

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council held on Wednesday 8 December 2021 at 9.30am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors: J Hornby (Chairman), B Bernard, J Halls and T Spruce

Apologies for Absence: Councillors: Y Bendle, B Duffin, J Easter, J Rowe and J Wilby

Substitute: Councillor: M Wilby

Cabinet Member Present: Councillor: R Elliott (for part of meeting)

Officers in Attendance: The Chief of Staff (E Hodds), the Assistant Director of Individuals & Families (M Pursehouse), the Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager (R Dunsire), the Communities Manager (D Goodwin), the Internal Consultancy Officer (L Tiernan), the Senior Governance Officer (E Goddard) and the Committee Officer.

1292 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 21 July 2021, were confirmed as a correct record.

1293 HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY REVIEW

The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager introduced the report which set out the review of the Housing Allocation Policy, implemented in April 2021. He explained that the new policy sought to align the policies of both South Norfolk and Broadland District Councils into one common ground policy.

Members were advised of a number of advantages of an aligned policy, which included:

- Increased resilience and continuity across the Housing Team
- Increased access to Covid relief funding

The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager also explained that a mixture of issues had affected the performance of the team, these issues included:

- Higher demand for housing
- Longer turnaround of properties (3 month minimum)
- Increased number of requests for a review of decisions (with regard to the Housing Priority Band allocated), pre-Covid there was approximately 25 requests per annum, currently there was expected to be 200 requests per annum.

He also explained that the report recommended that a number of updates be made to the policy in light of lessons learnt since the policy was implemented in April 2021. The Internal Consultancy Officer added that it was best practice to review policies regularly, to allow for improvements to be made as a result of changes in the economy or social setting.

The Internal Consultancy Officer presented the proposed changes to the policy, which had been split into three specific categories

- Core Policy Changes
- Core policy, which required updating or rewording to include more detail/guidance
- Sections to be moved to supplementary guidance

(a copy of the presentation made has been attached at Appendix A of the minutes)

Core Policy Changes

The Scrutiny Committee was advised of the main changes to the Policy, which were:

3 additional non-qualification rules to be added, which referred to capital and investments already held by the person as well as people who knowingly worsened their housing situation by gifting, transferring or spending assets.

Housing Priority Bands – remove the reference to ‘adapted property’ from priority bands 1 and 2. The need for adapted properties was already included within the medical needs section.

Band Considerations – Band 1 would only be valid for 8 weeks, this could be extended if there were no suitable vacancies in that time. If the applicant did not meet the extension criteria, their priority would be reduced to band 3.

Core Policy, which required updating or rewording to include more detail/guidance

The Internal Consultancy Officer explained that the majority of the changes required in this category were minor updates/rewording to fix typographical

errors, update legislation which had changed, or update out-of-date lists, Appendix 2 of the report laid out all of the changes required. She also explained that some of the larger rewording changes were required to provide clarity for residents, officers and partners.

In relation to the Housing Priority Bands, it was suggested that the priority bands be renamed from *Band 1, Band 2, Band 3, Band 4*; to *Emergency Band, Band 1, Band 2, Band 3*.

The Internal Consultancy Officer explained that the current priority band 1, was for those who were, in effect, homeless or had an urgent/serious medical need and couldn't be discharged from hospital due to their accommodation need. She added that residents often believed band 1 included those with a non-urgent medical need and so requested a review. It was believed that by changing the wording for band 1 to 'Emergency Band', more clarity would be given and the number or review requests should be reduced.

One member suggested that the priority banding be set to '*Emergency Band, Band 2, Band 3, Band 4*', as they felt this clearly showed that the first band (currently band 1) was for emergency need/homelessness cases only, thus reducing the number of review requests received, whilst maintaining consistency for those currently in the other bands, as the names and criteria would remain the same. After further discussion and a vote, the Committee unanimously decided to recommend to Cabinet that the priority bands be amended to 'Emergency Band, Band 2, Band 3, Band 4'.

The Internal Consultancy Officer explained that a rewording of the band 1 criteria had been recommended, this was to provide clarity on the criteria for people with an urgent/serious medical condition who could not be discharged from hospital. A rewording of section 4.4.13 was also proposed in order to provide clarity on the criteria for additional rooms as part of the medical need.

One member queried whether mental health needs were taken into account with regard to additional rooms allocation. The Internal Consultancy Officer advised that needs relating to mental health conditions were taken into account, and was included in a separate section of the Housing Allocation Policy.

Sections to be moved to supplementary guidance

The Internal Consultancy Officer explained that since the implementation of the policy in April 2021, it had been noted that a number of sections would better serve residents and officers as a separate Allocations Scheme Guidance document, this included sections such as:

- The viewings process
- Accommodation pathway model

- Predicting properties.

Members agreed that removing these sections from the main policy document would make the policy clearer for residents to understand and for officers to work with.

One member referred to the Armed Forces Covenant and queried whether any mitigations had been put in place. The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager explained that the condition which required the need for a local connection to the district had been suspended for veterans and their partners, he advised that their needs would then be assessed to determine priority banding.

In response to a question on how the proposed changes would affect the current backlog, the Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager explained that it was unlikely that the increased demand and need of social housing would disappear, however, the proposed changes would make the Housing Allocation Policy clearer. It was also expected that the number of review requests would be lower, which would allow for much more officer time and resources to be spent on applications and caseloads.

Members queried the means of contact available to the public in addition to the web services offered. The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager outlined the current methods of contacting the team:

- Email
- Telephone
 - Triage team who answered first contact queries
 - Direct officers were available for complex queries
- Online query form

Members queried section 3.1 of the report which stated that the single IT system 'has provided £72,987 savings over four years', when it had been implemented in April 2021. The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager explained that costing analysis had been undertaken which showed that by the third year of using the single IT system the Council would begin saving money and that by the fourth year the Council would have saved £72,987.

The Chairman reminded members that a more in depth annual review of the Housing Allocations Policy would be brought before the Committee in June 2022 and suggested that the Committee looked at the new IT system to compare performance against the old system used.

In response to a query on how social rent was calculated, the Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager informed members that it was standardised in a similar way to Housing Association rent, usually it was calculated at 80% of the private rent rate.

Members discussed the number of households in the Band 1/Emergency Band, and asked officers how they envisioned the numbers changing over time and whether they would continue to rise. The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager explained that it was unknown how the numbers change over time, however, modelling work had been undertaken which allowed the team to recruit additional staff. He highlighted the national shortage of houses and explained that the team was working with the Housing Enablement Team and Landlords to increase the stock of suitable houses.

One member queried how refugees and unaccompanied children were housed as part of the Housing Allocation Policy. The Housing and Wellbeing Senior Manager advised that unaccompanied children were housed and supported by Norfolk County Council. He further advised that there were ten refugee households who required housing in South Norfolk, four were provided with suitable social housing and six were housed in private rental properties, with funding provided by Government.

The Committee commended officers on their excellent hard work and after further discussion, it was

RESOLVED

To recommend to Cabinet that the proposed changes to the Housing Allocation Policy be adopted, however that the Housing Priority Bands be renamed to '*Emergency Band, Band 2, Band 3, and Band 4*'

1294 MEMBER WARD GRANT – SPEND REVIEW

The Communities Manager introduced the report which enabled members to review the member-led grant scheme to compare spend against the ground rules. He reminded the Committee that each member was allocated £1000. Due to Covid, members were also able to rollover last year's underspend to use this year.

£38K of member ward grants had been spent so far, with £24,500 remaining, he advised that members needed to allocate their funds by 31 December 2021, with any underspent/unallocated funds over £10K transferred to the Community Action Fund (CAF) budget after that date. The Committee discussed the £24,500 underspend and agreed that they needed to encourage all members to spend their grant funding and have it committed to a project by the deadline. The Communities Manager added that officers were available to help members find projects in need of funding.

Members were provided with a summary of the types of projects funded already this year, which included:

- 25 projects to provide new equipment for existing community projects
- 4 projects to provide defibrillators
- 8 projects to improve/replace exercise equipment

The Communities Manager highlighted the importance of the member ward grant as a source of funding for local community projects, where other funding was not available or as a way for community groups to secure match funding from other sources.

One member noted the rollover of last year's underspend and queried whether this could be continued this year, the Communities Manager explained that it was a Cabinet decision whether or not to roll over the underspend. Another member queried why an underspend of less than £10K was placed in the Council's savings instead of the CAF budget. The Assistant Director of Individuals and Families explained that, in principle any underspend of budgets across the Council were automatically transferred to the Council's savings. In this case it had been considered that £10K was the minimum feasible amount to run a CAF Panel, given the time/resources required to run it. Additionally, the average grant request was £5K. Members discussed this further and agreed to recommend to Cabinet that all member ward grant underspend should be transferred to the next year's CAF budget, to be spent on community projects. They further suggested that the CAF Panel could roll over funds of less than £10K to its next meeting.

In response to a query on how officers check/monitor that grant funding has been spent correctly by the community group, the Communities Manager explained that at present it was the responsibility of the member who awarded the grant to ensure it was spent correctly, however, the team was looking to implement more robust checks/proof and longer-term follow ups.

After further discussion, it was **RESOLVED** to:

1. Note the spend of the member-led grant scheme against the ground rules
2. Encourage all members to commit their funds by 31 December 2021, and work with the Communities Team if they were struggling to find projects to fund
3. Recommend to Cabinet that the Member-Led Grant Rules be amended to allow all underspend to be rolled over into the next financial year's Community Action Fund budget.

1295 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME, TRACKER AND CABINET CORE AGENDA

The Committee noted the Work Programme and Cabinet Core Agenda and it was observed that a number of important pieces of work were due before the Committee in 2022.

(The meeting concluded at 10.57am)

Chairman