

**COUNCIL SEMINAR
26th November, 2013**

Present:- Councillor McNeely (in the Chair); Councillors Ahmed, Atkin, Beaumont, Buckley, Falvey, Godfrey, Goulty, J. Hamilton, N. Hamilton, Kaye, McNeely, Read, Sims and Whelbourn.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clark, Ellis, Lelliott, Pitchley and Smith.

PROPOSED HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY CHANGES.

Members received a presentation from Sandra Tolley (Housing Options Manager) about the proposed changes to the Council's housing allocations policy. The review of the policy had begun during the Autumn 2012 and the revised policy would be implemented during the Summer, 2014, subject to Council approval.

The presentation included the following salient issues:-

- there are 25,000 Council houses;
- outcome of the consultation process
- increasing demand for social housing;
- ensuring the allocation of housing to people who are in the greatest need;
- implications of relevant legislation – Housing Act 1996; Homelessness Act 2002 and the local rules afforded by the Localism Act 2011;
- the Council's fair and flexible policy (amended in January 2010);
- the operation of the 'open' Housing Register;
- naming of the groups – Priority plus; Priority; General plus and General - re-title the groups to numbered groups 1, 2 and 3;
- the view that Council housing should be available for local people;
- the use of the qualifying criteria, to join the Housing Register – the view of
- the coalition Government that people should have a local connection before
- being allocated a Council house (there are some limited exceptions to this
- rule);
- other qualifying criteria (e.g.: service tenancies, where accommodation is
- provided as part of a contract of employment);
- tenants seeking to transfer to another Council house, who have breaches of their tenancy agreement; the rules relating to applications for transfer;
- specific rules relating to Armed Forces personnel;
- rent arrears policy – changing the '13 weeks' rule to one where tenants having to reduce their rent arrears by 25% before being considered for transfer;

- no longer undertaking annual reviews;
- encouraging tenants to pay rent by either direct debit or standing order;
- means of ensuring that tenants are able to afford paying rent, so as to achieve long-term, sustainable lettings;
- the implications of the coalition Government's under-occupancy Rules (the 'bedroom tax,);
- communicating the policy changes effectively, including the use of Internet communications and public 'drop-in' sessions;
- the use of the Council's ICT systems for processing applications for housing tenancies.

After the presentation, Members discussed the following issues:-

- the proportion of persons from outside the Borough area who obtain a housing tenancy with the Council;
- the implications of the coalition Government's Welfare Reforms;
- public consultation about the proposed changes to the allocations policy, which has been very wide-ranging;
- people who accept tenancies of properties in the private rented sector may be removed from the Council's Housing Register; such persons may be re-registered after two years, in accordance with legislation relating to homelessness;
- tenants who wish to move to smaller properties (referred to as 'down-sizing');
- such tenants will be categorized in Band 1;
- confirmation that housing need is the priority in terms of allocation;
- the role of the Housing Assessment Panel and appeals against the refusal of applications for housing tenancies;
- capacity issues – affecting the type(s) of properties for which tenants and prospective tenants apply;
- comparisons with the housing allocations policies of registered social landlords;
- issues concerning people who move house very frequently;
- the needs of vulnerable people and families and also of people who have specific medical conditions and needs;
- the 'local connection' refers to people already living within the Rotherham Borough area – and have done so for a continuous period of three years;
- communicating the policy changes and publishing a fact-sheet which will dispel and incorrect myths and rumours about the allocations policy;
- the practice of the private rented sector in offering initial housing tenancies only for a period of six months, rather than twelve months;
- the Council's proposed policy for the registration of private-sector landlords;
- tenants registered with the Rotherham Bond Guarantee Scheme Limited (the ROBOND homeless charity) and their applications for tenancies in the private rented sector;

- the division of rent arrears debts between persons who have separated and who owe Council housing rent arrears.

Mrs. Tolley was thanked for her informative presentation.