

MEETING OF THE RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP

THURSDAY, 31 MAY 2012 2.30 PM



GROUP MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Jean Bevan
Councillor Michael Cook
Councillor Nick Craft (Chairman)
Councillor Phil Dilks

Councillor Bob Sandall
Councillor Trevor Scott (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Jacky Smith

OFFICERS

Head of Finance (Richard Wyles)
Head of Community Assets (Paul Stokes)
Property and Facilities Service Manager (Liz Banner)
Benefits Manager (Lee Sirdifield)
Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer (Carol Drury)
Principal Democracy Officer (Jo Toomey)

PORTFOLIO HOLDER

Councillor Terl Bryant (Portfolio: Good housing)

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

2. ACTION NOTES FROM THE MEETING HELD ON 29 MARCH 2012

The action notes from the meeting held on 29 March 2012 were noted.

3. UPDATE ON VOID PROPERTIES

The Head of Community Assets and the Property and Facilities Service Manager gave an update on void properties. A property became void from the time a tenant handed in their keys until they were handed over to the next tenant. In 2011/12 housing management and the improvements/repairs service had worked together to reduce the average time a property was void from 45 days to 30.42 days. A void factor of 1.5% was budgeted; at the end of the year a void rate of 1.28% had been achieved.

One aspect that could delay the re-letting of properties was identifying the

utilities suppliers. To improve efficiency, Councillors suggested exploring the provision of all utilities for all council properties by a single provider. This could be considered as part of the review of the tenancy agreement. It was also suggested a single company providing utilities for all public buildings could deliver savings.

Housing management had been working on a pilot scheme of multiple viewings, which had previously been recommended by the PDG. However, it was recognised that there needed to be better integration with the benefits section so that prospective tenants were fully aware of their financial responsibilities.

Recommendation:

That the Council explores using a single energy provider for utilities in council-owned properties, and if possible, all Council owned/leased buildings.

4. LOCALISATION OF COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT

At its meeting in January 2012, the PDG received a presentation on the localisation of council tax benefit; the Benefits Manager provided an update. The concept was introduced as part of the Government's spending review in 2010 as an opportunity to achieve 10% savings in council tax benefit expenditure, which equated to approximately £165,000 for the authority through a reduction in grant funding.

On 17 May 2012, the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) issued its Statement of Intent document and what would be expected of authorities. If authorities did not adopt their own scheme, they would automatically subscribe to the default scheme, which required maintaining current arrangements. This would mean that the district council would need to top-up the grant to maintain existing arrangements.

A local scheme would not have to provide the same level of council tax benefit as its current scheme. The only protected group prescribed was pensioners, which was clarified as anyone over the state retirement age. CLG also stipulated the need for authorities to consult on any local schemes. An Equality Impact Assessment would be required to identify potential impacts of altering levels of council tax benefit.

There were a number of discounts and exemptions that the district council applied in respect of council tax:

- Class A - properties undergoing construction or undergoing major alterations (currently 100% reduction for 12 months)
- Class C – unfurnished and unoccupied properties (currently 100% reduction for 6 months)
- Class L – mortgage repossessions (no charge – no time limit)
- Second homes – 10% reduction

Officers from South Kesteven were working with colleagues from around the county in order to potentially develop a Lincolnshire-wide approach to improve consistency in service and administration. A countywide scheme could cushion the impact of changes; an overspend in some authorities would be mitigated by an underspend in others.

If SKDC chose to adopt a local scheme, it would need to consult with the other precepting authorities (Lincolnshire County Council and Lincolnshire Police), who would stipulate their own collection arrangements.

Officers provided a timeline showing the steps needed for the Council to adopt a scheme. It incorporated the required consultation periods and decision-making processes. A scheme needed to be in place by 31 January 2013.

Discussion ensued about the possible impact on parish councils. Concern was expressed about those parish councils who had taken on other functions as a result of spending cuts in principal authorities.

Action point:

- 1. Organise a PDG working group for Monday 18 June 2012, 2:30pm**
- 2. Ahead of the working group meeting, officers should model different scenarios from the suggestions made at the meeting.**

5. FEES AND CHARGES STRATEGY

The Head of Finance presented report number HOF199 on the draft fees and charges strategy. The report captured the PDG working group's discussions. Councillors were asked to consider the draft strategy and:

1. Decide whether they agreed with the charging principle behind each service (pages 8-9)
2. The suggested definition of concessions (page 4)
3. Decide whether they agreed with the list of services at page 10 of the report, which could attract concessions.

PDG members agreed with the charging principle behind the majority of services. Concern was expressed over the cycle centre in respect of income raised through fees and charges against expenditure. It was suggested that opportunities to improve the facility's usage could improve its performance. Councillors agreed that potential alternative uses should be explored if uptake did not improve.

The charging principle behind green waste collections should be amended in the strategy to cost-recovery.

Councillors noted the impact of charging on bus companies' usage of the bus stations; high charges deterred bus companies.

Discussions ensued on concessions and the policies that had been applied by different services of the Council. Consideration was given to charges for arts

and entertainment events, leisure and recreational facilities and the Helpline service. The PDG agreed to consider the policy on concessions at its meeting on 2 August 2012.

Final recommendations would be presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 3 September 2012.

Action point:

- 1. Add an additional line to the strategy document on pages 8-9 to show net service costs**
- 2. Add fees and charges strategy to the agenda for the next PDG meeting on 2 August 2012**

Recommendation:

Given its poor use, the PDG recommends that Cabinet should explore cost recovery and potential alternative uses for the cycle centre in Grantham.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

The PDG noted report number LDS070 by the Chairman of the PDG. Key pieces of work for the PDG during 2012/13 included:

- Fees and charges strategy
- Car parking strategy
- Council Tax benefit – development of the local scheme
- Localisation of business rates
- Budget 2013/14

7. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting was closed at 17:07.