

MEETING OF THE RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP

THURSDAY, 25 JULY 2013 2.30 PM



GROUP MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Jean Bevan
Councillor Nick Craft (Chairman)
Councillor Alan Davidson
Councillor Nick Robins

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

PORTFOLIO HOLDER

Councillor Mike Taylor (Portfolio Holder: Strategic Resources – Well Run Council)

OFFICERS

Strategic Director, Corporate Focus (Daren Turner)
Head of Finance (Richard Wyles)
Head of Community Assets (Paul Stokes)
Property Development Manager (Neil Cucksey)
Community Engagement and Policy Development Officer (Carol Drury)
Principal Democracy Officer (Jo Toomey)
Performance Management Officer (Sam Selby)
Environmental Health Team Leader – Private Sector Housing (Anne-Marie Coulthard)
Revenues Manager (Jeanette Strutt)
Team Leader – Leisure and Amenities (Susie McCahon)
Policy and Corporate Support Officer (Alicia Lambley)

11. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

No interests were disclosed.

12. ACTION NOTES FROM THE MEETING HELD ON 30 MAY 2013

The action notes from the meeting held on 30 May 2013 were noted.

13. UPDATES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

Local Authority Mortgage Scheme

Council considered extending the scheme at its meeting on 11 July 2013. It agreed to a further deposit with Lloyds TSB Bank PLC of £1m, approved

Teachers Building Society as an additional lender, increased the maximum loan size per application to £147,250 and delegated authority to the Strategic Director Corporate Focus and the Portfolio Holder for Strategic Resources – Well Run Council to add new lenders to the scheme.

Small loan scheme and hardship relief

Cabinet was scheduled to take a decision on these business support measures at its meeting on Monday 5 August 2013.

14. EMPTY HOMES PROJECT

The Performance Management Officer, Environmental Health Team Leader (Private Sector Housing) and the Revenues Manager gave a presentation and answered questions on the Empty Homes Project. The project began in June 2013 and was scheduled to end in March 2014.

The presentation provided an overview of the project which was designed to bring homes that had been empty for 6 months or longer back into use. The Council had engaged a company to validate occupancy, carry out reviews and inspections to survey occupancy status and maintain the Council Tax database. The company would receive payment for homes successfully brought back into occupied use.

As part of their contact with landlords, the company highlighted the Council's grant scheme, which offered grants to bring empty properties to the decent homes standard. Any landlords who took advantage of the grant were required to charge rents no higher than the Local Housing Allowance Rates for a period of three years.

At the time of the meeting, 29 properties had been brought back into use.

The group discussed the presentation. Of particular interest to members was the grant scheme and proposals to increase the individual award value from £3,000 to £5,000. It was also proposed that if the property was sold within 5 years, there would be a requirement that the grant was repaid. Several members felt that the period within which a landlord was required to repay the grant following the sale of the property should be increased and questioned whether £5,000 was sufficient to complete necessary improvements. Members noted that the conditions of the grant needed to be balanced against its value. In response to a question, officers informed the PDG that the Council did not have the right to nominate tenants to landlords in receipt of grant funding. It could however signpost prospective tenants to the landlord.

Members asked about the Council's right to inspect properties that had been brought back into use. If the property had been the subject of grant funding the authority had the right to inspect it to ensure it met the decent homes standard. If a property was brought back into use privately, the Council would only have the right to inspect it if a tenant made a complaint.

It was noted that there was a decrease in the number of empty properties since the introduction of a premium charge to empty properties from April 2013.

15. MARKETS - UPDATE AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The Head of Community Assets and the Team Leader – Leisure and Amenities presented report number LA0002 which updated Councillors on the Market Development Plan. The Plan was developed in 2012 by Leisure and Amenities, Economic Development and Communications officers to address a decline in traders and to identify ways to attract new traders.

The Improvement Plan particularly concentrated on Grantham market, which had experienced a downturn during the market improvement works in 2011/12. Reference was made to a 'love your market' event in April 2013, which aimed to attract new traders by offering one-off incentives. Ten traders participated, two of which became casual traders for Stamford.

Officers had worked with market traders, which led to the Market Place being used as a venue for entertainment and demonstrations. This has helped increase footfall and slowed down potential customers. Work was also undertaken with shopkeepers in Westgate, who felt the visibility of their shops was compromised by market stalls.

Councillors discussed opportunities for different types of market. The monthly farmers' market created an uplift in interest in Grantham market, however there was no appetite amongst traders to increase its frequency. Traders from the Stamford craft market had been canvassed about attending similar markets in Grantham but there was little interest. Members referred to continental markets which had previously been held in the towns; officers informed them that negotiations were underway with potential providers.

Reference was made to mid-week markets in the Market Place. One stallholder had traded there when the facility became available. Although the space was not currently used, the opportunity was still being promoted.

PDG members asked questions about the extent to which traders used the Council's stall covers. They felt that encouraging uniformity could help improve the environment and suggested that an incentive scheme to get traders to use the Council's covers should be investigated. This could include a trade-in discount of their old stall covers.

Action point:

Investigate an incentive scheme to encourage traders to use the Council's stall covers.

16. CAR PARKING REVIEW

The Head of Finance and the Property Development Manager summarised report number HOF247 and addressed Members questions on car parking and the impact of civil parking enforcement (CPE) following its introduction in December 2012.

Officers had undertaken an analysis of ticket sales following the introduction of

CPE in comparison with the same period the previous year. Income from fines was lower than that which was collected previously. This was partly attributed to the fine level being lower than under previous arrangements and a two-month transitional period to encourage motorists to change their behaviour.

Since the introduction of CPE, there were common trends in changes to parking behaviour in Grantham and Stamford. Ticket sales for short-stay parking had decreased while long-stay ticket sales had increased. This was attributed to active enforcement of short-stay parking creating a higher turnover of on-street spaces and driving long-stay parking to car parks.

Based on the changes in parking behaviour resulting in reduced ticket sales, it was anticipated that by year end, income would be £70,000 below the budgeted level.

Despite the projected decrease in income, Members were pleased with the way CPE had influenced behaviour. In particular, feedback from residents in Stamford had been very positive.

Officers updated members on work to introduce alternative methods to pay for car parking. A Member/officer working group was being created to consider submissions from different suppliers and identify a preferred option. Resources PDG was invited to nominate two representatives to the working group. Two representatives would also be invited from the Communities PDG.

Action Point

To appoint Councillor Nick Craft and Councillor Jacky Smith to the working group to consider alternative methods of payment for car parking.

When the PDG had considered fees and charges prior to setting the 2013/14 budget, it had agreed to look at car parking at a later date. Members concurred that more data following the introduction of CPE was required on which they could base recommendations and agreed to consider car parking charges during the next round of budget-setting. Members suggested that the review should look at the structure of car parking charges with a view to setting charges for a two or three year period.

Action Point

- ***Resources PDG to consider the charging structure for car parking as part of the 2014/15 budget-setting process.***
- ***Officers to provide a breakdown of long stay and short stay car parking spaces available across the district.***

A brief update was given on the introduction of Parking Orders for Bourne. Officers had met with the Town Council, where opinion had been mixed. A meeting was scheduled between the Town, District and County Councils at the end of August 2013, following which work on the Orders could progress. It was hoped that the introduction and enforcement of maximum stay parking orders would lead to increased turnover of car parking spaces.

17. CORPORATE DEBT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The Corporate Debt Management Framework, which formed part of the Council's corporate Enforcement Policy was presented by the Head of Finance. Members were invited to discuss amendments to the policy which covered changes to council tax support and the spare bedroom subsidy. The Framework followed statutory processes and was designed to be both consistent and transparent.

The changes to Council tax support and the introduction of the spare bedroom subsidy meant that a greater number of people were required to make payments than under previous legislation. Officers working within the Revenues Service reported increased enquiries and requests for help. There was also an increase in the number of notices to start official proceedings. Additional staff resources had been allocated to the service to help with the increased demand. Negotiations were underway with Lincolnshire County Council about the possibility of them providing financial assistance to support additional resources that were necessary to meet the higher levels of demand.

Members noted that a small debt could quickly increase in size once formal proceedings started due to the associated costs. The framework provided a means through which the customer could work with the Council to agree arrangements for making repayments and prevent further costs being added to their account.

Councillors agreed with the Framework as it was presented. Members briefly considered whether it would be possible to offer staggered payments for those customers who had not previously been required to make payments. It was suggested it might be easier for people to accommodate a gradual reduction in their income rather than losing the full amount at once.

There was consensus amongst Members that it would be appropriate to carry out an equality analysis on the framework.

Action Point:

The Head of Finance to carry out an equality analysis on the Corporate Debt Management Framework prior to its implementation.

18. FINANCIAL REPORT FOR 2013/14 MONITORING INFORMATION AND SUMMARY OF OUTTURN POSITION 2012/13

Financial report for 2013/14 monitoring information

The Head of Finance presented report number HOF246 which provided financial monitoring information for 2013/14 to the end of May 2013 and provided a summary of the outturn position for 2012/13.

Members noted a slight variance in the underspend to date, which was attributed to accruals and year-end adjustments that needed to be made. A small underspend was also reported against the employee position. Officers

highlighted three areas which were not achieving their budgeted income (building control, development management and car parking). Active work was underway in building control and it was hoped that there would be an upturn in performance in-year.

The Housing Revenue Account was slightly below the budgeted position, while the void rate was showing improvement (0.86% against a budgeted level of 1.5%).

Within the capital programme, a spend of £590k was pending for the purchase of service land on which remedial work was being undertaken prior to completion.

Summary of outturn position 2012/13

The report highlighted variances in the outturn position from budgeted levels. The General Fund outturn was approximately £100k below the budgeted level. A number of set asides were being created to support work going into 2013/14 and to smooth out expenditure across financial years.

The HRA delivered as expected, which meant it was able to make the planned contribution to the loan repayment reserve and form an HRA improvement reserve of £500k.

With regard to the Capital Programme, the full HRA programme was completed and overspent by £400k due to increased work necessary to bring empty long term voids back into Housing stock use. The outturn for the general fund was £900k below the budgeted level, which was the result of long-term Grantham Growth Point programme.

19. WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was noted.

20. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting was closed at 16:12.