

Housing & Community Safety Select Committee

A meeting of Housing & Community Safety Select Committee was held on Wednesday, 25th November, 2009.

Present: Cllr Julia Cherrett (Chair), Cllr Jackie Earl, Cllr Robert Gibson, Cllr Jean Kirby, Cllr Bill Noble

Officers: Mike Batty, Melanie Howard, Barry Jackson, Colin Snowdon, Carol Straughan, Ray Sullivan (DNS); Ian Short (CESC); Andy Bryson (R); Pippa Rayner (Xentrall Shared Services); Tanya Harrison, Peter Mennear (LD)

Also in attendance: John Stockill (UNISON)

Apologies: Cllr Mrs Allison Trainer, Cllr Mohammed Javed, Cllr Mrs Liz Nesbitt, Cllr Bill Woodhead

HCS 24/09 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Earl declared a personal non prejudicial interest in relation to the review of Regulatory Services due to owning a house of multiple occupancy.

HCS 25/09 **Draft Minutes - 8th October, 2009**

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 8th October 2009.

CONCLUDED that the minutes of the meeting held on 8th October 2009 be agreed as a true record.

HCS 26/09 **Efficiency, Improvement and Transformation Review of Regulatory Services**

- **Updated budget position**
- **IDeA research report**
- **Options Papers**

The Committee considered the updated budget position, IDeA research and option papers that were attached to the report. In addition to the options presented to the meeting, Members were informed that Xentrall Shared Services had been asked to undertake work in relation to the potential for efficiencies with regards to information and communications technology, and the results of this would be presented to a future meeting.

Members discussed various options that had been identified during the review.

Members felt that the following options should be considered further.

Members discussed increasing fee charges per room for the mandatory licensing of houses of multiple occupation. It was observed that an increase may encourage owners of the properties to sell up and purchase houses in neighbouring authorities who currently charge less.

Members were advised that the preferred option at this stage was to increase fees to £250 per room/unit.

Members believed that a review of the services provided by the River Tees Port

Health Authority should be undertaken to see if they could be provided at a lower cost. The exact savings would depend on the outcomes of the review.

Members considered that it would be likely that there would be no savings made by introducing sub-regional taxi licensing policies. However officers were encouraged to continue work towards this due to the possibility of improved service for residents.

Members considered the option of introducing shared services for one or more service areas. The Committee believed that shared services should be considered for all service areas. Further work would be needed to develop these proposals and to overcome issues related to specific services, for example issues related to planning fees and local development frameworks would affect a shared development services service.

Officers advised that the Corporate Director of Resources had received feedback regarding the possibility of further partnership working between Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and Darlington Council. Further information in relation to this, and how it relates to the Committee's work, was requested by Members.

The Committee believed that the Council should continue to look at opportunities to provide specific services on behalf of other authorities, although opportunities for savings would be limited

Members commented that the outsourcing of one or more regulatory services was not a favoured option, but that it should be considered if other measures do not produce the savings required.

Members considered introducing fees for pre-application planning advice. Advice is currently free of charge, and due to the increased costs to developers, it was felt that take-up would be low, and that if under prepared applications are submitted this would increase the work for the Council.

Some areas of the country have introduced it with good results as developers have been willing to pay for advice due to the relatively high levels of applications and competition for land. It was considered that it could be introduced in the Borough in future, should the local conditions be conducive.

The Committee considered options in relation to the Consumer Advice Centre. Members discussed the option of ceasing provision of the centre. However if this happened some work would still need to be undertaken by Trading Standards as the Centre currently filtered enquiries on potential criminal issues, and these would still need to be considered.

It was observed that it could be more cost effective to employ Consumer Advice Officers than Trading Standards Officers, however only Trading Standards could carry out matters of enforcement.

Members discussed the hidden costs of enforcement action. It was also considered that upcoming staffing issues may produce further opportunities for savings.

A different approach would be to introduce fees for consumer advice services, although the projected income was limited.

It was felt by the Committee that issues in relation to the Consumer Advice Centre should be taken together, and considered further.

Members discussed the option of joint enforcement/inspections across Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's regulatory services. It was observed that this was the area in which generic enforcement work could be undertaken that did not require specific knowledge.

Member felt that more information should be gathered on the working model at Gateshead.

Members considered the Joint approaches to service delivery within Planning Enforcement and Building Control. Officers advised that an example would be that building control surveyors were out on site a great deal of the time and could therefore assist planning enforcement by being aware of issues that should be brought to their attention.

Members considered an option in relation to providing a basic, statutory service for Building Control. Members requested more detail on the projected savings.

Members did not support the following options at this stage but that they could be reconsidered at a later date.

Members considered options in relation to ceasing non-statutory elements of environmental health services. These included: the out of hour's noise service, enhanced animal welfare provision, food advisory service, and pest control. In relation to enhanced animal welfare, it was observed that dealing with stray dogs was a statutory function; however the further element of dog fouling and animal welfare were the issues being considered.

The option of introducing a charge for treatment of domestic rats, mice and bed bugs was discussed. It was observed that if a charge was introduced people would be less inclined to use the service thus resulting in a greater number of enforcements which would provide budget implications, and therefore could be counter-productive.

CONCLUDED that the requested further information be brought to the next meeting of the committee to enable Members to draft recommendations at that meeting.

HCS **Work Programme**
27/09 **- to review the work programme in respect of the current review**

Members were advised that the next meeting would take place on 30th November 2009, and that this would be the overview meeting to consider housing services.

The next meeting scheduled to consider the review of Regulatory Services was

7th January 2010.

CONCLUDED that the list of recommendations will be presented at 7th January 2010 Select Committee.