



Service Policy Panel

Report of: Housing Services Manager
Date: 21 June 2006
Open

Proposal for the Introduction of a Local Lettings Policy for the Hurcott Road Estate, Kidderminster

1. Summary

To provide Members with a full appreciation of the history and context of the problems and issues on the Hurcott Road estate and to seek their approval of a Local Lettings Policy to help address these issues, as an important part of a comprehensive approach to regenerate the area.

2. Background

2.1 The estate comprises:

3 Multi-storey blocks with a total of 87 two-bedroomed and 44 one-bedroomed flats.

5 Medium rise blocks with 60 three-bedroomed maisonettes and 9 one-bedroomed flats.

2.2 This high rise, high-density development has for many years posed serious management problems. It has also long been subject to stigma, partly by association with the Horsefair area nearby and due to the fact that it is a high rise estate. Over recent years however there has also been often exaggerated and lurid press coverage of drug dealing and other criminality on the estate and its reputation has dropped to particularly low levels. This impacts directly on demand and while Housing Needs staff have managed to continue to let vacant properties on this estate the applicants (predominantly homeless priority need cases) typically accept such accommodation only reluctantly. The problem has been contained during the last 12 – 18 months probably reflecting the positive impact of the Homeless Support Service, Neighbourhood Wardens and the increased Estate Management presence on the estate. While this seems to have produced some softening in the public's perception of the estate, residents' concerns about security, but particularly allocations and criminal activity, remain very high.

- 2.3 The Community Housing Group set up the Hurcott Road Working Group in July 2002 to carry out a full review of the issues around the Hurcott Road flats and maisonettes and to identify both the immediate action required and a longer-term option appraisal.
- 2.4 In subsequent meetings between July 2002 and August 2003 a wide range of issues, and options were debated from the case for wholesale demolition and redevelopment through to retention and investment. This report summaries some of those debates and identifies a strategy for moving forward.
- 2.5 The improvement work recommended by this Group was dependant on additional capital funding being made available as part of refinancing under Group Structure, originally planned for April 2004 but introduced on 1st April 2005. The setting up of The Community Housing Group has put in place facilities over a 2 year period to enable the strategy to move forward.
- 2.6 The option appraisals carried out were centred around a number of long-term aims:
- To help develop a longer-term sustainable community within the area.
 - To provide affordable and attractive housing for local people.
 - To lower management implications and thereby cost to the Company.
 - To develop a positive asset within The Community Housing Group's portfolio whilst maintaining stock numbers and resident choice.
- 2.7 There are also some specific targets to help assess the success of measures arising from this strategy, over a 3 year period. From an agreed baseline, the following targets will be set, which should help measure the impact of the scheme and these will be reported upon.
1. Reduce Abandonments by 2%.
 2. Reduce Evictions by 2%.
 3. Reduce ASB incidents to Broadwaters/Greenhill average +10%.
 4. Reduce Maintenance Costs by 4%.
 5. To improve resident satisfaction levels across topics such as community safety, quality of life etc.
- 2.8 Additionally, these aims and target 3 also contribute to the Crime and Fire reduction targets which are part of the Worcestershire Local Area Agreement (previously LPSA2) targets for the district and Members will be aware that officers have identified Broadwaters (where Hurcott is located) and the Greenhill Wards as key areas for winning the war on crime and

fires. Members are reminded that achieving these targets will generate £1 million in 'reward money' under the Local Area Agreement. While later decisions on how such money would be spent cannot be pre-empted, there will be a good case made at the time for further investment in the more deprived areas of the district such as Broadwaters and Greenhill, or in those where crime and fires remain higher than average and again these two wards well may figure as priorities.

The Community Housing Group's Approach/Strategy

- 2.9 It is widely acknowledged that there are stages to developing both individuals' and communities stability with one of the key building blocks being the need to ensure safety and security. This is not just about a physical environment but also about the emotional security of individuals.
- 2.10 This is reflected in feedback from residents, who continue to express serious concerns about allocations policies and need for more effective action against the minority causing the worst problems.
- 2.11 The Community Housing Group has over the last 4 years carried out a range of initial actions to address some of the immediate issues whilst the option review and investment were being pursued. To date this has included upgrades to door entry, lift and lobby cameras, external CCTV, upgrade to communal louvre windows, additional cleaning, re-opening of Windermere housing office, redecoration of communal areas, development of floating support schemes for young single homeless and, additional monitoring of CCTV.
- 2.12 The additional works now in hand, totalling £1.2 million, include upgrading the lifts, providing a 'remote concierge' service and additional internal CCTV cameras to better control access to the building and the communal areas where much of the current criminal activity and anti-social behaviour takes place.

3. Key Issues

How does a Local Lettings Policy fit in with this Estate Regeneration Proposal?

- 3.1 A Local Lettings Plan is designed to assist in meeting particular issues facing a geographically defined area, such as a high degree of criminality or anti social behaviour, or as part of an approach to help create a more balanced and sustainable community.
- 3.2 The policies relating to the allocation of social housing can, where appropriate, be amended accordingly to restrict the letting of properties to applicants who fall within specific and definitions. The Council has one other Local Lettings policy in place at Broomy Close, Stourport on Severn, with Waterloo Housing Association, which has helped reduce the level of antisocial behaviour and management problems that were being experienced on the estate.

This is not a blanket ban and does not prevent individuals who may be affected by the Plan from joining the Council's Housing Waiting List.

3.3 The murder in Coniston House and the ensuing public meeting on 8th July 2003 refocused attention on allocation issues with residents demands for a vetting of applicants to reduce the level of drug-related criminality and other A.S.B. issues. Residents were made aware that such a local lettings scheme would require approval from the District Council, and also of course the Police who would need to be involved in this vetting. The Housing Corporation has confirmed it is content with this proposal.

3.4 Progress on the development of this proposed allocation policy issue has not straightforward. The Council's Housing Strategy Team initially had concerns about such changes in allocations potentially impacting on assistance to homeless households and increasing Bed and Breakfast costs. It is now accepted that the number of individuals who fail the test (set out below) will be very small, and in any event if the Council has a legal duty to house them they will be assisted by The Community Housing Group but not at Hurcott Road as we need to give particular protection to the estate during this essential regeneration phase. Here it is important for Members to appreciate that within such a high density, high rise complex a single tenant heavily involved in criminal activity can impact on the quality of life and safety of a large number of residents. The Police initially took time to reach agreement within their organisation on the data sharing implications of a Local Lettings Policy, involving Police checks, even though they had been made aware of similar models that exist in other parts of the country, and The Community Housing Group already share information through a formal protocol which meets the necessary legal requirements in respect of data protection. Further discussions with the Police however produced a workable arrangement to identify applicants for exclusion from Hurcott Road allocations, where they have certain criminal convictions, namely:

- **Drugs – dealing and possession**
- **Burglary and robbery**
- **3 instances of violent crime within the last 5 years**
- **3 instances of criminal damage within the last 5 years**

3.5 An outline draft procedure setting out the proposed operation of this approach is attached as *Appendix 1*. The model has been drawn from a successful scheme implemented by Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, which has assisted in reducing similar problems faced on some of its estates. Community Housing Group have discussed the operation of the scheme with Dudley MBC and believe that this forms the basis of a model that can be applied in Wyre Forest. The detailed procedures will be finalised taking into account the views of local partners and stakeholders.

3.6 The scheme will operate for a three year period to allow time to assess its impact. It will be monitored on a 6 monthly basis against local targets and its contribution to crime reduction targets for the Horsefair and

Broadwaters area generally. It will also be important through the monitoring process to identify trends, ensure that no discrimination is unintentionally resulting from the policy and whether there is any discernible knock on effect in other areas of the District.

- 3.7 An appeals system will also be built into the Procedures to deal with cases where applicants believe that they have unreasonably affected by the operation of the Local Lettings Policy.
- 3.8 The introduction of the Local Lettings Policy will have no additional cost implications to the Council as part of its Service Level Agreements with the Community Housing Group.
- 3.9 It is recognised that some individuals or families may through their vulnerability or other social, health or economic problems have difficulties in managing their accommodation and personal affairs. Notwithstanding the purpose and operation of the Policy there may be instances where a package of support from a range of agencies could assist in marginal decisions as to whether or not to allow an allocation to go ahead.
- 3.10 In order to ensure an understanding of the Policy and its potential implications, there will be a wide ranging consultation with key stakeholders, including the Community Safety Partnership, and the Wyre Forest Homelessness Forum. Any comments and subsequent discussions will be taken into account in the finalisation of the Local Lettings Policy.

Sustainable Community Issues

- 3.11 A key issue for Community Housing Group and the Council is to make the estate a more attractive place to live and create a safer and settled community.
- 3.12 Here there are several strands to the approach:
 - The first is to recognise that simply by implementing the programme of investments and maintaining rents/service charge costs at affordable levels for new tenants, it is possible to increase the relative attractiveness of this estate and the likely interest from customers who will bring a more mature and responsible lifestyle (as compared to reluctant, priority need, high risk cases only).
 - The second is to reinforce this by pursuing the Local Lettings Policy. The positive public relations impact this scheme will bring could in practice be as important than its actual success in identifying high-risk, criminal-history, cases.
 - A further layer would be in the medium term to revisit the allocation policy and consider ideas such as blocks for different age groups or otherwise responding to contemporary and future demand.
- 3.13 In summary, while the additional internal CCTV cameras and a local Police base being set up at Windermere House will be effective in generally reducing crime on the estate, particularly in the communal areas, it is also

vital to reassure existing tenants that access to new tenancies is restricted for applicants who have a criminal record, so preventing any escalation in the current level of particular criminal activity, particularly drug dealing, burglary, violence and criminal damage.

- 3.14 The Policy will be taken into account in any future development of a Choice Based Lettings scheme for allocating affordable housing, which will be subject to a further report itself.

4. Options

- 4.1 Officers are of the opinion that there are two potential courses of action that could be recommended to Cabinet to agree as set out below:

4.2 The first course of action is for the Council to approve the principle of a Local Lettings Plan as outlined in this report and

4.3 that the Head of Planning, Health and Environment, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, Health and Environment, finalise the necessary policy and procedural changes for the Local Lettings Plan for Hurcott Road estate, to include any appropriate amendment to the Council's Housing Waiting List policy.

4.4 The second course of action is to propose any further amendments to the Local Lettings Plan as outlined in this report, and

4.5 that the Head of Planning, Health and Environment, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, Health and Environment, finalise the necessary policy and procedural changes for the Local Lettings Plan for Hurcott Road estate, to include any appropriate amendment to the Council's Housing Waiting List policy.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 There will be no additional financial implications to the Council's contract with Community Housing Group.

6. Legal and Policy Implications

- 6.1 There is an important policy implication, namely on amendment to the Council's Housing Waiting List Policy, setting out the Local Lettings Plan for Hurcott Road, Kidderminster.

7. Risk Management

- 7.1 This policy is designed to assist reduce the level of criminal activity at Hurcott Road estate and make it a safer environment for residents.

7.2 The Council supports the Local Lettings Plan approach as part of a broader package of measures to improve the estate and help create a

more balanced and sustainable community. It will monitor the scheme closely over its 3 year life and keep Members informed as to progress and the impact upon the area as a whole. Detailed procedures will be worked up jointly with the Community Housing Group.

8. Consultees

8.1 Wyre Forest Community Safety Partnership (13th July 2006)

8.2 Wyre Forest Homelessness Forum (19th July 2006)

9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1 – Draft Outline Procedure for a Local Lettings Policy at Hurcott Road

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**DRAFT OUTLINE PROCEDURE FOR A LOCAL LETTINGS POLICY
AT HURCOTT ROAD**

The scheme will be detailed in Wyre Forest Community Housing and Wyre Forest District Council Housing Points Schemes.

All applicants including the Hurcott Road estate in their estate choices will be sent a summary/explanation leaflet covering the scheme and will be asked to give their consent to enquiries being made of the Police utilising an agreed Data Sharing form (similar to Dudley model), and to provide information related to the criminal offences as below.

Communication, appeals and secure handling of data will also follow the Dudley model.

Prior to any offers of accommodation at Hurcott Road (multi storey flats/maisonettes) the applicant will be asked for details on any criminal convictions and will be referred to the Police for a series of checks.

The Police will categorise applicants in the following manner:

RED

- Convictions for dealing or possession with intent to supply any illegal drugs.
- Convictions for burglary or robbery.
- 3 or more offences involving violence or criminal damage in the last 5 years.

Anyone deemed to be in the “red” category would be refused accommodation at Hurcott Road estate and we can disclose to the applicant why they have been refused. This will not disqualify them for rehousing elsewhere.

AMBER

Police surveillance indicates that the applicant may be involved in dealing in illegal drugs. This information cannot be disclosed to the applicant and the decision as to whether an offer can proceed will need careful consideration.

GREEN

Allocation can proceed.