



Report of the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods

Executive Board

Date: 19 December 2007

Subject: Deputation to Council - Allocations and Lettings – Queenswood Heights

Electoral Wards Affected:

Kirkstall

Ward Members consulted
(referred to in report)

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Eligible for Call In

Not Eligible for Call In

(Details contained in the report)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a result of a Deputation by Queenswood Residents and Tenants Group to Full Council on 31 October 2007, Officers are required to report to Executive Board. Queenswood Tenants and Residents Association reported that Queenswood Heights multi storey block has suffered a number of anti social behaviour incidents from some of the tenants. As a result, the Resident and Tenants association have sought changes to the organisation of Lettings teams in WNWhL, and raised other concerns regarding the management of the flats.

The role of LCC is to provide a strategic approach to the housing management and implementation of the allocations policy at Queenswood Heights.

1.0 Purpose Of This Report:

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to respond to the deputation from Queenswood Heights Residents Association to full council on 31st October 2007.
- 1.2 A meeting was held on 13 November 2007 as a result of this deputation, between the Chair of the Tenants Group and the Chair of West North West Homes Leeds, with West North West Homes' Chief Executive and Kirkstall Housing Management Team Members in attendance. This report also considers the conclusions of this meeting.

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 Queenswood Heights is a multi storey block sited off Queenswood Gardens, Headingley.
- 2.2 Queenswood Heights is managed by West North West homes ALMO (WNWhL) on behalf of the council.

3.0 Main Issues

- 3.1 The Queenswood Tenant & Residents Association feel that prior to the introduction of Choice Based Lettings in 2004, properties were only allocated to residents aged over forty. However, there has never been a Local Lettings policy for this block stating age restrictions, either formally or informally. In June 2006, the Queenswood Tenants and Residents Group requested a Local Lettings Policy, as they feel that through Choice Based Lettings they have suffered Anti Social Behaviour.
- 3.2 Before the ALMO Review, Leeds North West homes made a policy decision not to have any local Lettings policies in its area. On the other hand, Leeds West Homes did have a number of Local Lettings policies, particularly age restrictions, in flats where the construction type meant that there were a number of complaints due to lifestyle clashes.
- 3.3 WNWhL staff have been in regular dialogue with tenants and residents of Queenswood Heights to discuss their concerns about the management of the block, and whether a Local Lettings policy should be introduced. The ALMO has concluded that a Local Lettings policy is currently not justifiable as:
- Of the four most recent ASB Cases in Queenswood Heights two of the perpetrators are over forty years old. Therefore, an age restriction would not alleviate anti social behaviour.
 - Kirkstall is one of the most popular areas of the city. Because of high demand the former Leeds North West ALMO did not believe that restrictions such as Local Lettings policies would be appropriate. However, it is clear that the incoming customers may often present themselves having had a history of unsettled housing arrangements, and appropriate support does need to be given to tenants with support needs. On occasion it is accepted that it may be inappropriate to allocate tenancies in multi storey blocks based on someone's known behaviour. WNWhL are currently introducing a new housing support team to ensure that such tenants do receive greater support, if they are not already receiving it from Supporting People Funded agencies.
- 3.4 WNWhL have been in regular contact with the Queenswood Tenants and Residents Association through attendance at regular meetings. Since 2003, the Tenants and Residents association has raised 3 key issues for the block:

- **Anti-Social Behaviour**

Residents feel that the incidence of ASB at Queenswood Heights is affecting their quality of life.

WNWhL currently manage tenancies through a specific Estate Management Officer, who is responsible for day to day management issues. This ensures regular contact with tenants, and a consistent approach. It is supplemented by close work with WNWhL's specialist Tenancy Enforcement Team, the LCC Anti Social Behaviour Unit and the police. This approach has been successful in reducing the number of ASB complaints, and in resolving specific cases.

In June 2007 Executive Board agreed to a revised Lettings Policy for the city. One of the revisions enabled housing staff to provide additional support for applicants before they are made an offer of housing. This includes undertaking assessments of an applicants' housing needs and their sustainability in the neighbourhoods that an offer is likely to be made. The council is further developing this policy working with ALMOs and other stakeholders, especially supported housing agencies.

West North West homes has recently carried out a review of its Tenancy Management service and identified several specific improvements, including the need for a Tenant Support Team. This will support the council's vision to create more sustainable tenancies. This will be launched over the next few months and will allow the support needs of a number of new and existing tenants to be addressed at first point of contact. It will also ensure that risk assessments and health concerns of those tenants who require some form of support are identified and addressed.

Tenant support officers will work closely with the individual tenant and all other agencies on a day to day basis. It is worth noting that three of the residents involved with previous Anti Social Behaviour have support needs and that this approach may have been able to prevent problems developing.

In addition to this, WNWhL is also expanding its Tenancy Enforcement team to improve the response to ASB, expand the capacity to support area based staff in taking action against perpetrators of ASB, and to provide support to victims. The Tenancy Enforcement Team has been operating in NW Homes for some time and resulted in an improved approach to tenancy management.

West North West homes also recognises the importance of making sustainable lettings and, where possible, has agreed to allocate vacant properties sensitively to avoid further incidents occurring.

- **Health and Safety**

Tenants also raised a concern relating to health and safety due to the specific health issues of one tenant. This was originally raised in June 2006, when residents put forward concerns about residents with HIV being rehoused. The council will rehouse customers based upon their housing need. Therefore some customers will be rehoused will have support needs. Where customers with particular housing need may affect other residents, it will provide information on a 'need to know' basis' in a sensitive manner to the affected person and their neighbours. In this case, information leaflets were delivered to residents at Queenswood Heights, and discussions were held with the residents offering a presentation from Terence Higgins Trust. This was not taken up, although it can still be arranged.

West North West homes' approach to dealing with such situations is to carry out risk assessments of both individual and residents' needs at the time of any allocation, ensuring confidentiality for all residents. It is essential that a balance is

struck to ensure that the rights of all tenants are respected, as well as ensuring Health and Safety is not compromised. In these circumstances, the views of the residents about the risks are not soundly based and it would constitute a gross infringement of the right of the individual to remove him. .

- **Operation of a centralised team**

Residents also expressed concerns regarding the operation of centralised lettings teams, something that both West and North West have been operating for several years.

The centralised teams have provided consistency and high performance in both areas, rehousing more applicants, reducing empty properties and increasing long term tenancies. Since the adoption of the central teams, performance has increased, and WNWhL is now the best performing ALMO in terms of relet times and rent loss of void properties. This has limited the number of properties which remain empty and ensures that properties are relet as quickly as possible, a key issue across the city. There is no indication that the sensitivity applied to local issues has deteriorated as a result of the ALMO having a centralised team, as communication and consultation with local housing managers is still strong.

As a result of the service review and proposed restructure developed within WNWhL, the central teams are to be brought together, creating a specialised Lettings and Support team, with specialist knowledge of local areas. This will ensure new and existing customers are offered support and managed intensively where required. The new team will continue to work closely with area teams to ensure that appropriate allocations are made, and officers are able to work closely with customers from the start of their tenancies.

Queenswood Tenants and Residents Association are currently considering whether to adopt a scheme run by the Leeds Tenants Federation called 'Meet and Greet', where representatives from the tenants and resident group are invited to attend the viewing of the property, and advise the prospective tenants of services in the neighbourhood. Where this scheme is running elsewhere in the city, research shows that the prospective tenant appreciates such advice from fellow tenants, and the local tenants and residents group feel more engaged in the lettings process.

4.0 Implications For Council Policy And Governance

The council's Lettings policy states how council homes should be let in the city. Furthermore, the council has set the parameters for developing Local Lettings policies. These parameters have been developed in partnership with ALMO tenants, and stakeholders such as Leeds Tenants Federation were consulted.

There is a level of contention between the Council's Allocations Policy and the view from established tenants who have experienced serious ASB issues. The effects of ASB can ripple very wide within high density housing such as multi storey flats. Some feedback has been received from the group that they would like a more selective allocations policy.

The Council's statutory duties to accommodate those in serious housing need, the increasingly evident issue of supply and demand, and the rights of individuals make it impossible to restrict lettings for customers who have support needs. However, WNWhL's increasingly close link between lettings and housing support is designed

to minimise the risk of both unsustainable and unsuccessful tenancies, and the potential of ASB to affect neighbours.

Therefore, at the 13th November meeting, the following preventative actions were agreed:

- The implementation of a 'Meet and Greet' Scheme
- Obtaining revised costings to develop the group's idea to transform a redundant room at the base of the block into a communal facility
- WNWhL to sponsor the Groups 'Good Neighbour' Campaign and to help the group in the evaluation of their idea to develop informal routes to tackle low level anti social behaviour.
- Review the current level of caretaking services to the flats, recognising that an increased presence can potentially deter and reduce incidences of ASB.

Legal And Resource Implications

5.0 There are no legal implications. Resource implications will be accounted for as part of WNWhL staff restructure.

6.0 Conclusions

WNWhL has put considerable resources into a Tenancy Enforcement Team working in close partnership with the Councils Community Safety team, and is developing a Housing Support team to assist vulnerable tenants lead an independent life in the community. Moreover, in September 2007, WNWhL signed up to the government's Respect Standard for housing management.

Preventative actions have been agreed with the Chair of the Tenants Group to ensure that WNWhL and the Tenants Group work in partnership to strengthen the impact of good neighbour initiatives.

8.0 Recommendations

8.1 That the Executive Board note the report.