

## **Housing & Community Safety Select Committee**

A meeting of Housing & Community Safety Select Committee was held on Thursday, 27th August, 2009.

**Present:** Cllr Julia Cherrett(Vice Chairman), Cllr Jackie Earl, Cllr Robert Gibson, Cllr Mohammed Javed, Cllr Jean Kirby, Cllr Bill Noble, Cllr Bill Woodhead

**Officers:** Mike Batty, Colin Snowdon, Julie Nixon, Melanie Howard, Amanda Huitson, Carol Straughan(DNS), Ian Short(CESC), Andy Bryson(RES), Sarah Whaley, Peter Mennear(L&D)

**Also in attendance:**

**Apologies:** Cllr Allison Trainer, Cllr Mrs Liz Nesbitt

### **HCS 13/09**      **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Mrs Cherrett declared a personal/non prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item no.3 – Review of Choice based lettings and Registered Social Landlords as she was a member of the Tristar Management Board and also item no.4 - EIT Review of Regulatory Services for Environmental Health and the licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation as she was a member of Cleveland Fire Authority.

Councillor Earl declared a personal/non prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item no.4 - EIT Review of Regulatory Services for Environmental Health and the licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation as she was a Landlord of a licensed House with Multiple Occupation.

Councillor Gibson declared a personal/non prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item no.3 – Review of Choice based lettings and Registered Social Landlords as he was a member of the Tristar Management Board.

Councillor Noble declared a personal/non prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item no.4 - EIT Review of Regulatory Services for Environmental Health and the licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation as he was a member of the River Tees Port Health Authority.

Councillor Woodhead declared a personal/non prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item no.3 - Review of Choice based lettings and Registered Social Landlords as he was a member of the Tristar Management Board and also item no.4 - EIT Review of Regulatory Services for Environmental Health and the licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation as he was a member of Cleveland Fire Authority.

### **HCS 14/09**      **Minutes of the meeting held on 16th July 2009**

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 16th July 2009.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 16th July 2009 be approved and forwarded to Council.

**HCS  
15/09**      **Monitoring of Previously Agreed Recommendations  
- Reviews of Choice Based Lettings, and Registered Social Landlords -  
Progress Updates**

Members were asked to consider the assessments of progress within the Progress Updates on the implementation of previously agreed recommendations. There were outstanding recommendations from the reviews of Choice Based Lettings and Registered Social Landlords. Members were also provided with a copy of the draft Affordable Housing Framework and were asked to submit any comments they may have to the Housing Strategy Team in due course.

CONCLUDED that the assessments of progress be agreed and further updates be received as appropriate.

**HCS  
16/09**      **Efficiency, Improvement and Transformation Review of Regulatory  
Services  
- Baseline Information for Environmental Health, and the mandatory  
licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation**

The Committee were asked to consider and challenge the baseline information for Environmental Health, and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), as part of the review of Regulatory Services.

The Environmental Health Unit Manager presented Members with background information regarding the Environmental Health Department focusing on the services the department provided across the board to residents/businesses and other service areas within the authority. The Environmental Health Unit Manager also informed the Committee that the majority of the services provided were mainly statutory requirement dictated by legislation therefore would need to be maintained in some form.

The main areas covered from the presentation were as follows:

- 1) Port Health
- 2) Contaminated Land
- 3) No Smoking initiative
- 4) National issues such as foot and mouth/Legionella etc.
- 3) Stray Dogs

It was explained to the Committee that the department had a large customer base which included residents and businesses throughout the Borough and demand was mainly dependent on knowledge of the service or following local/national promotional campaigns which increased the departments profile within the community. In addition to this it was stated that the service was also responsible for responding to national issues as and when they occurred such as major outbreaks of foot and mouth or legionella etc.

Members queried the contaminated land expenditure which was £118k and whether the Council received income for such work. The Head of Community Protection informed the Committee that the Council were responsible for all contaminated land whether publicly or privately owned as this was a statutory requirement and therefore it was the responsibility of the Council to maintain or carry out remedial work on this type of land. However it was often the case that the actual costs were borne by developers and the Councils main role was to provide advice and guidance, followed by inspection to ensure work had been carried out. The Head of Community Protection informed the Committee that Stockton Borough Council did apply for grants from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs,(DEFRA) for work related to contaminated land.

Members then heard that current discussions were underway across the Tees Valley about reviewing the Port Health Service to identify efficiencies. This body was independent but carried out port health duties on behalf of the Teesside authorities. One option would be to take back in house functions. Alternatively duties may be passed to a lead authority. Both of those arrangements could be more cost effective than current arrangements, which was set up by statute however could prove difficult and/or costly to amend.

It was also highlighted within the report that Stockton could possibly manage closed landfill sites for Hartlepool as Stockton employed a member of staff with the necessary qualifications to do this and Hartlepool did not. Similarly Stockton could also carry out Animal Health duties for Middlesbrough and Hartlepool who did not have the necessary qualified employees. Members were keen to ensure that such opportunities would continue to be monitored, and in addition requested that the potential for increased joint working across Environmental Health be explored as part of the EIT process.

Members asked the Head of Community Protection why a long term contract had been entered into with a contract to build and use a private kennel rather than an authority owned kennel. The Committee learned that at the time of making the decision options were limited and the use of existing private kennels was not easy to find as owners were reluctant to allow the Council to use their facilities due to the risk of contamination from stray dogs to the other dogs using the kennels. Stockton needed to enter into a contract which gave the authority long term security for the housing of stray dogs within the borough, and which ensured that value would be obtained for the costs involved in building the new kennels.

The Private Sector Housing Manager introduced the baseline report for the mandatory licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) to the Committee. Members were given a brief history of what Private Sector Housing covered and the departments within the authority which they worked alongside. The Private Sector Housing Manager explained what the definition of a House in Multiple Occupation was and how it was licensed. Members attention was drawn to the considerable differences in licence fees landlords with HMOs had to pay across neighbouring authorities. All neighbouring authorities licences covered a period of five years, it was noted that Middlesbrough had the highest number of licensed rooms in the Tees Valley (as they have the most HMOs in their area) with Darlington having the fewest. The Head of Housing informed Members that a sub regional pricing structure would be looked into due to the

vast difference in the cost of licences.

Other options that would be considered were increasing the license fee for HMOs in Stockton alone but also the possibility of introducing an accreditation system where Landlords who fulfil the requirements of the scheme could possibly see reductions in licence fees. In addition to this, a suggestion was also made for a third party, such as a Registered Social Landlord, to manage the licences rather than the Council through the transfer of statutory functions, if this could be more cost effective.

CONCLUDED that:

The Committee note the information detailed in the baseline report and that the suggested options for change be considered at the next stage of the EIT process.

**HCS 17/09 Work Programme - to review the work programme in respect of the current review**

The Scrutiny Officer presented the Committee with the Work Programme in respect of the current review and highlighted what the next items would be for review at the Committees forthcoming meetings.

Members were informed that representatives of the Committee had attended the quarterly meeting between the taxi trade and council officers in order to seek their views to inform the review of Regulatory Services. The trade had concerns in relation to both the level of fees for taxi licensing in Stockton, and also the arrangement of the Council's accounts in respect of taxi licensing. The trade noted that they currently had a formal objection to the Council's accounts for 2008-09 lodged with the Audit Commission. Members of the trade had requested the opportunity to meet with the Committee in order to discuss these matters.

The Committee discussed the issue and in view of the fact that the objection to the accounts was still under consideration by the Audit Commission, Members decided to defer setting up a meeting with the trade until the objection was resolved.

CONCLUDED that:

- 1) The Scope and Project plan be noted.
- 2) That the meeting requested by the Taxi trade be deferred until the Audit Commission had responded to the formal objection in relation to the Councils accounts for 2008/09.

