



Housing Working Party

Minutes of a meeting of the **Housing Working Party** held in the **Yarrow Room, Lewes Town Hall, High Street, Lewes** on **Tuesday 17 December 2013** at **2.00pm**

Present:

Councillors I A Nicholson (Chair), M P Chartier, S B Davy, P Gander, E C Merry and S J Osborne

Officers Attending:

A Blanshard, Committee Officer
A Chequers, Corporate Head – Housing Services
S Horne, Head of Housing Management
J Jacks, Housing Needs Manager

Also Present:

D Forsdike, Tenants' Representative
A Hill, Tenants' Representative

Minutes

5 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 3 October 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

6 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors R Blackman and S Saunders

7 The Impact of Welfare Reform on Lewes District Council Tenants

The Working Party considered Report No 209/13 which updated members on Welfare Reforms and their effect on the Council's tenants. The Head of Housing Management introduced the Report which set out the facts and figures of the impact on the Council's tenants. She drew particular attention to the success that had been made in tenants downsizing by transferring properties and the Tenants Incentive Scheme.

The Chair thanked the Head of Housing Management for producing the Report. The Working Party expressed concern that the number of tenants on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) was likely to increase. The Corporate Head – Housing Services explained that officers were monitoring

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the situation on a monthly basis and that those tenants who had opted to remain in their current property and pay from existing resources would be regularly checked to ensure that they were not placing themselves in a position of debt to manage payments. The Housing Needs Manager explained that the Council had more DHP funding available for this municipal year than had been anticipated, and that the provision of DHP funds to the Council for the next two years had been increased.

The Working Party asked whether there had been any tenants who had fallen into arrears as a result of Social Sector Size Criteria – the abolition of the Spare Room Subsidy for Social Housing tenants. The Corporate Head – Housing Services explained that to date there had been two notices issued to seek possession and the progress of both was being monitored. The Head of Housing Management added that current figures showed a rent collection figure of 98.6% which the Working Party agreed was excellent.

The Tenants' Representatives welcomed the high rent collection rates but expressed concern about where tenants were finding the extra funds to pay the shortfall in their rents. The Corporate Head – Housing Services shared this concern and explained to the Working Party that officers were working with Tenants of Lewes District (TOLD) to gather evidence on this issue. He explained that it was not appropriate for tenants to be asked directly, but that officers would approach tenants to check that they were coping and advise on any issues they might have. He added that the Rent Arrears team was monitoring the issue and that, if they raised any concerns, he would escalate the matter to the Corporate Management Team and Cabinet to ensure the resources were available to allow the team to take preventative actions. The Tenants' Representatives added that broader and increased promotion of the Tenants Incentive Scheme might also assist tenants.

The Working Party suggested that monetary advice be included in each new tenant's pack. The Head of Housing Management explained that all new tenants were seen by Rent Officers who provided advice on the help and assistance that was available.

The Working Party also wanted to record their recognition and appreciation of the way officers had coped with the extra work that had been required of them.

The Working Party asked the Head of Housing Management if the Council was encouraging tenants to forward plan and be aware of the future impact that the reforms might have on them. The Corporate Head – Housing Services agreed that this was a good idea and that officers could discuss with the Housing Benefit Team about potential profiling of tenants and, if possible, use this for prevention planning.

The Chair read a letter to the Working Party which had been received from a Councillor relating to paragraph 2.2 of the Report, the content of this letter was noted but without further comment. A copy of the letter is contained in the Minute Book.

CH-HS

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The Working Party queried how Discretionary Housing Payment was allocated. They asked officers whether the Working Party could be shown how discretion was exercised. The Corporate Head – Housing Services informed the Working Party that the DHP policy had been reported to a meeting of the Cabinet on 23 April 2013. He added that if the Working Party wanted more information, the Benefits Operations Manager could report to members on the criteria that was used during the allocation of the DHP.

Resolved:

- 7.1** That the impact of Welfare Reform on Lewes District Council Tenants, as outlined in Report No 209/13, be noted; and
- 7.2** That the Corporate Head – Housing Services be requested to submit further reports to the Housing Working Party on the impact of Welfare Reform to the Council's Tenants when necessary.

CH-HS

8 Tenancy Policy for Lewes District Council

The Working Party considered Report No 210/13 which sought to clarify the Council's position on the use of Flexible Tenancies and the Council's Succession Policy, prior to a period of consultation. The Head of Housing Management outlined the details of the Report and explained that the Localism Act 2011 had introduced Flexible Tenancies, a new form of Social Housing tenure. Flexible Tenancies were for a specified limited term and were renewable at the discretion of the housing provider. Government guidance was that, for most, this period should be for a minimum of five years.

The Head of Housing Management explained that the Council needed to decide whether to use this type of tenure and, if adopted, on a time period and if any particular property type, such as sheltered accommodation, should be excluded. The Working Party noted that the Welfare Reform provisions on the removal of the Spare Room Subsidy had already provided an incentive to downsize for families who were over occupying properties.

The Housing Needs Manager informed the Working Party that the introduction of Flexible Tenancies would require considerable administration by officers, but that this was not a reason to decide against adoption of them. The Housing Needs Manager explained to the Working Party that the numbers of tenants affected would be limited and that more might be persuaded to downsize through the effects of Welfare Reform. The Head of Housing Management informed the Working Party that a consultation was planned for January 2014, but that the Council was reluctant to start until they had sought the views of the Housing Working Party. This consultation would be with both existing tenants and those people on the Housing waiting list. She assured the Working Party that the Council would be mindful of its thoughts when conducting the consultation and would return to a meeting of the Working Party with the results.

The Corporate Head – Housing Services added that should the Housing

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Working Party decide that it did not want to progress the adoption of Flexible Tenancies at the current time, the option would still be available to the Council should circumstances change.

A discussion followed during which the Working Party asked if all existing tenancies would be replaced with Flexible Tenancies. The Head of Housing Management explained that existing tenancies would remain as they are, it would only affect new tenants of the Council. The Working Party was interested in how other Local Authorities and Housing Associations that had adopted Flexible Tenancies were progressing. The Housing Needs Manager explained that this was difficult to quantify as the system was so new but that relevant Authorities could be contacted for their feedback on the system.

The Working Party discussed many possible effects and concerns and established that at the current time, and with the limited information available, it did not feel able to make an informed decision on the introduction of Flexible Tenancies. The Working Party agreed that it was not yet convinced by the argument for Flexible Tenancies, but that it wished to see how such a proposal would work in practice.

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The Working Party then considered the changes to the rules of succession that had been introduced by the Localism Act 2011, and affected all new tenancies taken up after 1 April 2012. This change limited the right of succession to a secure council tenancy simply to the spouse or partner of a tenant, unless specifically stated otherwise in the Tenancy Agreement. The Working Party discussed the potential impact of the succession rules and how this might affect the tenants.

The Working Party asked for clarification of the term 'one reasonable offer'. The Corporate Head – Housing Services explained that this meant a property which was suitable for the tenant's needs, in as near an area to their current property, and took into consideration any special circumstances.

Resolved:

- 8.1** That the Corporate Head – Housing Services be requested to report the results of the tenants consultation on the introduction of Flexible Tenancies, including potential scenarios and comparisons to a future meeting of the Housing Working Party; and
- 8.2** That the rules of succession for new tenancies be maintained as existing under the Localism Act, and that a policy of one reasonable offer of suitable accommodation to the qualifying member of the family who, under previous legislation, would have succeeded the tenancy, be adopted.

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9 Date of Next MeetingResolved:

9.1 That it be noted that the next meeting of the Working Party be called as necessary.

The meeting ended at 3.00pm

I A Nicholson
Chair

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note/CO**