

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM MINUTES

19 February 2007

The meeting commenced at 3.00 pm at the Municipal Buildings,
Church Square, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor: Gerard Hall (In the Chair)

Councillors: Jonathan Brash and Steve Gibbon

Resident Representatives:

Ian Campbell and Linda Shields

Officers:

Dave Stubbs, Director of Neighbourhood Services
Penny Garner-Carpenter, Strategic Housing Manager
Ken Natt, Landlord Registration Officer
Kerry Trenchard, Strategy and Performance Officer
David Hunt, Strategy and Performance Officer
Carol Davis, Service Development Manager
Joan Wilkins, Scrutiny Support Officer
Denise Wimpenny, Principal Democratic Services Officer

Also Present

Sue Thompson, Teesside Landlords Association

88. Inquorate Meeting

It was noted that the meeting was not quorate.

89. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Rob Cook, Geoff Lilley and Pat Rayner.

90. Declarations of interest by Members

None.

91. Minutes

None.

92. Responses from the Council, the Executive or Committees of the Council to Final Reports of this Forum

None.

93. Consideration of request for scrutiny reviews referred via Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee

None.

94. Corporate Plan 2007/08 (BVPP) 2007/08 – Proposed Objectives *(Assistant Chief Executive)*

It was reported that at a meeting of the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee held on 19 January 2006 it was agreed that the Corporate Plan proposals be considered by each of the Scrutiny Forums which related to the Community Strategy themes that fell under their remit. The comments/observations of each Forum would be fed back to the meeting of the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee to be held on 19 March 2007 and would be used to formulate the formal Scrutiny response to Cabinet on 16 April 2007.

The Assistant Director of Planning and Economic Development and Strategy and Performance Officer were in attendance to present a report which provided Members with the opportunity to consider the proposed objectives and actions for inclusion in the Corporate Plan 2007/08.

Discussion ensued in which the following issues were raised:-

- (i) Has there been a reduction in the take up of school meals as a result of the recent introduction of the healthy eating options and what strategy was in place to address this problem? The Director of Neighbourhood Services indicated that there had been an average 5% reduction in the take up of school meals and in some areas a 10% reduction. A strategy had been developed to deal with this issue. The Forum was advised that officers would like to see legislation with nutritional standards for packed lunches.
- (ii) With regard to promoting Hartlepool as a Fairtrade Town, a Member queried if the authority had explored examples of how other authorities had promoted this? Members were advised that other local authorities had been contacted and efforts were being made to encourage outside businesses and supermarkets to participate in initiatives to make Hartlepool a Fairtrade Town.

- (ii) What was the proposed timetable for commencement of work on the transport interchange? It was reported that there were still legal issues to resolve and, at present, attempts were being made to table this with Network Rail which was proving difficult. It was envisaged that work would commence in the spring.
- (iv) Members highlighted the ongoing issue of subsidised bus services and, in particular, the issue of the provision of transport to hospitals outside Hartlepool. Members were advised that work was being undertaken to look at this issue with Stagecoach and options considered for the provision of a service by the Local Authority.

Decision

- (i) That the proposed objectives and actions for inclusion in the 2007/08 Corporate Plan as attached at Appendix A, be agreed.
- (i) That the above comments be presented to Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee on 19 March 2007.

95. Scrutiny Investigation into the Performance and Operation of Private Sector Rented Accommodation - Housing Staffing Levels – Verbal Presentation *(Strategic Housing Manager)*

As part of the Forum's ongoing inquiry into the performance and operation of private sector rented accommodation and landlords in Hartlepool, the Strategic Housing Manager delivered a comprehensive verbal presentation in relation to Housing Staffing levels which included the following:-

(i) Current Staffing Structure

The Forum was advised that the main work undertaken by the Council was carried out by the Enforcement Team, headed by a qualified Environmental Health Officer (EHO), which was one of two in the housing division. Other staffing levels within the division were as follows:-

- Team Leader (EHO) 1 (Full time)
- Housing Standards Officers 3 (Full time)
- Landlord Registration Officer 1 (Full time)
- Admin Assistant 1 (Part time)

There was also within the housing division a Tenancy Relations Officer and others in housing advice who work with landlords, housing benefits tenants etc to prevent homelessness and ensure tenancies are sustained where possible. In addition to this, further attention was drawn to the role of other key partners within the Council, e.g. the housing benefits and anti-social behaviour teams, and emphasis placed upon the importance of outside partnerships with residents, Landlords, voluntary sector, regional and sub-regional partners, etc.

(i) Team's Roles and Responsibilities

In an effort to highlight the variety of duties undertaken by the Enforcement Team the Forum was advised of the following additional areas covered by the section outside of the issues being looked at as part of the scrutiny investigation. These included:-

(a) Housing Standards Officers

- React to complaints
- Public health nuisance
- Empty properties
- Disrepair
- Proactive inspections of properties in landlord accreditation scheme
- Unauthorised encampments
- Houses in multiple occupation
- Empty and insecure commercial properties and public health nuisance associated with non-domestic properties

(b) Landlord Registration Officer

- Advises landlords of obligations
- Advice to tenants
- Participation in landlords forum and training for landlords
- Consultation on selective licensing

The Strategic Housing Manager also emphasised that the team had responsibility for dealing with illegal activities by the landlord only – enforcement of property standards and management standards (harassment and illegal eviction). In these areas the Police had no duties or responsibilities and the local authority had the duty to prosecute where appropriate. All other crimes were reported to the Police for them to deal with.

Members were advised that due to limited resources the team were still reactive in some areas and as a result of the recent consultation exercise, other tasks had fallen behind. The Strategic Housing Manager advised that with the appropriate resources the unit would like to focus on the following areas of work:-

- (i) Empty properties/houses in multiple occupation.
- (i) Work currently being undertaken.
- (ii) Being proactive in critical areas.
- (iv) Recruit Empty Homes Officer.
- (v) If Selective Licensing is explored more work required to ensure it is feasible.
- (vi) Appoint a dedicated officer to manage Selective Licensing.
- (vii) Support to private rented schemes.
- (viii) Offer more support to landlords.
- (ix) Reduce turnaround time for disrepair claims.
- (x) Inspect more properties.

- (xi) Offer more training and incentives.
- (xii) Extend choice based letting to landlords.

The Strategic Housing Manager pointed out that two areas of particular concern were empty properties and houses in multiple occupation and suggested that in order to free up work, and be proactive, in these areas the appointment of two additional members of staff (one for each area) would be needed. It was also highlighted that:-

- (i) If a selective licensing application to Communities and Local Government (CLG) was to be successful considerable work would be needed. In order for this to occur it was suggested that the appointment of a dedicated officer would be needed; and
- (i) A Tenant Referencing Scheme was introduced effective tenant support would be critical to its success.

Following completion of the presentation the following issues were raised:-

- (i) **How many staffing resources were required to enable the above mentioned areas of work to be undertaken?** The Strategic Housing Manager stated that if the team were to carry out all of the duties outlined, there was a need for at least 5 or 6 additional staff within the team. Additionally, outside the team additional 5-6 support workers would be required. The Forum discussed staffing requirements in further detail and methods of funding for additional posts.

- (i) **What is the breakdown of housing across Hartlepool?** In response to a query relating to the level of rented and other housing across the town, the Landlord Registration Officer provided the following breakdown:-

Owner Occupier – 63%
Private Rented – 7.40%
Local Authority or Housing Association rented – 26.60%
Other – 3.00%

- (ii) **How do you deal with homelessness problems?** Members were advised that the figures would suggest that there were no problems with homelessness. However, this was due to the team proactively working towards preventing homelessness which was reflected in the figures.
- (iv) **How are you dealing with the under 25 rule with private landlords?** It was reported that houses in multiple occupation (owned and managed by accredited landlords) was one option. In addition, a housing needs survey had recently been distributed throughout town which would provide further information.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Housing Manager for the presentation and stated that the information provided had highlighted that the effective operation of the team and level of work undertaken was very much dependent

upon staffing levels and financial resources.

Decision

That the information given be noted and discussions be used to assist the Forum in completing the scrutiny investigation.

96. Scrutiny Investigation into the Performance and Operation of Private Sector Rented Accommodation – Evidence from the Rent Service *(Scrutiny Support Officer)*

As part of the ongoing investigation into the performance and operation of the private sector rented accommodation, Alan Simpson, Valuation Team Manager from the Rent Service had been invited to attend to provide further details and information as requested at the meeting of this Forum held on 29 November 2006 on the way in which the housing allowance was set. Details of the issues discussed at the meeting held on 29 November were outlined in the minute extract attached at Appendix A.

The Valuation Team Manager delivered a detailed presentation which focused on the following areas:-

- Background to rent service
- Housing Benefit referrals
- How claims/determinations were made
- Role of the Rent Officer
- Valuations/regulations
- Redetermination process if applicable

Discussion ensued in which the following issues were raised:-

- (i) The Forum discussed how the local housing allowance for the coming year would be calculated by the authority.
- (i) When the new Housing Benefit Allowances Schemes was introduced would this encourage people to rent cheaper properties? The Valuation Team Manager advised that this figure had been capped by the Government at £15.00. The Landlord Registration Officer added that under the current Housing Benefit System there had been some concerns about definition not matching experience in the community. A recent survey had revealed that 80% of landlords relied on housing benefit for income.
- (ii) The Valuation Team Manager advised that the rent officer's determination was based on what a working tenant would pay and not on the market rent. The Landlord Registration Officer expressed concern that the process used by the Rent Service to

determine what they described as “market rent” was no longer viable as they relied on a representative sample of properties rented to working tenants ie those not claiming benefits. In problem areas of the town, there were no longer viable numbers of suitable comparitors which resulted in the system breaking down. This resulted in a rent shortfall which vulnerable tenants had to pay creating an increase in rent arrears, evictions and tenancy terminations.

- (iv) It appeared that a number of valuations were determined from previous information and not from visiting properties. The Valuation Team Manager advised that the Rents Service generally achieved an inspection target of 15 to 25 per cent of cases per annum. However, it was highlighted that the rent service were currently suffering from a reduction in staffing resources.
- (v) Following further discussion in relation to the difference between the Rent Officers determination and market rents, the Valuation Team Manager pointed out that Rent Officers had no authority to change valuations on properties.
- (vi) One of the main problems appeared to be inconsistency in valuations. Are people being faced with higher rents as a result? The Valuation Team Manager indicated that estate agents did not necessarily provide the same valuation.
- (vii) In the event that rents become inflated, above the national average, how would Rent Officers address this? Members were advised that if evidence showed that rents were increasing that would be reflected in valuations.
- (viii) A representative from Teesside Landlords Association advised that deprivation had increased in the town as rents could not be achieved to sustain areas. New landlords were looking for a minimum of 5% return and would not rent property for any less and were therefore more likely to sell rather than rent.

Decision

That the information given, be noted and discussions be used to assist the Forum in completing the scrutiny investigation.

GERARD HALL

CHAIRMAN