

**COUNCIL SEMINAR
21st April, 2015**

Present:- Councillor Sims (in the Chair); Councillors Ahmed, Andrews, Atkin, Beaumont, Buckley, Ellis, Godfrey, Gosling, J. Hamilton, N. Hamilton, Reeder, Wallis, Whelbourn, Whysall and Wyatt.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors The Mayor (Councillor M.Clark), Currie, Hoddinott and Jepson.

LOCAL LETTINGS POLICY CHANGES.

Councillor K. Sims, Advisory Cabinet Member, welcomed all present and thanked them for attending the seminar. Dave Richmond, Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods, and Sandra Tolley, Housing Options Manager, had prepared a presentation for all Elected Members relating to changes that were required in the Council's Allocations Policy. The presentation covered why the why the Policy needed to change and how the Council would manage lettings in the future.

A background to Rotherham's Local Lettings Policy (2008) was provided.

South Yorkshire Police had communicated that they would no longer be performing blanket background checks following implications of Data Protection in 2015 prohibiting landlords from obtaining details. Data would only be shared for very good policing issues. The letting of properties was not considered an appropriate function.

This had led to Rotherham's voids increasing from its usual comparatively low level. Whilst Rotherham had not been above 200 voids at any one time over the past three years, the current level was 340. There were now voids that could not be let because of the stall in process.

Sandra Tolley explained how the lettings process relied on customers being truthful in their applications. They signed a declaration and the Council's Housing Officers were obliged to tell customers that it was a criminal offence to withhold information. There were local databases, local intelligence and police attendance at meetings, which could be used to determine whether applicants were a good fit for the properties and tenancies they had applied to.

Customers/applicants were referred to the requirement for truthful applications to be made a number of times throughout the process.

The Service was currently concerned about issues of affordable tenancies, particularly with regards to single, younger tenants. Credit checks on all applicants were undertaken to ensure they were affordable before being signed.

Work would continue with Areas Managers to agree sensitive areas where vulnerable individuals would not be moved to.

Discussion and questions on the areas presented followed: -

- Councillor N. Hamilton – reported incidents where local Champions' opinions were not taken account of when it came to letting properties. Dave Richmond explained how the joint process was conducted when assigning tenancies.
- Councillor Wyatt – supported the need to reduce voids as quickly as possible as it was not providing a value for money service;
- Councillor Atkin – asked what support was available for vulnerable clients who may not understand the application process and the requirement for full disclosure – Sandra Tolley explained the DVD that had been produced to explain expectations and requirements. Group sign-ups were held in an informal and relaxed atmosphere. The Service was working with 'Speak Up' to ensure that bespoke information was available in the best formats for more vulnerable clients;
- Councillor Ellis asked for more information about the policy relating to new builds and age-limits;
- Councillor J. Hamilton asked about legal processing delays that prolonged court cases from getting to a court hearing, often prolonging anguish for neighbours;
- Councillor Whelbourn spoke about the role that scrutiny should have in scrutinising performance relating to voids and the issues reported at the seminar;
- Councillor Andrews asked about support for customers who were in nursing homes. How did their entitlement to housing benefit change? - Sandra Tolley explained that they were entitled to housing benefit for six-months. Following this their tenancy would be kept open wherever it was intended they would return home. Their property would be classed as empty but not void;
- Councillor Wyatt asked about the process of introductory tenancies. - Dave Richmond explained that there were no changes. The Council did not provide references;
- Councillor Ellis spoke about the importance of there being deterrents against applicants not being truthful in their applications, and the enhanced role a specialist solicitor would bring to this process and Service;
- Councillor Ellis asked for clarification on what tenancy agreements specified in relation to visitors and lodgers? – Dave Richmond confirmed that tenancy agreements stated that written permission must be sought for lodgers;
- Councillor Wallis asked about the implications of the Data Protection requirements for the Council sharing information with the police in an effort to stop the pathway to more serious criminality. – Sandra Tolley explained that this was a different part of the Act and would not be impacted.

Councillor Sims thanked Dave Richmond and Sandra Tolley for their informative presentation and contribution to the discussion.

Resolved: - That the information shared be noted.