

Present: Councillor George Cornah (Chairman), Councillor Deborah Evans (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Alan Bell, Anton Dani, Anne Dorrian, Viven Edge, Martin Howard, Frank Pickett, Judith Skinner and Stephen Woodliffe

In attendance:

Councillor Martin Griggs (as Portfolio Holder) and Councillor Paul Goodale and Councillor Jonathan Noble (observing).

Officers –

Assistant Director - Assets, Assistant Director - Housing & Wellbeing, Housing, Homelessness and Wellbeing Service Manager and Senior Democratic Services Officer

## **75 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021 were agreed as a correct record to be signed by the Chairman.

## **76 APOLOGIES**

There were apologies for absence from Councillor Aaron Spencer. Following changes to political groupings, Councillor Tom Ashton no longer served on the Committee.

## **77 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

No declarations were made.

## **78 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

There were no questions from members of the public.

## **79 HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY AND HOUSING REGISTER CHANGES**

The Assistant Director - Housing and Wellbeing gave a PowerPoint presentation to the Committee, which set out a proposed Sub-Regional Housing Allocations Scheme.

All Councils were required to have a mechanism to assess housing need, advertise available social housing and allocate properties to households in need and to have a robust housing allocations policy framework in order to do so.

The Council had an existing housing allocations policy, but it needed updating. The current IT system (operated by Lincolnshire Housing Partnership) was no longer up to date and would cease from July 2021. These considerations, along with the interdependency between the allocations policy framework and IT system configuration, created an opportunity to update, improve and integrate the systems, processes, and the customer journey.

Work to explore an alternative IT solution and policy framework began in 2019. There had been significant changes since then, not least the Covid-19 pandemic, but also

legislative and policy frameworks and requirements. Furthermore, the Strategic Alliance with East Lindsey District Council (ELDC) provided an opportunity for a sub-regional approach.

The Assistant Director - Housing and Wellbeing went on to explain:

- How a sub-regional policy framework and approach to delivery would take a 'best of both' approach for the two authorities;
- What a 'digital first' system would mean for customers, stakeholders and staff; and
- How policy changes would affect the experience of Boston's applicants, including the use of the "reasonable preference" legal requirement and priority banding.

The presentation also set out the details of how the transition would be managed, including support for communities; methods of communication and engagement, of which the Scrutiny meeting was a key part; and the timeline.

The matter would be reported to Cabinet in May and ELDC's Executive Board in June 2021 with respect to the policy, approach, consultation feedback and equality impact assessment. Following a 'soft launch' approach, a reserved Members' day or Member briefing would be held in July to demonstrate the system. A review would take place twelve months later to ensure the sub-regional approach was effective and to report on progress.

Following the presentation, Members commended the work undertaken by officers. However, some raised concerns regarding additional information that had been e-mailed to them after the publication of the agenda pack to assist their scrutiny, as it had been received too late to allow them to read and digest it. The Assistant Director - Housing and Wellbeing gave apologies, but advised Members they could forward their comments after the meeting and they would be captured and incorporated in the consultation feedback.

During debate, the report was commended as professional and well written, and the proposal as one that would make a real improvement in the service to the public. Comments included the view that a single system would work better for partners and give applicants more choice; that it should reduce the need for applicants to provide evidence multiple times, which caused frustration; but also that the previous lack of investment in IT had resulted in an unsatisfactory service for the public.

Officers answered specific questions as follows, in summary.

*Would the transition period in June/July be long enough for people to re-register, to avoid re-inputting data?*

Officers would use direct contact, media and social media to encourage people to re-register. It would be a challenge, but they would ensure that communication with the public and Members was clear and timely, and guided by the configuration of the IT system. All efforts would be made to assist vulnerable people to re-register and this could be done by telephone. At ELDC, many people had delayed re-registering; therefore, officers had drawn up a database to assess who would be interested in the available housing to ensure they filled vacancies, to avoid a situation where housing providers had empty properties.

*Officers should not be making judgements regarding medical conditions; it should be for medical professionals to give their opinions in order to avoid any legal challenge.*

Some authorities used professional medical advice and some used their own methods. In the past, ELDC had placed reliance on obtaining professional medical opinions and it had resulted in a significant backlog of several months. Therefore, the contingency measure in place was for officers to apply a clear, defined matrix to assess applications and it worked well. Officers considered health issues along with evidence and assessed the impact on the applicant's life. For example, the impact for a person in a wheelchair living in an adapted bungalow would not be the same if they lived in a first floor flat. If a person was in receipt of personal independence payments this was clear evidence of health issues.

Professional opinions could be sought in order to review Council decisions and a review procedure would be added to the Equalities Impact Assessment.

It was confirmed there had been no response in terms of feedback after writing to all applicants on the housing register.

*How would existing applicants eligible under the current register in Boston but not eligible under the new system be handled?*

Officers would carry out appropriate communication with applicants including one-to-one conversations with everyone who wanted one. There would be people who did not appear to have housing need and had no local connection and, therefore, had it would be fair to let them know they had minimal prospects of accessing housing.

*How would they protect people from scams?*

The system would meet standard requirements in terms of security. For example, verification of identity via email, requesting strong login passwords be used and periodic reminders not to share passwords and so on.

Members were advised of the significant challenges and time pressures on officers in order to ensure continuation of service.

The Portfolio Holder urged Members to submit any further comments to the Assistant Director - Housing and Wellbeing after the meeting.

Members unanimously supported the proposal's recommendation to Cabinet.

**RESOLVED: That the proposed Sub-Regional Housing Allocations Scheme be recommended to Cabinet for approval with the Committee's comments.**

## 80 WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the work programme and noted that the first meeting of the new Municipal Year would be the Committee's work programme in the light of the new

*Overview & Scrutiny - Corporate & Community Committee*  
22 April 2021

Corporate Strategy, approved by Full Council in November 2020, which had updated the Council's priorities.

The Meeting Closed at 7.50 pm