



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA

DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

Councillor Mark Child
Cabinet Member for Wellbeing

BY EMAIL

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Overview & Scrutiny

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3rd March 2014

Dear Councillor Child,

Affordable Housing Working Group – 12th February 2014

The Affordable Housing Scrutiny Inquiry (completed in July 2013) raised questions regarding the feasibility of the Council and its Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners developing a single housing waiting list. The Scrutiny Programme Committee agreed to add this issue to its list of future work. A scrutiny working group was established to specifically look at the potential of introducing a single waiting list for all social housing in Swansea and a meeting was held on 12th February 2014.

On behalf of the working group, I would like to pass on our thanks to the lead officers who attended, namely Mark Wade (Community Housing Services Manager) and Steve Porter (Housing Options Manager). This letter reflects the main issues discussed together with our views. We will also be sharing this with the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

A report was prepared by the Community Housing Services Manager and this was presented to the Working Group. The report outlined the following key themes:

- the statutory duties of the Local Authority in relation to housing allocations
- the current relationship between the Local Authority and the RSLs in terms of nomination agreements
- advantages and disadvantages of a single waiting list
- the views of the RSLs

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- the potential costs of establishing a single waiting list
- the Local Authority's view on the desirability of establishing a single waiting list.

Overall, we were pleased to see that the Housing Service is taking positive action to improve access to housing. We were also pleased to hear examples of how the service has a pro-active approach in developing its on-going relationship with the local RSLs and we enjoyed a full and frank discussion on some of the key issues facing officers and Councillors.

The following paragraphs cover the particular issues that we discussed in more detail.

Advantages and disadvantages of a single waiting list

We discussed the advantages and disadvantages of introducing a single waiting list in some depth. A single waiting list would mean that there would be one application process to access all social housing in Swansea, with one set of criteria to assess housing need. As opposed to the four separate systems that currently operate. It was agreed that there would be merit from an applicant's perspective as this would simplify and reduce the number of processes they have to go through, but such a move would need to be properly resourced. We were advised that there would be significant financial implications due to the need to harmonise IT systems between organisations and that the development of a single list and allocation criteria would draw significantly on staffing resources.

We were also provided with information demonstrating that the RSLs are not currently supportive of the idea. They have indicated that their experiences of single waiting lists elsewhere have led to a more cumbersome letting process and higher costs.

Officers also advised that there is a certain amount of flexibility that is provided by having a number of housing waiting lists with different allocation criteria. For example, it allows the RSLs to apply different allocation criteria for specific schemes (such as City Living) and also provides alternatives to house applicants who may have been barred from Council housing for reasons such as former rent arrears or previous behaviour that resulted in eviction. The RSLs can be in a position to provide these applicants with an opportunity for re-housing, with the appropriate support. A single waiting list risks reducing these opportunities for flexibility, as all housing providers would be following the same allocation criteria.

Overall, we agree with the assessment that it would not be desirable to push forward with the development of a single housing waiting list at this time. We were advised that embarking on such a large scale project, especially when

the RSLs have made clear their reluctance would be a risky strategy to follow, is one which can be ill afforded in the current financial climate.

The information provided to us by officers convinced us that the key issue to focus on is the outcome desired by housing applicants, which is a swift process of obtaining housing that meets their needs.

All parties have acknowledged that there is room for improvement within the current system, which requires housing applicants to go through four application processes to ensure they have maximised their chances to be re-housed. RSLs have acknowledged that better information sharing could take place and council officers support the idea. A better system would be a common process where an applicant could contact just one organisation as a method of getting his/her name put on all four waiting lists (or as many as he/she wishes to be registered with, acknowledging that not all applicants want to be registered with all providers). Therefore, we recommend that you make the development of a common method of accessing all social housing a priority.

Examples of improved joint working

We were pleased to learn about successful joint working with the RSLs, including:

- the Move On Strategy, which ensures that people residing in temporary supported housing are re-housed in permanent accommodation with the appropriate support;
- the ADAPT project, which has created a single register of suitable adapted properties with one application process for all housing providers;
- the development of a Swansea Housing website, which demonstrates good communication between the Council and RSLs, for example by providing housing advice, giving comprehensive information on waiting times for different areas and advertising properties that are immediately available for rent from all housing providers;
- support to address one-off problems, such as dealing with the issue of a large number of single people in bed and breakfast accommodation and RSLs willingness to provide additional re-housing assistance when requested by the Council.

These examples provide us with confidence that the Council is well placed to develop further improvements and we would urge that the lessons learnt from this work are used to find a solution to develop a common method of accessing social housing in Swansea.

Information sharing

Officers provided us with a clear example of where better information sharing could lead to a significant improvement in service for applicants. It was suggested to us that the Council and RSLs could develop a common medical form. Obtaining medical confirmation of ill-health or medical support for an application can be a costly process as GPs charge for this, especially if the information has to be provided in four separate forms. Therefore, we strongly support this move to reduce the financial burden on applicants.

It also became clear during our discussion that there is room for improvement in terms of information sharing between the Council and RSLs. Specifically, we learnt that the RSLs will close their waiting lists to new applicants if they deem them to be full. Whilst we appreciate there may be valid reasons for this, we are concerned about the lack of transparency when this happens. We were informed that RSLs do not, as a matter of course, inform the Council when they shut their lists. In addition, the lists may be opened for short periods when movement takes place (i.e. a turnover of lettings and applicants get housed).

We feel that it is important for council officers to be made aware when this happens so that appropriate advice can be provided to housing applicants/Councillors. It is particularly important to know when the waiting lists are re-opened so that people can be advised to apply to RSLs at that point. We recommend that you raise this issue with the RSLs to discuss the need for them to close their lists and, to ensure that if this practice continues, council officers are informed in advance of when waiting lists will be closed, when they will be re-opened and for what period of time.

In addition, we feel that more general information should be provided to Councillors about the role of RSLs and we believe it would also be beneficial for Councillors to have an understanding of the allocation criteria used by the RSLs.

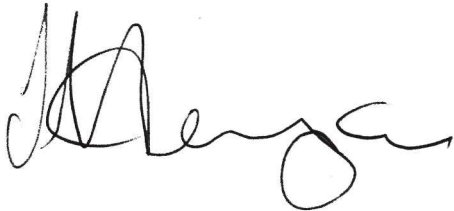
In summary we recommend that you:

- Make the development of a common method of accessing social housing in Swansea a priority for the Housing Service;
- Progress the development of a common medical form between the Council and RSLs;
- Meet with the RSLs to discuss the need for them to close their lists. Following that meeting, if decisions are made to close lists, then encourage the RSLs to ensure that council officers are informed in advance of when waiting lists will be closed and also informed when they will be re-opened and for what period of time;

- Review and improve the information that is provided to Councillors about the role of RSLs and their allocation criteria; and
- Confirm that the information available on the Swansea Housing website is also available to applicants without access to the internet.

We are grateful for the information and advice provided to us by the officers and look forward to receiving your reply. It would be helpful if you could respond by 4/4/14, so that we can report our correspondence to the Scrutiny Programme Committee in a timely fashion.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Terry Hennegan', written in a cursive style.

COUNCILLOR TERRY HENNEGAN

Convener, Affordable Housing Scrutiny Working Group

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