

## **NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM**

### **MINUTES**

28<sup>th</sup> February 2007

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm at Ow ton Manor Community Centre,  
Wynyard Road, Hartlepool.

#### **Present:**

Councillor: Gerard Hall (In the Chair)

Councillors: Jonathan Brash, Rob Cook and Geoff Lilley.

Resident Representatives:

Ian Campbell and Linda Shields

Officers: Penny Garner-Carpenter, Strategic Housing Manager  
Linda Igoe, Housing Advice Manager  
Siobhan Rafferty, Homelessness Strategy Officer  
Alastair Simpson, Tenancy Relations Officer  
Joanne Burnley, Senior Environmental Health Officer  
Ken Natt, Landlord Registration Officer  
Joan Wilkins, Scrutiny Support Officer  
Angela Hunter, Principal Democratic Services Officer

#### **96. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Stephen Allison, Pat Rayner, Dennis Waller and resident representative Linda Shields.

#### **97. Declarations of interest by Members**

None.

#### **98. Minutes**

None.

**99. Responses from the Council, the Executive or Committees of the Council to Final Reports of this Forum**

None.

**100. Consideration of request for scrutiny reviews referred via Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee**

None.

**101. Consideration of progress reports/budget and policy framework documents**

None.

**102. Scrutiny Investigation into the Performance and Operation of Private Sector Rented Accommodation – Evidence from Strategic Housing Manager** *(Strategic Housing Manager)*

The Strategic Housing Manager gave a very detailed and comprehensive presentation to the Forum which examined the involvement of the Housing Advice Team and Private Sector Team including enforcement, processing of accreditation, disrepair procedure and tenant referencing. Copies of the presentation were distributed to Members at the meeting. As part of the enforcement process, in 2005/06 798 enquiries were dealt with and 309 requests for advice were received in relation to the accreditation scheme.

In conclusion to the presentation, the Strategic Housing Manager informed Members that the Authority would need to encourage and enforce in the private rented sector for some time as low demand issues encourage poor management. It was noted that a well managed and maintained private rented sector was an essential part of the housing market.

A discussion ensued which included the following issues:

- (i) How many vacant properties were there in Hartlepool? The Strategic Housing Manager indicated that there was low demand in some areas which resulted in a number of empty properties, but the exact figures would not be available until April. This information would be forwarded direct to the Member once available.
- (ii) Members asked what degree of heating was required to be provided by landlords? The Strategic Housing Manager responded that the facilities provided at the beginning of a tenancy, should be maintained throughout the term of the tenancy agreement.

- (iii) What level of advice and guidance was given to new tenants by the Authority? The Strategic Housing Manager indicated that the landlords used by the Authority were accredited and offered advice and guidance on an individual basis. A good floating support scheme was also operational and information and advice was continually given out through the distribution of leaflets. Whilst Members noted the level of advice there was, concern as to how well the availability of the service was advertised. In view of this, it was suggested that ways should be explored to improve the advertising of the advice service.
- (iv) Was the repairs agreement with private landlords the same agreement as with Housing Hartlepool? The Strategic Housing Manager informed Members that there was currently no agreement with private landlords although all landlords were encouraged to participate in the Accreditation Scheme. The Landlord Registration Officer noted that Housing Hartlepool had greater access to a lot more repair facilities than the majority of private landlords.
- (v) Was there a mechanism in place to reduce rent whilst waiting for repairs to be undertaken? The Landlord Registration Officer indicated that housing benefit could be restricted, however the liability with the tenant remained the same therefore building up arrears and this could prove counter-productive. The main area for redress would be through the courts. This was not a favoured option as it was a lengthy process and could result in the tenant being asked to vacate the property.
- (vi) Was there a budget for any repairs that had to be carried out by the Authority? The Senior Environmental Health Officer indicated that where possible, costs were recovered from landlords and if this was not possible, charges were made against the property for the cost of the repairs.
- (vii) What happened to people who were not accepted by landlords and became homeless? The Homelessness Strategy Officer responded that the Authority had a statutory duty to secure accommodation for those applicants seen to be 'in priority need' under the housing acts, additionally there was a duty to provide housing advice and names of landlords for those applicants for the Authority did not have a statutory duty to house. Mediation with family members and other preventative measures were also undertaken wherever possible to reduce the risk of a person becoming homeless.
- (viii) Was there enough supported housing in Hartlepool? The Homelessness Strategy Officer indicated that more supported housing was needed including a wide diversity of housing. Members were of the view that supported housing was a valuable asset for supporting vulnerable people, a good example being an already established supporting housing scheme in Eamont Gardens in the town.
- (ix) Members were concerned about vulnerable people becoming homeless? The Landlord Registration Officer informed Members that if there appeared to be a correlation with anti-social behaviour, this may declare them intentionally homeless. Officers needed to be very clear that the vulnerable person understood that their actions resulted in their homelessness. Support and advice would be given to help

vulnerable people manage their tenancy successfully. The Housing Advice Manager added that time spent in supported housing would build up a good tenancy history, but some floating support was available once a private sector tenancy was secured. Funding for additional floating support was urgently needed.

Members acknowledged the importance of supported accommodation in helping vulnerable people manage their tenancies and the possible benefits this could have as part of the work to reduce anti-social behaviour. There was, however, concern regarding the apparent lack of supported accommodation to meet demand in Hartlepool and it was suggested that ways of closing the gap between supply and demand should be explored.

In providing increased supported accommodation, concern was expressed regarding the need for the transmission of accurate information to residents and Elected Members during the planning process. It was suggested that this would prevent misunderstandings regarding the type/level of accommodation and the specific group(s) of vulnerable people for whom it was to be provided.

- (x) Did the Authority do enough to educate people about the existence of supported housing schemes? The Landlord Registration Officer indicated that more should be done to promote these types of schemes but the problem faced was a lack of resources and time constraints. It was acknowledged that this was a difficult area to balance, as vulnerable people did not necessarily want attention drawn to the schemes.
- (xi) There was concern that someone can become a landlord and not know how deal with a tenancy arrangement? The Strategic Housing Manager indicated that a lot of people fall into being landlords and have very little knowledge of managing tenancies, for example the inheritance of a property. Advice was provided by the Housing Team if requested.
- (xii) Was there a procedure in place if someone became homeless out of office hours? The Strategic Housing Manager responded that during normal office hours the main Civic Centre number should be used, but that an out of office hours emergency number would contact Richard Court. The Landlord Registration Officer indicated that the Authority's duty of care only extended to people with priority needs, ie if they have children, were disabled or vulnerable. The only other duty would be to provide advice and assistance, including giving out lists of bed and breakfast accommodation within or outside of the town.
- (xiii) Whilst Members acknowledged that the Housing Team had limited resources available to them, they were conscious that any recommendations may have financial implications.

The members of the Housing Team were thanked for their presentation and for answering Members questions.

### **Decision**

The presentation and questions that followed would be used to inform Members compile their final report.

## **103. Any Other Business**

The Chair informed the Forum that he had attended a meeting of the Hartlepool Landlords Association and suggested more partnership working with the Association in relation to the production of leaflets and new tenant packs and developing best practice and advice.

Members were informed that there would be an informal meeting of this Forum on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2007 to formalise the final report for full consideration at the next meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2007.

GERARD HALL

CHAIRMAN