MINUTES OF HOUSING INCOME PROTECTION TASK GROUP

10TH SEPTEMBER 2012

PRESENT:
Councillors Mrs Avis, Ms Edwards, Mrs Garcia, Mrs New, Roodhouse and Sandison.
Ms Tracey Nuttall (co-opted member from Tenant Representative Panel)
Liz Dunlop (Operational Housing Manager), Debbie Dawson (Scrutiny Officer) and Claire Waleczek (Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer (Team Leader)).

7. MINUTES
The minutes of the meeting held on 26th July 2012 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

8. APOLOGIES
An apology for absence from the meeting was received from Councillor Pacey-Day.

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
Councillor Mrs New declared a general non-pecuniary interest by virtue of being an employee of Warwickshire County Council.

10. TRANSFER POLICY AND UNDER-OCCUPATION
The Task Group received a verbal update from the Council’s Operational Housing Manager concerning proposals for an interim Transfer Policy to deal with cases of under-occupancy as a result of the new legislation.

Further analysis on the Council’s housing stock was required to assess the number of tenancies affected by under-occupancy. At present, at least 380 properties are known to fall within the under-occupancy category, with 300 of these being houses. There are approximately 200 further properties yet to be assessed.

Last year only around 350 council properties were terminated for re-letting. It was envisaged that many under-occupied properties would be within the rural area, with limited alternative stock available for transfers. Partner social landlords were facing similar issues.

Under the new regulations, tenants under 35 years of age on benefits who wished to transfer to private tenancies would only be eligible for shared occupancy.

The issue of under-occupancy would also have implications for urgent cases such as homelessness.
A letter would be sent to all tenants affected by the under-occupancy rules. The Task Group requested that a copy of this letter be sent to all Members giving officer contacts for any queries on the matter. Newly appointed Housing Officers would be visiting all of the affected households.

It was agreed that officers undertake further analysis and circulate this data to all members of the Task Group. A decision would then be taken if a special meeting to discuss this specific issue was required.

11. FOCUS GROUPS

The Task Group considered a discussion paper concerning establishing focus groups to gain an insight into how the welfare reforms were likely to affect the Council’s tenants.

There was some concern that there were no proposals for a focus group in the rural area. It was agreed that a decision on a further group in this area be taken subject to the outcome of analysis of under-occupancy in villages. It was considered that a location in Wolston or Long Lawford would be preferable.

With regard to a focus group in Brownsover, it was agreed that Boughton Leigh Children’s Centre be used as a venue. The high number of households living in houses being affected by the under-occupancy rules meant that a focus group for high rise tenants was less of a priority.

It was agreed that three focus groups be arranged as detailed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Suggested tenants</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boughton Leigh Children’s Centre,</td>
<td>Families and young people, Orbit</td>
<td>General – universal credit, benefits cap,</td>
<td>Orbit Housing partner Tenant representative Councillor Edwards, other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownsover</td>
<td>tenants</td>
<td>non-dependent deductions, under-occupancy</td>
<td>Members of Task Group (to be confirmed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillmorton Children’s Centre</td>
<td>Families</td>
<td>Universal credit, benefits cap and</td>
<td>Children’s Centre Manager Tenant representative Councillor Roodhouse, other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>under-occupancy</td>
<td>members of Task Group (to be confirmed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claremont Children’s Centre</td>
<td>Families</td>
<td>Universal credit, benefits cap and</td>
<td>Children’s Centre staff Tenant representative Councillors Mrs Avis, Mrs New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>under-occupancy</td>
<td>and Sandison</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Children’s centres had indicated that expenses towards running a crèche for the duration of the focus group would offer an incentive for targeted tenants to attend the session. It was agreed that a reasonable fee be paid for this facility. Refreshments would also be made available at the groups.

Advice on timing of the groups would be taken from staff at the children’s centres, together with issues such as language difficulties. It was emphasised that confidentiality was a key factor when running the focus groups.

The Task Group considered the briefing and question sheet attached at Appendix 1 to the discussion paper.

It was acknowledged that each group needed to use similar questions and methodology during the sessions.

It was agreed that the description of changes be deleted from the briefing paper and be included in a handout for members of the focus groups. Copies of articles issued in Tenant Times regarding welfare reforms would also be circulated to all Task Group members.

The focus groups would be supported by Democratic and Scrutiny Services staff.

A draft consultation questionnaire was circulated at the meeting for consideration. It was agreed that the term ‘jam jar’ account should be removed, and the question be reworded to say: "Would you consider using an account that helped you to prioritise your bills?"

12. SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING

The Task Group considered a discussion paper concerning arrangements for its ‘select committee style’ meeting on 24th October 2012.

It was agreed that the meeting take the following format:

(i) Presentation by Warwickshire Welfare Rights Advice Service (giving an overview of the welfare changes and how they view them)

(ii) Evidence from the following organisations:
  • Rugby Citizens Advice Bureau
  • Rugby Credit Union
  • Warwickshire MIND
  • Warwickshire County Council’s Troubled Families Co-ordinator
  • Jobcentre Plus
  • Benn Partnership Centre
  • representative from private landlord forum

Those invited would be encouraged to submit written comments in advance of the meeting, and to send in any evidence if they were unable to attend in person.

The following organisations would also be asked to submit in writing data and any information on how they intend to support tenants affected by the welfare reforms:

  • Public Health / Warwickshire Observatory
  • local banks/building societies/Post Office
  • housing associations
The Task Group would have a brief pre-meeting at 5.00pm prior to the start of the meeting at 5.30pm. It was estimated that the meeting would last 2 ½ hours.

It was emphasised that the meeting needed to remain focused on the impact of the reforms on housing income for the Council.

13. REVIEW OF ONE PAGE STRATEGY

The Task Group reviewed its one page strategy and agreed that no further changes were required at this stage.

14. PROGRAMME OF WORK

The Task Group considered its future programme of work.

(i) 24th October 2012 – select committee style meeting - Task Group’s main opportunity for evidence gathering.

(ii) November 2012 - the Task Group decided that a meeting be held at 5.30pm on Wednesday 21st November 2012 to consider evidence gathered and its implications for the draft action plan.

(iii) Possible special meeting specifically to consider the impact of under-occupancy on the Council’s housing income.

CHAIRMAN