

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 16th June, 2011 at 6.00pm
in Committee Room 2, The Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

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

Officers

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

Also in Attendance.

Councillors Stanley and A Turner as Cabinet Members for Environment and
Culture and Housing, Libraries and Adult Learning respectively.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1. Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of
Councillors James and Mrs Jordan.

2. **APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS.**

It was reported that Councillors J Woodall and Body had been appointed as
substitute members for Councillors James and Mrs Jordan respectively for
this meeting of the Committee only.

3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No member made a Declaration of Interest in accordance with the Members'
Code of Conduct.

4. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That, the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 21st March, 2011, be approved as a correct record and signed.

5. PUBLIC FORUM

No matters were raised under this agenda item.

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

No Petitions had been referred to the Committee.

7. WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2011/12 AND APPOINTMENT OF WORKING GROUPS.

A report of the Lead Officer to the Committee was submitted on the Work Programme for the Scrutiny Committee for 2011/12.

In presenting the report submitted, the Lead Officer referred to a request of Councillor Mrs Jordan for an item in relation to Japanese Knotweed to be added to the Work Programme.

He also referred to the request of Councillor Kettle that an item in relation to private wheel clamping firms be added to the Work Programme. He reported that in relation to that item, the Government were proposing to legislate in order to outlaw wheel clamping with the introduction of the Freedoms Bill, which was currently at the Report Stage in the House of Commons. He further reported that the Government planned to enact the Bill in November/December, 2011 and in view of the new legislation invited Members comments in relation to scrutinising the item.

Following further discussion Members were in agreement that the issue of private wheel clamping firms would not require scrutinising in view of the proposed legislation outlined above.

There followed a detailed discussion in relation to the re-appointment of the Working Groups. Task and Finish groups were discussed and the possibility of reviewing the re-appointment of Working Groups later in the municipal year.

Members were in general agreement that the Recycling Working Group should not be re-appointed, however should specific issues in relation to recycling occur during the course of the municipal year, the position in relation to re-appointment would be reviewed.

Following further discussion Members were in agreement that the Housing Working Group should be re-appointed, with the position in relation to re-appointment being reviewed mid-way through the municipal year.

In responding to a question from a Member the Lead Officer stated that should Members wish to add items to the Work Programme they should email himself and the Chairman details for consideration of any items.

RESOLVED

- (1) That, the Work Programme for the Committee for 2011/12 be approved as follows:-
- Matters for information, e-mailed to Members, that they may wish to ask questions about (eg Equality and Diversity annual report). June 2011
 - Work Programme for 2011/12 June 2011
 - The Homelessness Service – Annual Report 2010/11 June 2011
 - Air Quality Action Plan June 2011
 - Food Service Plan June 2011
 - High Cost Voids June 2011
 - Any questions on matters e-mailed for information (eg Quarterly Corporate Performance Management Report and Japanese Knotweed) September 2011
 - Annual Report of the Select Committee to Council September 2011
 - Outcome of recycling trial and recycling proposals. September 2011
 - Matters for information, e-mailed to Members, that they may wish to ask questions about (eg Update on the Council's Capital Strategy, Quarterly Corporate Performance Management Report, Food Service Plan and Recycling Working Group. November 2011
 - Rogue Traders and Doorstep Crime. November 2011
 - Age Restricted Products November 2011

- Any questions on matters e-mailed for information (eg Quarterly Corporate Performance Management Report and update on Air Quality Management). January 2012
 - Proposed Revenue Budget 2012/13 January 2012
 - Any questions on matters e-mailed for information (eg Quarterly Corporate Performance Management Report and Equality and Diversity Action Plan) March 2012
 - Outline Work Programme 2012/13 March 2012
 - Tenancy and Estate Management March 2012
- (2) That the Housing Working Group be re-appointed and that the Membership of the Working Group comprise:-
- Councillors Mrs Cowell, A Finch, James, Mrs Turner and Waltho.
- (3) That the Committee review the re-appointment of the Housing Working Group mid-way through the municipal year.
- (4) That Members be requested to email the Lead Officer and the Chairman in relation to any items that they wished to add to the Work Programme.

8. FOOD SERVICE PLAN 2011/12

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted on the Food Service Plan 2011/12. A copy of the Food Service Plan Summary 2011/12 was attached as an Appendix to the report.

RESOLVED

That the information contained in the report, and Appendix to the report, submitted on the Food Service Plan 2011/12, be noted and referred to Cabinet and full Council.

9. PROGRESS WITH DUDLEY MBC AIR QUALITY ACTION PLAN

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted on an update on progress with the Dudley MBC Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) and to seek approval to take the Plan to Cabinet.

In responding to Members' questions the Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards reported that:-

He would ensure issues in relation to air quality in respect of the Halesowen/Cradley and Windmill Hill areas were monitored.

In relation to the awareness campaigns outlined in the report, that these were the most cost effective ways in terms of delivery and cost of addressing air quality issues.

In relation to industrial emissions, these were extremely localised and when new industrial premises were identified, officers would conduct a visit to those premises in order to ascertain the emissions that were being created and the measures in place to limit those emissions.

That funding had been obtained from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in relation to re-locating air quality monitoring equipment and as part of the ongoing programme the equipment was installed in the Wordsley area of the Borough.

In relation to Council resources, two full time operational Officers were in post to deal with delivery of the Air Quality Action Plan within the directorate together with partnership activity. Grant aid was also bid for from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when appropriate. He also stated that the campaigns referred to above were covered by the directorates existing budget.

The Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards undertook to provide further information on the overall resources as requested by Councillor Ms Partridge in relation to the Air Quality Action Plan.

RESOLVED

- (1) That, the information contained in the report submitted, on progress made with developing the Air Quality Action Plan and the approval for the Plan received from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, be noted.
- (2) That support be given to the proposal that the final version of the Air Quality Action Plan be reported to Cabinet for adoption by Dudley MBC.
- (3) That the Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards be requested to email to Councillor Ms Partridge information relating to the resources available to deliver the Air Quality Action Plan.

10.

PROGRESS REPORT – HIGH COST VOIDS

A report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services was submitted on the actions taken in respect of high cost voids since the last report in January, 2011.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, a Member raised concerns in relation to the Council's housing stock reducing with the number of applicants for council properties increasing.

The Head of Construction reported on the approximate budget for high cost voids and indicated that the Council had over one hundred high cost void properties that they were currently aware of, with the flow of new high cost voids being difficult to predict.

The Head of Housing Options reported that the Council's aim was to dispose of twenty four properties and that the receipts from those properties would provide additional support to the existing capital programme.

In responding to a Member's concerns in relation to the current market conditions impacting upon the sale of council properties and concerns that the Council had failed to dispose of Housing Estate Offices, the Assistant Director of Housing indicated that houses would be a more saleable commodity than the Estate Offices.

The Head of Construction responded to a Member's question stating that high cost voids were determined in view of the cost of repairs that were required and in general terms should the cost of repairs would exceed £25,000 to £30,000.

In responding to questions from Members the Head of Service stated as follows:-

In relation to the property that had been identified potentially suitable for adaptation, this would be for a specific family and efficiency savings would be made adapting a high cost void property, as two separate budgets were available for both high cost voids repairs and adaptations.

In relation to the 24 properties referred to in the report these were in the South and North of the Borough, however more were in the South and a consultation would take place with Ward Councillors prior to their disposal. She also undertook to provide Councillor Ms Partridge with details of the properties referred to above.

In relation to high cost voids it was reported that these were usually properties occupied by the elderly for a number of years who had refused to have work carried out such as modernisations. However, they also included properties with structural defects or subsidence.

In relation to the four properties that may be demolished, the Assistant Director of Housing indicated that these consisted of adjacent houses with structural damage and that as a result of demolition more units could possibly be re-provided on those particular sites.

It was stated that the projections for receipts for those properties that were to be disposed of could not be predicted at the present time.

The Head of Housing Options reported that Housing Officers were negotiating with approximately five to six Registered Providers and should a Registered Provider purchase a council property they may rent it to a family on the Council's waiting list, thus reducing the Housing List.

She also confirmed that 100% of the capital receipt would go back into the high cost void fund.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted, on the actions taken in respect of high cost voids since the last report in January, 2011, be noted.
- (2) That the Head of Service be requested to email to Members the addresses of the twenty four properties that the Council intended to dispose of.

11. THE HOMELESSNESS SERVICE – ANNUAL REPORT 2010/11

A report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services was submitted on homelessness activity during 2010/11 and for Members to consider any implications.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, the Head of Service responded to Members questions and concerns as follows:-

- That the numbers of rough sleepers within the Dudley Borough were relatively low; that details of rough sleepers were provided to the Council by other partners and in order to address their issues the Council undertook joint working with partners and offered help with securing accommodation;
- That the two refuge in the Borough were to be replaced next year by one new refuge with improved facilities.

- The reduction in homelessness due to relationship breakdown had resulted due to preventative work that had been undertaken, by either re-housing through the Council's waiting list or through partners providing physical security measures and support in order that they could remain in their own homes, thus reducing the need for re-housing;
- In relation to mortgage repossessions, the Mortgage Arrears Advice Service had received approximately five hundred referrals and provided interventions as talking to mortgage providers in order to negotiate terms in relation to mortgage arrears, and that a separate report would be prepared in relation to the Mortgage Arrears Advice Service;
- In relation to funding Homelessness was a General Fund Service and also received Government Grants;
- In relation to the Council introducing its own Mortgage Rescue Criteria that the Government had previously placed restrictions on that service and the restriction in numbers available would mean that the Council would have to add further local criteria;
- In relation to the Housing Options service, those with disabilities would be considered for properties that had been adapted for them and larger houses would be prioritised for larger families;
- That three members of staff dealt with all nominations to Registered Providers (Housing Associations) including Friars Gate and Extra Care and were currently carrying out work on the Lettings Plan for the Council new build;
- The Head of Service undertook to provide Councillor Ms Partridge with details of the number of training days referred to in the report submitted;
- That all four Black Country Boroughs had shared the cost of the on-line directory of homelessness services together with the provision of additional funding received from the Homelessness Grant;

A Member suggested that the high cost void properties should be utilised to provide accommodation for the Homeless and other Members supported that suggestion.

In responding to the above suggestion, the Head of Housing Options indicated that opportunities for additional funding and partnership working in order to meet acute housing needs were always actively pursued.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted, on homelessness activity during 2010/11 together with Members' comments as outlined above, be noted.
- (2) That the Head of Housing Options be requested to email to Members:-

- (a) The Mortgage Arrears Advice Service Report when available;
- (b) The number of training days undertaken by staff in relation to training in 2010/11 as referred to at paragraph 6.2 of the report submitted.

The meeting ended at 7.45pm

CHAIRMAN