

## Copeland Council RSL Framework

Housing Associations in Copeland are already playing an important role in assisting the local authority to meet its strategic housing objectives and addressing housing need. However, what has emerged from the recent critical Audit Commission Inspection of the Council's Strategic Housing Service is the need for the Council to develop closer working relationships with RSLs at both a strategic and operational level.

As part of the Council's Improvement Plan, submitted to the Audit Commission following publication of their report, we committed ourselves to developing a joint framework for working with local RSLs and to take this forward a meeting has been arranged for xx/xx/xx at x. The aim of this first meeting is to discuss the areas that we hope you agree should form the basis of a Copeland Council/RSL framework. The meeting will also provide us with an opportunity to inform you of the staffing and structural changes recently agreed by the Council to strengthen the Housing Service and bring about the improvements required. Given the importance of this meeting I would be grateful if you could ensure senior representation from your organisation from the officer or officers responsible for strategic and operational decisions for the Copeland district.

Clearly there will need to be individual meetings with local RSLs following this meeting to agree individual actions with that RSL. However, the headings and areas for consideration listed below clearly detail the areas that the council wish to see developed jointly over the next 6-9 month period. The Council recognises that the key to effective partnership working with RSLs is trust, flexibility and good working relationships at every level for both operational and strategic services. We seek to develop genuine partnership working to improve and coordinate housing services across Copeland and through doing so fulfil our shared commitment to meeting housing need and developing sustainable communities.

We hope to agree a clear framework for improving partnership working between the Council and RSLs and we hope that you share our aims which include:

- Improving partnership working between the Council and RSLs thereby contributing to both our strategic housing objectives.
- Making best use of the local social housing stock in Copeland and where appropriate increasing the supply of new affordable housing to rent and to buy
- Improving access to social housing, including minimising exclusions and providing access for vulnerable households.
- Agreeing nominations arrangements and discussing future possible arrangements for a Common Housing Register and Choice Based Lettings.

- Working together to better tackle homelessness in Copeland which has been identified by both Communities and Local Government and the Housing Corporation as a priority for partnership working.
- Where required improving housing management practices to minimise the risk of homelessness.
- A commitment to, and action to ensure, effective collection, collation, analysis and use of data to inform strategic housing decisions and monitor performance.
- Ensuring that information about need informs priorities for allocation of resources, such as Social Housing Grant and revenue for support
- Mutual awareness between local authorities and RSLs of their roles, responsibilities, skills, expertise and time constraints
- Improved and effective two way communication

Taking the objectives above we have set out a series of questions for discussion at the meeting that could be used as the basis for developing the framework. Following the meeting and your written comments we intend to formalise a framework which we hope we can all agree will form the basis of our partnership working over the next twelve months. We look forward to meeting with you all on the xx.

## **Improved Partnership Working**

- 1) How can RSLs actively contribute to the development of Copeland Council's Housing Strategic and enabling role; through active participation in Housing and Homelessness Strategic Forums and how should these be structured bearing in mind time constraints on both the Council and RSLs?
- 2) How can RSLs actively contribute to ongoing key strategic policy work currently being developed including the development of our Housing Strategy; Private Sector Housing Policy, and Homelessness Strategy?
- 3) How can we agree practical steps to build greater mutual understanding of each others work? For example we could discuss the potential for:
  - joint staff training
  - joint events/conferences
  - secondments
  - joint elected member/board member task and finish groups
  - joint visits to new schemes
- 4) How can we involve housing associations in discussions about the national targets the Council is expected to meet for housing and homelessness (for example for homeless

prevention and the use of temporary accommodation). How might RSLs help the Council achieve these targets?

- 5) Agreeing what essential information is needed by the Council to enable it to carry out its monitoring and strategic housing responsibilities across all sectors and how will information be provided including frequency?
- 6) Making sure that all partners are clear about what they are contributing, and practical actions that they have agreed to take, and when things are not working as intended, how we will work together to put things right?
- 7) How can we learn from each other to share and implement the best of practice across all Housing organisations in Copeland?

## **Tackling Homelessness**

- 8) How can RSLs raise the profile for tackling homelessness within their organisations at both strategic and operational levels on the basis of the Housing Corporation Homelessness Strategy published in 2007?
- 9) How can the following RSL housing management policies, procedures and practices be reviewed to ensure that they work to prevent, not create homelessness:
  - Lettings and re-let standards?
  - Exclusions and suspensions?
  - Rent collection and rent arrears, including access to debt advice?
  - Anti-social behaviour, including services for the perpetrators of anti-social behaviour?
  - Demotion, possession and eviction?
- 10) Developing an eviction/homelessness prevention protocol which identifies all actions to be taken at the beginning of a tenancy, during the tenancy and pre-eviction, where applicable, to prevent homelessness/eviction including:
  - How to facilitate access to the following services for tenants if and when they need them in order to prevent homelessness including:
  - Mediation?
  - Debt advice?
  - Tenancy/floating support?
  - General advice/signposting to specialist advice and Copeland's Housing options team?

- Have regard to the pre action court protocol published by the Department of Constitutional Affairs in October 2006?
  - Education and life skills training?
- 11) Discussing and agreeing with partner associations their roles in relation to:
- Prevention of homelessness?
  - The provision of information and advice?
  - Using their stock as temporary accommodation?
  - Developing leasing schemes and other alternatives to Bed & Breakfast?
  - RSLs working with private rented sector landlords to maximise the contribution of the private rented sector to tackling homelessness?
  - Tackling low demand and empty homes in Copeland.
- 12) Agreeing how RSLs will work with the Council and voluntary sector agencies in relation to interventions where tenants are experiencing problems in sustaining their tenancy?
- 13) Informing Associations of the role of the new Housing Options team in the council and agreeing referral routes to and from that team
- 14) Agreeing how we should jointly review Supporting People funded services provided by housing associations to ensure that they are contribute to the prevention of homelessness?
- 15) Reviewing links with the Housing Benefit service to help reduce the risk of homelessness through rent arrears. Have all relevant RSL staff been trained in housing benefit verification?

## **Allocations and Lettings**

- 16) How can we in the future extend partnership working on allocations/lettings, e.g. through developing a common housing register, joint choice-based lettings scheme, common exclusions/allocations policy, move-on strategy?
- 17) Agreeing appropriate nominations arrangements with our partner housing associations and formalising these into an up to date nomination agreement with each association based around a common agreement taking into account good practice guidance published by the Housing Corporation and National Housing Federation and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2005.

- 18) Agreeing how lettings plans will be developed that meet housing need and meet nomination agreements but at the same time achieve mixed and sustainable communities.
- 19) Agreeing a joint approach with partner housing associations regarding exclusions from social housing which are transparent and agree that exclusions should be the last option in the allocation decision making process.
- 20) To agree with housing associations the type of detail of information that needs to be provided with a nomination and how risks will be assessed by both the council and the RSL receiving the nomination?
- 21) How will nominations be monitored? What data will we both agree to use to monitor the nominations agreement?
- 22) How will access be agreed for vulnerable groups with particular needs such as disabled people, offenders, care leavers, etc including seeking to agree a mechanism with housing associations for their assistance in move-on arrangements from temporary and supported housing?
- 23) Agreeing how the Council will be consulted in the development of any local lettings policies for stock outside of those required by the Council for nomination arrangements.
- 24) Agreeing the definition of a true void and what proportion of total voids will be available to the council for nomination.
- 25) Exploring possible options with housing associations for supporting the development of new affordable housing, e.g. working with both Housing and Planning Services on key strategic sites, Section 106 agreements, land, etc
- 26) How can we work together to ensure that RSL lettings as a whole are going to those in need and contributing to sustainable communities?

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Date : XXX November 2008