

Bolsover District Council

Executive

15 June 2015

Hard to Let / Sheltered Housing Update

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing and IT

This report is public

Purpose of the Report

- To update members on progress on the recommendations from the Improvement Scrutiny report into hard to let properties.
- To establish a working group to take forward the issues raised by the Scrutiny Committee and the earlier Fletcher review including the fact that there are a number of the Sheltered Housing schemes where accommodation is currently vacant with the Council struggling to attract suitable tenants.

1 Report Details

1.1 On 2 March 2015 Executive received a report from Improvement Scrutiny Committee on hard to let properties. This report concluded that the majority of hard to let properties were sheltered housing, and made a number of suggestions to address these. The Executive accepted the following

- (1) *The report of the scrutiny review into Hard to Let Properties be noted.*
- (2) *The recommendations concerning operational actions (such as painting and decorating) be undertaken as soon as practicable, with a further report to come back to Executive in three months' time setting out what action had been taken and how the other recommendations could be taken forward.*
- (3) *Thanks be expressed to the Scrutiny Officer for her support to the Scrutiny Committees over the past year.*

1.2 This report is intended to update members on progress and to recommend that we build upon the work of the Scrutiny Committee by setting up a joint working group of Members and Officers. In addition to the work of Scrutiny the working group will take into account other work already available and in particular a review by Peter Fletcher Associates. Crucially, however, the working group will need to ensure that it operates in the light of the review of accommodation based support that is currently being carried out by Derbyshire County Council. Given that a significant element of the funding for the Council's current provision is derived from Derbyshire County Council it is crucial that the services operated by this Council are reviewed

to ensure that local vulnerable residents continue to benefit from the highest standard of provision possible and that they have a choice as to which type of housing best meets their personal circumstances. In order to ensure we meet these objectives the Council needs to ensure that its vulnerable persons support services are aligned with the changes to be introduced by the County Council.

Response to Scrutiny Recommendations:

- 1.3. The recommendations that were included within the Scrutiny Report suggested a number of practical steps to address the high levels of void properties that are evident within the Council's Sheltered Accommodation that are currently costing the Council some £100,000 a year in lost rent alone. The progress against each of these actions is summarised below:

That Bedsits be renamed Studio Flats and this term be used in all advertising of the properties.

As advised to the Scrutiny Committee this needs to be implemented by way of changes in the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) software which can only be actioned by the software supplier. This change has been requested from the supplier and we are currently awaiting a timescale for implementation. The position is, however, complicated by the fact that the regional CBL system now appears to be in the process of being disestablished and there may be a requirement to adopt a new system in the near future in order to replace the current software to maintain an effective CBL system in place. There will be a report to the July meeting of Executive concerning future arrangements in respect of CBL and it is considered unlikely that we can arrange a cost effective upgrade prior to that meeting. Once Members have agreed a way forward for Choice Based Letting then this recommendation will be actioned at the earliest opportunity.

That a programme of improvements to void properties be developed which includes basic decoration to ensure that the properties are ready to move into.

At its meeting in March 2015 Executive approved acceptance of a tender to establish a framework of companies to provide painting services. Officers from the Joint Procurement Unit are currently finalising contract terms and once this is achieved officers will begin a programme of redecorating an appropriate number of the void properties as part of a package designed to attract new tenants.

That the flat at Valley View currently used as an office for the Support Officers be returned for use as residential accommodation.

The property used by Support Officers at Valley View is a bedsit that has been difficult to let, with the alternative accommodation being the annex which will need additional work to meet the requirements of DCC (who currently fund the service) Officers have come to the view that this will only be undertaken once other void properties within Valley View have been occupied. This approach is considered to be the correct approach to ensure that HRA funding – which is derived from tenants rents – is used in a cost effective fashion.

That support be considered to offer to interested tenants as an incentive to move into Sheltered Accommodation.

The key initiative supporting this recommendation was that the Council should look to widen the eligibility for these properties. This will be taken forward as part of the review of Choice Based letting that is being taken to the July meeting of Executive. In addition where a potential tenant expresses interest in occupying a property housing officers will work with them to address concerns and practical difficulties arising from moving home.

That an advertising/marketing campaign be undertaken to promote the sheltered accommodation with a number of void properties (predominantly Valley View, Bolsover and Victoria House, Creswell).

This campaign will commence once there are show flats in place for potential residents to view.

- 1.4. It is intended that part of the remit of the working party would be to monitor progress in addressing the Scrutiny recommendations including their success in reducing the number of void properties.

County Wide Funding of Support for Elderly People

- 1.5. Linked with the issue of Sheltered Housing is that of the future funding of support to older people. As members are aware DCC have been reviewing the longer term funding of services that were previously considered as 'Supporting People' services. Initially the County Council proposed withdrawing funding for static wardens. This Council as part of a wider partnership with other local authorities lobbied strongly to ensure that the contract for floating support was sufficiently flexible to include those tenants who would be losing a resident warden. Given the continued impact of the austerity agenda the County is continuing of necessity to review the range of services that it provides. A potential outcome of this review is that the level of financial support available to Sheltered Housing will reduce which would place an increased element of the financial costs upon residents themselves. Clearly if costs for residents were to rise it will result in Sheltered Housing becoming a less attractive option for both current and potential future residents, which would have a significant impact upon the Council's ability to attract tenants. Current indications are that the funding level will be further reduced and one key issue for the working party will be to ensure that the Council is in a position to consider and respond to the impact of this at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 1.6. While the review of Sheltered Housing is partly driven by the austerity agenda Cabinet will be aware that another major factor is that well established services such as Sheltered Housing are now increasingly perceived as not being appropriate by potential residents. Given the reduction in the level of available resources to fund supported housing it is no longer considered appropriate that funding is targeted at Sheltered Housing when many potential tenants no longer view this as the housing tenure of choice. This shift in attitudes and personal choice regarding services is shown in the clear decline in demand for traditional sheltered housing which has been evident for a number of years. In the face of this declining demand and to enable resources to be moved into services which people want to choose many organisations have taken the decision to deregister some or all of the sheltered housing or in some cases demolish the buildings and redevelop the sites.
- 1.7. Previously in the light of these trends the Housing Department in September 2011 had commissioned some research by Peter Fletcher Associates to look at sheltered

housing. This was done as part of the preparatory work for the successful attempt to retain the warden services that was funded by Derbyshire county Council. While the report concluded that the condition of the structure of the buildings was good, it also noted that whilst some schemes remained popular others were unlikely to attract residents because of their location away from shops and other amenities. The Scrutiny report in large part was concerned with identifying measures which could be used to address this declining demand, with Scrutiny noting that certain schemes had become difficult to let in part because of declining demand.

- 1.6 Given the changes that are happening one of the clear roles for the working party will be to look at the level of demand within the current schemes and to consider whether concentrating Sheltered Housing on fewer sites would provide a better service for tenants and a more effective choice of housing options. Given that all of the schemes are in good structural repair to the extent to which they were to be considered unsustainable as Supported Housing they could be adapted to meet other Housing needs within the District. Given the Council's wider agenda of promoting growth there may be options for a wider regeneration programme for a small number of sites.
- 1.7 Given the extent of the issues which have been identified both by Scrutiny and in this report it is important that the Council is well positioned to respond to the anticipated changes to funding that will be introduced by the County Council. Accordingly it is proposed that the group will be a working group of members and officers consisting of
- The Portfolio Holder for Housing
 - The Deputy Leader
 - The Chair of Improvement Scrutiny
 - The JAD Community Safety and Head of Housing
 - A representative from Property Services
 - The Housing Needs Manager
 - The Housing Enforcement Manager

The Group will report back to Executive after a period of six months.

2 Conclusions and Reasons for Recommendation

- 2.1 The Council's Housing service is committed to providing housing solutions that meet the needs of local residents. It is clear that the demand for some sheltered housing schemes is reducing and officers guided by the working party will look to address this in part through the implementation of the recommendations made by Improvement Scrutiny. However, the developing position in respect of funding for Supported Services may well make Sheltered Housing a less attractive option for local residents with corresponding impacts upon the level of void properties. The Working Party will also consider the position as set out in the previous report by Peter Fletcher associates.
- 2.2 Given the extent of the work that needs to be undertaken together with the timescales to which the County Council funding review will be conducted it is recommended that a further report be brought back to Executive in six months time.

3 Consultation and Equality Impact

3.1 There are no consultation or equality issues arising at this stage. Should consultation be necessary in order to inform the report to Executive then the working group will initiate the necessary work. As part of the report to Executive consideration will be given as to whether any of its recommendations require a process of consultation. It should be noted that the Fletcher report referred to in this report undertook an extensive consultation with tenants the outcomes of which will be available for the working party to consider.

4 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

4.1 These are considered throughout the report.

5 Implications

5.1 Finance and Risk Implications

These are outlined where appropriate within the report, but Executive should note that they will all be met from within existing Approved Budgets.

5.2 Legal Implications including Data Protection

Not directly.

5.3 Human Resources Implications

Not directly, however proposals by DCC about the future funding of support services are likely to have HR implications.

6 Recommendations

6.1 That the position in respect of actions arising out of the recent Improvement Scrutiny report into hard to let properties is noted.

6.2 That a working group of officers and members is established to consider the future direction of the Sheltered Housing schemes in the light of the DCC review to ensure that they are continuing to meet the needs of local residents.

6.3 That the working group report back to Executive in a period of 6 months.

6.4 That the other recommendations made by the Scrutiny Report (i.e. other than decoration) are not progressed until the recommendations from the working group have been considered by Executive

7 Decision Information

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| Is the decision a Key Decision? | No |
| District Wards Affected | None Directly |
| Links to Corporate Plan priorities | |

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| or Policy Framework | |
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8 Document Information

| Appendix No | Title |
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| Background Papers (These are unpublished works which have been relied on to a material extent when preparing the report. They must be listed in the section below. If the report is going to Cabinet (NEDDC) or Executive (BDC) you must provide copies of the background papers) | |
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| Report Author | Contact Number |
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