

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17th February 2003

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

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

Conservative Group

Councillor Mrs. Robbins.

TACT Group

Mr. K. Cokayne.

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the Meeting were received from Councillor Mrs. Rose (Labour Group) and Councillor Harrison (Conservative Group).

CYS/52. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Special Meeting held on 25th November 2002 and of the Meeting held on 2nd December 2002 were taken as read, approved as true records and signed by the Chair.

CYS/53. **CO-OPTION**

The Chair welcomed Mr. Cokayne of the TACT Group to the Meeting and, in order to allow him to participate in the discussions, the Committee approved his co-option for the purpose of the Meeting.

CYS/54. **DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT**

The Committee received a news article from the Economic Development Manager which provided information on work being carried out by Newcastle City Council which he considered would be of interest to Members.

Members were advised at the Meeting on 2nd December 2002 of the Council's proposals to ensure that all relevant properties met the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) by October 2004. A revenue bid of £40,000 was submitted for the employment of consultants to undertake audits of all relevant properties. However, only £20,000 was approved as it was considered that existing staff might be able to assist with these audits. Unfortunately, the Council did not have staff with the training or resources to assist with this work and therefore it would need to be undertaken by consultants. It was decided to ascertain how many properties could be audited with the £20,000 allocated. An additional bid might be required to cover any shortfall. Four access consultants had been approached to quote for undertaking the initial audits.

A letter had been sent to all Parish Councils and commercial tenants, advising them of their responsibility as service providers to make the necessary improvements to their premises.

A Disability Access Steering Group had now been established to oversee the implementation of work to the Council's properties. Work had been concentrated on physical adaptations to buildings but the Council also needed to ensure that it was complying with all aspects of the DDA in the provision of services.

Following completion of the audit and costing of any necessary works, a capital bid would need to be submitted to finance them. It was felt that the Council should be able to ensure that its buildings were suitably adapted for equal access by all members of the community. However, all Divisions needed to consider the implications of the DDA on their service delivery.

Members referred to the letter sent to Parish Councils and asked whether there were funds available to implement any of the improvements. Officers advised that the Government would not be providing any resources and Members enquired whether government departments could provide assistance in locating a funding source. A copy of the letter would be sent to Members for information.

CYS/55. **SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICES**

Members received a progress report on the Improvement Plan for the Sheltered Housing Service.

At the Community Services Committee on 19th August 2002, Members were advised of the steps being taken to ensure the Improvement Plan was implemented, to achieve an improved Best Value rating from the Housing Inspectorate and ensure improved service delivery to sheltered housing tenants. Following the Best Value re-inspection, a rating of 'one star with promising prospects for improvement' had been awarded. The Best Value Report would be published by the Audit Commission during the week commencing 17th February 2003.

An updated Improvement Plan was included in the report and when the vision for the Sheltered Housing Service had been completed, a new three-year Plan would be developed. This would be reviewed annually and would incorporate any outstanding actions in the existing Improvement Plan. It would be a tool to reflect short, medium and long-term priorities, designed to ensure continuous improvement of the Sheltered Housing Service.

Included in the report was a list of additional improvements in the service to those highlighted in the Improvement Plan. These had been implemented as sufficient funds were available in the budget. An additional allocation of £100,000 had been agreed via the Capital Bidding round for improvements to laundry rooms and community areas. Members were advised that the new Maintenance Inspector was now becoming familiar with the stock and the needs of sheltered housing tenants.

Members received clarification of the service specification and standards included in the annexe to the report. This referred to improving the standards of community areas.

Members asked the TACT representative for TACT's views on progress to date. He advised that he was very satisfied with the manner in which the

Plan was proceeding and congratulated the Council on its efforts. Members enquired on residents' views on the new warden system and were informed that this was proving to be beneficial and that there was always someone present to receive calls.

Members referred to the condition of the windows at Pine Grove and asked when these would be upgraded. Officers confirmed that the work would be undertaken shortly and Members would be advised accordingly.

CYS/56. **HOUSING SERVICES BEST VALUE REVIEW**
STRATEGIC AND LANDLORD/TENANT

Members were informed of the current position on the Housing Services Best Value Review. This had been focusing on the Council's strategic housing role and had identified eight areas for improvement which had been reported in detail to previous Meetings.

Officers had taken the approach that improvements to services should be built into the Council's method of working as the review proceeded, rather than left until the end of the review. As a consequence, the following changes to the service had been implemented:-

- ❑ The establishment of a unified property adaptation service for customers with disabilities within the Environmental Health Division from April 2003
- ❑ The establishment of a private sector partnership with the Good Shepherd Trust for delivery of the Council's temporary accommodation and support services to homeless people
- ❑ Improvements to the processes used for developing, monitoring and delivering the Housing Strategy
- ❑ Partnership with an external specialist on assessing housing needs and the housing market

The Government Office for the East Midlands (GOEM) annually assessed the Council's performance in its strategic housing role and this had been assessed as "below average" since at least 1998. As a consequence of the changes and improvements during 2002, the Council's performance had improved with an assessment of "average" being obtained. The report included the recent GOEM feedback on the housing strategy which gave indicators of where further improvement should be concentrated. These were consistent with many of the areas for improvement identified in the Best Value Review.

The framework for the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) included proposals for a cross-cutting review of strategy housing work. A further review of the delivery of Decent Homes programmes would be undertaken as part of the CPA for Councils who retained their housing stock. A review of the current Best Value work on the strategic housing role was planned for 17th February 2003. This would overlay the likely "Balancing Housing Markets" CPA assessment over the work to date, so that any additional work could be built into the review in preparation for CPA's.

The Housing Best Value Inspection Service had invited the Council to work with them in April to pilot their Decent Homes CPA inspection which would assist in the preparation for CPA.

The timing and programme of future formal Best Value Reviews would depend on the Council's approach to preparing for the CPA. Currently, preparation work had been undertaken on the review of the landlord/tenant housing service, the exact timing and nature of which would be reported to Members when direction had been received on the CPA preparations. It was anticipated that the CPA work could be completed by May and a Best Value Review by mid-July.

(Councillor Carroll joined the Meeting at 5.15 p.m.)

CYS/57. HOUSING SERVICES CHANGE AND IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

Members received a report on the Housing Change and Improvement Programme together with the work planned to review and update its objectives.

The Housing Change and Improvement Programme had been in place since Spring 2002. Initially, support was provided to all staff in the Housing Division by Penningtons who were commissioned to support the delivery of the first stage of the programme. A key part of the programme had been the development of management skills and competences amongst middle managers in the Housing Division. This had been achieved through a management development programme which included team building and individual management action planning, monthly housing management meetings and the use of external mentoring and support for a number of staff. Middle managers across the Housing Division were now functioning as a team, challenging and working together to drive forward service improvements.

Officers were very pleased with the work of Penningtons which had resulted in a reduction in sickness absence across the Division and had improved performance on some key indicators, such as re-let times.

Over recent months, improvement work had concentrated on the repairs and maintenance service. Recent changes on the procurement of planned improvement programmes had been the result of challenging existing practice.

Penningtons had been commissioned to lead a mini Best Value Review in the repairs and maintenance service and provide mentoring for a number of maintenance staff up until the end of December 2003. Their final report on this work was due shortly which would identify remaining areas of risk and make suggestions for improvement, particularly in relation to the responsive repairs service.

The Housing Management Team would formally review the progress of the Change and Improvement Programme and update its objectives. The work would be undertaken against the context of the 2003/04 Housing Service Plan and the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

Members suggested that when checking void properties, gardens and premises should be inspected to ensure that they were left in a satisfactory condition. Officers agreed to build this action into the duties of an existing post.

The representative of TACT considered there had been a remarkable change and improvement in the Housing Service and Members echoed these comments.

CYS/58. **HOUSING SERVICES – PARTNERSHIPS WITH SOCIAL SERVICES**

There was nothing further to report on this item.

CYS/59. **EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

Members received a report outlining arrangements for the review and development of the Council's approach to equal opportunities and diversity issues. These were often used as interchangeable terms and could be confusing.

According to the Audit Commission, "the focus of equal opportunities practice was fairness – developing policies and practices that tackle inequalities, aiming to ensure that all staff are treated fairly and that service users do not experience discrimination. Managing people and performance in the context of diversity adds a new focus – creating a working environment that captures the potential of each staff member and uses their skills to add value and deliver services that meet the needs and tap the contributions of all sections of the community".

The Council's existing equal opportunities policy was approved by the Council on 22nd July 1999. It now required updating in the light of recent legislation and emerging best practice. It was intended to update the document for consideration by the Finance and Management Committee on 20th March 2003.

The Council was also required to progress a number of specific issues relating to equal opportunities and diversity.

Members had received a related report on the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act and there was also a statutory requirement to produce and implement a Race Equality Scheme. It was intended to produce this Scheme for consideration by the Council in May 2003.

CYS/60. **CORONARY HEART DISEASE (PREVENTION AND REHABILITATION)**

It was reported that Derbyshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee was conducting a review of prevention and rehabilitation services for coronary heart disease and had requested information and data on the following issues:-

- ❑ The integration of health improvement into plans and strategies
- ❑ Tackling health inequalities – plans, policies and practice
- ❑ Delivery of services to support coronary heart disease prevention and rehabilitation

A list of questions had been produced to help the Council consider these issues which were included in the report. The Head of Community Services had met with the County Council's Scrutiny Officer to discuss the Council's contribution and notes of the meeting were also included in the report.

Divisional Managers had been invited to provide any additional information comment accordingly. However, the only issue not addressed in the notes of the meeting was that the Local Plan provided under the “Community Facilities Policy 1 and 2” for “protection of health facility buildings unless genuinely redundant and new facilities to be built subject to criteria” and under “Housing Policy 3, 5 and 7” for “contributions from housing developers to be devoted to capital schemes”.

It was agreed that the notes of the Meeting attended by the Head of Community Services and additional comments of Divisional Managers provide the basis of the Committee’s response to the County Council.

CYS/61. **WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

Members received an update on the Work Programme and were informed that the next Meeting to be held on 24th March 2003 would be the last before the District Council Elections on 1st May 2003.

An additional Best Value Review would be carried out on Clean, Green and Safe Public Space and the Programme would be focusing on some of these issues. It would be appropriate therefore for Members to receive an update on the Best Value Review of Community Safety and the Crime and Disorder Strategy at the next Meeting.

The next Meeting would also consider the Annual Report which would reflect the activities that the Committee would like to develop in the future. Members were asked to provide any feedback of such issues to the Policy and Best Value Manager. The report would also provide information on the Committee’s work during the last year as well as the proposals for next year.

K HARRINGTON

CHAIR

The meeting terminated at 5.40 p.m.