

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 4 March 2003 at the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Doody (Chair); Councillors Butler, Byrd, Copping, Mrs Edwards, Harris, Kent and Mrs McFarland.

Mr George Dunkley (Warwick District Tenant and Leaseholders User Group).

Miss Rachel Hodgetts (Warwick District Federation of Tenants and Residents Association (Federation 2000)).

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Boad (Housing Services Portfolio Holder).

Councillor Kohler (Customer and Community Services Portfolio Holder).

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Shilton.

861. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

862. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 7 January and 4 February 2003 having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

863. EMPTY PROPERTY WORK WITHIN WARWICK DISTRICT

The Committee considered a report from Environmental Health on empty property work carried out by the Council. The report set out the work undertaken by the Empty Property Officer, the actions taken since the post had become vacant, and some suggestions on how the work might be taken forward.

In 1996 -1997, Warwick District Council were among the first local authorities outside London to employ an Empty Property Officer. The officer was tasked with developing and implementing a strategy for bringing long-term empty property back into use as dwellings, including some of the empty space above shops and businesses.

During the three year period of his employment Andrew Parkes, our Empty Property Officer, had been instrumental in bringing approximately 150 dwelling units into use. This had been achieved mainly by forging links with the Housing Association movement and facilitating the leasing or purchase and conversion of empty property. He had established a Landlord's Forum, a

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database of empty properties, links with local letting agents, and leaflets explaining the Council's Empty Property Strategy and providing guidance for landlords. All of this work had lapsed since the end of the contract.

The exit strategy, as shown in the report, had anticipated actions being undertaken by a number of departments within the Council. Although some had been addressed without a dedicated post holder it had been inevitable that many had not.

In 2001, the Government introduced a Best Value performance indicator which required local authorities to publish the percentage of long-term empty property brought back into use as a direct result of local authority action. Long-term empty property were defined as those which had been empty for more than six months at the beginning of the period under review. However, no one business unit had taken responsibility for collecting the required information until property work had been done. In 2002, the performance indicator had been amended to require the number of empty properties to be published. There was no dedicated officer to deal with empty property work and any direct action to reduce the number was therefore minimal.

The report stated that as at 9 November 2002 there were 55,426 dwellings in the district of which 1,917 were empty. Of these almost 500 have been empty for more than six months and 342 had been empty for more than 12 months. Within these figures were contained the houses which were empty and up for sale. However, also included were a number of second homes and business lets. The numbers of these were very difficult to obtain as the legislation stands presently the information cannot be shared within the Council. The Government had stated that this would change in the near future. There were also a number of properties which were subject to Closing Orders made under the various Housing Acts since 1936. The "whole house" closing orders were included in the list above.

Given that this was an area of high housing demand the majority of empty properties identified would sooner or later be sold or become re-occupied, there would always be exceptions to this general rule. The owners of empty properties could claim a 50% relief on their Council Tax liability. The Government had promised to give Council's the discretionary power to charge up to 90% of the Council Tax. Whether this change would have any major impact on reducing long-term empty properties it is unclear. However, it would be another means of persuading owners not to leave properties empty.

In order to see any demonstrable effect on the reduction of the numbers of empty properties, it was suggested that both the Council Tax and Environmental Health would need to put considerable effort into targeting the following list of actions:

Revisit and re evaluate the list of actions listed in the "Empty Property Exit Strategy";

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (Continued)

Consider offering financial assistance to owners of property which had already had statutory action (Closing Orders) taken against it to encourage them to bring the property (or part property) back into use;

Take a more proactive stance with (possibly absent) owners of empty property which was causing nuisance to neighbours;

Consider making more effective use (in an empty property sense) of the work of the Revenues Inspector in Council Tax. (This might mean increasing the resource put into this area of work).

Consider increasing the resources put into this area of work in order that:

Written and telephone contacts could be made with the owners of all empty properties;

An Information Pack could be devised containing advice on leasing, renovating and selling property, and with links to private companies who might be able to help with advice, loans, expertise etc;

A database of links, contacts, follow-ups etc could be set up and maintained;

Pressure could be applied in a constant consistent and helpful way.

Produce a new Empty Property Strategy to take account of local circumstances and the resources available.

In order to carry out this work, it was likely that additional resources would be needed. The report indicated that a part time (17½ hours) position, based in Environmental Health, would be sufficient to progress matters and make significant inroads into the empty property work area.

RECOMMENDED that the report be noted.

864. PROGRESS REPORT ON THE CRIME AND DISORDER STRATEGY 2002/2005

The Committee considered a progress report from Policy Services on the Warwick District Crime and Disorder Strategy for 2002-2005.

Together with the Warwickshire County Council and the Warwickshire Police Authority, the Council had a joint and equal responsibility to reduce crime and disorder within the district.

The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) required that an audit of crime and disorder was undertaken and, following consultation, used as the basis for a strategy to address the concerns raised. The Warwick District Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (WDCDRP) were the responsible body and had met quarterly to monitor the progress of the actions in the strategy.

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (Continued)

This was the second Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy and it came into force in April 2002. The actions in the strategy were addressed by six groups each with a lead agency and officer. Warwick District Council were the lead agency for actions in the communities and fear of crime. The action plan and progress report were attached as an appendix.

RECOMMENDED that

- (1) the report be noted,
- (2) Peter Cutts be thanked for his work in this area
- (3) the County Council be encouraged to allocate a lead officer to the "Young People" area

865. AIDS AND ADAPTATIONS - PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee considered a progress report from Housing on aids and adaptations.

Historically, demand for aids and adaptations had been met by adjusting the Council budgets accordingly. This approach had ensured that tenants' homes were adapted to create a safe environment to aid day to day activities. A table showing the budget adjustments made over the last five years was set out in the report.

On 17 September 2001, the Executive had approved the financing for a jointly funded Occupational Therapist (OT), with the Social Services Department, to be based within Housing. Problems experienced with the recruitment process had contributed to some delays in assessment. In September 2002, an Occupational Therapist was appointed. At that time, tenants had been waiting up to 12 months for their assessment [with the exception of emergency requests], the current waiting time was approximately four months.

In accordance with the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act (1970), the County Council continued to have responsibility for assessments. Therefore, requests for assessments were required to be registered with Social Services.

In September 2000, a fast track system was introduced specifically for handrails and banisters. This approach had enabled tenants to request rails without requiring an assessment. The scheme had proved successful and had been extended to include lever taps and half steps.

Cases awaiting assessment when the Occupational Therapist was appointed had been completed. From the time referrals were received within Housing to the time the work was completed was on average 12 weeks. This was reduced to six weeks for fast track requests. A short delay had been experienced in these time-scale while the majority of waiting list assessments were completed, this was due to staffing pressures.

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (Continued)

The report stated that demand for aids and adaptations for this year had significantly increased. It referred to national and local demographic data that illustrated the aging population.

As a result of the increased demand, a shortfall in the budget of £90, 000 had been identified.

RECOMMENDED that the report be noted.

866. TENANTS STOCK OPTIONS APPRAISAL

The Committee considered a report from the Tenants Panel and the Independent Tenant Advisor (ITA) updating on the progress of the Tenants Stock Options Appraisal and the work of ITA. A copy of the ITA - Project Plan was appended to the report.

In December 2001, the Council had received the findings of a housing stock options appraisal undertaken to review the housing element of its own business plan and to meet Central Government requirements in considering the main investment options for its housing stock in light of the Government's 'Decent Homes' standards. The main options considered were: transferring to either a new or existing Registered Social Landlord (RSL), Council retention, setting up an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO), utilising the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), and securitisation.

In 2002, the Council had agreed not to formally pursue any of these options until its tenants and leaseholders had had the opportunity to consider them and make the views known. To facilitate the process, an Independent Tenant Advisor (ITA) - Priority Estates Project (Midlands) - had been appointed by a panel of tenants and leaseholders.

The project plan for the ITA addressed the three main themes of the tenant stock options appraisal programme: the establishment of a Council-wide Tenant and Leaseholders Forum, the provision of information about the main stock options to all Council tenants and leaseholders, and the undertaking of a survey to establish tenant and leaseholders views. These elements were set out in greater detail in the report.

A variety of activities were planned for during March and April 2003 and would concentrate on local meetings and arranging 'drop-ins' at Council premises or near local shops in order to provide as much information as possible.

A further newsletter would be sent to all tenants and leaseholders in early April in advance of the survey. Study surveys to other areas/landlords and two further Tenant Panel training sessions on the options were also planned. The Tenant Panel would continue to meet on a monthly basis and receive reports from the ITA

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It was anticipated that a survey of all tenants and leaseholders would take place over a three week period commencing in mid-April. It would be despatched by post and augmented by door knocking. There would also be the opportunity for it to be completed at local 'drop-ins'. The Panel had set a minimum return target of 15%, and it was agreed that there should be a prize draw to encourage participation in the survey.

The ITA would analyse the results in June 2003 and report to both the Panel and the Council so that the views of tenant and leaseholders could be considered when the decision on which housing stock option to formally pursue is taken later in the year. A newsletter would be issued to all tenants and leaseholders in June summarising the survey results and indicating how the Council would carry the process forward.

RECOMMENDED that

- (1) the report be noted,
- (2) a prize draw be incorporated into the survey of tenants and leaseholders to encourage participation.

867. EXECUTIVE MEETING - MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2003

The minutes of the Executive on Monday 10 February 2003 which came within the remit of the Committee were submitted for information and scrutiny.

RESOLVED that the minutes be noted.

868. WORK PLAN 2002-2003 AND PORTFOLIO HOLDER PRIORITY AREAS

The Committee considered a report from Policy Services updating their work plan for the year and monitoring the progress against the Portfolio Holder priority areas. It had been agreed to consider the Committee's work plan as a standing item on each agenda. The current work plan reflected items raised by the Committee and was attached as an appendix to the report. The Executive had agreed priorities and work plans for each Portfolio Holder at its meeting on the 25 June 2001, the relevant priorities and work programmes for the Portfolio's covered by the Committee were appended to the report.

RECOMMENDED that the report be noted.

869. EXECUTIVE AGENDA (NON-CONFIDENTIAL ITEMS AND REPORTS)

The Committee considered the items which would be discussed at the meeting of the Executive on Monday, 10 March 2003 which came within their remit. As a result the following comments were made for forwarding to the Executive.

Agenda Item No. 3 - Performance Management System

The Committee supported the recommendations in the report.

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Agenda Item No. 4 - Performance Management

The Committee supported the recommendations in the report.

Agenda Item No. 8 - SRB6 Scheme - Promoting Inclusion and Enterprise

The Committee supported the recommendations in the report and requested that further reports on the Credit Union be made to it in due course.

Agenda Item No. 14 (A) - the Benefits Division and the Verification Framework - An Update

The Committee supported the recommendation in the report and were pleased to recognise the improvements made in service delivery.

Agenda Item No. 14 (B) - Cash Incentive Schemes

The Committee supported the recommendation in the report.

Agenda Item No. 14 (C) - Transfer of Land - Langley Road, Garage Site

The Committee supported the recommendations in the report.

Agenda Item No. 14 (D) - Improvement and Renewal Works to the Council's Housing Stock

The Committee supported the recommendations in the report.

Agenda Item No. 14 (E) - Housing and Public Health Enforcement Policy

The Committee supported the recommendation in the report.

870. **PUBLIC AND PRESS**

RESOLVED that under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following items by reason of the likely disclosure of exempt information within paragraphs 3 and 8 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

871. **EXECUTIVE AGENDA (CONFIDENTIAL ITEMS AND REPORTS)**

The Committee considered the confidential items which would be discussed at the meeting of the Executive on Monday, 10 March 2003 which came within their remit. As a result the following comments were made for forwarding to the Executive.

Agenda Item No. 17 - The Band Factory

The Committee supported the proposal to split the building into three distinct units. However, it was felt that the cost of doing so should be met by Regenesys.

COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (Continued)

Agenda Item No. 18 - Proposed Crazy Golf Course - St Nicholas Park,
Warwick

The Committee supported the recommendation in the report.

(The meeting ended at 8.20 p.m.)

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