

## **Appendix C**

### **Social Housing – Task and Finish Group**

#### **Meeting with Senior Officer from Network Homes**

**16 March 2020 at 2pm Wallfields, Pegs Lane, Hertford**

**Present:** Elected members N Symonds (Chairman), M Brady and M Goldspink

Jackie Trundell, Network Homes

**Officers:** Lorraine Blackburn, Scrutiny Officer and Jonathan Geall, Head of Housing and Health

#### **1. Introductions**

The Chairman on behalf of Elected members, welcomed Jackie Trundell and thanked her for coming.

#### **2. Questions posed to the Senior Officer from Network Homes**

##### **1. How well does the council's approach in allocating vacant RP properties work? Do the RPs have any suggestions for how things could be done differently?**

- The Officer from Network Homes (herein 'the Officer') said that she believed that the council's approach to allocating properties was working very well.
- There were regular meetings with the council and the association advertised properties which were available.
- In terms of process, the council sifted through the successful bidders and they nominated three individuals to be considered for the allocation of a property; Network Homes then undertook an assessment.

- The Chairman sought further clarification in relation to new build properties being advertised. The Network officer agreed that it could be a challenge processing a number of properties, with limited resources within the team especially, when 12 new build properties may become available in a single.
- The Chairman queried whether the risk process was too “soft”. The Officer commented that she did not feel that the risk assessment process was too soft but was designed to protect the most vulnerable. She referred to the issues and constraints posed by the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations). She further explained that the housing association had a legitimate business to ask questions about an applicant’s criminal and mental health background and an expectation that the questions would be answered truthfully. The Officer said that further checks could be undertaken if there was the possibility that the applicant may have not answered truthfully.
- The issue of anti-social behaviour was discussed and the powers of the housing association to deal with such a situation. The Officer explained that if there was proven anti-social behaviour, within the last two years, if the individual had specific vulnerabilities or the property was unsuitable, then the individual would not be offered the property.

**2. How well does the council support RPs to develop new homes in the district? Do the RPs have any suggestions on how things could be done differently?**

- The Officer explained that in terms of new developments, the council was supportive and that there was an “open door” arrangement with regard to being able to work with colleagues in planning and housing services.

- She explained that if the housing association had available land for development then early conversations would take place with both the planning and housing service officers to establish what was needed in terms of provision. The housing association was then able to consider how housing provision could be accommodated in terms of outright sale, shared ownership, tenured rent to make a proposed scheme financially viable.
- The Officer explained that grant funding was available and that this helped the provider deliver more affordable housing. Other sources of funding including those negotiated via Section 106 agreements.
- The Officer explained that there was potential to provide good quality housing for older people in order to encourage them to release rented under-occupied properties.

**3. How well does the Council communicate its aims and objectives to RPs? Could this be improved?**

- The Officer explained that there were good communication links, with meetings held regularly with Executive Officers (from the housing association); meetings were held regularly with developers and there were close links with the housing team. She explained that there were regularly housing forums in an effort to understand the challenges in relation to provision.

**4. What are the RPs' views on how elected members and/or officers raise tenants complaints with them? Could this be done differently?**

- The Chairman referred to the fact that some tenants do not like elected members getting involved in matters they are raising with their landlord. The Officer explained that if a tenant wanted an advocate, then the housing association would

respect that wish and ask the elected member(s) to complete the “permission card” which would facilitate open communication (and observe the requirements of GDPR). The Officer explained that if elected members wanted to progress an issue on behalf of a Network Homes’ tenant they should do so via the email address as shown [electedmembersenquiries@networkhomes.org.uk](mailto:electedmembersenquiries@networkhomes.org.uk)

**5. How satisfied are tenants / residents with the way their complaints are handled; is there a pattern of complaint which can be addressed?**

- The Officer explained that complaints were followed up via a Satisfaction Survey which were rarely returned. She acknowledged that this was a problem but that the return of the form depended on whether or not someone was happy with the result and that it wasn’t always possible to give people what they wanted.
- The Officer explained that Network was always looking at ways to learn from complaints.
- An elected member asked for clarification from Network Homes on the best way to proceed a resident’s complaint. The Officer re-iterated that if an elected member had a complaint then the best way to proceed was to allow the association to go through the complaints process and that if the resident was still not satisfied then to ask the tenant to sign a consent / representation form (to observe compliance with data protection requirements) and then email via the [electedmembersenquiries@networkhomes.org.uk](mailto:electedmembersenquiries@networkhomes.org.uk) box.
- The Chairman asked whether Network Homes had a Tenancy Sustainment Officer. The Officer said they did not but acknowledged the valuable help they could provide.

**6. How do you communicate with tenants / residents? Does this comply with equality / disability requirements?**

- The Officer explained that Network Homes used a variety of methods to communicate and that it was currently in the process of developing an online portal when the pilot study has been concluded. It was hoped that this would go “live” in April / May 2020.
- The Officer explained that Network Homes also communicated in writing, via the website, telephone, notice boards.
- Additionally tenants could call personally into the office where they could gain help.
- The Officer confirmed that all information in whatever medium, was compliant with disability and equality requirements having been first risk assessed.

**7. What are your procedures for complaints?**

- Responded to within the answer to Q5.

**8. In terms of the bidding process and viewing properties, what are your protocols? Do you experience difficulties with this?**

- The Officer explained that the bidding process was run by the council with the housing association being provided with nominations. S
- he confirmed that the process worked well and was aligned with Network’s priorities.
- It was noted that Network Homes received a number of nominations per property, which the council initially reviewed with the housing association taking the top three.

- She explained the review process which was aligned to risk assessments and that they tried to arrange multiple views wherever possible.
- The Officer explained that some properties were harder to let, for example, top floor properties to elderly people and perhaps those requiring re-decoration.

**9. How do you resolve problems issues with tenants? What are your protocols in relation to anti-social behaviour?**

- The Chairman referred to the fact that Network Homes provided life time tenancies and queried issues in relation to those who might show anti-social behaviour.
- The Officer She explained that virtually all would be converted to assured tenancies and secure tenancies.
- The Officer explained that in relation to Starter Tenancies and potential anti-social behaviour, there was a need to ensure that the housing association adhered to a stringent monitoring process if it was suspected that the tenant might be perpetrating anti-social behaviour which would then aid the process if the matter was taken to court; otherwise a case could be thrown out of court on a technicality. A court would need to be assured that every single aspect had been exhausted before measures could be taken forward.
- The Officer explained that where there were neighbour problems, the association expected the tenants to resolve an issue themselves.
- The court would not give the association possession of a property in relation to a dispute about a smell from cannabis.
- The Officer explained that the association worked closely with East Herts Council and that working together, they could obtain a Community Protection Notice (after a Community Protection Warning) had been issued by the housing association. Further

steps included the issue of a fixed penalty fine. If this was not paid then the matter would become a criminal offence and a criminal conviction could enable the housing association to take back possession of the accommodation.

- The Officer explained that if the tenant was vulnerable and at risk then the housing association could move the tenant via a “Management Move”.
- An elected member asked whether the group could be provided with a note of the procedures open by the association in relation to anti-social behaviour and securing possession of a property. The Officer undertook to provide this.

**10. Is there a mechanism to feed back to Social Services in terms of a holistic approach to issues which might be of a Social Services nature?**

- The Officer explained that Network Homes worked closely with a number of agencies including the NHS and Social Services.
- She explained that if the association was concerned about an individual who might be “high risk” then the association had a duty to contact Social Services and make them aware.
- She explained what agencies the housing association had regular contact with.
- The Officer explained that it was important to remember that Network Homes was a provider of homes and not a social service but would do all it could to ensure the needs of residents, from a housing provision viewpoint were met.

The Chairman, on behalf of elected members, thanked the Officer for attending.

The meeting ended at 3:10 pm