

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 22 July 2014

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D. Stallan

Subject: Housing Under-Occupation Officer Post – 1 Year Review

Officer contact for further information: Roger Wilson (ext 4419)

Committee Secretary: Mark Jenkins (ext 4607)



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the Housing Scrutiny Panel undertakes a 1 year review of the Housing Under-occupation Post; and**
- (2) That the outcome of the 1-year review of the Housing Under-occupation Post, and the planned expansion of the role (and the re-designation as Re-housing Support Officer) be noted.**

Report:

Background

1. At its meeting on 23 April 2012 (Minute 158 refers), on the recommendation of the Housing Scrutiny Panel, the Cabinet agreed a number of Housing Improvements and Service Enhancements including the appointments of some additional new Posts. One Post was that of a new Housing Under-occupation Officer with the purpose of:

- (a) Providing practical assistance to vulnerable under-occupying Council tenants who have insufficient family support to transfer to smaller Council accommodation; and
- (b) Generally seeking to reduce under-occupation in the Council's housing stock.

2. The Cabinet requested that the Housing Scrutiny Panel reviews the effectiveness of any new posts agreed within the Panel's recommendations after a period of 1 year. Therefore, the Panel is asked to review progress made with the Housing Under-occupation Officer Post.

Under-occupation and Welfare Reforms

3. It is known that many Council properties are under-occupied, mainly following children moving out of their family home and leaving their parent(s) in occupation. Not only does this not make the best use of the Council's housing stock, with so many housing applicants and other tenants in need of family-sized accommodation, it often results in older and vulnerable tenants incurring greater household running costs than required.

4. Under the Welfare Reform Act 2012, working-age tenants on low incomes and in receipt of housing benefit, who under-occupy their property by one or more bedrooms, have their housing benefit reduced. This means that such tenants have to either move to smaller accommodation, or meet the shortfall between the rent and the lower housing benefit themselves.

5. All of the Council's tenants of working age in receipt of housing benefit who are under-

occupying their accommodation and are therefore affected by the removal of the "Spare Room Subsidy" (sometimes referred to as the "Bedroom Tax") have been identified. Due to the two additional Housing Management Officers also agreed by the Cabinet, it has been possible to visit all tenants (who were willing - around 380) affected and offer them advice on, for example, downsizing accommodation and the available incentives in order to avoid the removal of the "subsidy", and budgeting advice etc. Of those visited, the vast majority decided to remain in their current accommodation and meet the additional costs.

6. Under the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme, under-occupying tenants who agree to move to smaller Council accommodation receive financial support from the Council of £500 plus £500 for each room "released" (up to a maximum payment of £2,000), to assist with the costs of moving. In order to encourage such tenants to move to smaller accommodation and free up their family-sized accommodation for families on the Housing Register, they also receive priority under the Allocations Scheme - and therefore greater choice - by being placed in Band A.

7. As the Housing Options Team did not have the resources to dedicate the time to publicise and promote the benefits of downsizing, or to provide any help to older and vulnerable Council tenants who would like to transfer to smaller accommodation, but do not have the confidence, knowledge or ability to co-ordinate and effect a move themselves - and do not have any family or friends willing or able to assist, the new post of Housing Under-occupation Officer was created.

12 month Progress Report of the Housing Under-occupation Officer Post

8. The new Housing Under-occupation Officer was appointed in May 2013. Letters were sent out to around 1,300 homeseekers who were on the Housing Register at that time, prior to the review of the Housing Allocations Scheme and the new Scheme coming into force on 1 September 2013. Posters were distributed to partner agencies publicising the benefits of downsizing accommodation. As a result, there were around 40 enquiries, all of which were followed up. This led to 5 of the Council's existing tenants moving to smaller accommodation, prior to the introduction of the Welfare Reforms.

9. Between July and December 2013, the Under-occupation Officer spent a great deal of time assisting vulnerable homeseekers re-registering their housing application on-line, which was a requirement of the Council's revised Housing Allocations Scheme. Although this work was not directly related to the role, it gave important support to the Housing Allocations Team when they were implementing the most comprehensive review ever of the Scheme. The Under-occupation Officer continues to support around 4 vulnerable applicants registering for housing each week.

10. During this calendar year, a further 1,300 letters were sent to all existing tenants over 60 years of age who are under-occupying Council accommodation, promoting sheltered accommodation and offering the opportunity to attend open days at the Schemes. The letter also referred to the services available from the Under-occupation Officer. This generated 30 enquiries, all of which were followed up with 6 appointments made to view. Prior to a person moving into sheltered accommodation, the Under-occupation Officer undertakes an in-depth assessment of their suitability for sheltered housing, and whether they need any practical support to move from the Housing Under-occupation Officer. Furthermore, the Under-occupation Officer has made presentations to all Resident Associations in the District and attended staff Team Meetings to update staff, particularly those who visit tenants, who can then promote downsizing.

11. Since being appointed in May 2013, there have been 93 enquiries from tenants wishing to downsize accommodation, 10 of these have been given practical assistance to move to smaller, more suitable, accommodation with a further 18 receiving on-going support whilst they wait for a suitable property to become available.

Expansion of the Role

12. Although the Housing Under-occupation Officer Post has been fully utilised since being appointed, it is accepted this is due to some time being spent assisting with the implementation of the reviewed Housing Allocations Scheme. Now the Scheme has been implemented, bearing in mind the reluctance of many tenants to downsize (referred to in Paragraph 5 of this report); the role can now be expanded. It is therefore planned that, in the future, the following duties will be added to the Post:

- Assisting older and vulnerable people who wish to join the Council's Housing Register to register on-line;
- Assisting older and vulnerable people with the practicalities of moving home when they need to downsize accommodation or otherwise due to health reasons, for example when they can no longer manage stairs. This will assist in dealing with difficult-to-let sheltered accommodation;
- Offering home visits to those 105 households in Band A who are under-occupying accommodation, particularly those who are not making bids under the Choice Based Lettings Scheme;
- Arranging open days at sheltered housing schemes, which is proving difficult with existing staffing resources within the Older Peoples Services Section of the Communities Directorate;
- Arranging accompanied viewings at sheltered housing schemes with potential homeseekers;
- Assisting successor tenants who are under-occupying to move to smaller more suitable accommodation.

13. The Panel is asked to note the outcome of the one-year review, the planned additional duties for the post and the intention to re-designate the Post as Re-housing Support Officer, which better reflects its future role.

Consultation undertaken:

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation will be consulted on the report at their meeting on 30 July 2014.