

These minutes are draft subject to confirmation at the next meeting of Housing sub-committee

Housing Sub-Committee

29 January 2018

Present: Councillor S Cox (Chair)
Councillors K Bolger, L Darke, John Hunter, N
Huscroft, A Newman, M Thirlaway and J
Walker

HO25/01/18 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Arkle, M Madden, P Mason and P Oliver.

HO26/01/18 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members reported.

HO27/01/18 Declarations of Interest

Councillor M Thirlaway declared a non-registerable personal interest in relation to Minute HO/28/01/18 Empty Homes Standard Review as his father worked for Kier North Tyneside.

HO28/01/18 Empty Homes Standard Review

The sub-committee received a report and presentation which informed of the recent Empty Homes Standards review carried out by Elected Members and Tenants in 2017. To provide context to the topic, Members were informed that the authority had around 14,000 (general need) properties, of which approximately 1,200 properties became vacant and were advertised, repaired and re-let each year. The annual repair costs were approximately £3.3m.

In order to deliver year on year improvements, several reviews of the service had been undertaken, with the most recent completed over the previous 6 months. Members were informed that since 2009, North Tyneside Council had been required to change its processes and procedures in order to adhere to changes in Government legislation. These brought new challenges that had a direct impact on the time taken to re-let a property. The most recent of these challenges had been the introduction of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, which brought in a 1% annual rent reduction policy for four years. This had impacted on the resources needed to deliver on aspirations and for 2017/18 this had resulted in a reduction of the repairs budget by £134k.

In 2017 a working group, comprising of tenants, members and officers, was created to review the empty homes standards and the repairs phase of the Empty Homes Process. The purpose of the review was to consider a revised Moving In Standard, a revised Moving Out Standard, the best balance between cost, time and quality, reducing the cost of repairs for transferring tenants and recharges which were fair and practical. As part of the review, Members and tenants heard presentations from service managers and engaged with key staff from both North Tyneside Council and Kier Team; looked at complaints and researched how other providers delivered the service; visited empty properties at different

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stages of the empty homes repair process and consulted with tenants who had moved into their new home to obtain feedback.

At the end of the review, the group identified a number of observations and improvements which included: the redecoration materials provided to tenants were generous and could be reduced; the welcome pack did not provide Value for Money; the costs associated with cleaning empty properties were excessive; the costs associated with replacing toilet seats and shower curtains were excessive; the number of tenants being allowed to transfer from homes in a poor condition was too high and the number of terminations were increasing. Members asked whether any thought had been given to returning to an incentive scheme to encourage people to properly clear a property and leave it in a good condition. It was explained that such a scheme had been available in the past but had been stopped as the cost of managing the incentive scheme did not deliver value for money. The incentive also did not pay as much as the costs of hiring a skip, therefore properties were still being left half cleared.

In relation to rechargeable repairs, it was noted that the rates recouped were not as high as the local authority would like and that recovering this debt was challenging. Whilst the outstanding debts would stay on a tenants account they did not form part of any rent arrears and outstanding rechargeable repairs was not grounds for evicting a tenant. Members asked if there were any penalties in place for a tenant that accepted a property and moved in, then terminated after a couple of days. It was noted that there was no penalty payment in place but that the tenant, having signed the tenancy, would be bound by the requirement to give 4 weeks notice and would therefore still be charged rent for those weeks. It was hoped that enforcing this aspect of the tenancy agreement would act as a deterrent to tenants doing this as it was costly for the local authority.

Members commented that they were often alerted to cases where tenants had moved into a property and there were still outstanding repairs to be done. This caused frustration as, if given a low priority rating, the timescale for carrying out the repair could be within 30 working days. Members asked about at what stage faults should be recorded and noted for repair. It was explained that when a tenant viewed a property they would be accompanied by a housing officer that would have a checklist to ensure the house was all in working order. If any aspects could not be ticked off the checklist, this would be sent to Kier for repairs to be undertaken to bring the property to the correct standard. It was also noted that quality assurance was done on a sample of properties and that for Kier there were key performance indicators, which determined profit margins, linked to meeting timescales and quality.

Members referred to instances where tenants may install additional features to their property i.e. electric showers, wood burners, conservatories and how this was dealt with when they left and a new tenant took up the property. It was explained that the local authority did not want to remove additional features unless necessary and therefore, as long as checked and deemed safe, it would be gifted to the new tenant. This however would be given with strict (documented) guidelines that the council would not be responsible for any repair and maintenance of the item. It was noted that there had been a recent increase in the installation of wood burners within the housing stock, which often were not known about until the end of a tenancy. Where a property contained a wood burner (known to the local authority), the tenant would be required to make sure the annual tests were undertaken by a relevant professional and certificates submitted to the council to demonstrate this. Any appliance that did not comply with the necessary regulations would be removed.

Members referred to the Working Roots initiative which was often used to undertake gardening work on council housing stock. This was a scheme delivered in partnership with

Justice Prince, where young people would be taken on to get involved in gardening, fencing, painting etc and each would have a mentor from Kier. Three days a week would be spent with Kier and two with Justice Prince gaining level 1 Maths and English qualifications. The scheme was funded by Kier, the Housing Revenue Account and Justice Prince. Successful applications had also been made to secure some external funding. Officers explained that there was a video which provided more detail on the scheme which hopefully could be shared with Members outside the meeting.

The sub-committee was informed that the next steps to implementing the new standards agreed as part of the review was to get final approval from the Cabinet Member and to circulate them to the relevant housing teams and stakeholders.

It was **agreed** to note the information provided in the report and presentation.