

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21st March 2005

**PRESENT:-**

**Labour Group**

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

**Conservative Group**

Councillors Hood and Lemmon.

**APOLOGIES**

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

CYS/32. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 14th February 2005 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

CYS/33. **BEST VALUE REVIEW OF HOUSING STOCK INVESTMENT AND ASSET MANAGEMENT**

The Committee received a detailed report outlining the issues discussed at an informal Meeting of the Committee held on 14th March 2005. A way forward was sought. The purpose of the informal Meeting was to gather information about the Best Value Review of Housing Stock Investment and Asset Management and to identify areas where the Committee might undertake reality checks prior to the proposed inspection by the Audit Commission. Members were reminded that the Meeting had focussed on the following three main areas:-

- The Review process (in particular, the involvement of Members, employees and external stakeholders).
- The Housing vision and priorities.
- Strengths and weaknesses (in terms of service delivery).

The Review Process

Members were reminded that the key points made by contributors comprised the following:-

- The Best Value Review process has changed substantially – the focus was now on Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) defined by the Audit Commission.
- The inspection ‘timescale’ was very tight – the Audit Commission required documents by 14th April, with on site inspection commencing 6th June.

- A Members' group (which met every 3 weeks) had been established to oversee the process; this group received reports from an Officer group that met fortnightly.
- Vacant posts within the Housing Service were creating difficulties. One consequence was that the Head of Housing Services had to be involved on a day-to-day basis in housing repairs. At the same time, a new IT system was being introduced. The IT System (Orchard) had been implemented on programme and within budget.
- A report would be submitted to the April Meeting of the Housing and Community Services Committee, along with recommendations. A second seminar for all Members was planned for May (prior to inspection).
- Service reports had been circulated to employees with Team briefs; staff meetings were planned.
- Consultation with external stakeholders on the repairs and maintenance service had been undertaken mainly through TACT (Tenant Advisory and Consultation Team), although contributors acknowledged there was a wider issue of tenant involvement; consultation on capital schemes in particular was considered to be 'very traditional'.
- The aim was to complete the HRA Business Plan by July. The long term financial projections made it unlikely that 'fit for purpose' would be achieved.
- Further 'benchmarking' had still to be completed; initial comparisons with other Councils in the East Midlands suggested the Council was performing relatively well.

#### The Housing Vision and Priorities

Members were reminded that in terms of the housing vision and priorities, key points made by contributors comprised the following:-

- Several documents already evidenced aspects of the vision – the Repairs Policy (agreed in April 2004) and the recent Service Plan; the main document, however, was the HRA Business Plan which needed to follow on from the decision on the housing stock options – the intention was to show the Inspectors draft chapters in the Plan to demonstrate how the vision was developing.
- A Housing Working Group (comprising Members and representatives of TACT) would be set up to progress the development of the HRA Business Plan; consultation on the vision would be a major piece of work; the vision would need to be framed in the context of available resources.
- The Repairs Policy outlined standards for repairs, which were not being met at the present time; a staff vacancy in Financial Services was adding to the difficulties of improving the service. This was currently being addressed by seeking temporary external support.

#### Strengths and Weaknesses

At the Meeting, the Director of Community Services had stated a need to identify main priorities of 9/10 actions in the Action Plan to progress. Officers also indicated that the Action Plan had been reality checked and it was anticipated that a number of the actions would be achieved in the near future. Councillor Southern, Chair of the Housing and Community Services

Committee wanted action to deal with void properties given greater priority. Void times were falling as outlined in the last Housing Performance report submitted to the Housing and Community Services Committee.

The Committee was reminded that other points made by the contributors included the following:-

- ❑ There was a need to ensure that the ‘fit to let’ standard for voids worked in practice.
- ❑ The Housing Department was working hard to prepare for the inspection; further meetings could have an impact on these preparations.
- ❑ Although more staff consultation was planned, staff were aware of issues relating to voids and the time taken to deal with non-urgent repairs.
- ❑ Housing staff had undertaken various training schemes more was planned (for example – management, customer care, asbestos, IT); this showed a willingness to change.
- ❑ Achievements (such as the improvements to the sheltered housing service) were not promoted sufficiently.
- ❑ The work/performance of other service areas would also impact on the outcome of the inspection.

To conclude, the Committee identified a number of areas worthy of further consideration as part of the reality check by the Community Scrutiny Committee. Such areas comprised:-

- (1) Consultation with internal and external stakeholders.
- (2) The development of the housing vision.
- (3) Dealing with repairs and voids.

The Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration advised that with regard to repairs and voids, further information was to be sought to be checked against current standards. Officers were already planning to agree standards with TACT and therefore the Community Scrutiny Committee could be incorporated into this process and ‘package’ the reality check procedure.

With regard to consultation with internal and external stakeholders the Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration reminded Members that copies of the Key Lines of Enquiries (KLOE) had already been circulated. KLOE (5) focussed on tenant involvement. The Committee could discuss KLOE (5) with staff and suggested questions had been circulated previously to be utilised as a check list. It was suggested that a specific meeting to discuss consultation should be arranged.

With regard to the development of the housing vision, the Chair reported that Sandra Whiles (the previous Director of Community Services) had produced an original document which had now been absorbed into the HRA Business Plan. The Deputy Chief Executive advised that the Government Office were now reviewing the need to produce a Business Plan for a period of 30 years but reminded Members that if the Council’s Business Plan was capital intensive then it needed to focus on a longer period identifying possible sources of investment. He felt however, that a 10 Year Business Plan was a likely requirement. It was suggested that the Committee needed to consider to what extent the rules imposed by the Government were limiting the

Council's Vision. The financing for this particular service was fixed and accordingly placed constraints on levels of service provision. The Chair advised that he felt there was a need to be clear on how sustainable the Vision was. There was a need to impress on Policy Committees that the Council must be clear on where it was going with the Vision. The Deputy Chief Executive advised Members that the previous Vision was being turned into reality through the Repairs Policy. However the current Policy was not being adhered to. Inputs to the service were controlled externally. The Council only had control over outputs and efficiency where it could spend less or improve efficiency. The Chair stated that documentation needed to be produced to check the longevity of the Business Plan. The Council's Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration suggested that the Committee might wish to hold a specific informal Meeting to discuss the above three points in detail. More information was needed before recommendations could be made. The Chair reminded the Committee was only concerned with processes currently. The Deputy Chief Executive advised that Officers would define the Vision within the financial framework which could be delivered and the Committee would need to marry the Council's political vision with what was actually deliverable.

It was agreed to hold a further informal Meeting inviting the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Housing and Community Services Committee, the Director of Community Services and the Head of Housing Services. Councillor Lemmon stated that he did not want the process to be confrontational as both the Community Scrutiny Committee and the Housing and Community Services Committee were working towards the same goals - to add value to the service. Councillor Bambrick referred to the Community Scrutiny Committee being 'a critical friend'. It was agreed to hold an informal Meeting on a convenient date for all those involved as soon as possible. The Meeting would focus on the development of the Housing Vision and tenant involvement. The issue of dealing with repairs and voids would be discussed at a further Meeting.

CYS/34. **HOUSING AND COMMUNITY ISSUES – FEEDBACK TO THE HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE**

Under Minute No. CYS/30 of the Meeting held on 14th February 2005, the Committee agreed to provide feedback and recommendations to the Housing and Community Services Committee on the following three issues:-

- (1) Housing Services (Sheltered Housing Services and the Best Value Review of Stock Investment and Asset Management).
- (2) Proposals for Neighbourhood (Street) Wardens.
- (3) The provision and maintenance of play areas.

A copy of the draft report to the Housing and Community Services Committee on 21st April 2005 was circulated for comment. The Committee discussed the proposed report and made some minor changes. Members of the Community Scrutiny Committee were encouraged to attend the Housing and Community Services Committee on 21st April 2005. A general discussion took place as to when the Committee would complete its work on the Best Value Review of Housing Stock Investment and Asset Management and it was agreed that the Scrutiny Committee needed to complete this work by early May 2005. The Deputy Chief Executive suggested that the Chair and Vice-Chair of Housing and Community Services Committee could be invited to attend the Meeting of the Overview Committee on 16th May 2005 when the

final report of the Community Scrutiny Committee on this issue would be presented. It was agreed that this would be pursued as a way forward on the matter.

CYS/35. **WORK PROGRAMME**

It was agreed to discuss the ‘milestones’ at the above-mentioned informal Meeting.

K. HARRINGTON

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.10 p.m.