties within the housing stock. Officers were identifying funding opportunities to complete this work across the rest of the housing stock.
- Officers were congratulated on the amount of funding that had been leveraged in to improve the SAP banding of Council properties.
- ***The second potential solution should be amended to read: “Encourage private landlords to ensure their properties are fit and fully utilised through an appropriate balance of positive support and enforcement.”***

3. Access to housing and wellbeing services

- Demographic changes meant that there was a significantly ageing population, increases in the number of people with disabilities and smaller households.
- One potential solution proposed was maximising the initial and ongoing benefit derived from the investment in disabled facilities grants in order to support independent living and the wellbeing of communities.
- Disabled facilities grants formed part of a statutory scheme to provide financial support for people in the private sector and private rented sector whose property needed adaptations.
- ***Change the potential outcome specifically referring to disabled facilities grants to “investment in adaptations” to encompass council properties.***
- ***Reference should be made to ensuring access to transport links.***

Housing Allocations Policy

It was proposed that the Housing Allocations Policy should be developed around four key principles:

1. How do we want to define ‘local connection’?
2. Should we aim to meet housing aspirations or only urgent need?
3. Do we want to reward economic or community contribution?
4. How do we want the scheme to operate?

Councillors discussed each principle (summarised in the bullet points below) and made recommendations. Any recommendations are shown within the bullet points as bold italics.

1. How do we want to define ‘local connection’?

- Armed forces personnel should neither be advantaged nor disadvantaged because of their service in respect of local connection.
- The current allocations policy takes account of local connections, with the weight of that connection growing each year for a maximum of ten years.
- Homelessness legislation defined a local connection as someone who has lived in the area for three of the last six months or three of the last five years.
- The Council's existing allocations policy defined a local connection as someone who was living in the district, or someone who had been resident in the district for three of the last six months or three of the last five years.
- Family connections in the local area were also taken into consideration. Family connections also applied to dependents who were not family members.
- ***Local connection and family connection should continue to be a consideration and it was suggested consideration should be given to mirroring existing criteria.***

2. Should we aim to meet all housing aspirations or only urgent need?

- There were some areas in the district where there was low demand for housing; in those instances it was possible to house people based on aspiration rather than need, subsequently preventing void properties.
- Taking account of aspiration could provide more sustainable, mixed communities.
- ***Both housing need and aspiration should continue to be a consideration.***

3. Do we want to reward economic or community contribution?

- ***Priority should not be given to people based on voluntary work within communities.***
- Consideration was given to a number of scenarios:
 - Giving priority to someone with a job in the district
 - Giving priority to someone with a job who would then be economically active in the district
 - Giving priority to people who have been employed for a specified period
 - Giving priority to someone with a firm job offer
 - Giving priority to someone in low paid employment
 - Giving priority to someone in employment-related training
 - Giving priority to key workers or skilled workers wanting to come into the area
- ***Councillors felt that there would be too many variables to***

make community contribution definable, fair and workable but agreed that in exceptional circumstances there should be facility for officers to use their discretion

4. How do we want the scheme to operate?

- There were three suggestions on how the scheme could operate: points (as per the current scheme), choice based letting and a banded system.
- A working group of the PDG which had considered the Allocations Policy previously had recommended a banding scheme.
- Banding schemes could help estimate when people on the housing list might expect to be housed as properties would be offered to people who had been within that band longest rather than someone coming in with a higher number of points.
- The Portfolio Holder wanted to ensure whatever scheme was adopted would be completely transparent and defensible if an allocation was challenged.
- Any banded scheme would not have a negative impact on people in urgent housing need, (an example was given of someone fleeing an abusive relationship) as priority would always be given to them. There were also additional mechanisms through which they could seek to be housed.
- ***PDG members recommended that the Council should move towards a banded allocations scheme.***

Mr Richardson explained that the Cabinet was due to consider the draft Housing Strategy and Allocations Policy at its meeting on 4 March 2013. A copy of the drafts incorporating the PDG's recommendations and considerations would be circulated to group members for any final comments.

56. COMMUNITY RIGHT TO CHALLENGE

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services presented report number LDS086 on the Community Right to Challenge. She explained that this was another right introduced through the Localism Act, which related to requests from organisations to run council services. An organisation could apply to run services already contracted out or those run in-house. If the application was accepted the organisation would be given the right to be included in a procurement exercise.

The proposed scheme, which was attached as an appendix to the report would regulate when expressions of interest could be made. If it's a service run in-house then expressions of interest would be limited to a period of months that would allow consideration as part of the budget process for the following year. If the application was about an outsourced service then expressions would be tied in with the renewal of that contract.

If the Council did not produce a scheme, it would have to accept applications at any time.

An indication was received that the Labour group might submit a minority report on the Right. Any transfer of staff would be dealt with separately from any procurement exercise. The scheme could not impose conditions on any procurement exercise.

Recommendation

That the Cabinet adopts the draft Community Right to Challenge Scheme as appended to report number LDS086.

57. WORK PROGRAMME

Noted.

58. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting was closed at 16:39.