

FINANCE AND EFFICIENCY PORTFOLIO DECISION RECORD

23 September 2008

The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor Robbie Payne (Finance and Efficiency Portfolio Holder)

Officers: John Morton, Assistant Chief Financial Officer (Financial Services)
David Dockree, Temporary Estates Manager
Keith Lucas, Asset and Property Manager
Joanne Burnley, Senior Environmental Health Officer
Sarah Bird, Democratic Services Officer

11. Blakelock Road Day Centre: Closure, Demolition and Sale of Land (*Asset and Property Manager*)

Type of Decision

Non-key.

Purpose of Report

The report was given to advise upon the relocation of Services, the redundancy of the building and to seek Portfolio Holder approval to the demolition of the property and disposal of the land to raise a Capital Receipt.

Issues for consideration by Portfolio Holder

After the approval given by the Portfolio Holder at the meeting on 14 March 2008 for the Council to undertake a lease at part of the Hartfields extra care village development at Middle Warren, the Adult and Community Services Department had relocated the services which used to be delivered from the Blakelock Road Day Centre. None of the Council's departments have any use for the Blakelock Road Day Centre and is therefore now surplus to Council requirements. It was considered that a cleared site would be suitable for redevelopment.

It was therefore proposed that the building be demolished to provide a marketable cleared site and that the site should be disposed of on the open market as an unoccupied building creates Community Safety issues and is detrimental to the visual amenity of the surrounding area. It was noted that a

cleared site would be more suitable for marketing for redevelopment and the cost of demolition could be funded from the Capital Receipt received from the disposal of the cleared land.

It was noted that the building currently was home to a number of bats and therefore a licence for demolition was in the process of being applied for. If this was obtained quickly it was hoped to demolish the building in November, or failing that it would not be demolished before April to accommodate the bat's hibernation period.

The Portfolio Holder pointed out the Cabinet agreement not to empty a building until demolition was imminent and asked that a representative from Adult and Community Services department explain why the building had been emptied.

The Portfolio Holder asked what the difference in marketing price would be between selling the building or selling the cleared site. The Temporary Estates Manager stated that the building was outdated and would be unsuitable in the current market and the sale of the cleared site would outweigh demolition costs.

Decision

The Portfolio Holder

- ❖ noted the closure of the Blakelock Road Day Centre
- ❖ Approved the demolition of the property to leave a cleared site for redevelopment
- ❖ Approved the disposal of the site on the open market. The subsequently terms of any such disposal were to be reported to the Portfolio Holder for approval prior to marketing.

12. Chief Executive's Departmental Plan 2008/09 – 1st Quarter Monitoring Report – Assistant Chief Financial Officer (Audit, Revenues & Benefits)

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

The report was presented to inform the Portfolio Holder of the progress made against the Chief Executive's Departmental Plan 2008/09 in the first quarter of the year.

Issues for Consideration by Portfolio Holder

The Chief Executive's Departmental Plan set out the key tasks and issues within an Action Plan to show what was to be achieved by the department in the coming year. The plan also described how the department contributes to the Organisational Development actions as laid out in the 2008/09 Corporate Plan.

Within the Finance, Legal and Procurement Divisions there were a total of 69 actions identified in the 2008/09 Departmental Plan. 26 of these have achieved their targets and a further 37 have been noted as expected to achieve their target. However a further 6 actions have been highlighted as not achieving target. These were all in the finance department and the Assistant Chief Financial Officer said that a lot of the targets had been ambitious, capacity issues and other emerging issues had prevented their being achieved.

He outlined the current position of those which had not been achieved:-

- ❖ Co-ordination of the Tender/Award of the Council's corporate Cash in Transit contract – This was planned to be advertised in October with the contract to start in early 2009.
- ❖ Development of Mobile/Home Working – The Finance Division currently had 6 staff who could work from home. The Personnel Division are co-ordinating the fine tuning of the Finance Division policy.
- ❖ Develop arrangements for the Centralisation of Financial Administration, Debtors, Payments/Receipts and other Financial Admin – Income is received into the Council in a number of ways and it is intended to standardise this across all departments to ensure Best Practice
- ❖ Maintain Benefits Service and prepare for future inspection regime – A new set of standards have been prescribed by the Audit Commission. Benchmarking has taken place against these standards and will be subject to peer review by officers of with Darlington Borough Council
- ❖ Review of Cashiering Service Arrangements – An analysis of costs and impacts of revised arrangements is in progress.

The Portfolio Holder said that he hoped that next year's targets would be more realistic and was reassured by the Assistant Chief Financial Officer that capacity would be fully considered in setting future targets.

The Portfolio Holder asked about the home working policy and was informed that this was being co-ordinated by a senior Human Resources (HR) officer who was on long term sick leave but that HR would be asked to reallocate this task to someone else to progress it.

Decision

The achievement of key actions was noted by the Portfolio Holder

13 Internal Bailiff Pilot – Chief Financial Officer

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

The report was presented to seek Portfolio Holder approval to the business case for formally incorporating the Pilot Internal Bailiff Team into a permanent function within the Finance Division's Revenues establishment.

Issues for Consideration

The Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992 included provision to allow Councils to enforce Council Tax and Business Rate debts once a Magistrates' Court liability order had been obtained. At Hartlepool this function had traditionally been undertaken by external private bailiff companies but a review of this had occurred and an existing Revenues member of staff was appointed on a temporary basis to the position of internal bailiff in 2006. This appointment complemented the anti-poverty policy in that the internal bailiff would be expected to take an holistic view of the debtor's position, identify hardship cases, provide advice and financial help and refer cases through to the appropriate support channels.

A number of benefits of this method were outlined in the accompanying report and it was pointed out that the actual cost of the pilot were more than covered by the fees generated during the period. The pilot has expanded with the appointment of a second bailiff in 2007. With the imminent finalisation of an agreement with Darlington Borough Council to provide a bailiff service for the enforcement of Council tax and business rate liability orders for one day a week, it was now proposed to appoint a further member of staff to meet the demands.

The Portfolio Holder stated that the service should not exist to make a profit but the fact that it was self financing was excellent. He stated that some people had suffered financial hardship and the Authority's approach was responding to their needs. He stated that he did not like the term 'bailiff' and suggestions for an alternative title were put forward. He asked whether the officers were resident in the town and it was confirmed that they were and therefore were aware of the needs of the residents.

Decision

The Portfolio Holder:-

- ❖ Noted the success of the Council's internal bailiff pilot, both in terms of efficiency and meeting the Council's objective of responding to individual needs and increasing financial resources within family environments to provide improved life style opportunities.

- ❖ Agreed to the internal bailiff team being incorporated into the Finance Division's Revenues establishment as a permanent function.
- ❖ Endorsed the proposed joint working arrangements between Hartlepool and Darlington for the provision of a bailiff service.
- ❖ Agreed to the appointment of 2 additional posts within the team, a bailiff administration post (band 5) and a further internal bailiff (band 9) to support the future development of the service.

14 Incentive Scheme to encourage Benefit Customers to Open Credit Union Bank Accounts – Chief Financial Officer

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

The report was presented to seek approval to introduce an incentive payment to each housing benefit customer who opened a Credit Union Bank Account during a three month period following the introduction of the new bank account facility and agreed to have their Local Housing Allowance paid into that account.

Issues for Consideration

It was noted that those who are disadvantaged often struggle to access affordable lines of credit available to more affluent individuals, which compounds their problems of managing on limited resources. This sector of the community also face problems in establishing bank accounts and in avoiding incurring bank charges. The operation of a bank account from which direct debit payments can be made could mean that the individual can then usually access discounts on the cost of services including electricity, gas, water, phones etc. The lack of a bank account can also impact on the ability to find work as most employers pay wages directly into an account.

Hartlepool Credit Union are introducing a Credit Union Current Account facility to give account holders a Visa debit/Automatic Teller Machine (ATM) card and allow account holders to set up direct debits etc. These accounts would be available to those that were disadvantaged and therefore promote financial inclusion when allied to the provision of financial advice and support.

The Council under the Local Housing Allowance Scheme was required to pay housing benefit to the claimant and wherever possible into a bank account. Paying benefit electronically into a bank account is a secure and efficient method of making payment. The annual cost of paying Local Housing Allowance by cheque is about £62 compared to approximately £2 if made by

bank credit transfer into a bank account.

The Portfolio Holder stated that this was an excellent initiative by the Council in conjunction with the Credit Union which would give people a dignity that others take for granted and should alleviate the problems of loan sharks. He congratulated the Officers and staff of the Credit Union for this initiative.

Decision

The Portfolio Holder approved the introduction of a financial incentive payment in the form of a one off £20 monetary credit to a credit union current account for housing benefit customers who open this account and have their benefit paid into the account within three months of the accounts being introduced.

15 Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006

Under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraphs below of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

Minute 16 – 36 Rydal Street (Para 3 - information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)).

Minute 17 – Briarfields Update (Para 3 - information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)).

16 36 Rydal Street – Head of Procurement, Property and Public Protection (Para 3) This item contains exempt information under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972, namely information relating to the financial and business affairs of a particular person (including the authority holding the information).

Type of Decision

Non key

Purpose of Report

The report was presented to obtain the Portfolio Holder's views on an application from the owner of the property to have a restrictive covenant on his property lifted.

Issues for consideration

The report contained some background to the previous decision by the Portfolio Holder about this property and detailed the current request and outlined options for consideration by the Portfolio Holder.

Decision

The decision was included in the exempt section of the minutes.

- 17 Briarfields Update** – *Head of Procurement, Property and Public Protection* (Para 3) This item contains exempt information under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972, namely information relating to the financial and business affairs of a particular person (including the authority holding the information).

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

The report was presented to update the Portfolio Holder with regard to a problem in respect of the sale of the plot of land which is at Briarfields House and confirm the Portfolio Holder's agreement to a resultant retention arrangement on another plot.

Issues for Consideration

The report highlighted the withdrawal of the purchaser for Briarfields House and the implications for a second plot about to be completed and raised potential for future marketing and security measures.

Decision

The decision was included in the exempt section of the minutes.

The meeting concluded at 11.00 am.

P J DEVLIN

CHIEF SOLICITOR

PUBLICATION DATE: 26 September 2008