

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING COMMITTEE

15th September 2004 - Committee Room, Riverbank House, Bideford

PRESENT:

Councillor Mrs M Brown (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs S E I Bushby (Vice Chairman)
Councillors D J Daniel, L S Ford, A T Inch, Mrs S A Mounce,
Mrs P J Paddon, T Sillifant

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Bond, J W E Cowle and J. Morrish

20. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the Meeting held on the 30th June 2004 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

(Vote : 8 For, 0 Against)

21. URGENT MATTERS OF INFORMATION BROUGHT FORWARD WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE CHAIRMAN AND THE COMMITTEE

- (a) The Chairman informed Members that a request had been received from the Regional Committee of Devon & Cornwall Housing Association that a representative was required from the Housing Committee to attend their meetings. This would normally be the Chair or Vice Chair, but as they were unavailable for future meeting, anyone from the Committee who was interested should contact Gail Bowering- Sheehan. Councillor Mrs Paddon said that she would attend in an emergency and it was proposed, seconded and;

Resolved: That Councillor Mrs Paddon should be the attendee.

(Vote: 8 For, 0 Against)

- (b) Potential Disposal of Land at New Street, Bideford

The Committee considered the report of the Housing Manager which stated that this was not a large area but had been problematic for some years. The owner of the adjoining Nightclub was interested in purchasing the piece of land to use as a storage area and the Residents Group supports this plan. Councillor Mrs Paddon proposed and it was duly seconded, and;

Resolved: That Policy & Resources Committee be recommended that the land in question be sold to the Club Owner, subject to it being fenced; and not utilised to extend the Club itself.

(Vote: 8 For, 0 Against)

22. HOUSING INSPECTION – BRIEFING

Phillip Thomas, Housing Manager gave a presentation on the upcoming Housing Inspection due to be carried out by the Audit Commission week commencing 20th February 2005.

He explained that the actual work starts much sooner, with all the relevant data (Policies, procedures, strategies etc) required to be sent to them by the end of November 2004 and the Commission's requirement to meet key Housing Staff next Tuesday (21st September).

The scope of the inspection is extensive - potentially covering all areas touched by the Housing Department except Benefits. Members were informed that they would be quizzed on various aspects including how their vision for the services was developed, how targets were set and how these were monitored and managed.

Three briefing sessions have been scheduled for staff and members to attend.

The result of the inspection will be a star rating of zero to three plus an assessment for prospects for improvement. It was made clear that whilst the Authority was expecting a lower star rating, it was aiming to do well in the prospects for improvement area.

Members were informed that they need to take ownership for the preparations for inspection and be prepared to devote time and effort to the process.

A mock inspection is scheduled for the end of October to check our perceptions of the service, identify strengths and weaknesses and allow us to target resources before the real inspection.

Members were informed that if this Council receives a poor rating the result will be possible intervention by Central Government and their appointment of Envoys that will cost £2-3K per day. Additionally we would suffer from poor morale amongst staff and Members and a loss of credibility with our customers.

After the presentation, Councillors voiced concerns that other Members may not be armed with enough detail to satisfy the Inspectors and therefore all must be encouraged to attend the briefings. Also tenants need to be aware that this inspection is taking place. They also stated the level of service we should be delivering is 'as good as we can'. All Councillors stated their understanding that we need a good inspection and that they must inform Group Leaders in order to ensure all members are involved.

Phillip Thomas highlighted that the inspection will rank the Members role and if this is seen as weak - it would certainly affect the overall rating.

The future briefings will be :

2.30 pm on 29th September
2.30 pm on 5th October
10.00 am on 6th October

It was noted that for any Member who could not attend these briefings, one-to-one meetings will be arranged at their convenience.

The chairman thanked Phillip Thomas for his very informative presentation.

23. AGENDAS AND MINUTES OF THE TENANTS AND RESIDENTS ASSOCIATIONS

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Services & Community) which updated Members in connection with the meetings of Tenants and Residents Associations.

Resolved: That the report be received and noted.

(Vote 8 For, 0 Against)

24. RENT ARREARS

The Committee considered the report of the Housing Manager in relating to progress in respect of the recovery of rent arrears. The graph attached to the report indicated the trend for 2002/2003, 2003/2204 and 2004/2204 for comparative purposes.

Members enquired if there were any incentives for tenants to pay on time, for example a reduction for direct debit payments. The Housing Manager replied explaining that whilst some Housing Associations have discount schemes relating to vouchers for use in High Street shops, and leisure centres, it was difficult to run and cash discounts were not viable.

Resolved: That the report be received and noted.

(Vote 8 For, 0 Against)

25. PROGRESS OF RENOVATION GRANT PROGRAMME 2004/5

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Services & Community) which provided information on the progress of the 2004/05 Renovation Grant Programme as at 6th September 2004.

Resolved: That the progress report be noted.

(Vote 8 For, 0 Against)

26. ALLOCATION OF CAPITAL FUNDING FOR SOCIAL HOUSING SCHEME

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Health & Housing highlighting the acute shortage of affordable housing in the District, the increase in Housing Register applicants and the letting of our own vacancies to homeless households in excess of the agreed quota due to Government restrictions on the use of Bed & Breakfast.

Phase I of the Salterns development was subject to a general agreement from a very early stage that Social Housing Grant would be available.

Members were informed that a contribution of £250k will secure Social Housing Grant from the Housing Corporation considerably in excess of what we would normally expect to receive through the Approved Development Programme.

Resolved:

- (1) That the current year's unallocated Social Housing Grant sum of £125k be apportioned to Devon & Cornwall Housing Association for the Salterns development.
- (2) That subject to sufficient funds being available, a further £125k be allocated in 2005/06 for the same element of the development.
- (3) That subject to available funding, £250k be allocated from the Capital Programme for Social Housing Grant in favour of Signpost Housing Association for the second part of Phase I of Salterns for the years of 2006/07 and 2007/08.

(Vote: 8 For, 0 Against)

27. CONTRACT ADMINISTRATION & CLERK OF WORKS DUTIES – CENTRAL HEATING 2004/05

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Property & Asset Management relating to the Contract Administration and Clerk of Works duties for three locations. Members noted that currently insufficient staff capacity existed within the Property & Asset Management section to provide these services. Approval was sought to let the work to an experienced external consultant who had previously carried out similar work for the Council in a satisfactory manner.

Resolved:

- (1) That the tender for 6% Fees is accepted from Kelvin Wills and that he is appointed to carry out Contract Administration and Clerk of Works duties with respect to Contracts E and F Central Heating 2004/05. This is to be funded from the Central Heating Capital Budget.
- (2) That the Policy Resources Committee be requested that Financial Rule 8:15 is waived in this regard.

(Vote: 8 For, 0 Against)

28. CAPITAL PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the report of the Head & Finance & IT relating to the 2004/05 Capital Programme which totalled £1,923,000 being an increase of £20,000 since the last meeting arising from an increased allocation from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in relation to Disabled Facilities Grants.

Resolved: That the Capital Programme for 2004/05 be noted.

(Vote 8 For, 0 Against)

29. BENEFITS UPDATE

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Customer Services relating to the Housing/Council Tax Benefit Administration. For the period 01/04/04 to 30/06/04. Members noted that funding had been gained for posts in both visiting and assessing areas. It was foreseen that Benefit and Revenue staff would work more generically leading to higher salaries and better qualified staff. Funding had also been received for an Overpayments Officer and the final candidate would have court experience. Additionally, funding had been received for IRRV qualification courses that staff would undertake (in their own time).

A Benefit Fraud Inspection is taking place next week which would see the arrival of 5 Inspectors who will be on site for three weeks. This will be a fully comprehensive inspection resulting in a rating. Following the rating, the Council will be able to take advantage of the input of a free of charge, team of consultants who will assist in improvements.

Resolved:

- (1) That members note the contents of the report.
- (2) That the Housing/Council Tax Benefit Administration Policy and Statement of Intent be approved.

(Vote 8 For, 0 Against)

30. CHANGES TO BENEFITS SANCTIONS POLICY

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Customer Services which detailed the proposed changes to the current sanctions policy in line with BFI proposals. This involves a simplification of authorisation to the following:

1. Recommendation by the Fraud Officer.
2. Approval by the Revenues and Benefits Manager or Head of Customer Services.
3. Approval by the Head of Customer Services or a Strategic Director.

NB - Each Officer involved should only be permitted to authorise one step within the process.

Resolved:

- (1) That the steps required to gain approval for sanction action be changed within the sanctions policy to the above three steps.
- (2) That relevant changes to those with approval responsibility be changed to those detailed above and within Appendix A.
- (3) That the revised sanctions policy be agreed and to take immediate effect.

(Vote 8 For, 0 Against)

31. TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING GENERAL REGULATIONS 1992

Resolved: "That pursuant to Regulation 3 of the Town & Country Planning General Regulations 1992 an application for planning permission shall be made by Torrington District Council to develop its own land, namely the removal of a window and formation of a doorway directly into the lounge of 7, Northgate, Hartland, together with the construction of a UPVC storm porch and associated pathway, to improve wheelchair access to the property".

(Vote 8 For, 0 Against)

32. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 (AS AMENDED)

Resolved: That under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 7 & 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

(Vote: 8 For, 0 Against)

33. TENANCY OF TWO BEDROOM HOUSE IN BIDEFORD WEST – HOUSING REFERENCE 01030519

The Committee considered the confidential report of the Housing Manager in respect of the tenancy of a two bedroom house in Bideford West.

Resolved:

- (1) That given circumstances the lease be extended for a further three months from 15 September but that there be no further extension beyond this.
- (2) That the Housing Manager respond in this vein to the Doctor and reiterate the Housing Manager's comments to the tenant to obtain advice on benefits that may be available.

(Vote: 8 For, 0 Against)

34. LAND AT CROWBEARE MEADOW, TORRINGTON

The Committee considered the confidential report of the Head of Property and Asset Management in connection with the above land.

Resolved:

- (1) That pursuant to Regulation 3 of the Town and Country Planning General Regulations 1992 an application for planning permission shall be made by Torrington District Council to develop its own land for residential purposes at Crowbeare Meadow, Torrington.
- (2) That Policy & Resources Committee be recommended to sell the land on the open market if planning permission for residential development is achieved.

(Vote: 8 For, 0 Against)

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and ended at 7.55 pm

Date.....

Chairman.....