

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 31 July 2014

PRESENT: Councillors Chris Weldon (Chair), Steve Ayris (Deputy Chair), David Barker, Simon Clement-Jones, Sheila Constance, Richard Crowther, Roy Munn, Josie Paszek, Sioned-Mair Richards, Richard Shaw and Sarah Jane Smalley

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors George Lindars-Hammond and Lynn Rooney. There were no nominated substitutes.

2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the public and press.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 26th March 2014, were approved as a correct record and, arising from their consideration, it was noted that Councillors Sheila Constance and Sioned-Mair Richards had attended the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Panel meeting on 31st March 2014, and this had proved to be a very useful meeting. It was also noted that each of the authorities in South Yorkshire had agreed to share their Scrutiny Committee Work Programmes relating to community safety issues and that domestic violence was a possible item for inclusion in the Committee's Work Programme.

4.2 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 4th June 2014, were approved as a correct record.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 Written responses would be provided to the public questions received regarding the Sheffield First Safer and Sustainable Communities Partnership, Crime and Disorder Committees and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary's Public Consultation on New Police Inspections and these responses would be circulated to Committee Members.

6. THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM ON SHEFFIELD'S RESIDENTS - UPDATE JULY 2014

- 6.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of Policy, Performance and Communications, which provided an update on the impact of welfare reform on Sheffield's residents and how the Council and others were responding.
- 6.2 In attendance for this item were Nicola Rees, Policy and Improvement Officer, and Maxine Stavrianakos, Income Management Unit.
- 6.3 Members made various comments and asked a number of questions, to which responses were provided as follows:-
- Council tenants wishing to downsize as a result of the Under-Occupancy Provisions (Bedroom Tax) would be given priority, whilst tenants in arrears would not be evicted as long as they were making some attempts at payment. In addition, tenants would be allowed to move house even if they were in arrears.
 - In relation to the Benefit Cap, the number of children in affected households averaged at 5/6 per household. This was because there weren't many families in Sheffield affected by the Benefit Cap and those that were affected were likely to be families with a greater number of children, who were therefore living in larger properties, with higher housing costs.
 - The cost of the research by the Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research (CRESR) was £15,000 and officers would provide a written response regarding the associated cost/benefit analysis.
 - Approval had been given to use the 2013/14 Council Tax Hardship Scheme underspend during 2014/15, but only for amounts owing during 2013/14. It was highly likely that this money would be used to assist customers who ran up debt in 2013/14 and who were now at a stage when referral to an external collection agency was the next course of action. Officers would provide a written response regarding the Local Assistance Scheme underspend.
 - Officers would provide a written response with regard to general Council Tax arrears.
 - Since April 2013, 459 Council tenants had been awarded a rehousing priority to move to a smaller property, of which 363 had stated that this was due to the impact of welfare reforms. However, the majority of Council tenants did not want to move and were opting to stay and pay.
 - A tenant who had received a Discretionary Housing Payment would be included in the relevant 'Paid in Full' section of the 'Payment Towards Under-Occupancy Cut in Benefit' pie chart in the report.
 - Officers would provide a written response regarding the numbers of tenants who were over-occupying.

- Officers would supply written details of Council tenant rent arrears by Ward and details of households affected by the Benefit Cap by Ward.
- No Council Housing Service tenants had been forced to move into a smaller property and become overcrowded because of the Benefit Cap. Officers would check to see if this information was available for private tenants and those in Registered Social Landlord properties.
- At the present time, no one had been evicted under the Under-Occupancy Provisions. In relation to general evictions, there had been 390 in the past year, but this high figure was partially explained by the inclusion of water rates in Council rents, so that sometimes evictions would take place on the basis of unpaid water rates alone. The Council did not offer introductory tenancies and there were increases in the numbers of tenants aged up to 29 years who weren't paying anything. It was the practice of local judges to give immediate possession, but suspended possession orders were likely to be given if the tenant was engaging with the Council. In comparison with other large housing organisations, the Council gave more support to tenants in arrears and also worked closely with the Courts to adopt best practice. Rent arrears caused by the welfare reform changes were currently estimated by the Council Housing Service to spike at £29 million by 2019/20. The numbers of people who were evicted and then got rehoused, sometimes privately, were difficult to track, but officers would try to obtain information on this.
- Whilst officers were aware of other spending cuts which were affecting communities, such as reductions in funding for teaching English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) provision, they were not aware of any specific analysis of the cumulative impacts on individuals of wider cuts within communities, over and above benefits cuts. However, the close links which the Council had with Sheffield Citizens' Advice did assist in building up a wider picture about other issues, such as ESOL cuts, which were affecting communities.
- The CRESR report had been commissioned to give the Council as thorough a picture of the cumulative impacts of the welfare reforms as possible. In terms of what would be done with the subsequent report, the Welfare Reform Implementation Group had a work stream entitled Strategic Policy and Direction and it was hoped that the subsequent report would provide the information to enable recommendations to be made as to future direction. It should also be borne in mind that things may change as a result of the forthcoming General Election.
- The CRESR researchers would address the issue of possible offsetting of increases in employment in their report, and officers would ask if it would be possible to also include within the report some reference to changes in personal tax allowances.

6.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks Nicola Rees and Maxine Stavrianakos for their contribution to the

meeting;

- (b) notes the contents of the report and responses to questions;
- (c) accepts the officer responses regarding the adoption of the aspects of best practice operating in Bristol and Manchester; and
- (d) requests that:-
 - (i) officers continue to look at best practice and highlight this in any future reports to it;
 - (ii) officers provide their written responses to Matthew Borland, Policy and Improvement Officer, for circulation to Committee Members;
 - (iii) the report be circulated to all Council Members and Sheffield Members of Parliament for them to note and respond to if they so wish;
 - (iv) a letter be sent to the appropriate Government Minister concerning the end of the Government grant to Local Authorities to provide a Local Assistance Scheme in March 2015, with a request for a response;
 - (v) Members wishing to take up the offer to visit the Rents Team contact Matthew Borland, Policy and Improvement Officer; and
 - (vi) a further report on the Impact of Welfare Reform on Sheffield's Residents, be presented to the Committee in six months' time.

7. COUNCIL HOUSE BUILDING

- 7.1 The Committee received a report of the Executive Director, Communities, and the Executive Director, Place, which provided the Committee with information on the delivery of new/additional Council homes, through either acquisition or new build, which was one of the top priorities for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.
- 7.2 In attendance for this item were Liam Duggan, HRA Business Plan Team Manager, Dave Mason, Housing and Regeneration, and Christine Rose, Regeneration Manager.
- 7.3 Members made various comments and asked a number of questions, to which responses were provided as follows:-
 - The Sheffield Strategic Housing Market Assessment showed that 725 additional affordable properties were needed every year. This took account of the newly forming households in the City.
 - Initially, around 600 new/additional units were forecast in the coming six years, but officers were looking at ways of expanding that figure. New building was limited by the amount of land available, with only a handful of

larger HRA sites being left.

- The 600 increase was a gross figure and did not take into account the impact of continued Right To Buy (RTB) sales.
- The projected new build and acquisitions for Council housing was a minimum of 600 over six years, with the RTB forecast being around 250 sales per year over the next three years.
- If new Council houses were built they could be sold under RTB, but for the first 15 years there was some protection to the Council via the cost floor rule. This prevented new homes being sold for less than the cost of building/acquiring them.
- RTB should be viewed as a risk but one that has been factored into the business plan.
- Information was received from the Council Housing Service on the demand for properties and the new build project was seeking to address the gaps identified in local provision. The data also informed future acquisitions.
- The projected Phase One New Build timetable of 18 months, as set out in the report, was about what would be expected for schemes of this size. It was important to note that some parts of this work wouldn't have to be repeated for future phases.
- One of the risks to the Council Housing New Build project was that building materials were becoming more expensive.
- Phase Two of the New Build project was proposed to comprise mostly family homes.
- The Council had acquired some properties from the Sheffield Housing Company (SHC) but the SHC's primary purpose was to build and sell homes at market value. It was considered that the market was starting to pick up for SHC. 60 hectares of HRA land had been earmarked for the SHC.
- Lower value HRA sites were being used for new Council housing, where the new schemes could have a regeneration impact.
- One of the remaining large HRA sites, Adlington in Parson Cross, was being considered for an Extra Care facility for older people. It was hoped that this would free up homes for families.
- The aim of the Housing Delivery Investment Plan was to increase the rate of housing delivery and to have a plan for which sites would be delivered through which route, including new Council housing.

7.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks Liam Duggan, Dave Mason and Christine Rose for their contribution to the meeting;
- (b) notes the contents of the report and responses to questions;
- (c) recommends that any Housing Revenue Account land should be prioritised for building Council properties, subject to the Council having sufficient funding; and
- (d) requests officers to explore the use of covenants to protect properties from Right to Buy.

8. WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15

8.1 The Committee received a report of Matthew Borland, Policy and Improvement Officer, which set out potential topics for the Committee to consider for the 2014/15 Work Programme.

8.2 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) approves the Work Programme as detailed in the report, subject to the Challenge for Change item on grass cutting being included on the agenda for the Committee meeting to be held on 25th September 2014; and
- (b) requests that:-
 - (i) the item scheduled for the Committee's January 2015 meeting on the Private Rented Sector includes reference to the changing nature of that sector;
 - (ii) the report on Domestic Violence to be considered at the Committee's November 2014 meeting includes an ethnic group breakdown; and
 - (iii) any Committee Members wishing to join the proposed Task Group, set up by the Economic and Environmental Wellbeing Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee, on "House Building and the Local Economy", contact Matthew Borland, Policy and Improvement Officer.

9. RIGHT TO BUY UPDATE JULY 2014

9.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the July 2014 Right to Buy Update report.

10. REVIEW OF THE PARTNER RESOURCE ALLOCATION MEETING (PRAM)

10.1 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the report on the Review of the Partner Resource Allocation Meeting (PRAM) and agrees that Matthew Borland, Policy and Improvement Officer, would pass on Member comments regarding the report's incomprehensibility and lack of clarity, particularly for new

Members.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 11.1 The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Thursday, 25th September 2014, at 2.00 pm in the Town Hall.

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