

## **CABINET MEMBER FOR SAFE AND ATTRACTIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS**

**Venue: Town Hall,  
Moorgate Street,  
Rotherham. S60 2TH**

**Date: Monday, 15th October, 2012**

**Time: 10.00 a.m.**

### **A G E N D A**

1. To determine if the following matters are to be considered under the categories suggested, in accordance with the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended March 2006).
2. To determine any item which the Chairman is of the opinion should be considered later in the agenda as a matter of urgency.
3. Allocations Review and Strategic Tenancy Policy Update (Pages 1 - 5)
4. Housing Customer Contact Centre Update (Pages 6 - 11)
5. Date of Next Meeting  
- Monday, 29<sup>th</sup> October at 10.00 a.m.

## ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods</b>
2.	<b>Date</b>	<b>15th October, 2012</b>
3.	<b>Title</b>	<b>Update Position on Allocations Review and Strategic Tenancy Policy</b>
4.	<b>Directorate</b>	<b>Neighbourhoods and Adult Services</b>

**5. Summary**

This report outlines progress and proposals regarding;

- the revision of RMBC's Allocation of Council Housing Policy, and
- RMBC's Strategic Tenancy Policy

This is an interim report, it is anticipated that the final reports will be presented at Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods on 10 December 2012

**6. Recommendations**

- **That Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods consider and comment on the likely proposals**

## 7. Proposals and details

Government's housing strategy, [Laying the foundations: a housing strategy for England](#), was launched November 2012 and has, amongst other objectives, offered social housing landlords greater flexibility and options in allocating and managing their housing stock.

Laying the Foundations and the introduction of the Localism Act, 2011, have prompted Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to;

- Publish a publically available Strategic Tenancy Policy which states its position on issuing fixed term tenancies (also known as temporary or flexible tenancies), and
- Revisit its Allocations Policy, taking into account the option to;
  - a. apply locally determined criteria to its housing register, and
  - b. offer a level of priority to specific groups of applicants

### Strategic Tenancy Policy

Legislation enacted through the Localism Act places a duty on all local authority landlords to produce a Strategic Tenancy Policy. The purpose of this policy is to set out the broad objectives to be taken into consideration by affordable housing providers operating within that local authority area.

Government housing reforms have given social landlords freedoms which allow:

- The issuing of fixed-term tenancies to new tenants if it is deemed to be more appropriate than a permanent secure (lifetime) tenancy
- Landlords to determine the length of the fixed-term tenancy offered to each tenant, on an individual basis
- The development of their own policy setting out the criteria to be used to determine whether or not to reissue a new tenancy at the end of a fixed-term

The Strategic Tenancy Policy must state whether RMBC plans to issue fixed term tenancies, the circumstances in which they would be issued, how tenants can appeal against a fixed term tenancy and what would happen when the fixed term tenancy comes to an end.

Despite the relatively high proportion of council accommodation in the borough there is not enough council housing to meet demand. The potential advantages of offering temporary housing support to a greater number of Rotherham's households, through the use of fixed term tenancies, is acknowledged but the wide spread issuing of fixed term tenancies would not be appropriate for Rotherham: there is an ongoing need to support sustainability in neighbourhoods and issuing fixed term tenancies to households with no long term interest in a community would undermine sustainability.

However, there is one specific circumstance when issuing fixed term tenancies could be beneficial and that is when allocating new tenants to larger, family housing (properties with 4 or more bedrooms).

As of May 2012, RMBC had two hundred and sixty one 4, 5 and 6 bed-roomed houses; 117 (45%) of them house just one occupant. This is clearly an unfortunate position given the high demand for larger family housing:

- 83 families with between 4 and 8 children are currently overcrowded and have a priority to move, and

- 259 families with between 4 and 9 children are currently registered with no priority

The Downsizing Scheme has been successful in facilitating and helping under-occupying households move to 'right-size' properties. The pending changes to welfare benefits have refocused the work of the downsizing officer towards under-occupying working age families (who will lose 14% - 25% of their housing benefit because they live in a social housing property considered to have 'spare' bedrooms). However, the majority of the one person households occupying Rotherham's larger family homes are over 61 years of age and only 2 couples and one single person household, all living in a four bed-roomed home, have agreed to move to smaller properties with the help of the downsizing officer.

In the absence of legislation which would give landlords the option of moving under-occupying households to smaller properties, due consideration should be given to offering longer length, fixed term tenancies for 4, 5 and 6 bed roomed homes; this would enable larger families to have security of tenure whilst their children are still living at home.

- The length of the tenancy would vary depending on the age of the applicant's children, but could extend to an 18 year fixed term tenancy, with the option to offer a second, fixed term tenancy if required (if the household size still warrants the size of the accommodation due to adult children continuing to live with parents)
- Applicants would be aware of the temporary nature of the tenancy prior to bidding through the property's advertisement
- Households would remain RMBC tenants at the close of their temporary tenancy but would be offered a permanent, secure tenancy in a smaller property
  - Where possible, the smaller property would be allocated in the area of their choice

Finally, pressures of the welfare reform's bedroom tax and local housing allowance changes may trigger an increase in under-occupiers (either who work or qualify for welfare benefits) letting out 'spare' rooms. The notion of tenants gaining financially through letting out rooms appears unfair yet there is no legislation to deal with this, in fact, tenants who hold a permanent secure tenancy only need inform the landlord that they are renting rooms and do not need the landlord's permission. Issuing fixed term tenancies for larger properties will limit this practice.

### Revision to RMBC's Allocations Policy

Open housing registers permit anybody, regardless of their current housing situation or ability to meet their own housing needs, to register for council housing. Operating open housing registers has resulted in 4.5 million people, across the country, waiting for social housing, many of whom currently have no realistic chance of being allocated a home. As at 7 September 2012 there were 27,243 applicants on the housing register in Rotherham, with only 1,800 properties being quit and re-let each year; if the number of applicants and the turn-over of properties remained constant it would take over 15 years to house existing applicants.

Rotherham has 27,000 applicants on its housing register yet nearly 20,000 of them have never submitted a bid for a property. Continuing with an open register is likely to

see this group of applicants increase, as will the costs associated with administering and reviewing them.

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council would like due consideration to be given to the application of locally determined criteria to its housing register in order to:

- Manage the 73% (nearly 20,000) applicants who are registered but do not bid for properties
- Save resources in sending out annual review letters
- Cut down on time spent administering and processing application forms from households who do not require rehousing
- Effectively manage the expectations of households applying for council housing, and
- Better meet the social housing needs of its residents

Potential options for Rotherham to manage its waiting lists (and the expectations of applicants) and to ensure best use of its housing stock could include;

- a) Moving applicants who are not in housing need onto a non-active register which would reduce administration costs by not undertaking an annual review and not accruing waiting time. Non active applicants would be offered housing advice and could have their application moved back on to the active register, without having to complete another form, should their circumstances change.
- b) Consider not accepting applications from households who are already adequately housed and do not meet the statutory or locally determined criteria. These households could include homeowners who submit an application 'just in case' or so they can secure a council home on retirement and sell their current home or gift it to family.
- c) Granting transfers for existing tenants only when they are in housing need or when the transfer would benefit RMBC
- d) Offering a level of priority to low income households to assist households who are struggling to manage in private rented accommodation but who do not meet a statutory need.

### **7.1. Next Steps**

The Revision to Allocations Policy and the Strategic Tenancy Policy reports are expected to be presented as follows;

- Tuesday, 6 November 2012 to DLT
- Wednesday, 28 November 2012 to Improving Places Select
- Monday, 10 December 2012 to Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods
- Monday, 10 December 2012 to SLT
- Wednesday, 19 December 2012 to Cabinet

### **8. Finance**

Applying locally determined criteria to Rotherham's housing waiting would:

- lead to a decrease in the number of families in temporary accommodation and the associated costs
- end the annual reviews of the housing register at a cost of £9,995 per annum (5p printing, 50p postage x 19,991)
- prompt the distribution of a summary booklet for existing and new applicants - this would incur a one-off cost of around 55p per applicant
- mean changes to the ICT system which supports allocations – most changes could be done in-house

### Strategic Tenancy Policy

Issuing fixed term tenancies for larger family homes would;

- require officer time to support the tenants' with their rehousing towards the end of their fixed term tenancies
- possibly result in a slight increase in the turn over of a small proportion of Rotherham's larger family homes

### **9. Risks and uncertainties**

- When long term fixed term tenancies come to an end the procedure of notifying tenants and supporting their downsizing must be followed – the consequences of not following procedure could lead to successful appeals and complaints
- Continuing to operate an open housing register is likely to:
  - see the number of applicants, and the annual housing register 'cleansing' costs, balloon
  - leave families in the greatest need, who are struggling to meet their housing costs, with little or chance of securing a council property in the short to medium term

### **10. Policy and performance agenda implications**

- Corporate Plan – Making sure no community is left behind
- Strategic Housing Investment Service Plan, 2012-2013 - We will publish a new housing strategy, a comprehensive asset management and area investment strategy
- Housing Strategy
  - Commitment 2, we will ensure our Council housing meets the needs of the people of Rotherham
  - Commitment 6, we will help people to access the housing related support they need, particularly people in financial hardship and at risk of homelessness, and
  - Commitment 8, we will help people in Rotherham's most disadvantaged communities

### **11. Background papers and consultation**

- Rotherham metropolitan Borough Council's Housing Allocations Policy, December 2008 (updated February 2011)
- [Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England.](#) CLG, November 2011

The consultation for both allocations and the issuing of fixed term tenancies was included with the Housing Strategy consultation programme. This ran from June to September 2012 and specific workshops and questions around operating an open housing register and permanent secure tenancies were held throughout that consultation. An on-line questionnaire was also completed by 51 respondents.

### **12. Contact details**

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**ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS**

1.	<b>Meeting:</b>	<b>Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods</b>
2.	<b>Date:</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> October 2012</b>
3.	<b>Title:</b>	<b>Housing Customer Contact Centre Update</b>
4.	<b>Directorate:</b>	<b>Neighbourhoods and Adult Services</b>

**5. Summary**

The Housing Customer Contact Centre has recently experienced a number of operational difficulties which have negatively impacted upon the delivery of customer services to agreed service standards and performance.

This report identifies the key issues which have impacted upon the service and the remedial actions that have been implemented.

**6. Recommendations**

**That the Cabinet Member notes the content of the report and the actions that have been implemented to restore levels of service delivery and performance.**

## **7. Proposals and Details**

### **7.1 Background**

Housing enquires are currently channelled through three routes. Repairs issues are dealt with by Connect, (the former RBT service), repairs calls after 8pm are dealt with by Rothercare and the Housing Customer Contact Centre, based within Riverside House, handles customer enquiries on a range of other(non-repairs) housing issues. In addition to call handling the Customer Service Assistant's (CSA's) in the Contact Centre also provide administrative support for defined areas of the service, including Rent Recovery, Key Choices and Housing Management . In order to do this effectively, staff are trained extensively on all aspects of the services they support.

### **7.2 Service delivery issues**

During recent months the Housing Customer Contact Centre has faced numerous key challenges that have negatively impacted upon the delivery of services to customers and the standards of service and performance that we are committed to.

The key issues impacting upon the service have been as follows:-

- High levels of staff turnover amongst the Customer Services Assistants (CSA's) with highly skilled staff securing employment elsewhere in the organisation as a result of vacancies arising from the re-organisation of the housing service post re-integration with 2010 Ltd. To date 11 CSA's from a staff compliment of 24 have left the team to take up alternative employment opportunities within other areas of the service/Council, and as a result there are currently 6 vacancies. Whilst this has seen positive progression for experienced and skilled staff and the retention of key skills and knowledge within the service/Council, it has resulted in a steady loss of experienced capacity within the contact centre.
- Recruitment processes to replace capacity within the service have tried to keep pace with staff turnover, but this has proved difficult to achieve. Predominantly recruitment has been geared towards internal recruitment, in support of wider Council change processes, which has not always delivered the quantity or acceptable calibre of candidate to undertake this challenging role. In addition, as with any recruitment into posts, there is a period of training and development required to optimise performance from new staff members.
- Changes in customer access arrangements, particularly the alignment of other service area contact arrangements, such as Key Choices, into the housing contact centre has created increased call volumes by around 25 - 40%.

In general, a constantly changing staff position, coupled with increasing call volumes has resulted in a significant decline in performance.

### **7.2 Mitigation**



The following measures were implemented in order to address service pressures and restore standards of service and service delivery.

- Analysing call volumes/peak times and deploying CSA's tactically to cover peak call handling times, whilst maintaining an acceptable level of capacity focussing on other work streams, such as general administration.
- Analysing CSA skill sets and individual performance and deploying staff to ensuring the most proficient call handlers are being deployed to call handling.
- Maximising call handler availability by managing associated administrative tasks more effectively. In effect, diverting more complex administrative functions arising from customer contact, to back office staff, freeing up the call handler.
- Managing vacancy levels effectively to ensure all vacancies were filled soon after they became available.
- Changing the telephone messaging service script to offer customers a wider range of options to access services, including the website.
- Ensuring that CSA's working in the Customer Service Centres have clear priorities and ongoing guidance from supervisors/management in respect of call handling.
- Reviewing call handling processes to ensure customers are, as far as possible, dealt with effectively at the first point of contact, whilst recognising that some enquiries may have to be redirected and if so, in a timely manner.
- Managing day to day issues such as leave and secondment requests in a way which is both conducive to maintaining good working relationships, but also reflecting the demands of the service.

Whilst these measures initially began reversing the situation and performance began to improve, staffing pressures again began to negatively impact on performance. During September, it was becoming clear that operational solutions from within the contact centre team alone were no longer sufficient to deal with the situation. As such, resources from other parts of the service would have to be redeployed into customer contact. This resulted in the following further measures being put in place.

- Withdrawing CSA's from the Councils Customer Service Centres to provide additional capacity to support more effective call handling. This was supported by the provision of customer freephone access within CSC's direct to the contact centre, support from corporate customer services staff and housing operational staff based within the centres.
- Drawing on staffing support from other areas of the service to support call handling and administration.

- Exploring all possible routes to recruit staff capacity as rapidly as possible.
- Drawing on potential additional capacity through offering overtime and additional hours opportunities to staff within the service.
- Re-organising call management to direct calls specifically for Key Choices to be managed within that service.
- Drawing on Housing Champions on a rota basis, to provide cover for the Customer Contact Centre service to help maintain service delivery.
- Continuing to review operational processes and working practices, to ensure they are as efficient as possible to maximise service outputs.
- Continuing to tightly managing operational issues such as sickness absence and annual leave requests, based upon the needs of the service.
- Week on week rota system identifying staff availability and potential pressure points, ensuring that additional capacity can be assembled in a timely and effective manner.

### 7.3 Impact

Following implementation of these actions, performance has improved significantly with reductions in abandoned call ratios and call waiting times.

The table below provides a snapshot of performance prior to (late September) and since implementation of the measures above.

Date	Incoming Calls	Calls Answered	Calls Abandoned (by caller) %	Average Delay before answering (Mins)
28/09/2012	563	342	39.25	8.25
01/10/2012	738	561	23.98	3.44
02/10/2012	480	438	8.54	1.25
03/10/2012	616	571	7.75	1.16
04/10/2012	484	458	5.37	1.20
05/10/2012	460	409	11.09	1.37
08/10/2012	794	770	3.02	.04
09/10/2012	483	475	1.24	.15

### 7.4 The role of Housing Champions

Perhaps the most decisive measure that has been introduced to improve performance has been the decision to call upon the Housing Champions to support the Customer Contact Centre. Whilst this creates an added pressure elsewhere, the rota arrangements have sought to minimise the impact on individuals and other work streams. The current arrangements are not

envisaged to be long term but to maintain staffing capacity within the contact centre until such time that it can sustain operations with its own staff resources.

In addition to providing call handling services the CSA's primary role is to provide administrative support services to specialist front line officers including the Housing Champions. By moving the Housing Champions into the Customer Contact Centre a number of other opportunities and benefits have also presented themselves including:

- Improved access to services for customers – customers are now able to access advice from a Housing Champion at the first point of contact rather than have to schedule appointments. This process is contributing to increased call resolution at the first point of contact.
- Improving the overall awareness and understanding of roles and responsibilities between Housing Champions and Customer Service Assistants. This experience will be utilised to deliver more effective support processes.
- Generating a much clearer understanding about the processes that are in place and the role each respective officer plays in making sure the service functions efficiently and the customers experience is positive.
- Providing opportunities for CSA's, particularly the more inexperienced staff to gain on the job experience from their more experienced counterparts. This is particularly important for a service where the training opportunities have become limited due to operational pressures. Added capacity enables an opportunity to exploit every opportunity to improve staff skills and capability.
- Providing opportunities to create efficiencies in the service by identifying and removing any possible duplication between the respective roles of the CSA's and the Housing Champions.

The current arrangements are working extremely well from a call handling perspective, performance levels are improving and the contact centre team is responding well to the added support being provided. Recruitment to the outstanding vacancies has commenced and it is anticipated that appointments to outstanding vacancies will be made during the next few weeks. The situation is being monitored on a daily basis with regular reporting to senior management.

### **8. Finance**

There are no immediate financial implications. Operational arrangements are being managed within agreed service budgets.

### **9. Risks and Uncertainties**

Recruitment processes are ongoing. However, the success of recruitment will be dictated by how the job market responds to the vacancies. We are confident

that in the current climate, the posts will attract solid interest, particularly from applicants external to the Council.

Utilising Housing Champions may impact on other key work streams such as ASB management and tenancy and estate management. Adopting a rota approach working around Housing Champions existing commitments will help mitigate this as far as possible.

Without these interim arrangements the main risk to the business would be that customers wanting to access the services via the Customer Contact Centre would simply not have their calls dealt with within the prescribed timescales. It is felt that the arrangements that have been put in place will deliver the required outcomes for all of the Councils customers with the minimum disruption.

Providing poor customer services at first point of contact will negatively impact upon customer perceptions of the service and the Council as a whole.

### **10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications**

Supporting our customers and particularly the most vulnerable, through the provision of high quality responsive services at first point of contact.

### **11. Background Papers and Consultation**

Daily performance statistics relating to the Customer Contact Centre are held by the Customer Contact Centre Manager.

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