

POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL

5 MARCH 2012

Present :- Councillor Nigel Offen (Chairman)
Councillors Nigel Chapman, Mark Cory,
Margaret Fairley-Crowe, Marcus Harrington,
Lesley Scott-Boutell and Julie Young

14. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2011 were confirmed as a correct record.

Councillor Julie Young (in respect of her spouse being the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

15. Review of Housing Allocations Policy

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Life Opportunities concerning the proposed changes to the Council's Housing Allocations Policy which governed the way in which applicants were prioritised for housing within the Council's Housing Register. These changes were necessary for the Council and its partners in order to address provisions in the Localism Act and also to mitigate the impact of the reforms to the welfare benefit system.

The Panel was invited to consider and make comments on proposed changes to those parts of the Allocations Policy which were under review. Subsequently, following a period of consultation with councillors, customers, housing providers and voluntary and statutory agencies, the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety would approve changes to the policy later in the year.

Councillor T Young, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety attended and, with the approval of the Chairman, addressed the Panel. He was very interested to hear the comments of the Panel members on the proposals and welcomed the Panel's recommendations to the Cabinet.

Matt Sterling, Housing and Communities Manager, and Diane Foley, Housing Options Manager, attended the meeting to assist members in their discussions. Diane delivered a detailed presentation to the Panel setting out the background to the current situation. She explained that a consultation event had been held on 20 January 2012 to which stakeholders of the sub-regional scheme were invited to give their opinions on the proposed changes and the results of that consultation were set out in the report.

The Council has been operating a sub-regional Choice Based Lettings (CBL) system called "Gateway to Homechoice" since May 2009. It was explained that Choice Based

Lettings was a process which gave prospective tenants control over where they would like to live. Homes were advertised weekly on a website which allowed applicants to see properties that were available and bid for available properties which met their requirements. The bidding applicant with the highest need was allocated the property. Additional support was available for the vulnerable or those without access to a computer.

Recently changes to government policy in the form of the Localism Act would remove the requirement for councils to operate an open housing register, which meant councils would be able to decide which categories of people to allow or exclude from its register. The Act also allowed councils to allocate properties to its own tenants outside the allocations scheme.

It was also explained that the welfare reform proposals would also have an impact on the allocations scheme in terms of housing benefit being reduced for working-age tenants in social housing who are living in homes larger than they need. This would bring the housing benefit for social tenants in line with the size entitlements in the private rented sector.

Colchester was part of a larger sub-regional scheme which comprised seven other partner local authorities in Suffolk and Essex. It continued to receive praise for using identical policies, a common computer platform and an agreement which allowed a percentage of tenants to move freely within the eight council areas.

The Choice Based Lettings Project Group had carried out a thorough review of the Allocation Policy and had concluded that most of the current allocations framework remained fit for purpose subject to some changes necessary to address the government policy agenda. Furthermore, there was sufficient flexibility within the policy to cater for the small number of cases where clients with especially complex needs and clients across the five housing priority groups (bands) were reasonably successful in being allocated housing. As such the Project Group had proposed amendments to the existing policy rather than to attempt to agree an entirely new approach.

Councillor Lewis attended and, with the approval of the Chairman, addressed the Panel. She referred to the problem of fathers' access to children following a relationship breakdown being restricted due to inadequate bedroom allocations.

The principle of parents with access arrangements to children living full time with another parent was discussed at great length. Councillor Harrington was of the view that the Council's existing policy whereby responsibility was not accepted for providing a second home for children was discriminatory, it led to value and self esteem problems for children and effectively denied many fathers from adequately parenting their children. Other members of the Panel acknowledged this difficulty but were of the view that there was insufficient accommodation available to provide children with a second home, bearing in mind the numbers of other families who were housed in temporary and bed and breakfast accommodation, waiting to be successful. The circumstances were dependant on the frequency of access arrangements and officers were asked to consider measures which might be possible to assist in circumstances whereby access arrangements were on a shared equally or nearly shared equally basis.

The Panel gave particular consideration to the following issues:-

- The recently announced levels of redundancies, both voluntary and compulsory, from Colchester Garrison and the government's direction that additional Housing Allocation preference must be awarded to former members of the Armed Services;
- The benefits of retaining the Choice Based Approach in terms of flexibility for tenants to move around the region, especially given the higher levels of need in Colchester compared to other authorities in the scheme;
- The need for the introduction of a more sophisticated / interactive online registration process to provide for automated information being provided to applicants as part of the registration process;
- The particular issue of young people who fall into arrears through difficulties in retaining or securing permanent employment;
- The financial difficulties as a result of the housing benefit changes to come into effect in April 2013 leading to benefit reductions where accommodation is deemed too large for household requirements;
- The potential impact on bedroom allocations for families experiencing the earlier onset of puberty, in some instances even as early as 9 years old for some younger people;
- The inability of potential foster parents to seek consideration to act as a foster parent without the required additional bedroom.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that the following comments from the Policy Review and Development Panel on the proposed changes be taken into account when the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety approves the final changes to the Council's Housing Allocation Policy:

(i) That existing arrangements be retained in respect of the following policy areas:

- The operation of a sub-regional Choice Based Lettings system;
- An open register policy, excluding only those people who are not eligible or with a record of serious misconduct;
- Registering but reducing the preference of people with poor tenancy histories;
- Reducing the banding of people from outside Colchester with no local connection;
- Allowing free movement, assuming a balance between inward and outward migration;
- Giving all overcrowded applicants the same priority and use welfare awards in extreme cases;
- Giving higher priority for overcrowding to social housing tenants;
- Allowing under occupiers to bid on one bedroom more than they need when downsizing;
- Giving bedroom entitlement only to those who have children living with them permanently;
- Awarding additional preference on medical or welfare grounds only.

(ii) That in respect of overcrowding, to increase the age limit for a girl and a boy

sharing to when the eldest child reaches 8 years old, with any housing benefit gap being met by the tenant;

(iii) That in respect of children of the same sex, they should share a bedroom but when the eldest reaches 16 years old, in special circumstances such as welfare reasons, consideration may be given to an additional bedroom;

(iv) That the Head of Life Opportunities be requested to investigate measures which might be possible to assist parents with access arrangements where these are on a shared equally or nearly shared equally basis;

(v) That in respect of the expressions of interest in homes, customers be given unlimited choice but, once housed, customers be prevented from re-joining the register for a period of 12 months.

16. Work Programme 2011/12

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Corporate Management giving details of the scheduling in the Panel's work programme for the year.

The report provided an update on the current situation regarding the four Task and Finish Groups. In particular, the Waste and Recycling Task and Finish Group had recently met again to begin the assessment of the results of the Food Waste Trial and the Magistrates' Courts Task and Finish Group had been reconvened to oversee the implementation of the proposals from Council to test the market regarding the future uses of the Magistrates' Courts, Old Library and other surplus space in the Town Hall.

The Panel members were concerned that, notwithstanding the progress made on the whole by the Task and Finish Groups, two meetings of the Policy Review and Development Panel had been cancelled during the year. The members were of the view that they had undertaken some valuable work, particularly in relation to innovative proposals for the lighting of the town centre and the Public Realm Strategy and it would also be worthwhile to revisit the Gypsy and Traveller Policy at the appropriate time.

The Panel was reminded that more recently its remit had been changed by the Cabinet from a scrutiny panel to one effectively undertaking work on behalf of the Cabinet and the Cabinet members.

RESOLVED that the contents of the work programme and the current situation regarding the various Task and Finish Groups be noted.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET that consideration be given to the work of the Policy Review and Development Panel, including its relationship with the various Task and Finish Groups, with a view to a more proactive role in policy related matters being assigned to the Policy Review and Development Panel.