

Minutes of the Place Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 20th January, 2016 at 6.00 pm
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

Present:

Councillor A Finch (Chair)
Councillor M Aston (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Z Islam, K Jordan, I Kettle, P Miller, D Perks, H Rogers, K Shakespeare, G Simms and E Taylor.

Officers:

M Williams - Chief Officer Corporate and Customer Services (Lead Officer to the Committee); A Lunt – Strategic Director Place, M Williams – Chief Officer Environmental Services, M Rodgers – Chief Officer Housing, P Griffiths – Head of Housing Assets & Development, I Gardner – Head of Housing Maintenance, H Marsh-Geyton – Head of Fleet & Waste Care (Place Directorate); I Newman – Chief Officer Finance & Legal Services, C Ludwig – Finance Manager and H Shepherd - Democratic Services Officer (Resources and Transformation Directorate).

Also in attendance

J Deakin – Operations Manager – Waste Care (Observer)

19 **Apology for absence**

An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor J Hill.

20 **Appointment of Substitute Member**

It was noted that Councillor P Miller had been appointed as substitute member for Councillor J Hill, for this meeting of the Committee only.

21 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillors I Kettle and H Rogers declared a non - pecuniary interest in agenda item number 5 – Medium Term Financial Strategy, in view of their membership of the Ernest Stevens Trusts Management Committee.

Councillors I Kettle and H Rogers declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item number 5 – Medium Term Financial Strategy, as they are Members of the Friends of Mary Stevens Park and Swinford Common and had attended meetings of the Heritage Lottery Project for Mary Stevens Park.

Councillors I Kettle and H Rogers declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item number 5 - Medium Term Financial Strategy, in view of their attendance at a meeting held on 10th November, 2015, to discuss the proposed increase in fees for bowls and croquet at Mary Stevens Park and Stevens Park, Wollescote.

Chief Officer Corporate and Customer Services declared a pecuniary interest in agenda item number 5 – Medium Term Financial Strategy, as he was directly affected by the proposed Management Restructure within the Resources and Transformation Directorate. Although the proposed savings were not directly within the remit of the Place Scrutiny Committee, if discussions did stray, the Chief Officer Corporate and Customer Services would withdraw from the meeting.

22 **Minutes**

In referring to minute no. 17, in particular the second paragraph on page PL/25, it was requested that the paragraph be removed entirely as it was irrelevant.

It was also requested that paragraph 4 on page PL/25 of minute no. 17 be amended to read ‘The Chief Officer also agreed to arrange a meeting with Councillor H Rogers.’

Resolved

That, subject to the changes referred to above, the minutes of the Place Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 23rd November, 2015, be approved as a correct record and signed.

23 **Medium Term Financial Strategy**

A joint report of the Chief Executive, Chief Officer Finance and Legal Services and the Strategic Director Place was submitted to consult the Scrutiny Committee on the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2018/19, approved by Cabinet on 18th January, as a basis for further consultation, with emphasis on those proposals relating to the Place Scrutiny Committee terms of reference. Items directly related to the Place Scrutiny Committee were those concerning the Place Directorate, as set out in paragraphs 32 and 34 of the report submitted.

The Chief Officer Finance and Legal Services presented the report, making particular reference to the changes in the report compared with the proposals that were considered in October, 2015, none of which directly affected the Place Directorate.

Resolved

That the Cabinet’s proposals for the Medium Term Financial Strategy to 2018/19, taking into account the considerations set out in paragraph 47 of the report submitted, be noted.

Medium Term Financial Strategy – Housing Finance

A joint report of the Strategic Director Place and the Chief Officer Finance and Legal Services was submitted to consult the Scrutiny Committee on the principles adopted in the proposed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for 2016/17 and future years, in the context of rent reductions and the impact of the government's welfare reforms and to report the outcome of the consultation to charge council housing and garage rents over 52 weeks rather than 50 weeks from April, 2016, to allow closer alignment with the monthly payments that more tenants were now making, and which would also be used for universal credit benefit payments under the government's programme of welfare reforms.

In presenting the report, the Finance Manager referred to the Chancellor's announcement in July, 2015, requesting social landlords to reduce rents by 1% annually for the next four years and the impact the reduction would have on the cumulative shortfall in income. Delegates of the Tenants Conference in October, 2015, had been advised of the new proposals and consulted on the impact the budget reduction would have on resources and services in Dudley. A copy of this report would also be submitted to the next meeting of the Housing Board for information.

The Finance Manager indicated that the proposed budget for 2016/17, based on estimated resources available, would be approximately £89 million, which would be £2 million less than the current year's budget and outlined how the proposed budget would be allocated.

The key issues for the service were highlighted with particular reference made to the cost of works undertaken in making void properties lettable and the need to reduce these costs and speed up the letting process to minimise the loss of rent while a property was empty. Consideration also needed to be given to address failing stock and as to whether properties identified as a low demand and high investment need should be disposed of.

The Finance Manager confirmed that programmes such as adaptations for people with disabilities and heating to reduce fuel poverty, would continue and had been included in the proposed budget proposals.

In referring to the proposed changes to charging rents over 52 weeks instead of 50 weeks, the Finance Manager stated that tenants had been consulted via an online survey but a low response rate had been received. Information had also been included in the Home Affairs magazine which was circulated to all tenants in the borough. The responses received via the online survey indicated that approximately 60% of the tenants were unaffected or happy with the proposed change. The reasons provided by the remainder of the tenants that preferred to retain the two 'free' weeks were that they did not feel that they would be disciplined enough to pay a little extra each week to ensure they had 'free' weeks and that they liked having a break at Christmas time.

Arising from the presentation of the report, Members questioned whether or not an 8% response rate to the consultation was considered valid when there was currently 22,000 tenants in the borough.

In response to a question raised by a Member with regards to the timeframe that a void property would again be lettable, the Head of Housing Assets and Development stated that a refocused approach on the specifications of work that was undertaken prior to the property being re-let had now been applied, but the impact of the new approach on expenditure and turn around would not be quantifiable until March 2016.

Further concerns were raised by Members with regards to void properties and the length of time that vacant properties had been left empty when it would appear that not much work was required to put the property back into use. The Strategic Director Place stated that in the majority of these cases significant problems had been identified and therefore delays had been due to a decision being made as to whether or not investment should be made to bring these properties back into use. An investment strategy was currently being developed to include all properties and decisions would be made as to whether they would be disposed of, demolished or brought back to the required specification and re-let.

In responding to questions raised with regards to charging rent over 52 weeks, the Finance Manager confirmed that it would not be possible to operate both options, payment over 50 weeks or 52 weeks. Tenants could however continue to pay an increased weekly rent to benefit from 'free' weeks if they desired and the impact of the proposed change would be closely monitored. It was also stated that tenants had been consulted via the Tenants Conference in October, the online survey and through Home Affairs which was circulated to all tenants. A further publication would be included in the next issue of Home Affairs and notification of the agreed proposal would be included in tenants rent notification in February. Information was also available on the Dudley website.

Arising from questions raised by Members, the Chief Officer Housing commented that the Cabinet Member for Housing had been advised on a range of empty properties, collectively, and of the scope of the problem with regards to void properties, and although decisions on individual properties had not been discussed, recommendations on low demand stock would be made shortly. It was also stated that the strategic approach would allow properties to be grouped and colour coded to identify the severity of the issues with individual properties and decisions would need to be made on how these properties would be disposed of or whether they could be sold on to independent developers.

Concerns were raised by the Chair and Members of the Committee with regards to the membership of the Housing Board as it was considered that it did not represent the whole of the Borough as there was no representative appointed from the north. The effectiveness of the Housing Board was also discussed as it was considered the previous arrangements of Forums were preferred and concerns were raised with regards to the lack of communication between Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations and the Housing Board.

Further concerns were raised with regards to the number of years that void properties had been discussed at Committees without the issue being resolved. It was suggested that annual checks of properties should be undertaken, so an indication that a property is requiring improvement is identified at an early stage to prevent future voids.

Arising from questions raised, it was stated that once a property was vacated, an inspector would visit and provide a quote for the work that was required to bring the property to the required standard before it could be advertised for let. If the quote for the works reached the imposed threshold, Officers would then visit the property to see if alternative options could be arranged to ensure that the property is put back into circulation as soon as possible. It was stated that an average turn around for void properties was currently 50 days, however this also included properties that were in low demand and had been advertised on more than one occasion. If these properties were to be removed, the average turnaround for void property would be approximately 20 days.

A member queried whether or not the Tenants Conference was cost effective as it appeared to be attended by mostly officers rather than tenants. In responding, the Strategic Director Place stated that all events were reviewed regularly to ascertain that the correct rationale was achieved. It was considered that the poor attendance may have been due to lack of communication and it was hoped that this had since been addressed and would result in a significant improvement at future events.

In responding to concerns raised with regards to the lack of consultation with tenants in relation to the change in charging rent over 52 weeks, as not everyone had access to online facilities and the request for a letter to be sent to all 22,000 tenants, the Chief Officer Housing confirmed that this would not be cost effective as not all 22,000 tenants would be affected by the change and the tenants directly affected had already been contacted either via the online survey or through the Home Affairs magazine, a copy of which would be sent to Scrutiny Committee Members for their reference.

In response to a question raised, the Head of Housing Management confirmed that under the previous process, gardening works and replacement fencing would be provided to bring a void property back into use, however under the new regime this work would only be provided if completely necessary, as tenants would be encouraged to complete the work themselves, if capable to do so. This would be assessed on a case by case basis. Exact costings for the gardening works and replacement fencing would be provided to Scrutiny Committee Members following the meeting.

Arising from a question raised by the Chair, the Chief Officer Housing confirmed that the Choice Based Lettings bidding process was considered to be the most effective resource for the current property portfolio and neighbouring authorities all operated similar facilities. With regards to properties that required work and was considered difficult to let but residents were still expressing an interest, a separate section was under development and would be established so that these properties could be let more quickly.

Resolved

- (1) That the principles adopted in the proposed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for 2016/17 and future years and the report on the outcome of consultation to charge council housing and garage rents over 52 weeks rather than 50 weeks from April, 2016, be noted.
- (2) That a copy of the Home Affairs magazine that included the consultation survey information circulated to all tenants, be sent to Scrutiny Committee Members for their reference.
- (3) That the costings for gardening works and fencing replacements undertaken at void properties under the previous process be provided to all Members of the Scrutiny Committee.

25

Recycling Participation

A report of the Chief Officer Environmental Services was submitted to update the Scrutiny Committee on the ongoing work to increase participation in the household recycling collection service.

Following the presentation of the report, Members acknowledged the support for the sub-group and considered the involvement of the Scouts and Guides and targeting Primary Schools to be a good way in promoting recycling participation and that the development of an on-line room by room house would benefit all and help educate residents in what can and cannot be recycled.

Members commented that they were continuing to receive complaints from residents with regards to the recycling bags and boxes and did not want this to deter people from recycling. The Head of Fleet & Waste Care confirmed that this was sometimes poor housekeeping by the crew, as recycling bags should be placed into the black box after emptying, however not everyone put a black box out for every collection, but would continue to raise the issue with the crew.

Arising from a question raised by a Member with regards to the proposed increase in costs at the recycling site and landfill tax, the Chief Officer Environmental Services confirmed that Dudley currently had a good deal with the existing contractor for waste disposal, however, the whole commodity market had been impacted upon and was under pressure and therefore a not so favourable contract was likely.

In responding to a question raised with regards to accessing recycling hubs, the Head of Fleet and Waste Care confirmed that there were a number of recycling hubs within the borough, however these sites were currently under review due to an increase in fly-tipping in these areas and the impacted costs. However work was being undertaken on how to develop business recycling without additional resources, which may result in co-mingled recycling for businesses.

A Member requested that future consideration be given to the reinstatement of providing a Christmas tree disposal service at local parks. The Chief Officer Environmental Services stated that this service would not be ruled out, but that there would be cost implications, however working in partnership with neighbouring authorities or private companies could be explored.

A Member also requested further consideration be given to the recycling of commercial cardboard as the majority of business recycling waste was cardboard and suggested providing businesses with wheelie bins to accommodate this.

Arising from a comment made, the Head of Fleet and Waste Care confirmed that the importance of recycling and the enforcement of prosecution if caught fly tipping was promoted when and wherever possible.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report, be noted, and that Members of the Scrutiny Committee supported the campaign and education activities highlighted.

26 **Comments made by the Chair**

The Chair and Members of the Scrutiny Committee expressed their best wishes to Richard Sanders for a long and happy retirement and thanked him for all his help with the Committee.

The meeting ended at 7.55 pm.

CHAIR