

Minutes of a meeting of the **POLICY DEVELOPMENT PANEL** held in the Meeting Room 1, Council Offices, Priory Road, Spalding, on Wednesday, 6 November 2019 at 6.30 pm.

PRESENT

J D McLean (Vice-Chairman)

J R Astill
F Biggadike
R A Gibson

M Hasan
G T D Rudkin
E J Sneath

A M Newton

In Attendance: The Housing Landlord Services Manager, the Housing Services Manager, the Housing Repairs Manager and the Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies for absence were received from or on behalf of Councillors J Avery, M D Booth, J L King, P A Redgate, J L Reynolds, S-A Slade, S C Walsh and A R Woolf

29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Notification had been received that Councillor Newton was replacing Councillor Walsh for this meeting only.

30. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the Policy Development Panel meeting held on 24 September 2019.

AGREED:

That the minutes be signed as a correct record.

31. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS.

There were no declarations of interest.

32. QUESTIONS ASKED UNDER STANDING ORDER 6

There were no questions asked under Standing Order 6.

33. TRACKING OF RECOMMENDATIONS

There were none.

Action By

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34. ITEMS REFERRED FROM THE PERFORMANCE MONITORING PANEL

There were no items referred from the Performance Monitoring Panel.

35. KEY DECISION PLAN

Consideration was given to the Key Decision Plan dated 29 October 2019.

AGREED:

That the Key Decision Plan be noted.

36. POLICY REGISTER

The Panel gave consideration to the Policy Register dated 21 October 2019.

AGREED:

That the Policy Register be noted.

37. HOUSING REPAIRS POLICY

Consideration was given to the report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health which sought approval for adoption of the Housing Repairs and Fitness for Habitation Policy.

Once approved, the policy would give a clear understanding, in terms of repairs and maintenance, as to what was expected of the Council as a landlord, and equally what was expected of the tenant in terms of looking after their home. The policy stated clearly the tenant's responsibilities and rights, and enabled the Council to have a fair and consistent approach to repairing its stock.

Members considered the report, and the following issues arose:

- Where emergency accommodation was required, was it the Authority's responsibility to find alternative housing whilst work was undertaken on the tenant's home?
 - Officers responded that if the property was uninhabitable, the tenant would be housed elsewhere. The responsibility lay with the Authority as landlord, not the insurance company.

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- Was it the Authority's policy to remove all carpets when a tenant left a property?
 - Officers advised that if carpets were still in good order, the new tenant would be given the option to keep them.

- With regard to voids, would this policy and the tenancy handbook assist in preventing properties falling into a poor state in the first place, and thus affecting turnaround?
 - Officers confirmed that the Housing Repairs Policy was supported by the tenancy handbook. The Authority was now in a strong position, with regard to recharges, to manage tenancies. It was anticipated that the new policy and the handbook would make tenancies easier to manage, and improve the position on voids. It was also stated that officers were working on a suite of policies around tenancies and estates which would assist with other tenancy issues. It was important that policies were in place so that the Authority would be in a strong position where there were legal challenges.

- Were there staff in place to monitor tenancies, to ensure that they did not deteriorate in the first place?
 - Regular inspections of properties were now being undertaken, and contractors were being worked with. Whilst tougher action was being taken against those tenants that simply would not pay, the authority was also ensuring that those who were vulnerable and could not pay were being assisted where necessary.

- Members asked whether photographs were taken of the property when a tenancy ended.
 - Officers confirmed that photographs were taken of properties when keys were handed back, and after any void work was undertaken.

- Members asked whether access could be gained when an officer presented at a property and there was no response.
 - Most tenants would be aware of pre-arranged appointments. If they were not at home when officers called, a card would be posted through the door and the onus would be on the tenant to re-arrange an appointment. Currently, missed appointments were not charged for, but the new policy would be introducing charges in this respect.

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If there was a real emergency (e.g a gas leak), officers could force entry to the property if the tenant was not there, and any damage would be repaired afterwards. However, to date, entry to a property had never been forced.

- Members questioned what action could be undertaken with regard to overgrown gardens, and how it could be ascertained whether they were privately or council owned.
 - Officers advised that enforcement could be taken, and that this was the same for both council and private properties. Policies now referred to the fact that non-compliance could result in police and/or criminal records.
- Members asked whether there was a programme of works for housing repairs and if so, whether these works were on-track.
 - Officers responded that there was no list of properties showing at what stage of their life they are at, that a property asset review was being undertaken, and that there was a planned programme of works. The programme was generally up to date, although there had been a challenge in the current year with roofs. A few years ago, the lifespan of roofs had been extended, and the programme of works for them had therefore been delayed, although day to day repairs were still undertaken when required. Currently, demand was outweighed by the council's ability to respond as there was a shortage of contractors available to undertake the work, and the amount of rain over the past few months had created additional demand.
- <1>Members commented that the state of roofs was the most important issue to address, and the authority needed to ensure that there were enough contractors on hand to undertake works required. If this remained a problem, the Panel could consider addressing it as part of its Work Programme in the future.
- Officers stated that once approved, the policy would be available on the website, and that enforcement of the issues laid out within it could begin.
- Officers stated that this policy, and any other related policies would be added to the Policy Register. The new Housing Repairs Policy would replace the 2012 version.

CMycock

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AGREED:

<2>That the Housing Repairs and Fitness for Habitation Policy be noted, and recommended to Cabinet for approval.

CMycock

38. REVIEW OF HMO LICENSING POLICY

Consideration was given to the report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and the Executive Director Place, which updated the Panel on the licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation in the first six months, following the implementation of the Council's revised policy.

The Housing Act 2004 introduced a new mandatory licensing system for certain types of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO's). Following the consultation by central government in late 2015, Statutory Instrument 2018 No 221 was issued. From 1 October 2018, the scope of licences was increased to include all HMOs occupied by 5 or more people in 2 or more households. Cabinet approved the revised HMO Licencing Policy on 12 March 2019, and the Panel had requested an update on progress made six months after implementation.

Members considered the report, and the following issues arose:

- A list of known HMOs in the area had been circulated to members some time ago – could this be recirculated?
 - Officers advised that this information was available on the website.
- Members commented that they were well placed to identify any possible HMOs in their wards, and officers responded that it would be useful for councillors to provide details for officers to follow up.
- How long would it take for a property, believed to be a HMO, to be fully licensed?
 - Officers responded that the process would take a few months, once a property had been identified.
- Was the fee charged to the licence holder sufficient to cover costs?
 - The current fee was calculated by taking an average of officer time. A review of fees was to be undertaken, to bring this in line with the ongoing uplift in costs. No additional staff had been taken on to undertake this additional work.

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- <1>With regard to guesthouses, members asked what the difference was between unlicensed guesthouses and HMOs. Also where, for example properties were let out through agencies such as AirBnB, with the owner continuing to live in a separate part of the property, were these affected by the policy?
 - Officers advised that they would ascertain the facts on these questions, and provide members with an answer in due course.

Jason King

AGREED:

That the content of the report be noted.

39. REVIEW OF THE REVISED ALLOCATIONS POLICY

Consideration was given to the report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and the Executive Director Place, which updated the Panel on housing allocations following changes made to the Allocations Policy from April 2019.

The changes to the policy had been the result of a review which had sought to address concern with the relatively low number of applicants on the register compared to other Lincolnshire authorities, and the time elapsed from the previous policy review. Key areas that had been reviewed had been – how to apply for housing; local connection; sheltered accommodation qualifying age; and offers of accommodation.

Members considered the report, and the following issues arose:

- Had there been any concessions made with regard to ex-service personnel?
 - Officers replied that this group of people had been included within the policy and given appropriate consideration.
- Member commented that there had been a higher amount of lets in the current year – was this as a result of more requests, or because of an increase in stock?
 - Officers responded that there had been no change in voids, and that the increase was as a result of the increase in housing stock.
- When would on-line application go live totally?
 - Officers advised that testing was still underway, and that when this had been completed, there would be communications undertaken to promote the online

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process

- Members asked what the timescale was to deal with a homelessness application, and officers advised this process took 3 – 4 weeks.

AGREED:

That the content of the report be noted.

40. POLICY DEVELOPMENT PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel considered a report by the Executive Manager Governance, which set out the work programme of the Panel. The work programme consisted of two sections, the first setting out the dates of future panel meetings along with proposed items for consideration, and the second setting out Task Groups that had been identified by the Panel.

Members considered the report, and the following issues arose:

- <1>The Policy Development Panel agreed that the Public Open Spaces Task Group should cease being a joint Task Group, and that the Performance Monitoring Panel be requested to continue the task group's work to a conclusion. CM
- <2>Planning Design Task Group – At its meeting on 25 June 2019, the Panel had selected its membership for this task group. Members agreed that work on this task group should start in the new year. It was requested that a draft scope be drawn together, with the input of members, and circulated before the first meeting to ensure that the scope encompassed what the task group wished to deliver. CM, CP
- <3>It was agreed that the Leisure Facilities Task Group (which had been a joint task group) should be removed from the Work Programme. CM
- <4>It was agreed that Appendix B be altered to include a separate section for dormant task groups that had concluded their initial work, but which were still required for the future, and that any such task groups be moved to this section. CM
- <5>At the last meeting of the Panel, it had been agreed to set up a task group to consider the facts on the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and the Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) – it was agreed that membership of this task group be considered at the next meeting when more Panel members were present. CM

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AGREED:

That the Work Programme be noted.

41. HOUSING INCOME MANAGEMENT POLICY

Consideration was given to the report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health which noted the proposed Housing Income Management Policy recommended for approval by Cabinet on 3 December 2019.

The Housing Income Management Policy set out the Council's approach to maximising the housing income it received, including – rent; garage license fees; service charges; use and occupation charges; court costs; and chargeable repairs. The Authority's approach to income collection had been reviewed to ensure that its procedures supported vulnerable tenants, and that appropriate action against tenants who had the ability to pay charges but chose not to. The Policy sought to bring together the Council's established working methods with current best practice and legislation.

Members agreed that only the principles of the report would be discussed and there was therefore no need for the meeting to go into private session.

Members considered the report, and the following issues arose:

- Member asked how quickly the authority reacted to stop severe arrears from accruing.
 - Officers responded that they responded as quickly as possible, and were alerted when a tenant was a week behind in their rent. If there were any delays, these normally occurred when an application was made to the courts and their workload was heavy. The Authority's aim was, wherever possible, not to evict tenants, and to work with them while they got their finances back on track. There was a lot of support on hand if tenants engaged with the Authority, and the Authority worked with the Citizens Advice Bureau where required.
- Members congratulated the Housing Services Team on their high collection rate of collectable rent of 99.6% in 2018/19.

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AGREED:

<1>That the Housing Income Management Policy be noted, and recommended for approval by Cabinet on 3 December 2019.

VC

42. ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE CHAIRMAN DECIDES ARE URGENT.

There were no urgent items.

(The meeting ended at 8.00 pm)

(End of minutes)