

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 11 MARCH 2014

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HEALTH, HOUSING AND
COMMUNITY SUPPORT

PROVISION OF SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE TENANTS IN EAST
HERTS

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

Purpose/Summary of Report

- To consider the issue of the provision of services to vulnerable tenants housed via the Council’s nomination process to Registered Providers in East Herts, primarily South Anglia and Riversmead Housing Associations.
- This report provides background information on the subject and details a range of services provided by South Anglia and Riversmead Housing Associations to support vulnerable tenants.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Community Scrutiny: That:

(A)	The range of support and services for vulnerable tenants offered by the Registered Providers be scrutinised, and
(B)	Members agree that no further review is warranted at this time.

1.0 Background

1.1 Councillors had identified a few instances of poor services to vulnerable tenants by Registered Providers (RPs). Councillors were concerned that the effect on a vulnerable tenant of poor service, by an RP, would exacerbate their vulnerability and could have a disproportionate detrimental affect compared to someone less vulnerable.

1.2 Councillors wanted to challenge RPs on how they identified and provided their housing services to vulnerable tenants. The report covers more detail than the provision of a prioritised repairs service or adaptations as these are a small part of the additional services they provide for vulnerable tenants and the number of tenants affected is small. In additions adaptations is part of the Stock Transfer Agreement and is reported separately to Community Scrutiny annually.

1.3 It was agreed that Officers would contact the two main Registered Providers (RPs), South Anglia and Rivermead Housing Associations, and report back to Community Scrutiny on the services provided with regards to vulnerable tenants for consideration and a decision as to whether a further review is warranted at this time.

2.0 Report

2.1 **Legal Definition of “Vulnerability” and Statutory Responsibility with regards to rehousing.**

East Herts Council, in common with all other local authorities has a statutory requirement in relation to the housing of vulnerable people. The Housing Act 1996, Part VII (Homelessness) identifies that a person has a priority need for accommodation if they are “vulnerable” as a result of: old age; mental illness or handicap; physical disability; or other special reason”. In addition to this, the Housing Act 1996 Part VI (Allocation of Housing Accommodation) states that reasonable preference must be given to households consisting of or including someone with a particular need for settled accommodation on medical or welfare grounds. The Code of Guidance for the Act states that this group should be given reasonable preference within a Local Authority’s allocations policy, which means that such a household should be accorded greater priority for housing.

2.2 Therefore Council has to have regard to their vulnerability in terms of securing housing i.e. the Council is not required to necessarily provide housing directly, it can meet its obligations through housing associations or the private sector. As East Herts Council transferred its housing stock to South Anglia (formerly Stort Valley) and Riversmead Housing Associations in 2002 the primary method for the Council to discharge its housing duty is through nominations arrangements with RPs.

- 2.3 Alongside services provided by the RPs Hertfordshire County Council and East Herts Council do provide services to vulnerable tenants that can be accessed by all tenants including tenants of RPs. However because RPs recognise that their tenants are more likely to have a vulnerability they have developed or commissioned additional services. This report does not discuss Safe Guarding duties and policies for children or adults to which all public bodies have a duty.
- 2.4 This report mainly focuses on the additional support that can be provided by RPs to enable tenants to live safely and maximise their life chances. However it should also be recognised that RPs must take a balanced view with regards to the lifestyle choices that some vulnerable tenants make that can have a significant impact on local tenants, whether they be RP tenants or not. The behaviour of some tenants designated as vulnerable can significantly affect the quality of life and feelings of security for those living around them and the needs and wishes of such tenants can not always be paramount when seen in the wider context.
- 2.5 The Housing Service has discussed with both Riversmead and South Anglia the work that they carry out to identify vulnerable tenants, the additional services they provide and the tailoring of their generic services. However it is difficult to list all the work they are doing and both RPs encourage Councillors to meet and discuss the work they do at one of their regular 'councillor meetings' or if they have particular concerns to discuss them at any time.
- 2.6 **Identifying vulnerable tenants**
The emphasis is on identifying potentially vulnerable tenants as early as possible from when the tenancy commences and prevent issues with tenancies arising as far as possible or mitigating their impact. Because of the way Housing Registers must be framed the East Herts tenants nominated through the Choice Based Lettings Services, to vacant RP homes, are more likely to be vulnerable for some reason than the general resident population of East Herts. In addition vulnerability may not be a long-term condition or disability but maybe short-term as a result of a significant event such as bereavement or developing an illness that is not initially treated
- 2.7 When a resident is nominated to a RP's property the Council's Housing Options Team carry out a 'Housing Needs and Risk

Assessment' that identifies any safety issues and support requirements. This assessment is signed by the prospective tenant and forwarded to the RP along with the nomination. This document is reviewed by the RP and is part of their decision on whether the accommodation and the services they provide meets, the prospective tenant needs and flags up whether any additional support services may be required early on. In addition at 'sign up' to a tenancy both RPs make an assessment as to whether there is additional support required for example to assist with benefit claims or referral to support agencies if they are not already involved. Both RPs also carry out six week visits after the tenant has moved in and this is an additional opportunity to discuss with the tenant any concerns or advice they require and identify any potential vulnerabilities.

2.8 **Enhanced Repairs Service**

Both RPs have policies to prioritise certain repairs for older or vulnerable tenants for example due to ill health. If the tenant has a vulnerability or health issue that is affected by the repair needed then the priority to do the repair is increased to reflect the increased urgency to undertake the work. Some tenants are flagged on the RP's repairs database that they have a health issue and are prioritised by the Repairs Officer if appropriate but if they are not then both RPs will take the information from the tenant and make an assessment based on what they have been told – they don't require confirmation from another agency. Once the repair's priority has been increased, the time taken to complete the works is monitored amongst the general statistics for that repair priority and reported on to the Board. This means that neither RP are able to advise specifically how many repairs they enhance the priority for or identify the number or percentage of enhanced priority repairs that met the adjusted target time.

2.9 Throughout the lifetime of a tenancy, Neighbourhood Officers and Technical Surveyors are front line staff who visit tenants in their own homes. If they have any concerns about particular households they engage with, there is a mechanism in place for both RPs whereby the visiting officers will seek to engage with the household and signpost them to appropriate support services. In addition, both also have policies with their repairs contractors where they can also flag up any concerns following on from their visits to households. This could be due to vulnerability, crime or any other major concern.

2.10 **Additional Services**

Both RPs have identified a growing need for low level general support for tenants as well as higher level of support for a small number. Both RPs employ specialist staff to work with those tenants identified that may require support, whether that is long-term or short-term interventions, in Tenancy Sustainment and Financial Inclusion Teams. Tenants can be referred to these teams, primarily by the Neighbourhood Officer. Tenancy sustainment officers are about providing a service which enables a tenant to maintain their tenancy. Part of their role is therefore about identifying other support services which may be able to support existing tenant's individual needs e.g. liaising with Mind, Social Services, Occupational Health or supporting tenants with form filling. Where they are supporting a new tenant it will be about supporting them with what they need to do to settle into their new home, ensuring they apply for benefits etc, and provide guidance and advice on how to manage their income.

- 2.11 For the Financial Inclusion teams the work level has significantly increased following the recent Welfare Reforms. These officers focus on new tenants and those who are directly affected as a consequence of Bedroom Under-Occupation policy. Both RPs have worked with the Housing Options Service to increase points on the Housing Register to enable these tenants to move to more suitable sized accommodation. Other support that can be accessed for existing tenants includes that provided by Anti-Social Behaviour officers who work with both the tenant causing nuisance and those affected to identify the reasons or causes and provide advice and support or contact agencies to provide specialist support. There are also links to the Council's Anti-Social Behaviour and Projects Officer.
- 2.12 Both Riversmead and South Anglia housing associations advertise and make use of services provided such as The GreenAider Garden Project which is a free service for the elderly and other vulnerable adults who need assistance getting their garden under control. This is not just an aesthetic outcome to appease neighbours but crucially offers some uniformity to the external area of the property to avoid it being identified and potentially targeted by criminal elements who might take advantage of the tenant's vulnerability.
- 2.13 The detailed possession proceedings policies, which both RPs have, aim to give tenants, whether vulnerable or not, every opportunity to turn their tenancy around. To be evicted from a tenancy has serious implications for future re-housing options

particularly through the Council's Housing Register. For each tenant that possession proceedings are begun against the RPs review every case both before and after a tenant has been evicted to see if they can or could have done things differently. However they also have a careful balance to maintain between the safeguarding of vulnerable tenants and the impact on of anti-social behaviour on neighbours and communities or lack of payment of rent on their ability to provide services.

- 2.14 **Riversmead** contribute to agencies such as Surestart , CAB and Thriving Families. These projects works with vulnerable households that have often come to the attention of a number of agencies at the same time for reasons such as debt, worklessness, poor school attendance. Agencies work together intensively to improve outcomes and behaviours. Currently, as part of their restructure , Riversmead are increasing the number of Neighbourhood Officers to reduce the size of their 'Patch'. They are also introducing a formal process of tenancy audits which will mean that over a period of time they will have made contact and visited all of their tenants to ensure that they are complying with their tenancy conditions. This will also help them to identify those who are vulnerable and require some support. Riversmead are introducing the role of a Tenancy Support Officer. This role will give more intensive support to vulnerable families particularly to those which fall below the Thriving Families threshold.
- 2.15 **South Anglia** has a Money Advice Officer which is a specialist role within their tenancy sustainment team and is focused purely upon money and housing benefit advice and providing basic debt advice before making referrals. In addition to their tenancy sustainment team South Anglia also has a Community Development (CD) team which includes a financial inclusion officer who targets new customers and visit tenants who need general guidance/signposting on money matters. They have also been actively involving in encouraging tenants to take up bank accounts, Credit Union membership and affordable loans and savings accounts to support the management of their money. South Anglia continue to financially support East Herts CAB and the CD team have been undertaking a lot of work around getting tenants back into work with training initiatives, apprenticeships and the recent Work Fair which they held. South Anglia have also been involved with the 'Joining the Dots' project in East Herts to provide an outreach service which offers benefits advice.

South Anglia has introduced 'Concern Cards' with their contractors so that they can report any concerns they may have regarding tenants or a neighbourhood. There has also been work done within the group on issues such as identifying and responding to cyber-bullying and hoarding that has been rolled out across the group. A copy of Circle's 'Vulnerability and Individual Support' Policy is provided at Essential Reference paper B.

- 2.16 South Anglia and Riversmead have policies for identifying vulnerable tenants but this can be a very subjective and emotive issue. Not all clients identified as vulnerable recognise that they are or want or accept assistance. In addition it must be recognised that the primary purpose of all RPs is the provision of housing and not social or health care. However due to the nature of how social housing is accessed RPs recognise that their tenants are more likely to be vulnerable than the general resident population and have provided services, tailored their services or provided a financial contribution to other agencies to meet that need and support their tenants.
- 2.17 To date 357 new tenancies have been let since April 2013 of which 327 or 92% have been let through choice based lettings to Riversmead and South Anglia housing associations. The remaining 8% or 30 have been let through other RPs mainly Paradigm, Aldwyck and Orbit housing associations. The report has therefore concentrated on the two main RPs.

3.0 Implications/Consultations

- 3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

Background Papers - none

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