

Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Select Move

Wednesday, 26 February 2014

Present: Councillor Graham Dunn (Chair), Councillor Hasina Khan (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Paul Leadbetter, June Molyneaux and Steve Murfitt

Also in attendance

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

14.SM.21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Paul Walmsley.

14.SM.22 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of any interests.

14.SM.23 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group – Select Move meeting held on 7 November 2013 be held as a correct record for signing by the Chair.

14.SM.24 CUSTOMER SURVEY ANALYSIS

The Task Group had requested for two surveys to be undertaken for current applicants of the Select Move lettings partnership and those applicants that had recently been housed by the process.

The two surveys were sent out with an equality form and return pre-paid envelope in the week commencing 18 November with a deadline of the 20 December given for their completed submission. Surveys sent out to current applicants totalled 1,369, with 228 (16.7%) being returned. 376 surveys were sent out to customers that had been rehoused in the last six months, with 71 (18.9%) being returned.

Most characteristics roughly matched profiles of those surveyed except age profile and those with disabilities. Older age ranges over represented increasing through 40s, 50 and over 60's. Weighting applied based on ages for comparison purposes but only had a significant impact on one question, so un-weighted data was used. 60.1% of respondents were female and 39.9% male, although 37.8% of main applicants in Chorley are male.

Interestingly the percentage of people that considered that they have a disability was 37.5%, which was significantly higher compared to the 7.1% on the housing register. Over half the people with a disability indicated 'co-ordination, dexterity or mobility', and almost 3 in 10 indicated 'mental health'.

Most people indicated that they had found out about Select Move by word of mouth either by a friend or family member, council or housing association staff as opposed to via the internet. Even though the Select Move was an online process, a high volume of people still preferred to complete a paper application form. The majority of people found the application process easy to apply, however, 13.9% did find it difficult, stating internet access and complexity and length of form as the main reasons for those difficulties. It was important to note that it was predominately older people who found it difficult.

Members discussed the difficulties with the language barrier that many BME applicants found when applying online as there did not appear to be any provision for people who could not read English. Although, the mosque was used as a central location for help and advice, there were many people in the community who did not attend the mosque, in particular other religions and women, who were actually the biggest % of gender applying in the first place. It was explained that language line is still in use at the Council offices and arrangement can always be made to translate the paper application form into other languages by request.

Nearly everyone (88.2%) who responded indicated that a photograph of the property on the advert was important when deciding on which properties to bid on. Members felt that some of the reasons given as to why they were not included were not acceptable as the reasons as to why the property was empty did not need to be advertised.

72.1% of people that had been recently housed stated that they had bid upon a property on a weekly basis with 33.0% of current applicants doing the same. There appears to be a large percentage of people who had never bid against a property. Lack of bidding was partially down to internet access/ability and with a preference for dealing with people, but it was also down to personal choice or requirements.

70% of Select Move customers had been housed in less than 12 months, with 34.3% being housed within 4 months of applying. 68.6% of respondents were satisfied with the condition of the property that they had moved into. Of the 11.4% of people dissatisfied, there were no particular problems highlighted. With decoration, fixtures and fittings, repairs, problems with utility supplies, condensation and cleanliness all being given as reasons.

Not surprisingly the percentage of people satisfied with the overall processes relating to Select Move was higher (55.9%) for those people who had been housed, as opposed to (45.6.9%) of current applicants. The main reasons for dissatisfaction once again related to IT issues that included, complicated processes, lack of internet access and difficulties logging on to the system. However, a high percentage of customers both current applicants and recently housed had no desire to return back to the previous allocations system, with 7 out of 10 respondents preferring the Select Move process and finding it easy to use.

Whilst satisfaction in general is reasonably high, the need for personal contact either face to face or via the telephone came across as important for those who do not have internet access or prefer not to use an online system.

The Task Group considered the information provided and came to the following conclusions:

- The Council needed to work with the partners to address the issue of not providing pictures when advertising properties for let on the Select Move system.
- The main source of dissatisfaction was around initial access and Members thought that greater consideration needed to be given to the equality of access to IT. One idea was to hold surgeries, especially in rural areas.
- There appeared to be significant differences between the registered social providers with regards to the condition of property for new tenants. One provider stood out above the rest in terms of the offer to prospective tenants regarding the letting standard including decoration allowances and it was suggested that this higher standard needed to be set across the partnership.
- The Council would continue to work with the Registered Providers to develop a housing database of properties that had adaptations already installed to assist those applicants with specific needs.
- That additional advice and support should be provided to assist those applicants with specific needs, apply for suitable property, including providing

information on how to apply for discretionary payments etc or how to obtain medical evidence for their application.

- That more needed to be done to alleviate the shortage of one bedroomed property, especially for the under 35's and bungalows, particularly in rural areas.
- Consideration needs given to under 25's with regards to affordability policies. Registered Social Providers are advising that these customers are not able to afford properties as Job Seekers Allowance for under 25's is lower. This is irrespective of entitlement to full housing benefit.
- The Partnership needed to agree to the implementation of a Standard Affordability Policy so that a consistent approach is adopted by all the partners.

The Chair thanked Michael Coogan for his analysis of the survey results.

14.SM.25 APPLICANTS WITH VERIFIED LOCAL CONNECTION - UPDATE

The Group were provided with an update on those applicants who had been verified as having a local connection to Chorley in line the recent changes to the policy. In order to transfer current applicants within the Select Move scheme, applicants were contacted twice by letter that detailed the changes, along with a mini application to complete and return. A pre-paid envelope was enclosed to assist the applicants in returning their application.

Each banding was than reviewed by officers in December 13, to identify those households that had not responded, were currently a live case with housing options or/and in temporary accommodation,

All the Partner Organisations had dealt with their own lists using the same process at the Council, which had been agreed at the Steering Group. To understand the accurate picture of applicants who had a local connection to Chorley, Members were provided with tabled analysis of all the partners showing both bedroom need and banding assessment.

All the partners, including the Council have seen a reduction in the number of applicants on the waiting list. Chorley Council's managed cases have reduced from 767 to 286.

All applicants who did had not responded to the re-assessment had been cancelled and would not be able to make further bids on properties, they would however be re-instated should they contact the Council or other partners, providing they meet the new policy criteria.

It was AGREED that the Council would monitor the downward trend on the waiting list in relation to the local connection policy.

14.SM.26 CUSTOMER DROP-IN SESSION - 7 MARCH 2014

The Task Group met with those customers that had indicated a wish to speak with Councillors about their experiences in relation to the Select Move processes. Members of the housing team were also available to take down any details relating to specific issues of concern.

Lack of communication seems to be an overriding factor in many of the issues that were raised. Customers reported incidences of documentation going missing on more than one occasion and the absence of clear and correct advice from staff of registered social providers, particularly in relation to Select Move policy. Even though the process had been made easier by only having to apply once with one partner, each

partner still appeared to have their own allocation policies which made it confusing to the customer.

Applicants also reported being subjected to poor customer service from the registered providers, including rude staff and were often made to feel inferior because they were apply for social housing. Most people still felt that there was a stigma attached to 'applying for a council house', and were often labelled or categorised unfairly.

Customers were aware that properties had become empty and yet were let without any advertisement on Select Move, citing examples. This confirmed that the process of direct matching takes place 'behind the scenes' and although it may be done fairly and consistently, the lack of transparency promotes the theory that preferential treatment is given, leading many applicants feeling disengaged and a lack of confidence in the scheme.

There also appeared to be evidence of vulnerable applicants not being supported enough through the process and it was felt that additional signposting was needed for customers along with the necessary training for staff.

There was also evidence that customers had applied to Select Move and as a result of regular bidding in person at local offices, had been successful in obtaining a property. As a result they were very happy with their experience of the scheme and the outcome.

Chair