Housing and Public Health Policy Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Public Health Policy Committee of South Norfolk Council held at South Norfolk House, Long Stratton on Tuesday 2 July 2013 at 2.00pm.

Committee Members Present: Councillors L Neal (Chairman), N Legg, K Smith, S Thomson and G Walden

Apologies: Councillors T Palmer and N Ward

Officers in Attendance: The Housing and Public Health Manager (Martyn Swann), the Housing Standards Manager (Tony Cooke), the Housing Strategy Manager (Keith Mitchell), and (for part of the meeting) the Revenues and Benefits Manager (Amanda Adams)

14 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held 4 March 2013 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Arising from Minute No. 8, the Housing Standards Manager provided the Committee with an update on the Empty Homes Programme. Members noted that following responses to two mailings to owners of empty properties, officers had been able to change some categories of properties to second homes and had identified one or two situations where future enforcement proceedings might be necessary. The Housing Standards Manager reminded members that South Norfolk Council might consider either Compulsory Purchase Orders or Forced Market Sales to resolve extreme cases where properties remained empty and where owners could not be traced.

In response to a member’s question, the Housing Standards Manager stated that he would provide feedback to the Committee regarding the success rate of the scheme so far and what impact the mailings and follow-up procedures had made on the number of empty homes remaining in the South Norfolk area.

Arising from Minute No. 11, members were informed that the Gypsy and Traveller Strategy was being re-drafted and that there was no further progress to report.
15 UPDATES FROM INFORMAL MEETINGS HELD 7 MAY AND 6 JUNE 2013

Home Options:
The Housing and Public Health Manager advised the Committee that the Home Options Policy Review Workshop on 7 May 2013 had been well attended by members, representatives of the Council’s partner registered providers, and support providers. He stated that it had been agreed that the policy introduced in April 2012 had worked well in embracing the Localism Bill, prioritising local residents and those in housing need, plus it had demonstrated a commitment to supporting the Armed Forces. He added that the high level of applicants housed (39%) was an indication that the changes had been effective, informing members that the number on the housing register had reduced from 3482 (January 2012) to 692 applicants. Members were informed that the results of the discussions would be collated to enable the Council to identify whether recommendations would suggest a policy or operational change.

The Committee noted that, in addition to the new allocations policy, other improvements made following a LEAN review and the implementation of a new IT system had all made a positive impact on Home Options in the South Norfolk area. A concern was raised by a member that the printing font of the new IT system had been too small to read at homelessness reviews and officers agreed to feed this concern back to the system developers.

Affordable Housing Grants:
Members discussed the new process for determining Affordable Housing Grants. It was agreed that it had been helpful to hold a meeting to discuss the first three cases but that future cases would usually be decided by email. Officers confirmed that Cabinet would need to decide whether to roll over the scheme to the next financial year and that, although the funding levels were unknown, it could be assumed that the New Homes Bonus would increase year on year.

16 POSITIVE OUTCOMES

The Housing Standards Manager advised the Committee that the number of completed affordable homes was now 215 with a total of approximately 500 expected by March 2014. Members agreed that affordable housing was much needed as many young people were unable to raise the high deposits needed to purchase their own homes.

Members were advised that the Handyperson Scheme had received many enquiries and was also attracting interest from health workers.

The Housing and Public Health Manager reported that there had been no cases of repeat homelessness in the last year and that very low levels were expected in the current year. He stressed that through officers working hard to build good working relationships with partners, many cases of homelessness had been prevented.
17 PUBLIC HEALTH

The Housing and Public Health Manager provided members with an update on the Council’s work with the South Norfolk Clinical Commissioning Group and the Health and Wellbeing Board. He explained to the committee that officers, together with Cllr Yvonne Bendle, had been proactively involved in the early stages of the new structures by representing South Norfolk Council at meetings and workshops to build strong relationships for joint working with partners. He further stressed the importance of achieving quick successes as well as working together on larger projects.

It was suggested and agreed that a representative from the South Norfolk Clinical Commissioning Group be invited to a future meeting of the Housing and Public Health Committee.

The Housing and Public Health Manager advised members that he had attended a Welfare Reform meeting which had proved useful and which had highlighted the need to take an evidence based view of Welfare Reform. The Committee was advised that a report on Welfare Reform was to be presented at the next meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board.

Members were advised that ten towns, two of which were in South Norfolk, had been identified to take part in a community-led health improvement programme. The towns, Wymondham and Diss, were currently in stage 1 of the programme and it was suggested that a representative from the scheme be invited to a future meeting of the Health and Public Health Committee so that members could become more involved in the project.

18. WELFARE REFORM

The Revenues and Benefits Manager provided members with an update on the progress of three major Welfare Reform changes affecting the Council; the removal of the spare room subsidy (commonly referred to as the Bedroom Tax), the change from Council Tax Benefit to Council Tax Support, and the introduction of the Benefits Cap.

The removal of the spare room subsidy (Bedroom Tax):
Members noted that 718 people in social housing would be affected by the removal of the spare room subsidy in South Norfolk. It was confirmed that only people of working age would be affected by the changes which would result in a cut of 14% of benefit if the tenant had one extra bedroom and a cut of 25% of benefit if they had two or more extra bedrooms. The Revenues and Benefits Manager advised members that a discretionary hardship fund would be available from the DWP which could provide help as a short term measure. She advises that hardship applications to the Council had increased ten-fold, on the same period for last year, in the three months since the scheme had been implemented. She added that officers were working with partners to determine affordability for those customers applying for assistance.
Council Tax Support:
Members were advised that, due to a Government initiative to limit the cut to Council Tax Support, the impact on customers had been less than expected. It was confirmed that over 2000 residents in South Norfolk had been asked to pay Council Tax who had not been liable in the previous year. The Revenues and Benefits Manager advised members that the average bill for those residents was £75.96 per year. The Committee was informed that 70% of them had started to make payments and although the number of reminders sent had risen from 3% to 5% of households on the previous year, this could also be attributed to other changes made to Council Tax.

Benefits Cap:
Members were informed that the Benefits Cap would come into force from 15 July 2013 but the changes would be implemented gradually. The Committee noted that 33 families would be affected by the cap and that these were mostly Saffron Housing tenants. The Revenues and Benefits Manager advised members that the Council was working jointly on a pilot with Saffron Housing, the Credit Union and Job Centre Plus to manage the changes.

Members passed on their thanks to the Revenues and Benefits Manager and her team.

19. HOUSING STRATEGY - HORIZON SCANNING FEEDBACK
The Housing and Public Health Manager presented a report which provided members with officer responses to the issues raised during the Horizon Scanning session for the Housing Strategy at the meeting of the Housing and Public Health Committee on 4 March 2013. He spoke of the changing concept of Housing and Public Health and of the importance of concentrating resources on prevention of hardship and early intervention in order to protect the vulnerable and those in need of assistance.

20. DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS
As Cllr Yvonne Bendle was unable to attend the meeting, the Housing Standards Manager delivered a presentation to members which provided details of the recent District Council’s Network (DCN) event on Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs), which he had attended with Cllrs Bendle and Neal. The Committee was advised that South Norfolk Council (SNC) had spent £865.8K in the last year on adapting homes and making them suitable for the needs of residents, £385K of which was funded by DFGs.

The Committee was informed that previously, a complicated system that involved many procedures and departments had made the application process for DFGs difficult and stressful for residents, and it was concerned to note that the average time to process an application had been 468 days.

The Housing Standards Manager advised members that, following a report by the Audit Commission which identified a lack of strategy in the process for administering DFGs, a group of Strategic Housing Officers had been set up to highlight the issues and to improve and simplify the system. As a result of this project, an Integrated Housing Adaptation Team (IHAT) was established which would enable all issues regarding DFGs to be managed in-house through co-location of SNC and Norfolk County Council staff. The Committee was advised that since the IHAT had been in place, they were receiving 30-50 calls per month and that DFGs had been processed in as little as 70 working days.

The DCN had produced good practice guidance following the event and the Norfolk practice of co-location had been made their first recommendation.
21. **FUEL POVERTY**

The Housing Standards Manager provided members with an update on the progress of the Fuel Poverty Strategy, advising that funding had been received for the two Green Deal initiatives discussed at a previous meeting of the Housing and Public Health Committee.

Members were informed that councils had been ranked as the top preferred source of energy advice and information in a recent customer survey.

The Committee was advised that Cllr Yvonne Bendle had attended many local events and had been actively promoting the Switch and Save scheme through newspapers and radio. Concerns were raised that although 69% of residents had indicated an interest in the scheme, only a small number of those had registered. The Housing Standards Manager confirmed that a further meeting had been arranged to discuss the way forward with the scheme.

22. **WORK PROGRAMME**

Members noted and approved the latest version of the Housing and Public Health Policy Committee Work Programme, with the addition of a member of the Clinical Commissioning Group being invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee.

23. **DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

Members noted the dates of future meetings.

The meeting closed at 4.07pm

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Chairman

Housing & Public Health Policy Committee – SE 2 July 2013