

Northampton Borough Council

Northampton Disabled People's Forum

Tuesday, 17 July 2012

Officers at the meeting

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair and Co Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Those present were;-

Cllr Phil Larratt – Chair
Martin de Rosario – Co - Chair
Ann Timson
Cllr Bev Mennell
Cllr M Markham
David Smith (NAB/Individual)
Larry Barber (Individual)
Barbara Barber (Individual)
Christine Woodhams (Individual)
Bill Broadribb (Individual)
Faith Broadribb (Individual)
Primrose Landstowne (Individual)

L Ambrose Equalities Officer

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Graeme Wilson and Rasmi Shah.

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 24 April 2012 were agreed.

Councillor Mennell made a tribute to Jack Ashley, Baron Ashley of Stoke, who died recently, he was a long serving labour politician and a long-time campaigner for disabled people.

4. HOUSING ALLOCATIONS SCHEME CONSULTATION

Ian Swift, Housing Solutions Manager gave a presentation on the consultation on the proposed changes to the Housing Allocations scheme.

He explained that since July 2008 Northampton has operated a choice based letting scheme and overseen 4,000 lettings. This has proved very popular and achieved an 84% customer satisfaction and best performance in benchmarking exercises. However, this council, alongside all others will have to change its scheme in light of

the welfare benefit changes. Existing tenancies will not be affected.

The proposed welfare benefit changes will affect those people claiming housing benefit, who are of working age and who are currently occupying a property that is larger than their needs. There are changes in criteria for those who have additional requirements with regard to fostering/ adopting children.

Currently there are 9,200 people on the Northampton waiting list. This includes people from all over the world.

A 16 week consultation on proposed changes has just started and the presentation to the forum was one of 37 consultation events currently scheduled.

The main proposed changes were: -

- Reduction of bands from 5 to 3
- Additional priority for working households
- Additional priority for voluntary work
- Government has determined that there should be priority for armed forces personnel. Wider exclusions from the housing register
- Clearer local connections criteria
- Refusal of 3 properties excluded in the future.

In reality housing is an increasingly scarce resource and it has to be accepted that customers currently on band C and D will not have any chance of being housed. Therefore this needs to be made clear to the applicants, who can then be assisted to make proper alternative housing provision.

The aim is to reduce the housing register from 9,200 to 4,500. Part of this will be achieved by concentrating on the top two bands and also there will be the introduction of local connections, for example people who have lived in Northampton for 3 years out of the previous 5. Currently there are 5000 applications a month and only 70 lettings a month.

There are proposals for tenancy checks before being allowed to join the Housing Register and potential tenants may be excluded if they have caused damage to properties or being convicted of committing hate crimes for example.

There is also a proposed reduction in the amount of time that a person will be housed in emergency accommodation.

The allocations scheme has been assessed by a housing barrister and is following national best practice.

The key point was that this scheme is currently out for consultation and every effort is being made to involve as many people as possible. Consultation packs have gone out to everyone currently on the Housing Register.

A view was expressed that the new benefit proposals could be seen as discriminatory to working age people

In answer to questions Ian commented that: -

The discretionary level of funding for Local Authorities has not yet been determined, although there would be £30 million allocated throughout the country. Currently the Borough has £136,000 to spend on discretionary housing benefit payments.

In some new developments on the edge of the borough allocations to affordable housing will be made in proportion to the councils who are involved in the development. For example that could be Daventry, Northampton Borough council and South Northants,

In response to a question about older people occupying larger properties. It was pointed out that there is an incentive scheme paying £5000 per bedroom that is released and £300 removal fees for those that move into smaller accommodation. It was considered that this is not well known and Ian commented that there would be an information campaign with letters sent out with August rent letters.

Councillor Markham, as Cabinet member with responsibility for housing, urged everyone to attend consultation events and make their views known.

5. TENANCY STRATEGY CONSULTATION

Gary Parsons, Strategy and Performance Manager gave a presentation on the Council tenancy strategy and policy.

The Localism Act requires councils to have a Tenancy Strategy by 15th January 2013. There are also new regulatory standards requiring social landlords to have a tenancy policy.

The Tenancy Strategy will affect new tenants, it will cover all the relevant housing providers in Northampton and the aim is to make the best use of existing stock.

The Strategy is required to cover a number of issues:-

The main changes are

- The Introductory Tenancy Strategy will remain at 12 months.
- Currently, if appropriate a secure lifetime tenancy is then offered. Proposed a lifetime tenancy would be older tenants and disabled. Other households would be offered a five year fixed term.
- After five years there would be a review and may not be renewed if a property was under occupied, there was a change to household make up or income or the property was no longer suitable for the tenants needs.
- There would be a exceptional circumstances where a tenancy may be shortened.
- Currently it was proposed that those people on mobility levels 1 and 2 would still be offered secure tenancies.

The main points of the discussion were as follows:-

Not all disabilities were physical mobility problems. It was accepted that there were

many different forms of disability and that was one area where feedback is particularly needed. It is not the intention to discriminate against any particular disability. It was also accepted that disability could be due to mental health issues.

It was emphasised that know the consultation documents are being sent to as many individuals as possible and there are a wide range of events, but members were urged to let officers know if there were housebound or vulnerable people who they felt might be excluded and officers will try and set up special visits.

There was also some concern at the appropriateness of some existing tenancies and whether special needs tenants should be housed in high rise blocks etc. Consideration should be given to other tenants when allocating tenancies. Officers responded that needs are considered but that the shortage of suitable accommodation has led to some compromises.

It was questioned whether physical disabilities were being focussed on because of structural requirements of a property but this is only one element. It was considered that there should be not just be relying on consultation feedback but getting a professional Equality Impact Assessment of changes to different groups. There will be equality impact assessments done on all of the current consultations and there would be an over arching equality impact assessment as well.

There is a comprehensive data base being used to contact individuals to inform them about the consultation, and dedicated helpline and web pages. Again members were asked to encourage as many people as possible to engage with the consultation.

6. SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW CONSULTATION

The Sheltered Housing Review consultation was presented by Jo Osborn.

About 18 months ago there was a Chartered Institute of Housing review on both sheltered housing accommodation and the support supplied to sheltered housing tenants. This identified the need to review the sheltered housing service. This consultation is about what the council believe to be the best possible option to improve that. Funding through the Supporting People scheme has also been reduced

The consultation continues to 24 September 2012 and everyone is encouraged to take part.

At the moment, support is only given to sheltered housing residents, so 95% of residents of Northampton cannot access the service. There are inflexible levels of support provided even though some people may have varying health and disability needs. People may just get a visit once a month, others 3 times a week, others every day with a very few getting a more intensive visiting regime. People in real need may not get as much help and quality of help as required, while other people get more help than they need – because the system is too inflexible.

There are increasing numbers of elderly and disabled people in Northampton.

Although many people want to stay living in their own homes, the current sheltered housing service only helps those who have moved into the council's sheltered housing.

Things need to change and improve to help more people and to help people more appropriately.

There are community rooms across the Borough, many of those are under-used but could be a good space for people in the community to use and help toward tackling feelings of isolation.

The proposal is that everyone would have an assessment and support would be tailored to fit the needs of an individual. The service would be expanded to include other people not just those living in sheltered accommodation. This would be a benefit to those who wanted to stay in their own home. The service could also be flexible to cover periods where there may be more intense support required for example recovery after a hospital stay.

This would also interact with other services, so an assessment would look at any gaps in the provision of services or indeed any duplications.

As the scheme would no longer be restricted to those in sheltered housing it would require an alternative title and it was proposed that the term Independent Living be used.

5,000 information packs have been sent out to all those currently in sheltered housing or waiting for sheltered accommodation, 500 have been returned.

Members of the forum commented that wardens were often too busy to spend quality time with tenants and it would be better if they were able to target those who required it.

As there are potential implications for the sheltered housing co ordinators they have been asked not to actual complete questionnaires on behalf of tenants, but to refer them to the Gateway Support Officers.

The system of emergency pull cords was also discussed. Currently some properties have a pull cord system, with emergency cords in each room. These systems are reaching the end of their practical life. If they fail there is no warning system. Therefore it was proposed to move over fully to the pendant lifeline system whereby people carry a device with them which when triggered makes a call to the central lifeline support team.

It was also pointed out that some schemes were no longer exclusively sheltered housing, but mixed tenure and there was a mix of age groups on some sites. About seven years ago some properties were deemed not to be suitable for sheltered housing use and these were redesigned into general use. These properties will not have been specifically targeted to receive consultation information.

It was appreciated that better use of community rooms was needed, but some areas did not have community rooms or centres, this was acknowledged and work is being done to try and identify rooms which could be used for community events i.e. libraries or clubs. It was questioned that better use of these rooms would not be achieved if it was left to volunteers alone, as in some areas there is a lack of people willing to get involved. However it was acknowledged that they could be a very valuable resource and it was important to try and get the best solution for the locality.

7. COMMUNITY INFORMATION EXCHANGE

It was reported that from 1st July 2012 those in receipt of the Disabled Living Allowance mobility element would not be eligible for use of the ambulance transport service.

It was agreed that this issue should be included in items for a meeting with the hospital, hopefully for the next meeting.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Three points were raised

1. Clearing up after Grass Cutting- The Chair commented that obviously due to the poor weather there had been a slippage of the grass-cutting programme. He acknowledged that the performance of the contractor, Enterprise had been poor and assured members that there was on going scrutiny of the issue. He said most drainage gullies were the responsibility of the County Council but urged if there were any that were in NBC ownership they report them.

The problem of overgrown bushes at 10-12 Harborough Road was also raised. Councillor Markham did inform the group that contract penalties have been issued.

2. Travellers on Great Billing Way/ Ecton Brook Road – Gary Parsons commented that he had been in liaison with the County traveller unit and it was anticipated that they would be moved by the end of the week. Work would then have to be undertaken to ensure that the school site was secure
3. Parking at St Johns Marina- A responses from Councillor Hadland was still awaited.

9. ITEMS FOR NEXT AND FUTURE MEETINGS

Lindsey Informed the group that there would be an item on the retail experience, following on from a request from the Scrutiny Panel.

There were several issues that related to the hospital so Lindsey would liaise to see

if a representative would be available for the next meeting.

10. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next meeting to be held at 5.30pm on 17th October 2012. Venue to be confirmed, but possibly Northampton College.

The meeting concluded at Time Not Specified