

## **ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Monday 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2012 at 6.00pm  
in Committee Room 2, The Council House, Dudley

### **PRESENT:-**

Councillor Mrs. Shakespeare (Chairman)  
Councillor Mrs. Turner (Vice-Chairman)  
Councillors Body, A Finch, Hill, James, Ms Partridge, Mrs Rogers, Waltho and Mrs Westwood.

### **Officers**

Director of Corporate Resources (As Lead Officer to the Committee), Assistant Director of Housing, (Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing Services); Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards, (Directorate of the Urban Environment) and Miss K Fellows (Directorate of Corporate Resources).

### 22. **APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE**

An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor Mrs Jordan.

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### 23. **APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

It was reported that Councillor Body had been appointed as a substitute Member for Councillor Mrs Jordan for this meeting of the Committee only.

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### 24. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Body declared a personal interest in Agenda item no. 7 – Housing Service – as he had a close relative who had been made homeless.

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### 25. **MINUTES**

#### **RESOLVED**

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 2012, be approved as a correct record and signed.

26. PUBLIC FORUM

No matters were raised under this agenda item.

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27. CONSIDERATION OF PETITIONS (IF ANY) REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE BY THE PETITION'S OFFICER

No Petitions had been referred to the Committee.

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28. HOUSING SERVICE

A report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services was submitted on Housing Management activity following on from the report presented to this Committee twelve months previously. Appended to the report were the outcomes from the Consultation on the Council's Review of Anti-Social Behaviour, a report that had been submitted to the Community Safety and Community Services Scrutiny Committee in relation to the Dudley Borough Anti Social Behaviour Review and the Welfare Reform Key Measures.

Following the presentation of that part of the report that related to Housing Managing Activity Members asked questions and the Assistant Director, Housing Services responded as follows:-

In relation to the pilot programme for people who were on Council house waiting lists who had the skills and experience to carry out their own repairs, the scheme was advertised on the Choice Based Lettings site in order to provide everyone with the opportunity to apply to carry out their own repairs.

That assessments as to the competence of people to carry out their own repairs would be carried out by Building Services, although tenants would be unable to carry out certain work including gas or where work needed to be certified. The Assistant Director, Housing Services undertook to provide details in relation to assessments, the types of work people were entitled to undertake and the exclusions to all Members.

A Member suggested that the Council utilise the services of the Community Pay Back Team in relation to the Gardening Scheme that was referred to in the report submitted and the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that the Division were attempting to utilise the services of volunteer workforces who had regular contact with tenants.

She also advised that the Council worked with the Fire Service in relation to fire safety issues and adhered to their recommendations in order to make

tenants and their visitors' safe.

The Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that there was a large population of tenants who had special needs and adapted and accessible homes were required for those tenants. She advised that people could bid on adapted properties or those that could be adapted through Choice Based Lettings ensuring transparency. The Assistant Director, Housing Services undertook to provide Councillor Ms Partridge with details of the number of Council properties that were adapted for those with disabilities and respond to her direct.

In relation to rent arrears and how debts were allowed to get so high, the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that courts tended to give people several chances to repay debt and could give several stays of execution prior to the Council being in a position to evict and that during that time rent arrears may well escalate. There were also some cases whereby once a tenant had left a property they believed that their responsibility to pay rent had ceased however this was not the case given the period of notice that a leaving tenant would be required to provide.

Councillor Ms Partridge referred to a specific case in relation to rent arrears and the Assistant Director, Housing Services undertook to discuss that case and respond to Councillor Ms Partridge direct.

The Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that the Anti Social Behaviour Review had highlighted problems with the service and that these problems would be addressed.

In relation to those who carried out their own work to Council properties the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that the type of tenancy they hold would be dependant upon the tenant. If a tenant was transferring from another Council property they could hold a secure tenancy. However, if this was a new tenant they would hold a Licence whilst carrying out the work.

Those properties that required work to them that would cost £10,000 plus would trigger an assessment and could be termed as High Cost Voids, however this threshold was due to be re-assessed.

The Assistant Director, Housing Services undertook to provide Councillor Waltho with details of the New Homes Bonus Scheme including the amount of funding that the Council received and what the funds had been utilised for.

In relation to tenancy fraud cases the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that the majority of these had resulted from cross over tenancy cases and had been established as more work was now being completed during the application stage. However a robust fraud policy was required given the introduction of the new welfare reforms.

In relation to tenancy enforcement action it was reported that the Council could not repossess properties without the intervention of the Courts.

It was reported that there were no trends in relation to tenants who would not allow entry for gas servicing.

In relation to the allocation of funds for fire safety and the role of the Area Housing Panel, the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that comments from that Panel were conveyed to both the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services and the Cabinet Member for Housing and that reports in relation to how the fire safety funds were allocated would be presented to future meetings of Area Housing Panels.

The Assistant Director, Housing Services stated that when tenants allowed entry for home checks, appointments for gas safety checks were immediately made with the Council's gas contractor however this did not automatically result in tenants allowing entry for such checks.

A Member raised concerns in relation to the accommodation provided at Lye Hostel suggesting that further provision should be made available.

The Assistant Director, Housing Services reported that it was hoped that funding could be secured to renovate the hostel in Lye and that the type of accommodation that was available to young people who leave home would be looked at and if they presented as homeless and were vulnerable the Council was under a duty of care to re-house them.

She also stated that she would like to see some improvement in the type of accommodation that was available to re-house young people.

In responding to a question of the Chairman in relation to the provision of accommodation for young people the Assistant Director, Housing Services reported that the Council provided support in emergency situations by the provision of "beds for one night". In addition there was direct access to the Lye Hostel and mediation between young people and their parents was also available by way of "Project Flashpoint".

She further reported that the Tenancy Sustainment Team provided support to people once they had been re-housed and there was supportive housing for people who were experiencing drug abuse problems.

A Member requested that a report be submitted to a future meeting of this Committee in relation to the Anti Social Behaviour Review.

In responding to a question from Councillor Ms Partridge the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that she would provide information in relation to the amount of rent arrears that was currently being pursued by the

Council's appointed outside agency and the age of those debts, directly to Councillor Ms Partridge.

In relation to the repayment of Housing Benefit, the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that the Government immediately requested the repayment of any payments made in error.

Following the presentation of that part of the report relating to the challenges facing Housing Services Members asked questions and made comments and the Assistant Director of Housing responded as follows:-

In relation to the key measures regarding Welfare Reform as outlined in Appendix 1 to the report submitted, she advised that although there may not be sufficient one bedroom housing stock to re-house those under occupying, the Council would still be expected to collect under occupancy levies from those tenants who were under occupying properties.

She also indicated that there would be under occupancy issues in relation to those mature single people who occupied two bedroom flats and the Council was awaiting further information as to whether there would be exceptions to the under occupancy rule.

It was also reported that in relation to Council Tax Rebate, those tenants of working age (under the age of 62 years) would be liable to pay some of their Council Tax and non-dependant deductions had increased substantially and would increase again in 2013.

It was further reported that Universal Credit would be phased in by 2017 with every rent account being charged with the full rent and the Council having to collect that debt. It was stated that the Council were putting in place direct debit facilities for the collection of rent and council tax payments. It was also stated that the Council had set up a hot line through the Citizens Advice Bureau in order that specialist advisers were available to address tenants' problems.

The Chairman suggested that the Welfare Reform changes should be added to this Committees work programme.

In responding to a question from a Member in relation to under occupancy the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that work was being completed in relation to accommodation for the elderly together with work with Partners in order to obtain further accommodation.

In relation to the reform of Social Housing Regulations the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that she was unaware of the Regulations relating to private landlords and a Member requested that the issue of regulation of private landlords be added to this Committees work programme.

In responding to a question from Councillor Ms Partridge in relation to the Right to Buy Scheme, the maximum tenant discount of 75% and the model that the Government were utilising for this scheme, the Assistant Director, Housing Services advised that there would be a consultation in relation to the sale of land and she undertook to provide direct to Councillor Ms Partridge the link to the Government website that provided details of the Right to Buy Scheme.

Councillor James appreciated that there was a problem with under occupancy and was pleased to note that this would not affect those who were 62 years of age and over.

Councillor Hill referred to the transitional period in relation to the new Welfare Reforms and suggested that the Council should anticipate how many tenants may be adversely affected by the changes and should be in a position to re-house those tenants who were under occupying as soon as possible.

The Chairman suggested that the process in relation to mutual exchanges should be re-examined in order to simplify these and make them more timely.

#### RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report, and Appendices to the report, submitted on Housing Management Activity following on from the report received by the Committee twelve months ago, be noted.
- (2) That the Assistant Director, Housing Services be requested to email the following information :-
  - (a) Details in relation to the Assessments that were carried out by Building Services as to the competency of a person to carry out their own repairs, the types of work that people were entitled to undertake and the exclusions to all Members of the Committee.
  - (b) Details of the number of Council properties that were adapted for those with disabilities to Councillor Ms Partridge.
  - (c) Details of the New Homes Bonus Scheme funding and how the Council utilised that funding to Councillor Waltho.

- (d) Details of the amount of rent arrears that were currently being pursued by the Council's appointed outside agency and the age of those debts direct to Councillor Ms Partridge.
  - (e) A link to the Government's Website in relation to the Right to Buy Scheme direct to Councillor Ms Partridge.
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29.

PROVISIONAL WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2012/13

A report of the Lead Officer to the Committee was submitted on initial consideration of the Work Programme for the Committee for 2012/13.

Arising from consideration given to this matter Members suggested the addition of the following items:-

- Tenancy Fraud
- Welfare Reforms
- The Anti Social Behaviour Review in so far as it related to the Terms of Reference of this Committee;
- The Regulation of private landlords;
- Information Item Only – Badgers;
- Information Item Only – Dog Fouling Enforcement;

RESOLVED

That, subject to the inclusion of the additional items indicated above, the provisional work programme for the Committee for 2012/13 be noted and that Members be requested to submit to the Democratic Services Officer any further suggestions concerning the work programme.

The meeting ended at 7.40pm

CHAIRMAN