

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 25 July 2013

PRESENT: Councillors Chris Weldon (Chair), David Barker, Simon Clement-Jones, Richard Crowther, Denise Fox, Rob Frost, Sioned-Mair Richards, Robert Murphy, Keith Hill (Substitute Member) and Pat Midgley (Substitute Member)

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received and substitutes attended the meeting as follows:-

Apology

Substitute

Councillor Penny Baker
Councillor Sheila Constance
Councillor Roy Munn
Councillor Philip Wood

Councillor Keith Hill
No substitute nominated
Councillor Pat Midgley
No substitute nominated

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 Councillor Sioned-Mair Richards declared a Personal Interest relating to Item 7 (Arbourthorne Fields Redevelopment Scheme) as she was a member of the Board of Sanctuary Housing Association.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

4.1 The minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 28th March 2013 and 15th May 2013, were each approved as a correct record.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 The Chair, Councillor Chris Weldon, provided responses to a series of public questions from Mr Martin Brighton as follows:-

Agenda Item 9 – Challenge For Change: Grass Cutting Scrutiny Report

He confirmed that the Committee would take a balanced view with regard to this issue and would bear in mind the issue of dog fouling when considering future reviews of Council services. Consideration would also be given to the Committee having a tour of the Batemoor area to see how Council services were operating.

Agenda Item 7 – Arbourthorne Fields Redevelopment Scheme

The Policy and Improvement Officer would seek written answers from the appropriate Council officers and these would be forwarded to Mr Brighton.

Agenda Item 8 – The Impact of Welfare Reform on Sheffield's Residents

The Committee's position in relation to these issues would become clear during consideration of this item.

6. ARBOURTHORNE FIELDS REDEVELOPMENT SCHEME

6.1 The Committee received a joint report of the Executive Director, Place, and the Executive Director, Communities, which provided information on the funding package for Arbourthorne Rehousing and Acquisition in relation to the Arbourthorne Fields Redevelopment Scheme. The report made specific reference to the cost of the overall scheme, sources of funding available to ensure completion, details of how the funding was to be allocated and acquisition costs.

6.2 Attending for this item was Christine Rose, Interim Programme Director, Regeneration, who emphasised that funding from the Housing Revenue Account would not be used for private purposes.

6.3 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the report.

7. THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM ON SHEFFIELD'S RESIDENTS

7.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of Policy, Performance and Communications which examined the impact of both the 'bedroom tax' and of other changes to the welfare system on the people of Sheffield, and explained what the Council was doing to support Sheffield residents in response to the Welfare Reform agenda.

7.2 Attending for this item were Councillor Mazher Iqbal, Cabinet Member for Communities and Inclusion, James Henderson, Director of Policy, Performance and Communications, and Maxine Stavrianakos, Manager, Income Management Unit, Council Housing Service.

7.3 Members made various comments and asked a number of questions, to which responses were provided as follows:-

- Council officers were in regular contact with other social landlords and had jointly produced a DVD which outlined the effects of the Welfare Reforms on the people of Sheffield. In addition, work was being undertaken with the other local authorities in South Yorkshire to assess the impact of the Welfare Reforms and benchmarking was being undertaken with a wider group of local authorities, from Nottinghamshire to the North East, in this regard.

- The Council supported downsizing but would not force anyone to move house. If people wanted to move home they were given priority and financial and practical help. Smaller properties were available provided requests were reasonable and priorities were continually being reviewed by the Access to Housing Team. Other measures such as mutual exchanges, advice on lodgers and allowing people to move if they were in arrears were also being used to assist those who were affected by the Welfare Reforms.
- In relation to rent collection, it was not possible to set up a direct debit without the tenant's authorisation and there was a ten day notice period of any intention to increase the amount of any direct debit. A more flexible approach to rent arrears was being adopted, with a period of 5 weeks being allowed to elapse before an initial letter was sent out. The importance of early contact by those tenants in financial difficulties was emphasised, in order that appropriate advice and support could be provided.
- In relation to employment, Council officers were working with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to find out about work programmes, with direct contact lines being established and joint working being considered.
- The DWP was considering transitional arrangements in relation to the move towards monthly rather than weekly payments and Council officers were working with Credit Unions, in conjunction with the advice sector, to assist people with budgeting. It should be noted that there would be an obvious impact on rent arrears, particularly bearing in mind that, under the new regime, housing benefits would now be paid directly to the individual.
- The Leader of the Council, Councillor Julie Dore, had written to Lord Freud, Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Department for Work and Pensions) (Welfare Reform), to invite the DWP to work with the Council in relation to the introduction of universal credit, so that the Council could provide appropriate support to people, but this had been met with an equivocal response.
- In order to avoid the destabilisation of communities, the Council would do everything it could to support people who wanted to stay in their homes.
- The Government would not allow the reclassification of bedrooms. If the Council attempted this there was a risk of further withdrawal of Government funding.
- The Council was finding out about individuals who were most affected by the reforms through the advice sector and would do what it could to support individuals.
- The Council's policy was that tenants would not be evicted if they were engaging with the Council in relation to any resulting rent arrears, which reflected the policy of other local authorities who claimed to have a 'no eviction' policy.

- There was a local project on tackling doorstep lending in which the Dean of Sheffield Cathedral was involved.

7.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- (a) thanks Councillor Mazher Iqbal, Cabinet Member for Communities and Inclusion, James Henderson and Maxine Stavrianakos for their contribution to the meeting;
- (b) notes the contents of the report and responses to questions; and
- (c) requests that:
 - (i) a copy of the report be sent to the Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP, Deputy Prime Minister, to seek his intervention to help alleviate the issues raised in the report;
 - (ii) a one page update on progress with Welfare Reform issues be provided to Committee Members bi-monthly;
 - (iii) a further report on the Impact of Welfare Reform on Sheffield's Residents, to include examples of how other local authorities were dealing with these issues, case studies and an explanation of the way in which Capita was managing these changes, be presented to the Committee in 6 months' time;
 - (iv) officers inform the Chair and Deputy Chair, through the Policy and Improvement Officer, of any urgent issues which may arise in relation to the effect of the Welfare Reforms so that such issues may be given appropriate consideration; and
 - (v) the Director of Policy, Performance and Communications arranges for appropriate publicity for the Council's policy that tenants in rent arrears would not face eviction provided they were engaging with the Council with regard to those arrears.

8. CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE: GRASS CUTTING SCRUTINY REPORT

8.1 The Committee received a report of the Challenge for Change Tenants' Scrutiny Group which examined the grass cutting service delivered by Sheffield Homes (now the Council Housing Service) and the Council's Parks and Public Realm Service, in relation to the level of customer satisfaction and reviewed whether this met with customers' expectations. The report was supported by a presentation which provided details of key areas for investigation, objectives, findings, the customer survey which was undertaken, the budget for the exercise, conclusions and recommendations.

8.2 Attending for this item were Michelle Cook, Challenge for Change Scrutineer, and Tina Gilbert, Performance and Planning Manager.

8.3 Members made various comments and asked a number of questions in relation to the report and presentation, to which responses were provided as follows:-

- Amey was responsible for cutting highway grass with Parks and Public Realm being responsible for the remainder, with support from the Council's Housing Service on Housing owned land.
- The report had been presented to the Sheffield Homes' Boards and the Executive Director, Communities, had indicated that he would circulate it more widely.
- The challengers felt that it would be clearer for tenants if grounds maintenance was based on Housing boundaries as opposed to Community Assembly boundaries.
- The relevant managers would report back to the Challenge for Change Tenants' Scrutiny Group on actions taken as a result of the report. The managers' update could be made available to the Committee.
- The Challenge for Change Tenants' Scrutiny Group's next project was to consider community engagement.

8.4 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) thanks Michelle Cook and Tina Gilbert for their contribution to the meeting;
- (b) notes the contents of the report and responses to questions; and
- (c) requests that:
 - (i) a copy of the report be presented to the Cabinet Management Team and the Executive Management Team; and
 - (ii) the relevant Cabinet Member reports back to the Committee on the Council's response to the report's recommendations, with all the scrutineers involved in drafting the original report being invited to attend.

9. WORK PLANNING 2013/14

9.1 The Committee received a report of the Policy and Improvement Officer which outlined an approach to the Committee's Work Planning for 2013/14 and made proposals on some practical next steps. The report listed the dates of Committee meetings and gave details of items to be included in the 2013/14 Work Programme and items which would be circulated for information only.

9.2 RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- (a) agrees the approach to Scrutiny and Work Planning as outlined in the

report, with the agenda to be led by the Chair, Councillor Chris Weldon, and Deputy Chair, Councillor Penny Baker, in conjunction with Councillor Robert Murphy;

- (b) agrees that items on Welfare Reform, grass cutting, private sector landlords and the Housing Maintenance Contract be included in the Committee's Work Programme 2013/14; and
- (c) notes Members' concerns regarding:
 - (i) the Community Safety Partnership with Councillor Pat Midgley to be informed when this report is to be considered by the Committee; and
 - (ii) the financial stability of Christmas Clubs, with the appropriate Council officers to be informed of these concerns.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 10.1 The next meeting of the Committee would be held on Thursday, 26th September 2013, at 2.00 pm in the Town Hall.