

Housing & Community Safety Select Committee

A meeting of Housing & Community Safety Select Committee was held on Thursday, 30th June, 2011.

Present: Cllr Julia Cherrett(Chairman), Cllr Derrick Brown(Vice Chairman), Cllr Michael Clark, Cllr Evaline Cunningham, Cllr Mohammed Javed, Cllr Miss Tina Large, Cllr Andrew Sherris, Cllr David Wilburn

Officers: Jane Edmonds, Julie Higgins, Julie Nixon, Linda Stephenson,(DNS) Sarah Whaley, Anthony Duffy, Graham Birtle(L&D)

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr Robert Gibson

HCS 10/11 **Declarations of Interest**

None

HCS 11/11 **Minutes from the meeting which was held on the 13th January 2011**

Consideration was given to the minutes from the meeting which was held on the 13th January for signature.

AGREED that the minutes be signed.

HCS 12/11 **Minutes from the meeting which was held on the 24th February 2011.**

Consideration was given to the minutes from the meeting which was held on the 24th February 2011 for signature.

AGREED that the minutes be signed.

HCS 13/11 **Quarterly Progress Updates on Previously Agreed Recommendations**

Consideration was given to the progress of the implementation of previously agreed recommendations from the review of Choice Based Lettings.

It was highlighted that No.7 on the Progress Update report was on track for August 2011 however had slipped from an original date of April 2009. It was agreed that the Scrutiny Officer would investigate why this date had slipped and report back at the next Quarterly update which would be in the next three months.

AGREED that:

- 1) the information be noted
- 2) the Scrutiny Officer investigate the slippage of item no.7 on the Progress Update report.

HCS 14/11 **Housing Overview**

Members received a Housing Overview presentation from the Head of Housing which included each Service Area's responsibility and achievements as follows:

- 1) Housing Strategy & Regeneration
- 2) Private Sector Housing
- 3) Housing Options
- 4) Benefits Service
- 5) Key Achievements in 2010/11 Housing Strategy & Regeneration
- 6) Key Achievements in 2010/11 Private Sector Housing
- 7) Key Achievements in 2010/11 Housing Options
- 8) Key Achievements in 2010/11 Benefits Service
- 9) Emerging Issues and Priorities in 2011 and beyond

In conjunction with the attached presentation the main topics discussed were as follows:

1) Housing Strategy and Regeneration

- a) It was no longer a requirement that the Housing Strategy was prepared on an annual basis.
- b) A master plan was currently underway for the development at Swainby Road, and the Parkfield phase 2 site. This will be followed by 'masterplanning' for the Victoria estate.
- c) Affordable Homeownership including Time2Buy.
- d) Sub-regional work with TVU was continuing to develop a tenancy strategy across the Tees valley.
- e) Significant need for care provision.

2) Private Sector Housing

- a) Increasing Importance for Private Sector Housing within the Borough.
- b) Future regards improving Private Sector Housing Schemes due to lack of funding and loans.
- c) Issues surrounding empty homes would become more difficult due to lack of funding.
- d) Licensing of Houses of Multiple Occupancy(HMO's).
- e) Landlord Accreditation scheme.

3) Housing Options

- a) Client base changing and increasing due to recession, and increasing numbers of home repossessions.
- b) Homeless figures
- c) Single Gateway Scheme, finding the most appropriate services for people with specific needs.
- d) Emergency funding to help families in difficult situations to enable them to keep their homes.
- e) Management of Traveller sites.

4) Benefit Services

- a) Major increase in the number of residents applying for benefits. The department had initially received additional funding to deal with this however

this was to be cut going forward.

b) Increased pressure on the delivery of the service to make sure benefits were paid on time.

5) Key Achievements Housing Strategy & Regeneration 2010/11

a) Successful large scale voluntary stock transfer of 10,200 Council homes.

b) 161 new affordable homes in the borough.

c) 42 unit extra care scheme in Thornaby.

d) 100 households assisted into homeownership in the borough through time2buy.

6) Key Achievements in 2010/11 Private Sector Housing

a) Home improvement Agency providing advice and assistance reducing the need to transfer residents from home to hospital. It was noted that this was an excellent service and very popular.

b) Almost 600 homes now under the Landlord Accreditation Scheme.

7) Key Achievements in 2010/11 Housing Options

a) Vulnerable households sustaining tenancies for longer than six months.

b) Advice given to 445 households with mortgage/rent arrears.

8) Key Achievements in 2010/11 Benefits Service

a) Improvement on the time taken to process benefit claims from a target of 11.2 days to an actual of 9.6 days

9) Emerging issues and Priorities in 2011 and beyond

a) The Committee heard that due to the recession there was a significant increase in case loads.

b) That Government were currently looking to restructure rents. All local authorities were to have a Tenancy Strategy which would set out principles. Guidance was still to be finalised however the Localism Bill would enforce the strategy. Partners were having to make decisions ahead of legislation, the 1st year rent being set and the next 3 years being indicative. It was also discussed that although local authorities must follow the strategy, registered providers would only have to give it due regard. The Head of Housing informed the Committee that all housing providers had been contacted and asked what future rent levels they had put forward to the Local Housing Association. This information was not as easy to obtain with national providers.

c) Changes to local housing - rents, funding.

The Committee requested the following further information:

- Homelessness figures be provided by ward.

- Quantity of Empty homes in the borough be provided including a comparison with neighbouring authorities.

- The number of residents facing repossession who are relying on benefits, per

month, to highlight peaks and troughs.

- Contact details to be given to Members for residents who experience difficulty with Landlords.

AGREED that:

1) the information be noted.

2) further information be provided as requested.

**HCS
15/11**

EIT Gateway Review of Housing

Consideration was given to the Scope and Baseline Report of the EIT Gateway Review of Housing Benefits.

Members received an introduction and background of previous reviews and learned that the review undertaken in 2010/11 did not include the housing benefits service due to the uncertainties over the future of the service relating to the proposals for the new welfare reform.

The main items discussed were as follows:

1) Welfare Reform

a) Universal credit to be introduced and replace the following

- income support
- income based job seekers allowance
- income based employment and support allowance
- housing benefit
- tax credits for people of working age from 2013.

b) Pensioners to receive Housing Credit by 2014.

c) Universal credit and Housing credit to be centrally controlled by the Department of Work and Pensions(DWP). Full migration of existing housing benefit cases to the new service will have taken place by 2017.

d) Council Tax Benefit to be abolished and to be replaced by a local alternative which must save 10% on current benefit costs and be implemented by April 2013, however this date may slip.

e) Local authorities would lose responsibility for the investigation of benefit fraud.

f) DWP to provide a transition strategy and appropriate funding to aid in the migration of services from the Local Authority in the Autumn of 2011.

g) Concentration of the current review would focus on current performance and a review of new proposals would be carried out when more detail was known.

2) Baseline Information including what and how the service was provided and

what influences had an impact on the service.

a) What the Service does and how it is provided.

b) Key activities carried out in order to deliver services.

c) Influences which impact on the Service.

d) Effects of the recession were highlighted as follows:

- workloads increasing by 47%
- an increase in 100 new cases each month
- a change in client group
- increase in number of telephone and face to face enquiries, which were now the responsibility of the resources team.

e) Legislative changes, which were considered to be controversial and likely to see an increase in the number of enquiries, appeals and requests for discretionary housing payments etc.

f) Stock Transfer.

g) Admin Review.

h) Reduction in DWP funding.

i) Technological Issues.

3) What the Service cost and what resources it used.

a) In relation to consultation results and customer satisfaction, it was explained that although the time it took to process a claim had reduced, customer satisfaction had also reduced. The Benefits Manager informed the committee that the results were a possibility of the changes to customer profiles and increased expectations.

b) Very few complaints received within the service.

c) The effects of the changes on staffing levels within the service.

d) Benchmarking

4)The Challenges Housing Services face moving forward.

a) Neighbouring authorities had already implemented new principles cutting costs further and reducing time to process claims, however DWP had previously visited Stockton's Housing Services and were unable to identify any further savings within its processes at that time.

b) Reduce time taken to process claims further even though this has already been reduced from 28 days to 16 days.

c) Redesign systems based around customer needs / satisfaction.

d) Body of outstanding debt still to be recovered - ask DWP to help.

e) Making best use of discretionary housing payments to prevent homelessness.

The Committee requested the following further information:

a) Stocktons' Housing Service to gather further information from neighbouring authorities which have introduced the principles of cutting costs further.

b) Provide the Committee with details of redesigned system and improvements introduced elsewhere.

c) Provide information clarifying how cost effective it is to recover all debt via court proceedings.

AGREED that:

1) the Scope and Baseline report be noted

2) a further report to come back to this Committee on the 20th October 2011 to provide an evaluation of the service, options for the service reconfiguration and recommendations for future delivery of the service.

3) further information be provided as requested.

**HCS
16/11** **Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that the next meeting of Housing and Community Safety Select Committee would be held on July 21st at 2.30pm in the New Lecture Hall.

**HCS
17/11** **Chair's Update**

None