



Lewes District Council

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Housing Working Party

Minutes of a meeting of the **Housing Working Party** held **Room 7, Southover House, Southover Road, Lewes** on **Monday 25 March 2013** at **2.00pm**

Present:

Councillors R K Maskell (Chair), M P Chartier, S B Davy, P Gander and E C Merry

Officers Attending:

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

Also Present:

Councillor J V S Page, Leader of the Council
R Parmar, Graduate Intern
L Steer, Tenants' Representative

Minutes

1 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

2 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors S J Osborne and S Saunders.

3 Review of Housing Allocation Policy

The Working Party considered Report No 59/13 which outlined the proposed changes to the Council's current allocation policy in response to the Localism Act 2011. The Act authorised local authorities to adapt their housing allocation policies to suit the particular needs of their area. The Working Party was also being asked to authorise Officers to commence consultation on the proposed changes.

The Corporate Head – Housing Services informed the Working Party that following the Government's Welfare Reform changes it was anticipated that there may be an influx of applicants seeking cheaper accommodation from

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more expensive areas and wishing to register for housing with the Council. He explained that a particularly important consideration was that the Welfare Reform provisions for numbers of bedrooms, to be implemented in April, were less generous than the Council's current rules. There was a concern that under the present system applicants may be allocated a property they could not afford if dependent on Housing Benefit.

The Corporate Head – Housing Services added that this review gave the Council the opportunity to adjust the policy to allow for penalties for refusing accommodation and various practical amendments which would make the allocation system more workable and transparent. He explained that before finalising the policy it was a statutory requirement for the Council to consult with stakeholders. Discussions had already taken place with TOLD (Tenants of Lewes District) who had been in broad agreement with the proposed amendments. He informed the Working Party that an online consultation was being prepared.

The Working Party reviewed the proposed amendments, shown in Appendix 1 to the Report, one by one. The Head of Housing Management explained each amendment in turn and then the Working Party discussed the proposal and made suggestions for any actions or changes that it felt appropriate.

One proposal was that the policy be amended to restrict the housing register to those who have been living in the District for two of the past four years. The Corporate Head - Housing Services explained that certain sheltered housing which could be more difficult to let, could be advertised to applicants from all areas if necessary.

The Head of Housing Management informed the Working Party that the third proposed amendment, as shown on page 2 and 3 of Appendix 1 to the Report, was a high profile change that needed urgent attention. This amendment involved revising the Council's policy to reflect the bedroom standard under Welfare Reform. She explained that this was what was currently being referred to by the media as the 'bedroom tax'. She explained that the change would have the greatest effect on those tenants who were dependant on Housing Benefit to pay their rent. It was an urgent matter because if people were housed in, or allocated to, a property too large for their needs under the Government Welfare Reform standards then they would not receive full Housing Benefit and the Council may face loss of income.

In response to a Councillor's question, the Head of Housing Management explained that in pursuit of ensuring that families were housed in properties of appropriate size, Mutual Exchanges had been actively promoted and a 'Mutual Exchange Swap Shop' had been proposed for the Tenants conference.

The Working Party then discussed the proposed amendment regarding foster carers. It was felt that this amendment warranted further discussions with East Sussex County Council regarding the possibility of a policy

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agreement between both Councils that ensured the housing criteria of the fostering process worked for all concerned.

The Working Party then focused on the proposal to amend the 'Village Connection' section of the policy to accommodate a quota for letting appropriate properties to those in the greatest housing need, rather than purely those with a connection to a village. This would allow officers to be more flexible, particularly regarding adapted properties. There was some concern amongst Councillors that allocations to village properties should be subjected to particular consideration. The Head of Housing Needs explained to the Working Party that it was getting harder to find the required village connection. The suggested amendment would ensure that those people with particular needs would be offered the right accommodation without having to wait extra time because they did not have a village connection. The Working Party agreed that this needed to be reflected more clearly in the proposed amendment.

The Head of Housing Management explained to the Working Party that the proposed amendment to the 'Priority for Medical Reasons' was an important change. The Working Party discussed how different the approach was at other Councils. It agreed that there was a strong argument for the Council to amend this section of the allocations policy to be more in line with that of other authorities whilst ensuring that any changes were fair and supported by officers. The Working Party agreed that this proposal needed to be discussed more thoroughly with officers from the Housing Department. It requested that the amendment be reviewed and reworded to take account of these suggestions and discussions.

The Corporate Head – Housing Services thanked the Working Party for its suggestions and assured it that he would lead the review of the proposed policies and that the new Housing Allocations Policy would contain all the reviewed amendments before it went out for public consultation.

Resolved:

- 3.1** That the proposed amendments to the Lewes District Council Housing Allocation Policy, as set out in Report No 59/13 be agreed subject to the following changes:
- (a)** That the proposed amendment relating to 'exclusions', as shown on page 1 of Appendix 1 to Report No 59/13, be extended to include a ceiling figure on the amount of savings that applicants on the Housing Register may have;
 - (b)** That the Corporate Head – Housing Services be requested to continue discussions with East Sussex County Council with regard to amending the protocols around the allocation of properties to prospective foster carers, as shown on page 3 of Appendix 1 to Report No 59/13;

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(c)	That the Head of Housing Management be requested to reword the amendment regarding relaxing the 'Village Connection', as shown on page 5 of Appendix 1 to Report No 59/13, to include more detail about the proposed quota for allocations to those in need;	HHM
(d)	That the Corporate Head – Housing Services be requested to research and develop the proposed amendment to the 'Priority for Medical Reasons', as shown on page 5 of Appendix 1 to Report No 59/13, to bring the Council's amended policy in line with policies at other authorities;	CH-HS
(e)	That the Corporate Head – Housing Services be requested to research and develop the amendment 'Working Households and those making a positive contribution', as shown on page 6 of Appendix 1 to Report No 59/13;	CH-HS
3.2	That officers in the Housing department be authorised to commence consultation with housing applicants, tenants and other stakeholders on the proposals and to invite other proposals for consideration; and	
3.3	That the Corporate Head – Housing Services be requested to report the outcome of the public consultation and a draft Housing Allocation Policy to a future meeting of the Housing Working Party.	CH-HS
4	Date of Next Meeting	
	<u>Resolved:</u>	
4.1	That it be noted that the next meeting of the Working Party will be called as necessary.	All to note/CO
	The meeting ended at 3.30pm	
	R K Maskell Chair	