

## **BROADLAND COMMUNITIES, HOUSING AND PLANNING POLICY DEVELOPMENT PANEL**

**Minutes of a meeting of the Broadland Communities, Housing and Planning Policy Development Panel of Broadland District Council, held on Wednesday, 6 September 2023 at 6.00 pm.**

**Committee Members Present:** Councillors: J Bailey (Chairman), E Laming (Vice-Chair), M Goodman, K Leggett, M Murrell and D Thomas

**Apologies for Absence:** Councillors: L Douglass, R Potter and S Ward

**Substitute:** Councillors: N Starling (In place of S Ward)

**Cabinet Member in Attendance:** Councillor: S Beadle and N Harpley

**Officers in Attendance:** M Pursehouse (Assistant Director of Individuals and Families), L Sayer (Housing and Benefits Manager), Simmonds (Housing and Health Manager) and C White (Democratic Services Manager)

### **6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Douglass, Potter and Ward. Cllr N Starling was in attendance as substitute for Cllr Ward.

### **8. MINUTES**

Referring to minute 4 of the meeting held 7 June, regarding the greater Norwich local plan: proposed examination submission on the requirement for gypsy and traveller pitches and allocation of sites for gypsy and traveller pitches, Cllr D Thomas stated that he had voted against the recommendations and had asked that his vote be recorded in the minutes.

Subject to this change, the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

## **9. COUNCIL TAX ASSISTANCE SCHEME 2024/25**

The Housing and Benefit Manager introduced the report, which was an annual review of the Council Tax Assistance Scheme, as required by Government legislation.

The Committee was advised that a number of revisions had been made to the Council Tax Assistance Scheme since 2020 to ensure that it was legally compliant, efficient and fair and directed support to those most in need.

The most recent version of the Scheme had now been in place for a year and a recent analysis of it by Policy in Practice, an external consultancy, had found that the scheme remained effective and was directing support to those most in need. It was, therefore, proposed that no changes be made to the Scheme for 2024/25.

In respect of Universal Credit, a managed migration of data from the Department of Work and Pensions had been undertaken, which would see an increase in Universal Credit customers. However, despite the additional pressure on services, officers remained confident that the Council Tax Assistance Scheme remained the best available option for supporting residents.

Members were also asked to note that due to the statutory time constraints on the governance process, it would not be possible to make any significant changes to the scheme for the next financial year. However, if members did want to consider any changes for the 2025/26 Council Tax Assistance Scheme, they would have the opportunity to do so.

A member noted how much work had been put into the scheme by officers and members and that he was pleased that the external consultancy had found that it remained effective.

In response to a query, the Housing and Benefit Manager informed the meeting that the introduction of the new IT system for benefit assessment was in the very early stages. Staff were currently receiving training in the use of the new system and managers were beginning to explore what it could offer in terms of automation and efficiency when processing claim. It was intended that by the time that members next considered the Scheme that the new system would be embedded within the Benefits Team, so that any further efficiencies and improvement could be incorporated into it.

In respect of Council Tax arrears, members were advised that this was reported in the quarterly Strategic Performance Report. The Council also had the Discretionary Council Tax Relief Policy to assist residents that were having difficulties paying their Council Tax and the fact that this pot was not being completely used was a sign that the Council Tax Assistance Scheme was working effectively.

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET**

That Cabinet recommends to Council the proposal and approves the Council Tax Assistance Scheme for 2024/25.

## **10. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT**

The Housing and Benefit Manager introduced the report, which sought agreement to adopt the reviewed Discretionary Housing Payment and Council Tax Discretionary Relief Policies for implementation in April 2024, due to an increased demand on these funds. Both schemes were discretionary payments, with all claims being considered on a case-by-case basis.

Members were advised that for the years 2021/22 and 2022/23, extra Covid support money had been allocated by the Department of Work and Pensions to cover the extra demand, however, this funding would not be available this year, even though the demand had not decreased. Therefore, the Benefits Team had to assess how it would fairly distribute the money that had been made available to it. Officers used a decision matrix to determine eligibility on a on a case-by-case basis.

The major change to the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy for this year was to firm up the rules around rent in advance demands from both the private and social housing sector. For privately rented properties, the Council had a loan scheme that customers could utilise. However, there was no such scheme for customers in Housing Association properties, as historically this had not been required. However, landlords for these properties were increasingly requiring rent in advance before a customer could sign a tenancy. As the fund would not be sufficient to fund all applications for this assistance the eligibility criteria had been considered and applied to the reviewed Policy. All other options for assistance with rent in advance would also be explored before any award was made.

As already noted earlier in the meeting, there was less demand on the Council Tax Discretionary Relief pot even with the increase in pressure as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, which demonstrated the effectiveness of the Council Tax Assistance Scheme and allowed the Team the discretion to ensure the funding went to those most in need.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Housing commended the Benefits Team for the excellent job they did in administering these discretionary funds.

Members were also reassured that the Benefits Team worked closely with colleagues in the Help Hub in a joined-up service which ensured that residents in need of additional assistance received support from the Council.

In response to a query about funding, the Assistant Director for Individuals and Families advised the meeting that, in addition to any external funding, he would be seeking a core pot of money to enable residents to stay in their homes and remain independent as part of the next budget setting process.

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET**

That Cabinet recommends to Council the proposal and approves the Discretionary Housing Payment and Council Tax Discretionary Relief policies for implementation in April 2024.

## **11. HOUSING STANDARDS ENFORCEMENT POLICY REVIEW**

The Housing and Health Manager introduced the report, which reviewed the Council's Housing Standards Enforcement Policy and recommended amendments to ensure that the Council had an up-to-date Policy that enforced where necessary, whilst supporting vulnerable residents.

Members were advised that the Housing Standards Team was routinely involved in enforcement activities in the private rental sector and took a strong approach to enforcement using the various legislative procedures available to the Team through various Acts, Regulations and Orders.

Currently the Housing Standards Team operated a reactive service for complaints from tenants regarding issues of disrepair such as a leaking roof or mould. Approximately 80 complaints per year were received and all were investigated.

To ensure compliance where co-operation did not achieve the required outcomes, enforcement could be initiated. Since the current Policy had been approved, 75 notices had been issued.

Members were advised that the issue of damp had been raised as a national priority and the Housing Standard Team was working alongside the Help Hub in a joined-up approach to tackle the issue.

The Team had also initiated a proactive approach to the Minimum Energy Efficiency Regulations requirements by proactively identifying rental properties with an Energy Performance Certificate of F or G and taking enforcement action where necessary, to ensure that they were brought up to the required standard.

The Committee was also asked to note that the Team had initiated a proactive response with regard to Houses in Multiple Occupancy. This involved the use of intelligence gathering and work with partners including Norfolk Constabulary and Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Housing commended the hard work by the Team in undertaking the review and bringing forward the proposals to update their procedures.

In answer to a question about damp the Housing and Health Manager advised the meeting that according to national guidelines damp was still categorised as a low hazard, however the proposed update to the Housing Standards Enforcement Policy would allow damp and other hazards to be aggregated together to designate them as a more serious hazard where action could be authorised under the Housing Act 2004, if necessary.

In response to a query about complaints and workloads, members were advised that complaints varied seasonally, with more issues being raised in the winter.

The Team was sufficiently resourced to meet the demand on its services and monitor properties and landlords where breaches of legislation had taken place to ensure that housing standards were adhered to.

## **RECOMMENDED TO CABINET**

Cabinet agrees to:

1. Incorporate the revised Statement of Principles for the enforcement process of the Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (England) Regulations 2015 as detailed in Appendix 2.
2. Incorporate a formalised Notice Charge procedure for the service of applicable enforcement procedures as detailed in Appendix 3.
3. Introduce a discount for early payment of Civil Penalties as detailed in section 4.4.
4. Authorise the use of the Civil Penalty Procedure detailed in Appendix 2 of the Policy for use with future legislation where the circumstances relate to potential harm and culpability and the maximum fine is set at £30,000.

Replace the enforcement procedure for Category 2 hazards relating to Damp and Mould Growth as detailed in Appendix 4.

(The meeting concluded at 6.43 pm)

---

Chairman