

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

19th July 2007

**PRESENT:-**

**Conservative Group**

Councillor Lemmon (Chairman), Councillor Grant (Vice-Chairman) and Councillors Mrs. Farrington, Harrison, Hewlett, Murray, Mrs. Patten and Roberts.

**Labour Group**

Councillors Dunn, Mrs. Gillespie, Mrs. Lane (substitute for Councillor Richards), Shepherd and Southern.

**In Attendance**

Councillors Grant and Mrs. Wheeler (Conservative Group), Councillor Lane (Labour Group) and Councillor Mrs. Brown (Independent Member).

**APOLOGY**

An apology for absence from the Meeting was received from Councillor Richards (Labour Group).

HCS/15. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 14th June 2007 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

HCS/16. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Mrs. Wheeler declared a personal interest in the report on the Bretby Crematorium Joint Committee, as a Council representative on that Committee.

**MATTERS DELEGATED TO COMMITTEE**

HCS/17. **BRETRY CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE**

**RESOLVED:-**

***That the Open Minutes of the Bretby Crematorium Joint Committee Meeting held on 29th November 2006 be received.***

HCS/18. **FUNDING AND DELIVERY OF DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS**

It was reported that Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) funded adaptations to assist disabled people to live independently in their own homes and the Council was obliged to fund such mandatory grants. The Government made annual allocations to support these grants, calculated on a needs-based formula, but the payments failed to meet actual demand. The report outlined the increase in demands for such grant funding over the last three years and the lower increase in Government funding allocations. Additionally,

authorities could only reclaim 60% of their expenditure on DFGs, up to the limit of their allocation. Growth in the last few years had been increasing dramatically and a table within the report demonstrated this.

In recent years, the Council had made the delivery of DFGs a priority. A substantial financial commitment was made to use resources anticipated from the sale of Council houses, towards providing DFGs and considerable managerial effort was invested to speed up the delivery of these grants. This faster processing of applications had added to the difficulties in managing the financial consequences of the increased demand for such grants. Last year, 90% of new applications were processed within 42 weeks. Historically, such grant applications could take up to three years to be completed and paid.

Current projections suggested a shortfall in the capital funding for the private sector in the region of £650,000 and for the public sector approximately £100,000. The report outlined those factors, which had contributed to this shortfall, and further detail was provided in an appended briefing paper.

Immediate action was required to control expenditure and to address the potential shortfall in this financial year. However, the need to consider how the service could be sustained in the longer term was of equal importance. The report explained the actions already implemented. This comprised the reallocation of some other grant funding, seeking support through the Member of Parliament, the Regional Government Office and representation on a steering group to review funding of DFGs. In addition, action would be taken to rationalise the demand and to prioritise grant applications, for example through the adoption of protocols. The decision to limit capital spending on non-statutory types of assistance needed to be formalised with immediate effect. To this end, a separate report was included on the agenda, to review the existing Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.

In addition to these urgent changes, it was suggested that research be undertaken to consider broader private sector housing issues, in the light of the new controlling group manifesto and the identified circumstances. The report outlined some of the issues to be considered through this review.

These measures would assist in the longer term and might influence the scale of demand at the margins. Given the short term actions required, it was suggested that the Directors of Community and Corporate Services undertake an urgent review of the capital programme and put forward recommendations regarding reallocation of funding, to sustain the current levels of DFG provision.

Councillor Southern explained that he had been involved in seeking the Member of Parliament's support on this issue and he apologised to the Chairman for not informing him previously. He felt the Council had suffered from its own success, as previously there had been a three-year waiting list for such grants. He confirmed the work undertaken to streamline processes, resulting in Derbyshire County Council increasing its staffing resources and an associated increase in the number of grant applications.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the Committee affirms that the provision of timely and appropriate disabled adaptations remains a high priority for the Council.***
- (2) That the Finance and Management Committee be recommended to consider the projected shortfall in Capital funding for the Disabled Facilities Grants, in their consideration of the Medium Term Financial Plan.***
- (3) That the Directors of Community and Corporate Services undertake an urgent review of the capital programme and bring recommendations to the Finance and Management Committee as to the possibilities of re-allocating capital funding, in order to sustain the current levels of Disabled Facilities Grant provision.***
- (4) That in addition to these urgent proposals, a further more broad-ranging review of the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy be submitted to the Committee in the near future.***

**HCS/19. PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING RENEWAL POLICY 2007**

It was reported that this policy formed part of the Council's wider Housing Strategy, guiding action relating to private sector households in the District. The Council was required by the Regulatory Reform Order 2002 to publish a policy that set out how it would provide assistance for housing renewal. The existing policy was approved by the Committee in March 2006. It required immediate revision, in order to reflect the current financial position, to ensure the Council was able to fund mandatory forms of assistance and not impeded by expenditure on discretionary assistance.

The revision would include:-

- The introduction of a clear protocol to define the scope of disabled adaptations to those within the mandatory requirements prescribed in the Housing Grant, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 (as amended).
- Revised Capital Programme to reflect current resources at section 5 of the policy.
- Revision of sections 7, 8 & 9 of the policy, detailing the types of grant assistance that would be available for 2007/08.
- Revision of the Implementation Plan at section 10, detailing proposed actions and initiatives for 2007/08, which had been aligned to the current Service Plan.

In response to a question from Councillor Dunn, the Director of Community Services provided further information on the Government assistance towards DFGs. Effectively, the District Council had to fund 40% of the cost of all such mandatory grants. The Head of Environmental Services added that case law had proven it was not legitimate to use a funding shortfall as a reason for non-payment of such grants.

**RESOLVED:**

***That the Committee approves the revisions submitted to the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.***

**HCS/20. REVISED MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMMES FOR COUNCIL HOUSING 2007/2008**

It was reported that the Council had been undertaking bathroom replacement contracts since 2003/04. Tenders were sought and contracts were awarded to both Harvey & Clark Limited and Robert Prettie Limited. Since that time, the contracts had been negotiated annually and the programme split equally between these two contractors. In the 2006/07 financial year, there was a significant lack of take-up by residents, with only 69 properties receiving bathroom replacements from the intended list of 123. A further 130 properties were identified for replacement bathrooms in the current financial year and it had been proposed to obtain tenders, with a view of entering into a partnering agreement. Pre-tender surveys had subsequently identified that only 15 residents were likely to take up the option of a replacement bathroom for their property. It was therefore proposed to negotiate a contract extension with one of the existing contractors, rather than incurring the expense of tendering for such a small programme of works.

Through monitoring the performance of the two contractors, it was considered that Harvey & Clark had produced a better overall product in a shorter time. Customer satisfaction questionnaires also showed that this contractor achieved a higher overall satisfaction level and it was therefore recommended that the contract extension be awarded to Harvey & Clark Ltd.

The report then looked at the Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) and the proposed improvement works. The MRA budget for 2007/08 was £1,824,000 and the proposed allocation between the various budget heads had been approved by the Committee at its Meeting on 8th February 2007. Additional resources were available due to efficiencies in the previous years programme of works and through grant income from Scottish Power. To date, these additional resources, totalled £224,133 and this would be increased further once the grant figure from Scottish Power was determined.

The trend for kitchen replacements was opposite to that for bathrooms and there was an increased expectation by tenants for improved facilities, with many being disappointed by the state of repair of their kitchen units. Where possible, repairs were undertaken, but in some cases it was inevitable that further repairs would be required.

Under the Decent Homes programme, there had been a reduction in the number of kitchen replacements. However, reduced expenditure on bathroom replacements would enable funding for additional kitchen replacements, to meet the known demand.

The additional resources in the current year enabled other works to be undertaken, including roofing works and estate-based environmental works. Minor roofing problems were addressed on a planned maintenance or responsive repair basis. However, more significant problems required greater investment. Problems had been identified with the roofing structures at properties in Brookdale Road, Hartshorne and despite numerous repairs, an adequate solution had not been provided. The increased budget would allow for these properties to be re-roofed, avoiding the need for repeated repairs.

The total MRA stood at £2,048,133. A table was included within the report proposing the revised MRA budget plan. This took account of the additional funding and proposed variations for kitchen and bathroom replacements.

Particular reference was made a programme of environmental works and over recent years there had not been any significant expenditure on such estate-based environmental issues. The Government's agenda had widened from Decent Homes to 'Decent Communities'. This built on the improved property conditions from the Decent Homes initiative to ensure that other, wider matters were considered and to look at ways to strengthen tenant's role in decisions on social housing. It was planned to implement schemes to combat the deterioration of some housing estates. It would concentrate on fencing and providing gates with sufficient levels of safety and security. There were many public concerns within the District regarding parking issues. However, given the cost of those environmental works, only a limited number of new schemes could be provided with the available resources.

The Chairman referred to the visit by Members to a number of the housing estates. He asked whether the schedule of proposed works included the replacement of the external coating to properties in the Salisbury Drive area. It was confirmed that the environmental budgets were planned to be spent on the replacement of boundary fences.

Councillor Southern also referred to the proposed expenditure on environmental works. He commented that some tenants did not maintain the gardens at their Council properties adequately. He also felt it would be better to spend half of the budget for environmental works to meet the known shortfall in funding for DFG works at public sector properties. The Head of Housing replied that the MRA was to be used primarily for Council house investment. There was a demand in the public sector for DFGs, but the majority of grant funding was needed for private sector properties. Environmental improvements were not usually a high priority, because of other funding demands. However, if these works were not undertaken, there would be some decline in the appearance of the Council's housing estates. He felt the proposed works would have a positive effect, helping to alleviate some of the current issues. If the funding was used elsewhere and estates became more run down, significant funding would be required to remedy this in the future. With regard to tenant's maintenance of their gardens, he explained the substantial work undertaken by Officers. Often, problems occurred where negotiations with tenants had not proved successful, but this was an ongoing area of work. In response to a further question from Councillor Southern, it was confirmed that it was possible to spend some of the MRA funds to deliver DFGs at public sector properties. A motion was submitted to this effect, but was defeated. It was then questioned whether the Finance and Management Committee could be asked to consider this matter as part of its review of the funding shortfall for DFGs.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That as part of the review of funding for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) referred to earlier in the Meeting, the Finance and Management Committee considers utilising £100,000 of monies allocated under the Maintenance and Improvement Programmes, for expenditure on DFGs at public sector properties.***

*(2) That the Council negotiates with Harvey & Clark Limited to undertake the replacement bathroom contract for the financial year 2007/08.*

*(3) That subject to resolution (1) above, the Committee approves the revised Major Repairs Allowance Budget Plan.*

HCS/21. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 AS AMENDED BY THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985**

**RESOLVED:-**

*That, in accordance with Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), the press and public be excluded from the remainder of the Meeting as it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that there would be disclosed exempt information as defined in the paragraphs of Part 1 of the Schedule 12A of the Act indicated in brackets after each item.*

**MINUTES**

*The Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 14th June 2007 were received.*

**AMENDMENT TO FORMER TENANT ARREARS PROCEDURE AND COLLECTION PERFORMANCE (Paragraph 3)**

*The Committee amended the collection procedure for Former Tenant Arrears.*

J. LEMMON

CHAIRMAN