

HEALTH AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
24 APRIL 2024

HOUSING SERVICES VULNERABILITY POLICY

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. For Members to consider the draft Housing Services Vulnerability Policy 2024-2029 before approval by Cabinet on 7 May 2024.

Summary

2. To ensure that we meet the diverse needs of our tenants, we need to provide adaptable services, which takes our tenant's, and their household's needs into account, whilst ensuring we meet regulatory and legal requirements.
3. The Housing Services Vulnerability Policy 2024-2029 at **Appendix 1** sets out our aims, including how we will record any of our tenant's vulnerabilities on our systems and how we will use this information in the way we provide our services, the decisions we make and how we refer to other statutory and external organisations.
4. The Tenants Panel has been consulted on the draft policy and they have given their full support.

Recommendation

5. It is recommended that Members:
 - (a) Consider the report and draft Housing Services Vulnerability Policy at **Appendix 1** and agree its onward submission to Cabinet.

Reasons

6. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:
 - (a) The Regulator of Social Housing's new Consumer Standards from April 2024 places a duty on social housing landlords to:
 - (i) Treat our tenants and prospective tenants with fairness and respect, and
 - (ii) Take action to deliver fair and equitable outcomes for our tenants and prospective tenants.
 - (b) The adoption of a formal Vulnerability Policy is one of the ways to demonstrate how we will achieve this.

Anthony Sandys
Assistant Director – Housing and Revenues

Background Papers

Regulator of Social Housing Consumer Standards.

Anthony Sandys: Extension 6926

S17 Crime and Disorder	There is no impact
Health and Wellbeing	Treating our Council tenants with fairness and respect will have a positive impact on their health and well-being
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	There is no impact
Diversity	This policy supports the promotion of diversity amongst our Council tenants
Wards Affected	All wards with Council housing
Groups Affected	Council tenants and leaseholders
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
Council Plan	This report supports the Council plan to ensure we are able to provide our tenants with good quality housing
Efficiency	There are no implications
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

7. Darlington Borough Council provides over 5,300 high quality homes for local residents. We are committed to meeting the diverse needs of our tenants by providing adaptable services, which takes our tenant's, and their household's needs into account, whilst ensuring we meet regulatory and legal requirements.
8. The term 'vulnerabilities' has no standard definition. The Housing Ombudsman's defines vulnerabilities as; *"characteristics that a tenant or household member possesses, either permanently or temporarily, that may mean they need care, support or other reasonable adjustments to complete landlord-tenant transactions such as paying their rent, opening the door to allow a gas safety check. These characteristics may mean that reasonable adjustments are appropriate to actively prevent harm or distress. These can include recognised physical disabilities or mental health issues, but will also include transitory situations, such as financial difficulties or a broken leg"*.
9. The Housing Services Vulnerability Policy 2024-2029 at **Appendix 1** sets out the following aims:
 - (a) To record any vulnerabilities on our ICT systems and keep this up to date.
 - (b) To use all available information to identify if a tenant has vulnerabilities.
 - (c) To ask our tenants to inform us of vulnerabilities, permanent or temporary, within their household, as well as taking a pro-active stance at our interactions with tenants.
 - (d) To take account and evidence that we consider known vulnerability factors in the provision of services and decision making.
 - (e) To assist tenants in accessing additional services that they may need.
 - (f) To record any known representatives who act as a 'delegated authority' or with power of attorney, to act on the tenant's behalf or who the tenant states can access their account on their behalf.
 - (g) To consider any additional needs due to their vulnerability, and where appropriate, vary our service delivery to ensure tenants still receive the same level of service.
 - (h) To make appropriate referrals to our own advice and support teams, such as Housing Plus, Tenancy Sustainment, Lifeline or Social Services, to provide additional support and guidance, where appropriate to do so.
 - (i) To refer to statutory agencies and external support agencies, where appropriate.
 - (j) To make safeguarding referrals whenever needed.

Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) Consumer Standards

10. The RSH has published new consumer standards from April 2024. Under these new standards is a section specifically relating to transparency, influence and accountability, which provides outcomes about how landlords provide information, listen to tenants, and act on their views.
11. Included within this standard, the RSH has stated, “landlords need to have a good understanding of the different tenants that they serve and their diverse needs and provide the right support and access to services to deliver fair and equitable outcomes for tenants”.
12. Our Housing Services Vulnerability Policy will help us demonstrate how we will achieve these new proposed standards.

Outcome of Consultation

13. Our Tenants Panel were consulted in March 2024 and overall, the Panel support the proposed Housing Services Vulnerability Policy. Examples of the Panel’s comments were as follows:
 - (a) “On the whole it is a really good document. Every opportunity is given to vulnerable tenants, while also ensuring they do their part and fulfil their tenancy requirements. As far as I can see, the author of the document has looked at everything I could think of and a lot more besides. A good document and interesting too.”
 - (b) “This is a really excellent policy. It gives a strong message with communication, managing expectations, capturing data and improving awareness. Vulnerability is an ever-increasing area where it is difficult to be mindful and universal, covering all bases. I think the document covers everything very well. It highlights all the legislation covering the guidance and laying the foundation for adequate policy and process to be implemented. I can’t add to the superb document or think of anything that should be changed.”
 - (c) “I’ve read through this, and everything is absolutely fine.”
 - (d) “After questioning about staff having refresher training, I am more than happy with the document. It is well thought out and I have no further suggestions.”