

ADULTS AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6th November, 2012

PRESENT – Councillor Thistlethwaite (in the Chair); Councillors Hutchinson, Mrs D. Jones, Kelley, Knowles, S. Richmond and York (7)

APOLOGIES – Councillors Harman, B Jones, Lister and Maddison (4)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Pauline Mitchell, Assistant Director – Housing and Building Services, Hazel Neasham, Head of Housing and Anthony Sandys, Head of Revenues and Benefits.

AH32. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

AH33. MINUTES – Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 4th September, 2012.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes be approved as correct records.

AH34. WORK PROGRAMME – The Director of Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to the work programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during the current Municipal Year.

The submitted report outlined those areas where this Scrutiny Committee had previously identified it would like to focus its work over the next Municipal Year and also emphasised that the work programme was a rolling programme and any Member of this Scrutiny could request an item to be included provided that a Quad of aims had been submitted to the Scrutiny Committee prior to ensure that it contributed to the strategic aims of the Council.

Particular reference was made to a piece of work previously undertaken by this Scrutiny Committee in relation to the Safeguarding Adults Board, its functions and the roles and responsibilities of this Authority within the Board and to a suggestion that a further piece of work focussing on the operational area of this work, both in care homes and in the community, could be undertaken.

RESOLVED – (a) That the current status of the Work Programme be noted.

(b) That a Task and Finish Review Group be established to undertake a piece of work into safeguarding adults and that the terms of reference be considered at the first meeting of that Group.

(c) That all Members of this Scrutiny Committee be contacted to ascertain if they are interested in being a Member of the above Group.

(d) That the Task and Finish Review Group be led by Councillor S. Richmond.

AH36. SUPPORTED HOUSING STRATEGY – The Director of Place submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting Members' views on the draft Supported Housing Strategy 2012-17 (also previously circulated), which had been amended to reflect the changes that had been introduced in national policy since 2010 and the need to offer more choice of housing when placing individuals in need of support and care services within the context of a difficult financial environment.

The submitted report outlined the background to supported housing, the development of the draft Strategy, which established a framework of housing changes in Darlington for the next five years and which covered all forms of supported housing, including that provided by other Registered Providers and the Private Sector as well as the Council.

Discussion ensued on the role and objectives of supported housing and the challenges faced in developing the Strategy, the consultation process which was currently being undertaken with a number of groups and individuals who used supported accommodation, including a workshop being held in November with GOLD and an Older People's Housing workshop in December including Registered Social Landlords and other organisations.

RESOLVED – That the report be received and that a further report detailing the outcome of the consultation be submitted to a future meeting of this Scrutiny Committee.

AH37. HOUSING BENEFIT AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT REFORMS – The Head of Revenues and Benefits gave a presentation on the Welfare Reform changes, with particular focus on the changes coming into force from April 2013.

Reference was made to the restriction on housing benefit for Council and Housing Association tenants whose accommodation was larger than needed and the current work being undertaken to data match information with partners; the cap on the total amount of benefits that working age people could receive; the abolition of the Council tax Benefit and the introduction of local Council Tax Support, and the new local Social Fund Scheme for crisis and community care support.

Discussion ensued on the significant impact the proposals would have on some residents and the work currently being undertaken by the Revenues and Benefits Team to both implement the changes and contact those residents affected to advise of the likely implications for them.

RESOLVED – That the thanks of this Scrutiny Committee be extended to the Head of Revenues and Benefits and that a copy of the presentation be forwarded to all Members of this Scrutiny Committee.

AH38. COMMON ALLOCATION POLICY – With the prior approval of the Chair to the matter being treated as urgent to enable Members to be advised of the changes at the earliest opportunity, the Head of Housing gave a presentation on the main changes to the Common Allocation Policy.

The presentation gave an overview of the requirement for the Council to have a published allocation scheme for determining priorities; the background to the introduction of the Compass Partnership, the Sub-Regional Choice Based and Common Allocation Policy which had been introduced in 2009 and which this Council was a member; the need to review whether that Policy was still fit for purpose in line with the provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, the Localism Act 2011 and any forthcoming changes in other policy areas; and the outcome of the consultation which had been undertaken on the proposed changes across the Sub-Regional partnership.

Particular reference was made to the proposal, which had been supported by the Partnership, to allow families to bid on any property, including flats, which met their bedroom requirements and the need to consider the possible effect this might have in terms of increased tenancy management issues and increased noise. The Head of Housing reported that suitable placements could be achieved through the application of the Local Lettings Policy.

Discussion also ensued on the proposals to change the three reasonable offers of accommodation to a one offer policy in recognition of the need to be more efficient and the process for applicants who were disqualified from joining the housing register to reapply at a later date.

RESOLVED – (a) That the thanks of this Scrutiny Committee be extended to the Head of Housing for her presentation.

(b) That the concerns of this Scrutiny Committee in relation to the proposal to allow families to bid on any property, including flats, which met their bedroom requirements be forwarded to Cabinet as part of the consultation response.