

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Report of Group Manager, Housing and Social Inclusion

To Audit Committee

25th April 2018

Report prepared by:
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Housing Allocations

1. Purpose of Report

To update the Audit Committee on progress following the audit report for Housing Allocations (17- 47) issued in November 2017, with a completion date of April 2017.

2. Audit Objective

- 2.1 To assess whether the actions agreed in the original audit report issued December 2016 have been implemented and are now effectively embedded into the day-to-day operation of the service.

3. Audit Recommendations

A number of Management Actions were required following the audit, including the following which were outstanding from a previous audit:

- Develop a set of procedure notes to support the delivery of the Policy;
- Undertake a project to establish whether the Abrisas system has the functionality required to support the manner in which the service should operate;
- Establish how to use the Abrisas system to monitor delivery of key elements of the Policy, within the expected timescales;
- Establish a quality assurance process for independently reviewing a sample of applications;
- Create a process to ensure that direct lets are undertaken in line with the Council's Allocations Policy;
- Formalise the expectations of the work South Essex Homes do in respect of the allocations process, using clause 67 of the Management Agreement;

Limited action had been taken to address the issues identified in the original Housing Allocations report. As a result, there remained a need to:

- Develop comprehensive procedure notes and a quality assurance process to ensure the Housing Allocations Policy is properly and consistently applied;
- Revise the direct let process to reduce the risk of properties being allocated in a manner that does not comply with the Housing Allocations Policy;
- Formalise the arrangements with South Essex Homes with regards to assessing applications for housing and allocating properties;
- Define the performance information required from the company to ensure this work is delivered in line with the Council's expectations.

4. Background

- 4.1 The Council's Allocations Policy has been in place since August 2014 and along with the accompanying procedures, sets out how Council will let property through the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. The policy enables the Council to consider the individual needs of its applicants whilst making best of housing stock, and sets out: how to apply for housing; eligibility criteria for the Homeseekers Register; how applicant need is prioritised and how decisions are reached; and, how homes will be let.

5. Current position

- 5.1 Since the initial audit was undertaken there has been considerable change within the housing landscape at both national and local levels. This change includes the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, reviews of the housing service programmes within Southend, and new senior management in place across the housing service since September 2017. Following this time work has been underway to transform the service offer and to enable a more corporate approach through the development of the housing strategy programme endorsed by Cabinet in January 2018. This programme includes the revision of the allocations policy as one of its stated areas of work.
- 5.2 Progress against the management actions outline in Section 3 is thus not as extensive as would have been the case as may reasonably be expected to be the case had this work been completed at the time of the original audit. Of the 9 actions within the action plan none are fully complete and further work remains on all three themes of activity: procedures; ICT and South Essex Homes. A brief overview of work actively underway in each of these is given below.
- 5.3 Council staff are working with South Essex Homes officers to re-engineer the pilot referenced within the audit report and this is anticipated to result in new arrangements within the next couple of months. Moreover, work has commenced on the drafting of the new Management Agreement with South Essex Homes and care will be taken to ensure this is wholly consistent with both the findings of the audit work and the subsequent procedural changes required by the Homelessness Reduction Act. The new Management Agreement will be in place from April 2019.

- 5.4 The existing allocations policy is being reviewed and revised as part of the broader Housing Strategy programme. This process will take account of all the procedural revision required by the audit findings, and together with any staff restructuring or recruitment which may be required to enable the delivery of this work, is anticipated to be in place late in 2018. Additional staff have already been recruited in line with aspects of this work and will start in the next few weeks.
- 5.5 A number of recommendations require changes to the Abrisas ICT platform used by the Council's housing service. Due to the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act the Council is working very closely with Abrisas to ensure that new functionality required by the Act is in place and, alongside this, we are working with the provider to deliver the above amendments. Some of the process changes required by the Act do not come into force until the autumn and thus we are working to ensure all aspects of this work will be completed by late 2018.
- 6. Financial Implications**
The changes required to Abrisas fall outside the core contracted rate and are therefore chargeable. Developer time is typically around £1000 per day.
- 7. Legal Implications**
None
- 8. People Implications**
None
- 9 Property Implications**
None
- 10. Consultation**
None
- 11 Equalities Analysis**
An Equality Analysis will be undertaken as part of the development of the new allocations policy.
- 12 Value for Money**
N/A
- 13 Community Safety Implications**
None
- 14. Environmental Impact**
None.
- 15. Background Papers**
None