

Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Select Move

Thursday, 7 November 2013

Present: Councillor Graham Dunn (Chair), Councillor Hasina Khan (Vice-Chair) and Councillor June Molyneaux

Also in attendance

Officers: Lesley-Ann Fenton (Director of Partnership, Planning and Policy), Zoe Whiteside (Head of Housing) and Dianne Scambler (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

13.SM.17 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Alison Hansford, Steve Murfitt and Paul Leadbetter.

13.SM.18 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of any interests.

13.SM.19 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group – Select Move meeting held on 22 October 2013 be confirmed as a correct record.

13.SM.20 REGISTERED PROVIDERS

The group interviewed representatives from Registered Providers who had housing stock in the Chorley area. Members had prepared a number of questions that were sent to the representatives in advance of the meeting and their responses were taken in turn at the meeting.

Members were interested to learn how the Registered Providers knew that their Select Move customers were happy with the choice based lettings system. For example, what front line services were available, how they decided on what band a certain property would be advertised in and how did their organisation intend to improve the overall online experience for the customer.

Chorley Community Housing:

Customers can contact their main Contact Centre in Leigh, where staff are trained to use the Select Move system and can give advice, complete applications/bids on properties over the phone. For those customers who wish to speak to someone face to face, Chorley Community Housing have a local office in Chorley which deals with around 200 visitors a month about Select Move. Those people who don't want to wait to see someone, but are unable to access the internet, can complete and leave a card at reception, requesting a bid to be processed on their behalf.

The organisations all subscribe to Language Line and arrangements can be made for a telephone interview with a translator. CCH also have some staff who are polish, who can also be called upon to assist applicants.

Chorley Community Housing consider changes in legislation, property type, location, adaptations, whom needs it most and banding criteria when allocating the correct banding to each property and then use the calculating spread sheet to ensure that they don't go over or under a bandings quota. For example an adapted bungalow would be allocated under medical priority banding. This is sometimes a challenging process. Higher demand properties could go to Band A but need to ensure a spread of people with different needs have access to a wide range of housing.

The new improvements to the system that have been agreed by the partnership will make the system far more user friendly for the customer and is a big step going forwards.

All Chorley Community Housing properties are advertised with photos, but understood the reasons as to why other housing associations did not. It could often be difficult to obtain photographs of a property at the pre-termination visit and turnaround times were tight.

Contour Homes:

Although Contour Homes have a small housing stock within Chorley, they have property that is extremely popular to rent. The organisation has changed its name quite a bit over the years and they are now a confederated partnership. Contour Homes joined the Select Move Partnership around the same time as Chorley Council and follow the policies and procedure set by the Partnership to ensure fair and consistence lettings. They don't have a central office in Chorley but do hold a drop-in session once a week in the town. Their central office is located in Preston and the organisation operates a one phone call system where customers can receive help in every aspect of the letting process. Contour Homes recognises that there are still a lot of homes that don't have access to the internet at home and these people need to be catered for in other ways, so the organisation tries to encourage internet access in the libraries

Properties are selected for banding in line with the published Select Move Allocations Policy. Their main aim is around tenant sustainability, this is seen as an important part when matching tenants to properties in a fair and transparent way. Any concerns that are flagged are checked through with other relevant officers to ensure that they are placed correctly and that the environment is suitable etc.. They do ask for the applicant to be honest and up front with them and they will do the same in return.

The Partnership has a policy on when a tenant may be skipped and Contour Homes follows this guidance.

Places for People:

Customers that contact Places for People are able to visit their Regional Office in Bamber Bridge alongside being able to contact them using a Select Move Freephone number and via their website.

Properties are selected for banding in line with the published Select Move Allocations Policy. Places for People have a number of Local Lettings Plans (LLP) that are in place across the sub-regional area. The LLP's allow Places for People to consider advertising different % levels of properties to various bands in under to address sustainability issues we may have with a particular neighbourhood. Judgements calls are always made on a case by case basis and every effort is made to try to balance out the community.

Places for People are part of the Select Move Partnership Steering Group which looks at the overall customer's experience with customers registering on-line. Places for People are able to assist its own customers wishing to move by carrying out a home visit in order to guide customers through the process if they require it.

Whilst they appreciated that applicant wanted to look at photographs of the properties in advance of bidding, it was not always a possibility to source a photograph within the tight turnaround cycle of re-letting.

Progress Housing Group:

The majority of Progress Housing Group customers access the service online; the back office then validates the applications and follows up on references, etc. For those customers who want to call into an office they are able to call into any of the Select Move partners offices; Progress Housing Group have an office in Leyland. This means that applicants are able to access the service in the most convenient location for them

in the sub region. Progress Housing Group also offer a service of assisted bidding for tenants who are unable to access a computer, although they are also investing a lot of time in increasing Digital Inclusion with a "Digital Futures" programme that will increase access further for sheltered schemes and other community sites. The partnership were also in the process of implementing a facility to enable customers to access the website more easily via a smart phone.

In order to ensure that there was a fair distribution of the bands, they monitored the advertisements of their band quotas throughout the year. They tried to ensure that they were mindful of doing this fairly for areas as well as types of properties, although some properties are deemed more suitable for certain bands – such as ground floor flats, especially those with walk in showers are better suited to someone in band B who has a medical need to move due to mobility problems.

Progress Housing Group reported that they had 42% of customers accessing the system online and that those bidding online were at a very high level of 92%. The new upgrades to the system following the policy reviews agreed as part of the Partnership would further improve the system that applicants use to access Select Move.

Members were also interested in the length of time customers are on the waiting list and the factors that may influence this. For example, what processes were undertaken by the Registered Providers, once a customer had been match suggested for a property, were there any further checks undertaken before their allocation was confirmed, what were their processes/policies regarding skipping and what, if any, measures were put into place to enable customers to move who are either under or over occupied.

Chorley Community Housing:

Applicants are match suggested once they meet the advertising criteria (for example they meet local connection, Local Lettings Policy, sheltered approval etc.) and have been contacted/responded positively regarding the provisional offer. After the applicants are match suggested for a property, an in depth interview is carried out regarding, confirming their identity, income, address history and local connection is also checked. References need to be provided in support of the applicants reason for re-housing and checks are made in line with policy in reference to partner associations (partner Registered Social Landlord's, Police, Anti-social Behaviour and character referees).

Applicants who have bid for a property and who are shortlisted but either have housing related debts or a history of anti-social behaviour will not normally receive an offer of accommodation. This is in line with Select Move policy. Customers are free to appeal against such decisions and these are reviewed if an appeal is made. At the shortlist stage, if contact is attempted using the preferred method for the applicant and the applicant doesn't respond within the policy timescale, the next suitable applicant is contacted. The select move system doesn't prevent people from bidding at the moment whom have no local connection, so if this is the case we allocate to local connection firstly and the applicants without local connection are skipped. If at the interview stage, circumstances have changed or information comes to light which may have been withheld or falsified or failure to provide references or the applicants details have changed so that bedroom needs have changed for example, the provisional offer is withdrawn as per policy and the correct skipping text chosen with notes added to the system for partner associations and the applicant notified accordingly.

Chorley Community Housing, actively look at re-housing their tenants whom have been affected by the bedroom tax/ under-occupying. They have an under-occupancy officer as well as ensuring that every tenant affected is on select move and actively bidding for suitable accommodation. Each case is judged on its own merits and where a customer requires practical or financial assistance to move they have provided this if/when available which has also included moving.

Contour Homes:

Whilst the organisation followed the same process that the Partnership had set, For Contour, tenant sustainability also played an important role when matching tenants to properties, but their processes were fair and transparent. Any concerns that were flagged were checked with the relevant officers to ensure that tenants are placed correctly. If the applicant is honest and upfront they endeavoured to be the same.

Places for People:

Places for People have a dedicated Allocations Team based at their regional office that allocates all their properties on Select Move in Chorley, Preston and South Ribble Local Authority Areas. When an allocations officer goes to match an applicant for a property further verification checks are carried out to confirm the applicants eligibility for the property.

Places for People work in line with the published Select Move allocations Policy for the processing of an applicant being refused a property with them.

Places for People are enabling their customers to make real choices about how they may wish to move if they are under occupying their home or are overcrowded. Places for People carry out home visits to their customers who wish to move in order to discuss potential rehousing solutions including registering for rehousing. Mutual Exchanges are also considered as the most effective way for a customer facilitating a move as this can be the quickest way for this to happen.

Progress Housing Ltd:

When applicants were made active, initial checks were carried out to ensure that they were eligible and qualified; such as checking tenancies and debts, and previous conduct. At the point of offer, it could have been some time since the applicant was registered, so further verifications are necessary. Part of this process is also checking that they are eligible for that particular property, for example, are they eligible for sheltered accommodation, do they require an adapted property, do they meet any local connection criteria?

Further checks were also carried out to ascertain if the applicant was able to afford the rent, following changes to the benefit system, Progress Housing Group have restricted offers to applicants who are not classed as under occupying if they are on benefits – for example, they would in a lot of cases be immediately putting someone into financial hardship who had two children under 10 of different sexes into a three bedroom house, has they would need to pay a large proportion of their rent each week. However if one of the children, only one year from reaching their 10th birthday, they would look at considering whether it was affordable for that applicant to pay the short fall for a few months by supporting them to apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment until they were eligible.

Progress Housing Group implemented the Select Move partnerships policy and procedures in relation to skipping, stating that applicants are skipped for a number of reasons that included, when an applicant had arrears that they were no longer paying off, the applicant had applied for a property but had no local connection, it had been identified that the applicant would be better suited to more supported accommodation and would struggle to maintain a tenancy without excessive support, the applicant had not told them about previous addresses that they had left following anti-social behaviour or a relevant criminal record that they had not declared, there household had changed, meaning that they were subject to the “spare room subsidy”, or they have failed a transfer inspection if they were already a tenant of the Association, meaning that they need to carry out works to damage before they are allowed to move. They may have been given a banding for medical need and they have bid for a property that would not improve their situation, for example, an upper floor flat or a house with no lift for someone who has been given Band B for medical need, or they

may have been given a priority due to domestic abuse but they have bid for a property too close to the perpetrator or the applicant attends a viewing with the perpetrator.

Progress Housing Group had a downsizing incentive fund to assist those customers who were either over or under occupied, along with an Under Occupation Officer who has made contact with every tenant that they think has been affected. As well as looking at moving the customer, in some cases, they directly match some applicants who need to move due to changes in benefits. They talk to the customer about other options, such as having lodgers or applying for a Discretionary Housing Payment for a short term issue. This however, has had a knock on effect in that more three bedroom houses are available and are difficult to match due to the size of family required.

Members asked about the condition of properties at the point of handover to the tenant. For example, if they had a minimum standard that all their properties must meet upon re-let, how they ensured consistency and what pre-let checks did they undertake to ensure that the property is fit for let/met their standards.

Chorley Community Housing:

At the point where a property becomes void it is inspected and if needed, works are carried out to the re-let standard and post inspected by the supervisor for the void team in each area. The new tenant views the property during void works and re-attends at the property to sign to state they accept/are happy with the property. If there are any further works found, these are noted and planned in immediately by the lettings officer whilst the tenant is present. Chorley Community Housing will carry out minor repair works to a property or allocate vouchers, so that the property can be re-let quickly, because demand is strong, they do what is reasonably possible to ensure a tenancy that is sustainable as it would be seen as a failure if it turned out to be a short-term tenancy because the property was not maintained to an acceptable standard. Properties are also randomly inspected by senior managers on a spot check basis to ensure that standards are maintained.

Contour Homes:

The organisation had a firm of contractors that assessed the properties and reported back on what works needed to be done to get the property to letting standard. The organisation was looking to invest in the redecorating of some of their properties in order to attract more tenants. Neighbourhood officers would assess which rooms needed to be decorated and vouchers were available and based on £25 per room.

Places for People:

Places for People do operate a lettings standard that all homes meet prior to them being re-let. A letting standard is issued to customers in relation to this at viewings/sign up.

Places for People's Property Team carry out checks prior to the handing over of properties being 'Ready To Let'

Progress Housing Ltd:

The organisation has a lettable standard that they follow and all applicants are given a copy before viewing properties. The properties are checked throughout the process and they also have tenant inspectors who look at a large percentage of their empty properties.

Properties are usually viewed whilst works are still to be completed but there is a list of works that staff share with those viewing and they agree at sign up that they are happy with this. A new tenancy visit is always carried out within the first 6 weeks

which checks that everything has been completed satisfactorily particularly in those cases where works have been carried out after let, for example, garden works.

All the organisations reported that they are first and foremost social housing providers and that although this can be challenging in the current environment every effort is given to provide quality affordable housing to those in need. Recent rules changes by the government now meant that registered social providers could charge vastly differing rents for similar properties. Some of Chorley's registered providers were working with the Council to develop additional properties across the borough and have allocated the funds to do this

Chair