

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)

19th August 2002

**PRESENT:-**

**Labour Group**

Councillor Harrington (Chair), Councillor Bambrick (Vice-Chair),  
Councillors Evens, Rose and Sherratt.

**Conservative Group**

Councillors Harrison (arrived at 4.45 p.m.) and Mrs. Robbins.

**In Attendance**

Councillors Bell, Lauro and Southern (Labour Group).

CYS/16. **HOUSING INVESTMENT PROGRAMME 2002**

Members were advised that each year, the Council had to submit its Housing Investment Programme (HIP) by 31st July. The HIP comprised the Housing Strategy and statistical returns and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.

This year, the Council had concentrated on improving performance on its HIP. This had included the following:-

- Developing the Housing Strategy and HRA Business Plan in a more inclusive way. This comprised working with a wide range of housing partners in June 2002 to develop the priorities for the Housing Strategy and developing the HRA Business Plan through the HRA Business Planning Group which includes Members, tenants' representatives and Officers.
- Commissioning a Housing Markets and Needs study to inform the priorities within the Housing Strategy.
- Involving tenants in the consideration of future housing operations through the HRA Business Planning Group.
- Presenting the Housing Strategy in a more visual and customer focussed style.

It was noted that the Housing Strategy by its nature, was a long-term strategic document, which would influence the provision of housing across the District into the future. The current strategy had been written to reflect future needs and aspirations of customers. It was intended that the strategy would continue to be developed in a way which involved a range of stakeholders in order that customer focus was improved.

The HRA Business Plan outlined how the landlord business would be managed into the future and set clear objectives for the service which would result in improved services for tenants.

S. Whiles advised that the Housing Strategy was based on an up to date assessment of housing needs. Much work had been undertaken on the presentation of the strategy (with a large contribution from colleagues in the Planning Department). The Business Plan included a clear vision on the housing service development. The Chair queried the timescale involved in the production of a Stock Condition Survey. It was reported that a full report was due in September and this would be presented to Members and officers. The Stock Condition Survey and the Asset Management Plan would be combined to form a three year Improvement Plan. The Best Value Inspectors would return to the Council to inspect in September 2002.

The Committee discussed the target for improving non-decent homes. Councillor Sherratt queried the meaning of “non-decent standard”. He was advised that in order for a property to be rated above this standard it must have a bathroom and a kitchen less than 20 years old and sufficient heating and ventilation. 77% of the Council’s properties were rated to a decent standard. Councillor Southern outlined that the Council had a five year cycle of planned maintenance but very often problems could occur when tenants did not maintain their properties properly. It was proposed to improve the inspections service in the future in order to minimise this problem. Councillor Southern advised that a compulsory rent restructure would mean less revenue for housing maintenance but the Council would still be required to meet the decent home standards. S. Whiles outlined that detailed information on the Stock Condition Survey was awaited (ie some houses may have failed on one aspect of the standard and some properties may have failed on all four). Councillor Rose talked about incentives which could be introduced to encourage tenants to maintain their properties and a discussion took place with regard to tenancy agreements and the need to improve such agreements in the future.

(At 4.50 p.m. Councillor Southern left the Meeting.)

Councillor Bambrick queried how the Council prioritised its housing maintenance programme. He expressed concern that some tenants appeared to have work carried out urgently particularly if their property had been neglected which seemed unfair and a general discussion took place on this matter.

S. Whiles referred to the Housing Strategy document addressing all housing needs. The Housing Needs Market Survey had highlighted two particular housing markets in South Derbyshire, one being on the Derby fringe and the other being the southern area towards the M42. Housing officers were working with local plans officers regarding the number of affordable houses required in the District. It was acknowledged that there was a need to work with Housing Associations on the issue of shared ownership. A general discussion took place as to how the Council could protect rented houses in some of the more rural villages. A Housing Association Liaison Group was to commence meeting in September 2002. Officers would be working during late autumn on the issue of housing needs, particularly specialist housing. I. Reid outlined that officers in the Planning Department had estimated the proportion of housing which needed to be “affordable” within the District. Councillor Evens advised that he felt that the Housing Needs Survey was difficult to translate into the different types of houses and there was a need to find ways of bringing developers together with registered social landlords

in order to provide such affordable housing. Councillor Evens queried what impact on Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) would arise from the large development sites proposed in the Local Plan to which S. Whiles advised that this matter had not been discussed with the RSL's and healthy competition between such RSL's was required.

Councillor Sherratt queried the term "affordable housing". He asked whether there was a large waiting list for Council houses in the urban core and was advised that there was approximately 956 on the current waiting list. S. Whiles advised that the Council did not have a definition of affordable housing in its Housing Strategy (but this was usually based on mortgages/rents costing a third of the owner/occupier's income). Ian Reid advised that the Council was encouraging developers to build affordable housing for sale but a sound Housing Needs Survey was required to inform of this process. The current housing waiting list remained at approximately 1,000 even though the Council's Housing Stock had been reduced. Therefore the Council needed to consider what the realistic demand for affordable housing. Councillor Sherratt advised of a requirement to give consideration to this issue in more detail when developing planning agreements. Councillor Harrison expressed concern that some young people which had grown-up in rural communities could not afford to live where they were born and raised. He advised that it was a desirable objective to create affordable houses for young people in such a position. S. Whiles advised that applicants on the Council's housing waiting list would have local links taken into account when being allocated a property, if possible. She referred to a project at Repton, where a need had been demonstrated and an "exception site" put forward for affordable housing in that particular area. She advised that some Authorities had taken a decision on this matter and reserved particular housing sites in villages for affordable housing. Some Authorities had used capital receipts from Council house sales for affordable housing. Councillor Rose queried whether looking at the housing needs on the Council's current waiting list would give officers some idea of housing needs within the District. S. Whiles advised that the Council did not have a sufficient computer system in this area to provide this information easily without taking up a great deal of officer time.

In response to a query from Councillor Bambrick, S. Whiles advised that the private sector housing department within the Council were working to encourage private landowners to bring properties back into use for rent.

#### CYS/17. **SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICES**

The Committee was advised that accomplishments and improvements to the Sheltered Housing Service had been reported to the Community Services Committee on 18th July 2002 and a copy of this report was circulated for information. A further inspection of the Sheltered Housing Service was due in November 2002 although no official date had been received.

In order to secure an improved rating from the Housing Inspectorate, a number of key actions had already been addressed and completed. In addition to these actions, the following activities were also planned for commencement and/or completion before the inspection took place:-

- Installation of fire doors to Schemes.

- Upgrading of Community Alarms and Communications Systems.
- Replacement of furnishings in communal areas (to fire retardant standards).
- Commencement of accreditation to the Centre for Sheltered Housing Studies service standards.
- Implementation of enhanced performance management systems.
- Consultation with tenants in relation to the provision of facilities within Schemes.
- Review of the Allocations Policy and Procedure.
- Completion of an Options Appraisal for “difficult to let” Schemes.

It was reported that the improvements in service provision and delivery would continue beyond the inspection in November. The Best Value regime was one of demonstrating continuous improvement, and the Improvement Plan detailed actions to be undertaken to December 2003. It was important to note that the Improvement Plan would remain under review with additions being made subject to identified changing need and legislation.

The Committee reviewed the Improvement Plan in detail and took the opportunity to ask questions arising from the Plan. It was noted that fire safety awareness training for all community wardens had been progressed and officers were currently promoting a safety culture amongst Sheltered Housing residents (as it was noted that the most common fire within such residencies were due to chip pans).

Councillor Rose expressed concern regarding the outside appearance of some Sheltered Housing accommodation. It was noted that the contract for this work was undertaken by the Council's Direct Services Organisation as part of its Grounds Maintenance Contract. Officers were currently in the process ascertaining whether the Grounds Maintenance Contract contained sufficient information and requisitions for the continued outside maintenance of Sheltered Housing accommodation to the standard required. (It was noted that as a team building exercise the Central Control room staff were stripping and refurbishing all benches at Granville Court this weekend.) The Committee expressed the view that a Sheltered Housing Maintenance Inspector should be considered a high priority. Councillor Mrs. Robbins expressed concern that when the grass is cut at such accommodation the grass left on the ground sometimes becomes slippery and a safety hazard. Accordingly, the initiative of “preventative maintenance” was supported by the Committee.

With regard to the target of acceptable standards of accommodation to be agreed S. Whiles advised the Committee that there were some key decisions to be taken regarding the long-term use of some of the Sheltered Housing schemes which were difficult to let. An option appraisal report would be submitted to the next round of Committees and officers acknowledged that there was a need to manage properly the difficult to let schemes whilst at the same time being sensitive to the issue of peoples' homes.

Officers advised that ongoing quarterly meetings were now being held between officers of this Council and key officers at Social Services. The Council's officers Dennis Dawson and Mark Alflat were also involved in the County Council's Elderly Persons Best Value Review.

It was noted that there was a need to review and update the Sheltered Housing handbook although an interim book had been produced. S. Whiles suggested the organisation of a seminar for Members on issues such as housing allocation and this idea was welcomed by the Committee.

Councillor Bambrick queried whether the Council would be arranging particular activities for Sheltered Housing residents over the Christmas period and was advised that Councillor Southern had ideas in this regard and that certainly officers hoped to do more during next year's Christmas period. D. Dawson advised that the Council was working with Sheltered Housing residents to ascertain what communal activities such tenants would like offered.

(At 6.10 p.m. Councillor Mrs. Robbins left the Meeting.)

The Chair suggested that the Committee undertake a "reality check" prior to the Sheltered Housing Service inspection in November and it was suggested that this be undertaken during the second week of October. The Chair queried whether any feedback had been received from the Inspectors to date. S. Whiles advised that feedback had been received from Ann Bennett (one of the Inspectors due in November) and there was a need for the Council to concentrate on its vision and difficult to let schemes.

#### CYS/18. **HOUSING SERVICES CHANGE & IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME**

It was noted that a progress report on the Housing Change and Improvement Programme was presented to Community Services Committee on 18th July 2002 and a copy of this report was circulated for information. It was intended to present a further report to the Community Services Committee in August. This report would review achievements during the first three months of the change programme and ask Members to agree further detailed targets and associated support mechanisms. These would be designed to continue to drive forward service improvements so that a reflection in improved performance indicators and tangible service delivery improvement could be demonstrated.

It was noted that there continued to be significant staffing pressures in the Housing Division and these would be considered by the Community Services Committee.

S. Whiles advised that it was intended to produce a monthly news sheet on Housing Services for Members, frontline staff and tenant representatives. In response to a query from Councillor Bambrick it was confirmed that improvements were being made on the re-letting times for void properties.

#### CYS/19. **HOUSING SERVICES BEST VALUE REVIEW**

Members were advised that this Review had identified and confirmed eight key issues for improvement which were outlined as below:

- The provision of accessible and appropriate service information to customers.

- The requirement for short and longer term improvements in the storage, retrieval and management of information of the housing register and homelessness.
- The requirement for effective joint working arrangements between housing staff and other agencies.
- Improvements of the working environment and information/support to enable staff to provide effective services.
- Achieving an integrated service for property adaptations for disabled people.
- Effective measurement and use of housing needs and community needs information to develop and deliver prioritised housing programmes.
- Prioritising and targeting resources to achieve effective regeneration
- Achieving effective strategic and operational housing partnerships.

To date, this list had not been prioritised. The above issues were challenged with stakeholders in June 2002 and were confirmed as relevant to developing an effective strategic housing role. The Review Team had not met during the Summer in order to allow officers to concentrate on the Housing Investment Programme (HIP). In drawing up the 2002 HIP officers had been guided by the key areas for improvement and had built-in service improvements to the HIP as it had been developed. The Review Team would meet again in early September and report to the Community Services Committee in October 2002.

Councillor Harrison advised that he wished to see work carried out on safety/security issues. S. Whiles advised that an increased budget for lock replacement schemes at Sheltered Housing accommodation had been approved. Officers were currently prioritising which locks were to be replaced. Officers were also investigating the possibility of a Neighbourhood Ranger Service for the District.

(At 7.00 p.m. pursuant to Procedure Rule No. 9 the Committee agreed to continue the Meeting.)

CYS/20. **MEMBERS QUESTIONS AND REPORTS**

A proposed report on the issue of play equipment was circulated by the Chair. It was intended to submit this report to the Meeting of the Community Services Committee on 29th August 2002. The Committee agreed the report in its current format.

I. Reid advised that the Leisure Centre were formulating a contract on continuous improvement. The first stage of this process was a 'scoping' session with Members and two nominations from the Community Scrutiny Committee were requested to attend a Meeting in September 2002. The Committee agreed that Councillors Harrington and Rose represent the Community Scrutiny Committee for this purpose.

K. HARRINGTON

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 7.05 p.m.