

‘Subject to Approval at the Next Working Group Meeting’

HOUSING & CUSTOMER SERVICES WORKING GROUP

15 September 2016 at 6.00 p.m.

Present: - Councillors Clayden (Chairman) Mrs Pendleton (Vice-Chairman)
Mrs Ayres, Mrs Harrison-Horn and Mrs Rapnik.

Councillor Bence was also present.

11. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Blampied and Bicknell.

12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Monitoring Officer has advised Members of interim arrangements to follow when making declarations of interest. They have been advised that for the reasons explained below, they should make their declarations on the same basis as the former Code of Conduct using the descriptions of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

Reasons

- The Council has adopted the government’s example for a new local code of conduct, but new policies and procedures relating to the new local code are yet to be considered and adopted.
- Members have not yet been trained on the provisions of the new local code of conduct.
- The definition of Pecuniary Interests is narrower than the definition of Prejudicial Interests, so by declaring a matter as a Prejudicial Interest, that will cover the requirement to declare a Pecuniary Interest in the same matter.

Where a Member declares a “Prejudicial Interest” this will, in the interest of clarity for the public, be recorded in the Minutes as a Prejudicial and Pecuniary Interest.

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

13. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Housing & Customer Service Working Group held on 7 July 2016 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

14. INTRODUCTORY TENANCY POLICY

The working group received a report from the Rent Arrears Team Leader on the Introductory Tenancy Policy which was a new policy that set out a framework ensuring consistency, a systematic approach and professional clear and firm guidelines. It was explained that the policy would be of particular benefit to staff, allowing them to sensitively deal with individual circumstances within a common understanding and agreement by providing tenants and staff with clear guidelines.

The working group was then asked to endorse the report’s recommendation to Full Council that proposed the Council adopted the Introductory Tenancy Policy.

In discussion, Members welcomed the policy with its clear guidance. It was agreed that the firm guidelines would assist the Council in gauging whether or not tenants would be able to maintain their tenancy obligations. Following a question it was noted that, wherever possible, tenancy sustainment would always be the main objective. The Rent Arrears Team Leader informed Members that eviction would only be pursued as a last resort. Assurance was given that, early in the recovery process, the relevant support organisation would be alerted in order to secure assistance for the tenant so that the tenant would be given help to sustain the tenancy.

Following further questions which were responded to at the meeting the Chairman thanked the Rent Arrears Team Leader and her team for their hard work on this topic and referred the working group to the report’s recommendation.

The Housing & Customer Service Working Group

RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL

that the Introductory Tenancy Policy be adopted.

15. RENT ARREARS/INCOME RECOVERY POLICY

The Rent Arrears Team Leader presented the report on the Rent Arrears/Income Recovery Policy. Members were informed that as a result of significant welfare changes since April 2011 and amendments to the pre action protocol for possession by social landlords (rent arrears) effective from 6 April 2015, the Council’s Rent Arrears Policy had been reviewed and re-drafted. This document outlined Arun District Council’s policy for managing current and former tenant arrears and would replace previous policies. The policy would assist the Council in helping promote tenancy sustainability and prevent homelessness.

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It was explained that the policy would ensure good practice by providing staff with clear guidance on current legislation with respect to how the Council should operate a rent arrears team. Members noted that the Policy aimed to establish an effective service whereby rental income is maximised and rent arrears minimised.

Members welcomed the Rent Arrears/Income Recovery Policy and approved the policy’s aims of:

- Early intervention to prevent arrears arising.
- Helping tenants sustain their tenancies and prevent homelessness.
- Ensuring effective management and control of rent arrears
- Ending a tenancy and evicting as a last resort.
- Ensuring that treatment of all Arun’s tenants is accountable, fair, efficient, effective; and uniform throughout the processes.

The Head of Housing confirmed that the policy could assist the Council from a legal perspective if necessary but clarified that any legal action would only be taken as a last resort.

Following questions which were responded to at the meeting the Chairman thanked the Rent Arrears Team Leader and her team for their hard work on this topic and referred the working group to the report’s recommendation.

The Housing and Customer Services Working Group

RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL

that the Rent Arrears/Income Recovery Policy be adopted.

16. HOUSING FRAUD INITIATIVE

The Housing Services Manager presented the report on Housing Fraud Initiative which explained the reasons for the Council’s Housing Fraud Initiative, the success of the initiative since January 2016 and asked Members to note the intention to extend the initiative for a further 12 months.

It was noted that the aims of the initiative was to ensure the Council was making the best use of its housing stock and managing the increase in demand for social housing by making it available to those in greatest need.

In discussing this update, Members welcomed the Housing Fraud Initiative noting some of the benefits including getting properties back into use and financial savings for the Council. It was pointed out that although the Audit Commission had assessed that bringing a social housing property back into legitimate use would give a financial saving of £18,000 per annum Arun District Council’s Housing Fraud Initiative had saved in the region of £300,000

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based on the Audit Commission's sum as well as the prevention of Right to Buy, the savings from fraudulent Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

The working group welcomed this initiative and the fact that it would continue for a further year. It was agreed that Social Housing was a limited resource and should be allocated to genuine cases of need.

The Chairman thanked the Housing Services Manager and her team for their hard work in achieving significant progress with the Housing Fraud Initiative. It was agreed that the Housing Fraud Investigator would be invited to attend a future meeting of the Housing and Customer Services Working Group to provide further update and insight.

17. WORK PROGRAMME 2016/17

In discussing the work programme 2016/17, items were added and allocated dates as follows:

- Draft Anti-Social Behaviour Policy – 24 November 2016
- Presentation from the Housing Fraud Investigator – 26 January 2017
- New Housing & Planning Act – 26 January 2017
- Draft Allocations Scheme – 23 March 2017

The change of date for the November meeting from 10 November to 24 November was noted. The Head of Housing stated that he would ask StonePillow if they were able to attend on the revised date.

The work programme 2016/17 was then noted.

(The meeting concluded at 6.53 pm)