

OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

9th August 2001

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Bell (Chair), Councillor Richards (Vice-Chair) and Councillor Routledge.

Conservative Group

Councillor Mr.s. Robbins.

In Attendance as Contributors

Councillor Southern (Chair of Community Services Committee), Mr. T. Neaves (Chief Finance Officer), Mrs. S. Whiles (Head of Community Services), Mr. J. Morle (Housing Services Manager), Mr. B. Jones (Chair of Unison) and three representatives of T.A.C.T.

In Attendance as Observers

Councillors Mrs. Mead and Mrs. Rose (Labour Group) and Councillor Harrison (Conservative Group).

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the Meeting were received from Councillor Harrington (Labour Group) and Councillor Bladon (Conservative Group).

OV/1. **SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICE**

It was noted that the scope of the Sheltered Housing and Warden Service Review was to consider the following:-

- (1) The Financial Viability of the Proposals for Change (both now and in the long term).
- (2) The effectiveness of the consultation process, in particular the extent to which Councillors and other key stakeholders had been involved.
- (3) The feasibility of the proposals.

Tenant Advisory And Consultation Scheme

Members of the Tenants Advisory and Consultation Team (T.A.C.T.) were in attendance at the meeting and were asked to what extent T.A.C.T. had been involved in the development of the proposals and whether they considered that their views had adequately been addressed. Representatives of T.A.C.T. were also asked whether they thought that the proposals would work in practice and on what basis these views had been formed.

In response to the above questions, representatives of T.A.C.T. outlined that their involvement in the consultation had been limited. A meeting with the

Head of Community Services, Sandra Whiles, and the Housing Services Manager, John Morle, had been held to submit contributions to the consultation. They advised that any greater involvement in the consultation process would have been limited due to a lack of knowledge on the subject, however T.A.C.T. were keen to be involved in the exercise. They had been consulted after the Best Value Review had been undertaken and felt that their views had been addressed although it was not possible to measure whether they had been addressed adequately at this time.

With regard to whether the proposals would work in practice, representatives of T.A.C.T. outlined that they thought the present proposals would work but they had concerns about the system. They asked how it would be monitored, what staff training would be undertaken and whether there would be a uniformity within the service. They were concerned about any charge increases to tenants and felt that there should be slightly more wardens than currently proposed. They felt that the current proposals met the recommendations made by the Best Value Inspectorate. With regard to wardens being appointed to cover particular regions and mobile wardens for when regional wardens were off duty, members of T.A.C.T. felt that the Council needed to take into account what times wardens would be visiting properties.

The Vice-Chair asked what percentage of T.A.C.T.'s membership lived in sheltered housing accommodation. In response it was reported that in Melbourne approximately 75% were in sheltered housing accommodation and these tenants had expressed a great deal of concern. Other tenants had advised that one visit would not be sufficient and it was queried whether vulnerable tenants would be monitored in the future proposals. It was suggested that mobile wardens could cover the less vulnerable tenants and resident wardens could cover the vulnerable residents within the District.

Representatives of T.A.C.T. advised that they had concerns regarding the financial aspects of the proposals, in particular they were concerned about a great increase in charges when Supporting People was introduced in 2003. They suggested that monitoring the progress of any proposals was essential and that tenants should be involved in this monitoring exercise.

The Chair Of Unison

Mr. B. Jones, Chair of Unison, was in attendance and was asked by Members to what extent employer's and their representatives had been involved in the development of the proposals and whether it was considered that the Union's views had been addressed adequately. Mr. Jones was also asked whether it was thought that the proposals would work in practice and what was the basis for these particular views.

Mr. Jones advised that he felt that the consultation document was a document aimed at staff involved in the service and that it should not have been sent to members of the press. At the start of the process he was aware that a Committee had been set up to review the Sheltered Housing Service but was advised that it was inappropriate for Unison to be represented on that body (January 2001). He accepted that two Unison representatives were represented on this Committee but this was in the capacity as Sheltered Housing representatives, not Union representatives. Mr. Jones felt it would have been better if the Union had been consulted informally prior to the

issue of the above mentioned Press Release. He advised that the first time Unison were involved in the process was during the consultation period. Unison's comments had been incorporated into a letter which had been submitted to the Head of Community Services. Unison felt that in hindsight there should have been more proposals included within the consultation document.

Mr. Jones outlined that he did not think the current proposals would work. To work well he felt there needed to be "more Indians on the ground". He stated that currently there was a two-tiered service. He accepted that financially it was not possible to upgrade most of the service to the "5 star" service provided at some sheltered housing sites. Unison had asked for ten resident wardens supported by two mobile wardens and appreciated the Council could not do more financially. Unison accepted that the Management Team wanted to refrain from employing resident wardens and suggested that the Council could employ ten mobile wardens in order to provide an adequate service. Mr. Jones accepted that Unison's proposals would cost more but they had suggested the removal of the PO4 post on the structure making their proposals cost neutral.

The Chair queried the costings of Unison's proposals and Mr. Jones advised that the Unison's proposals would not amount to the saving of £47,000 identified by the authority but would be a cost neutral service. With regard to the outsourcing of the cleansing services, Mr. Jones advised that Unison would prefer this service to remain in-house but appreciated the possible need to tender the service externally. He accepted that it was not ideal that some wardens were providing cleaning services. With regard to absenteeism within the service Mr. Jones advised that Unison's proposals would put another four people "on the ground" within the service and therefore gave an opportunity to provide improved cover arrangements.

Mr. Jones advised that he had held a meeting with wardens. The consensus of that meeting was that the wardens accepted that there was a need for a change in the service. He asked that as there had been uncertainty regarding the future of the service since January 2001 there be an informed quickness in dealing with this matter.

The Chair of the Community Services Committee

The Chair of the Community Services Committee, Councillor Southern, was in attendance at the meeting and was asked the following questions:-

- (1) What is your vision for Sheltered Housing and the Warden Service?
- (2) In terms of your vision, where do you think the Council is at the moment?
- (3) What needs to be done to put your vision into practice?
- (4) How do you intend to resource your proposals?
- (5) What are your views on the level and nature of Member involvement in the consultation process?

In response to the above questions, Councillor Southern advised that he wanted to provide the best possible service for sheltered housing residents. He accepted there was a large variation in service standards from one site to another, and felt that if equal wages were being paid to wardens then an equal service was required of them. He stated that he was in favour of the resident warden system as resident wardens had personal contact with tenants and were aware of their individual needs. He felt that there was a high financial cost on the resident warden system which the Government insisted the Council could not continue with. The Council was looking at all possibilities but he could not see that the Council could continue being able to provide the current service. He felt that the current proposals were not adequate, this being eight wardens covering 11,066 units and there were other possibilities for the Council to consider. He stated that residents had not been asked whether they were prepared to pay between £1 and £2 more for the service and this should have been done and he also noted that there were between 400 and 500 residents who currently did not have a warden.

Councillor Southern stated that mistakes had been made at the beginning of the consultation process and a “yellow paper” that had been circulated to tenants should not have been. He felt there should have been more member involvement and stated that this “yellow” document had upset both tenants and wardens within the service. He accepted that in hindsight the consultation process could have been done in a better way.

The Vice-Chair queried the other options available referred to by Councillor Southern who agreed that these options were to be considered. He stated that the options needed examining and costing accordingly. He expressed concern that some residents in sheltered housing accommodation did not have contact with/or have family and therefore the wardens were their “family”. He said that people could be asked to move to better vacant schemes but that tenants could not be forced to move when their roots were in particular areas.

Head of Community Services

The Head of Community Service (HCS), Sandra Whiles, was in attendance at the meeting and was asked the following questions:-

- (1) Could you explain the nature of the consultation process from the Draft Report of the Best Value Inspectors to the issue of the Section 188 Notices to employees ?
- (2) How have Councillors and other key stakeholders been involved in this process ?
- (3) How has consultation been used to inform the proposals ?
- (4) Could you explain how the proposals would work in practice ?
- (5) What are your plans for strengthening the partnership working to support the new arrangements and what indicators do you have that partners will deliver what has been promised ?

The HCS outlined that the Draft Report from the Best Value Inspectorate was received on the 24th May 2001 at which time the early consultation had been

carried out (arising from the Best Value Inspectorate Interim Challenge Report dating back to February 2001). The consultation and information process had involved work with staff, tenants, Members, and stakeholders as detailed in a timetable previously provided. The HCS outlined that early consultation had involved four focus groups, two with tenants, one with stakeholders and one with staff. Following these focus group meetings, a series of six tenant meetings were held to explain the vision, services to be provided and to explore the issues that had emerged from the focus groups with sheltered housing tenants. Further input from tenants via letters and three petitions had been received and analysed. On the 19th March 2001 Officers had worked with the Chair and Vice-Chairs of the former Housing and Environment Committee to look at the vision, types of services and appraise the advantages and disadvantages of the three different models of service (resident wardens, mobile wardens and a flexible area based service combining residential and community staff). This work informed the report presented to the Housing and Environment Committee in April 2001 where a vision, service parameters, financial objectives, and a consultation strategy was agreed. The HCS outlined that a structure forming the basis of the consultation on the 9th July 2001 was based on the appraisal of models, the need to move towards meeting the objectives agreed at the Housing and Environment Committee meeting held in April 2001 and information arising from the focus groups and tenants meetings. Meetings had been held with the Chair of the Community Services Committee on the 11th June and 2nd July to brief him in detail on the emerging proposals in advance of the staff consultation exercise. (Also, on the 2nd July 2001, the Chief Executive and Head of Community Services had briefed the Leader of the Council on the proposals in advance of these going to Management Team for consideration on the 4th July 2001). The HCS stated that informal meetings had been held with Unison in advance of the issue of the staff consultation packs on the 9th July 2001 and running alongside the work on structural change, a team of staff had been meeting regularly to co-ordinate some of the other necessary improvement works (which was inspecting all sheltered housing accommodation to deal with any necessary building repairs/improvements/fire issues, progressing work on the procedural manual for the service and looking at options for cleaning sheltered housing accommodation etc). In addition, a news sheet had been drawn up (with assistance from T.A.C.T. representatives on plain English) based on the consultation proposals and sent to all sheltered housing tenants shortly after the staff consultation packs were issued.

With regard to the involvement of Councillors and other stakeholders in the process, the HCS advised that this had mainly been done through discussions and briefings with the Chair and some early involvement of the Vice-Chairs of the Housing and Environment Committee. These early briefings gave officers a steer as to the model that was developed in light of the focus group and sheltered housing tenants meetings and had led to the proposed staffing structure incorporated into part of the consultation document. All Members had been sent a copy of the staff consultation pack plus a copy of the tenants News Sheet on 10th July 2001.

Social Services, Health and the Supporting People Manager and the Voluntary Sector were involved in one of the Focus Groups during April and had been sent a copy of the consultation proposals. The HCS outlined that Social Services, Health and the Voluntary Sector had met with officers in May 2001 to agree a list of key areas for joint working. A copy of the consultation

pack had also been sent to representatives of T.A.C.T. following which they had asked for a specific meeting with officers to discuss the proposals.

With regard to how the consultation process had been used to inform the proposals, the HCS advised that the work of the focus groups and the sheltered housing tenants meetings were used to try to shape the consultation proposal against the background of the vision, types of service, the appraisal of models, housing and environment objectives for the review, including financial objectives. Feedback and ideas from the staff consultation exercises were being used to develop final proposals that would be submitted to the Community Services Committee on the 23rd July 2001 for Members consideration.

With regard to how the proposals would work in practice, the HCS advised that one manager would be responsible for the Sheltered Housing Service and Housing Advice and Liaison Service (so that sheltered housing was more closely linked to work on allocations and dealing with neighbourhood nuisances). There would be three Tenant Liaison Officers reporting to one manager (a Sheltered Housing Team Leader) based at the Civic Offices and responsible for Community Wardens. A Central Control Unit Team Leader working from Granville Court would be responsible for the Central Control Unit Officers and there would be a Housing Management and Advice Team Leader responsible for rent arrears, allocations, housing advice, and neighbourhood disputes etc.

The HCS advised that the Tenant Liaison officers would be responsible for working with their staff to organise work rotas, visit rotas etc., and would meet regularly with staff both in one to one supervision/support/monitoring roles and in teams so that service procedures and improvements could be developed through a team approach. For sheltered housing purposes the District would be split into ten areas with a community warden based in each patch and responsible for delivering services to tenants in their area plus responding to emergencies across the District on a call out system at night. Two relief community wardens would provide holiday cover and support the work of the community wardens as directed by the sheltered housing tenant liaison officer. Community wardens would be able to live on a scheme on a service tenancy or to choose to live elsewhere. In either event they would provide services to all tenants in their patch on a needs based approach which tried to meet customers requirements. The ten areas would be split geographically into two sets of five and community wardens encouraged to work together and to get to know tenants in other schemes, so that if there was a need to work in other areas they would already be known to tenants. Careful management of staff would be required in terms of availability, holidays etc. and there would be an expectation that absences would be booked in advance so that cover could be arranged.

The HCS advised that on average one community warden would have responsibility for approximately 116 properties, although currently around 10% of tenants opt out of the visiting service. Average visit patterns at present ranged from 30 per day for resident wardens, to up to 80 per day for mobile wardens. Working on a visits ratio of 10 visits per hour and community wardens visiting between 8.30 am and 3.30 pm, 60% of residents would be visited daily with the timing of visits varied so that morning and afternoon visits alternated. The HCS advised that the emergency response service during the day would be provided by the community warden or the

relief community Warden based on where the emergency was. At night, a rota system would operate. The Housing and Environment Committee had agreed targets for training and quality issues for the new service. The cleansing aspect of the service would be incorporated into the window cleaning contract and the grounds maintenance aspect of the service would be incorporated into the existing contract with the D.S.O. (incorporating Unity Close).

With regard to strengthening partnership working, the HCS advised that progress work on the priority areas had been agreed with Social Services, Health and the Voluntary Sector through a meeting which set targets/actions. Various feedback had been received from key stakeholders which was outlined.

Councillor Routledge queried what would happen if a warden was ill and the Head of Housing Services advised that the existing management system caused a problem but the new proposals would assist in the provision of cover. All the mobile wardens had mobile phones and could contact the Central Control Unit. The Chair queried absenteeism within the service as he felt the sickness records for this particular area were worrying. He was advised that the sickness absence policy would assist in the management of absenteeism and a degree of flexibility within the warden systems was anticipated.

The Chief Finance Officer

The Chief Finance Officer (CFO), Mr. T. Neaves, was in attendance at the meeting and was asked the following questions:-

- (1) What are the costs (both direct and overhead) of the current sheltered housing and warden service, and how are these costs met from both income and other sources ?
- (2) What are the costs of the proposals and how will these costs be met ?
- (3) In terms of the service both now and in the future, what are the financial implications of Supporting People and what mechanisms could be used to bridge any funding gap in the future ?

The CFO advised that the Council's Budgets E.C.1 and E.C.4 demonstrated the main costs of the warden services, but did not show costs of providing accommodation. A charge for the service was set and met by people living in such accommodation and those on Housing Benefit. The subsidy for the service was met from the Housing Revenue Account (General) in the sum of approximately £300K per year. The service did receive income from the Piper Control System which was included in another budget head. All authorities were to be asked to separate out the costs of providing the Sheltered Housing Service. The Council had yet to carry out that exercise but the CFO emphasised that most other Councils were in the same position. The core element costs of the service were outlined.

The Chair queried the rising maintenance costs of maintaining the Piper Control System and was advised by the Head of Housing Services that for the financial year 1999/2000 the maintenance costs had been reduced as the system was still under guarantee. Officers were currently investigating

whether there was a need to be “tied” to one manufacturer for such maintenance.

The costs of the proposals which compared the existing and proposed structure were circulated and a saving of £51,000 had been identified. The cleaning contract and the Out of Hours service had not been provided for however, and the costs provided were only first year costs which would increase over a period of five years. Some assumptions had been made within the financial proposals with regard to redundancies and T.V. Licence costs. The costs of the proposals would be met by the Housing Revenue Account but would need reviewing in light of “Supporting People”.

The Chair queried what proposals were to be put in place for the payment of T.V. Licences for tenants and was advised that the Council were covering the first year of the changeover to give tenants a year to adjust to the change (where resident wardens were in place each tenant did not require an individual Television Licence). The Chair also queried the finance for Supporting People and was advised that the sheltered housing element would move away from the Housing Revenue Account and be funded by a Supporting People Grant (no longer Housing Benefit). Residents in receipt of Housing Benefit would not be effected but it was unclear what would happen to those not in receipt of such Housing Benefit. For 2003 it was unclear how many units the County Council would pay for and it was anticipated that over time the County Council would look at a range of different providers.

The Chair thanked all of the above contributors for their input.

R. L. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.00 p.m.