



MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER 2005 9.30 AM

PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Pam Bosworth (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs Joyce Gaffigan (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Harrish Bisnauthsing
Councillor Stephen Hewerdine

Councillor Bob Sandall
Councillor Gerald Taylor
Councillor Mrs Mary Wheat

OFFICERS

Corporate Director Regulatory Services
Housing Improvement Programme Facilitator
Housing Strategy Manager (Minute 26)
Housing services Co-ordinator (Minute 26)
Housing Improvement Programme Support Officer (Minute 26)
Project Manager LSVT (Minute 26 & 27)
PR
Scrutiny Officer
Scrutiny Support Officer

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Mrs Cartwright	}	Minute
Councillor Kirkman		
Councillor Martin-Mayhew	{	26 only
Councillor G Wheat		

20. COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

None.

21. MEMBERSHIP

None.

22. APOLOGIES

An apology was received from Councillor Mrs Smith.

23. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

24. ACTION NOTES

The action notes from the meeting held on 31st May 2005 were confirmed as a correct record of the decisions taken.

25. FEEDBACK FROM THE EXECUTIVE

None.

26. STRATEGIC HOUSING SERVICES

The Housing Improvement Programme Facilitator referred members to the Strategic Housing Improvement Programme. The programme was designed to improve strategic housing to a two star service in 12 months. To help with this programme and best practice the District Council contacted Wychavon District Council which were the best in the country, and had gone from a poor rating to an excellent three star rating in just two years. Wychavon District Council were very similar to South Kesteven with a similar urban and rural spread and were also a member of our audit group.

A visit to Wychavon had been arranged and members and officers had had an excellent day. The Housing Improvement Programme Facilitator then showed members a short video which had been made by Wychavon District Council on best practice which showed the Chief Executive and the Portfolio Holder discussing what changes they made with their focus moving from a bricks and mortar service to a customer focused service with a pragmatic approach. They had a one-stop shop in which partners including the police worked in the same place, were able to share information and had a joined up working culture.

Kath Smith was then introduced to the Panel. She was the Revenues & Housing Services Manager at Wychavon and had been one of the key players in changing Wychavon's strategic housing management. The Chairman welcomed Ms Smith to the meeting.

In a presentation to the Panel Kath Smith outlined how the strategic housing service at Wychavon had changed. She indicated that it was not the poor CPA report that they received which had prompted the change but they had done it for their customers.

Areas that were highlighted within the presentation were:

- Strong Leadership
- Financing Change
- Empowering the team
- Improving Key data
- Consultation
- Effective Plans
- Partnership
- Service Improvements
- Help for the Homeless

- Helping the Private Sector
- Development of New Affordable Housing
- Promoting what they did

She said that having a very proactive portfolio holder had been a great help and the political will of members to drive the service and improvements was necessary for success. By empowering the team which at the being had been depressed and disheartened by the CPA report had brought a complete culture change. All officers had been encouraged to make suggestions or innovations for improvements be they small or large and the responsibility for making the decisions had been given to the officers. They could fail once but not twice.

The improvement to key data, specifically IT programmes had been a major development and the use of text messaging had saved the authority a tremendous amount of money as people were more likely to reply to a text where as letters would be put directly in the bin. The merging of revenue services with housing had also benefited their customers. The area of consultation was important and the forums for the disabled and private landlords had been very successful. A visit with the Overview and Scrutiny members had been arranged to go out with the grant officer in order that members could see what a day in the life of a grant officer meant which helped them see where money was spent and who it was spent on. Benchmarking and exit surveys also gave you information to see who was doing what better or worse and the views of people who had been in Bed & Breakfast accommodation had they been treated with respect was the standard acceptable.

Having effective plans and strong partnerships were essential, especially partnerships with the RSL's. Other areas highlighted were seeing that the customers had access to the correct funds available and the Council used those funds/schemes that were available to them. Having a grants policy that targeted resources to those most in need and new forms of adaptations work such as the use of portacabin/pod structures which once no longer needed could be moved to a different location.

Proactive enforcement to target the worst cases, Wychavon tried not to use enforcement but preferred where necessary to talk to people and offer them the support that they required, often this negated the need for enforcement.

Improvement to communication between internal departments had helped with the development of new affordable housing and the co-ordinating of "round the table" meetings. By promoting what they did with council wide-staff briefings everyone was aware of what was happening and by having a press release fortnightly the general public were also kept informed.

Ms Smith concluded by saying that unless changes brought about an improvement for the customer there was no point in carrying out the changes. The whole culture of Wychavon DC had changed and this was down to the political will of the Council the strong leadership and investment that had taken place together with the customer focus and the supportive partners. They

challenged what they did and learnt from criticism and others with new ideas and solutions. They were people focused, worked as a team and offered a service that people wanted.

A few questions and comments were made about homelessness, the change of Wychavon's culture, the costs involved in the change and text messaging to which Ms Smith replied. The Chairman and members of the panel thanked Ms Smith for attending the meeting and for an excellent presentation. The Corporate Director of Regulatory Services informed the Panel that Ms Smith had agreed to be the Council's critical friend and would be back in six to nine months time to review the progress that the council had made.

Members then discussed the strategic housing improvement plan update that had been circulated. The document was self explanatory and highlighted the milestones that had been reached to date. The Corporate Director of Regulatory Services informed the panel that the partnership agreement with the RSL's, which had been circulated, was part of the action plan.

Comments were then made about the confusion that exists between what was meant by strategic housing services and the large scale voluntary transfer LSVT. The Corporate Director Regulatory Services said that work was currently being undertaken to make the differences between the two topics clear to both the public and the media.

27. LARGE SCALE VOLUNTARY TRANSFER (LSVT)

The Corporate Director Regulatory Services introduced to the Panel Mr Geoff Brooks who had been appointed at the Project Manager for the LSVT. He would be working three days a week and had a background which made him ideal to carry out the work necessary having been involved with 12 stock transfers.

The Corporate Director Regulatory Services in a presentation to members outlined the current position with regard to the LSVT. She highlighted how the Stock Option Appraisal Commission had reached the decision on the preferred option having regard to the following five reasons: enhanced housing management, fulfilling tenants priority investment choices, enhanced tenant involvement, more affordable housing and focus on strategic housing function.

It was clear that the HRA could not sustain the reasons given after 2012. Following what had been said earlier on in the meeting she reiterated that the public and the media seemed to be confused about the landlord and strategic function of housing. The Council would always have an obligation to strategic housing which dealt with homelessness, housing need, private sector stock even if these areas were contracted out, the responsibility would still rest with the council.

She then outlined the current status with appointment of consultants for the various areas including the retention of LIBRA by the tenants as the

independent tenant advisors which gave the tenants continuity of care. Legal consultants were yet to be appointed and currently expressions of interest were being sort from the eight to ten firms that specialised in LSVT work.

An indicative work programme to develop the strategy was then outlined. The options for the choice of new landlord were: a brand new organisation, to merge completely with an existing RSL or create a new organisation within a RSL.

The member governance structure was then outlined to the members and how this would work together with the indicative new landlord shadow board structure which would comprise of five council representatives, five tenant representatives and five independent representatives. It was still early stages and there was an awful lot of work that needed to be undertaken before any formal offer was made to the tenants. The uncertainty within the public and the media to differentiate between strategic housing and LSVT needed to be addressed.

The Project Manager for the LSVT said that in order to have the correct balance on the shadow board a skills matrix was often a useful tool to enable people to be placed on the board to maximise the skills available. Council representatives could be chosen in a number of ways from having a councillor from each of the three main towns and the north and south of the district to having a political balance. It was not a written rule as to how representatives were allocated.

One member expressed concern that the fourth option was not spoken about. He understood the Corporate Director Regulatory Services position, however governments change and this would certainly be the case over the next thirty years. A 30 year business plan was a comparative nonsense and he wished for something resembling a level playing field. Everything seemed to be floating and the fourth option was well worth considering, as the situation seemed to be biased towards one side. Other members of the panel agreed with this view.

The Corporate Director Regulatory Services referred to the work that had been carried out last September by the Stock Option Appraisal Commission taking into consideration all the information available to reach the preferred option. She stated that all literature sent out to tenants would give them the facts as they stood, it would not be biased and this would be checked. Mention was then made of the sustainability of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and again it was stated that the workings of the HRA was driven by the government.

Discussions then followed about the costs involved with appointing consultants and how places such as Glasgow and Liverpool had dealt with LSVT. Also how the council would be involved on the stock transfer board if the stock was transferred to which the Corporate Director of Regulatory Services replied.

The Chairman thanked the Corporate Director of Regulatory Services and the Project Manager LSVT for their report.

28. SCRUTINY HANDBOOK

Circulated with the agenda was a draft copy of the Scrutiny Handbook, it was intended as a guide to members and officers. The Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group had asked that it be circulated to DSP's for comment. Members had nothing to add to the document.

29. REPORTS FROM WORKING GROUPS

Conclusion

That the Corporate Manager Democratic and Legal Services be asked to look into the possibility of the Council making its own order to ban drinking at certain locations within the district. The results to be reported back to the DSP.

Housing Issues specifically difficult to let properties and voids

The Chairman informed members that they were still waiting to see a property in the Deepings and hopefully this could be arranged in the near future. Trevor Burdon was now the responsible officer; it was no longer Mike Smith.

Strategic Housing

The Corporate Director of Regulatory Services had covered this issue earlier on in the agenda.

Street Drinking

The findings of the Working Group had been circulated with the agenda. Councillor G Taylor who had been a member of the working group expressed regret that the group had not been able to achieve more progress on the subject. Stamford members then referred to problems experienced in Stamford with glass bottles being smashed in Red Lion Square on a Friday and Saturday night and young people drinking on the Meadows. It was suggested that the Corporate Manager Democratic and Legal Services be asked to look into how orders are made to ban drinking in certain areas and if it is possible for the Council to make their own orders. Reference was made to Nottingham where drinking had been banned in the town centre and in certain parks.

30. BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

A more recent copy of the BVPI's was circulated to members following the CMT meeting that had been held the previous day. The Corporate Director of Regulatory Services referred to various indicators where work was being undertaken but the outcomes would not show in the indicators for a few months e.g voids. Reference was made to rent collection which the Corporate Director of Regulatory Services said was a quarterly indicator and information would be available at the end of September.

31. WORK PROGRAMME

A copy of the work programme had been circulated with the agenda. The Scrutiny Officer referred to the work which the DSP was already undertaking but if any member had anything they wished to add to the programme to let him know. Reference was made to the Crime and Disorder Action Plan and it was suggested that street drinking be incorporated within the plan and Alan McWilliams be invited to attend a meeting of the DSP. The Scrutiny Officer suggested that the DSP may wish to hold a meeting in Stamford possibly at the Town Hall and invite the public to air their views on street drinking to which members agreed.

32. REPRESENTATIVES ON OUTSIDE BODIES

Members were circulated with a report from Councillor Mrs Wheat on the Community Care for the Elderly. A member referred to the problems being experienced in Stamford with the “meals on wheels” and a member suggested that the Town Council look at Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972 as this would be helpful in dealing with grants that Parish/Town Councils could issue.

33. ANY OTHER BUSINESS, WHICH THE CHAIRMAN, BY REASONS OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES, DECIDES IS URGENT

Members were reminded about the special meeting of the DSP which would take place on Thursday 13th October at 9.30am.

34. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 12.20pm.