

Minutes

Community Service Scrutiny Panel

3rd October, 2007

Present: Councillors Howarth (in the Chair) Crooks, Laverick, Lightley, Mavin, Moderate, Norman, Robinson, D Smith, Taylor and Young.

Also Present: Councillors: Lodge and Thompson.
Mrs Anne Delandre – Housing Strategy and Development Manager.

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Laverick, Robinson and Walton.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5th September, 2007 were confirmed as a correct record.

3. Review of Homelessness – Rough Sleeping

3.1 Overview

3.1.1 The City of Durham's Housing Strategy and Development Manager, Mrs Anne Delandre was in attendance to speak to Members on the topic of Homelessness, in particular the issue of "Rough Sleeping", within the City of Durham District.

3.1.2 The Panel was informed that the current Homelessness Strategy would be reviewed in July 2008 (subject to Local Government Review).

3.1.3 The Panel was told that work towards securing better links and working relationships with Private Landlords was progressing well, with the formation of a "Private Landlord Forum". Over fifty private Landlords responded to the initial consultation and the Forum held its inaugural meeting in September. It is hoped that after an initial steer by the Housing Strategy and Development Manager Chair the initial three or four meetings that a Chairperson could be elected from the Landlords themselves. This Forum provides a useful platform in which the Council can approach Landlords and speak to them about various Housing issues and to this end there will be guests from the City of Durham at both the October and November meetings of the Forum. In October a representative from the Housing Benefits section will be in attendance, and in November a Rent Officer will speak to the Landlords. Details of the Forum have been made available to the public via articles in Durham City News and the Durham Advertiser.

NOTE: Councillor Thompson entered the meeting at 5.40 p.m.

3.2 Information Leaflet – Domestic Violence

- 3.2.1 As regards recommendation (ii) of the Review Report on Homelessness prepared by the Panel in January 2007 (relating to the issuing to all Members of information leaflets on domestic violence), it was felt that due to the limited number available to the City of Durham, it would be best to save them for those that genuinely needed the information. It was suggested that a copy of the leaflet could be taken for the Members' Room and/or be placed on "Members Online", and hence be available to Members.

3.3 Homelessness Prevention Officer

- 3.3.1 Recommendation (iii) of the Review Report on Homelessness stated that the Council aims retain the position of the Homelessness Prevention Officer beyond the date for which it is currently funded (March 2008). A report regarding the restructuring of the Housing Department should be submitted to Cabinet in October 2008, and it is hoped that the post would be made permanent. If so, then the normal recruitment process would be followed. If the post is not established, then it may be possible with some of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) funding the City of Durham receives to help continue to fund the post beyond the expiry of the fixed term contract.

3.4 Rough Sleeping

- 3.4.1 The Rough Sleeping Count is a requirement by statute and a Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI). The last count for the City of Durham was nil and Members were curious as to this low figure. Whilst this nil result was perhaps unexpected by Members, the result was no a surprise for those organisations that deal with the issues of rough sleepers. It was noted that any result of five persons or less allows for a period of five years in between these counts.
- 3.4.2 Based on the previous count result, and with the lack of evidence of any particular problem with rough sleepers in the City of Durham area, there was no need to bring forward the next mandatory count. Indeed as the cost of carrying out such a count is approximately £4,000 it was felt by Officers that the next count should be carried out at end of the period permitted.
- 3.4.3 Members were reminded that the Rough Sleeping Count was conducted over the course of a single night across forty one City Centre sites and some additional sites at Bearpark. Some Members intimated that they thought that the count may not have been taken over a large enough sample period. Members were informed that thorough research had been undertaken prior to the actual Count taking place to record the known and likely places used by those sleeping rough, i.e. liaising with relevant interested groups such as the Salvation Army, Durham Constabulary, Bus Depot staff etc. Also, a prolonged period for the Count, or a larger amount of people conducting the count, could have proved traumatic for anyone who was sleeping rough, damaging any working relationships that had been built up.
- 3.4.4 Councillor Thompson informed the Panel that he would bring up the topic at a upcoming meeting of the Durham Police Authority to ascertain whether the

issue of rough sleeping was perceived to be a large problem (further to the aforementioned meeting, Councillor Thompson reported back to the Chair of the Panel that whilst the Police were aware of some individuals that slept rough on occasion, there was not perceived to be a problem in the City of Durham).

- 3.4.5 The Housing Strategy and Development Manager informed Members that the members of the Homelessness Implementation Group meet on a six weekly basis with four “task groups” that also meet regularly.
- 3.4.6 The Housing Strategy and Development Manager informed Members that a meeting scheduled for the Homelessness Implementation Group 4th October, 2007 will include guests representing “The Big Issue”, a Distributor and a Seller. It is hoped that at this meeting, amongst other issues, that it may be possible to talk about rough sleeping.

3.5 End House – Moving On

- 3.5.1 Councillors noted that the Durham Young People's Centre at End House was to close as the building was being sold. Help had been given by the City of Durham, via the Portfolio Holder for Housing and the Community Development Section, but they were unsuccessful in locating suitable alternative accommodation. Within End House, “Moving On”, a charity which offers advice to 16-25 year olds on housing issues, has relocated to the Durham Miners’ Hall at Redhills. The City of Durham, through a DCLG grant, provide Moving On with funding as they deal effectively with the 16-25 year old demographic, an area which the Council has had difficult in dealing with in the past.
- 3.5.2 Moving On provides Peer Education Sessions and Life-Skill Workshops that can help young people to become more self sufficient and prepare them for the responsibilities associated with being a Tenant, whether that in the public or private sector. It therefore could be possible to refer any appropriate cases of rough sleeping to these sessions, with an ultimate aim being the rough sleepers secure a tenancy for themselves. Indeed, Moving On refers “good candidates” to the City of Durham and the Council can be confident that these individuals are aware of what they can expect, and what is expected of them as Tenants.

3.6 Homelessness – Mental Health Issues

- 3.6.1 Recommendation (v) of the Review Report on Homelessness stated that representatives from Durham County Council (DCC) and the Durham Primary Care Trust (Durham PCT) are invited to speak to the Panel as relation to metal health issues within the homeless community and about the support being made available. Whilst it was hoped that Ms Catherine Bleasdale from Durham PCT and a representative from Stonham Housing (an Agency that provides support for vulnerable people) would be in attendance at the meeting, unfortunately they were unavailable. It was suggested that they be invited to a meeting of the Panel in December 2007 or January 2008 to inform Members on the issue.
- 3.6.2 Some Members questioned whether there was an issue as regards the number homeless people with mental health problems that the City of Durham has to deal with.

The Housing Strategy and Development Manager pointed out that, whilst the number of individuals was relatively small, it often took a longer amount of time to help these individuals effectively due to their more complex situations. Often the solutions open to homeless people would be unsuitable for those with mental health issues. Members were reminded that advice and options can be given, but even if the best solution may be a place in a supported scheme, individuals may choose not to take this option.

4. Draft Report – Closed Graveyards

- 4.1 A copy of the revised draft of the Report on the Scrutiny of Closed Graveyards was attached to the agenda papers and Members were asked for their comments. The Chair noted that additions had been made at the request of Panel Members to note the appropriate appendices within the body text of the Report. Also that an additional paragraph (4.10) had been introduced following a meeting between City of Durham Officers, the Chair of the Panel and Mr Roger Norris, Durham Diocese Vice Chair of Churches. This paragraph relates to the contact details of the Durham Diocese Registry who are the relevant body to grant a Faculty should any works within a Church of England graveyard need to be carried out.
- 4.2 Also Members were asked to note a further recommendation (5.5) relating to copies of the Scrutiny Report being forwarded to Parish and Parochial Church Councils for their information and comment.
- 4.3 The Panel approved the Report and agreed that it should be forwarded to the Scrutiny Committee.
- 4.4 On a related matter, Councillor Lodge informed the Panel that he had looked for War Graves in the graveyard at St. Cuthbert's Church, North Road and could not find four of the graves as listed. Councillor Lodge wished to know whether, prior to contacting the War Graves Commission, the City of Durham knew of these apparent missing graves. Also Councillor Lodge whether the City of Durham, in the capacity of putting pressure on the relevant Authority, could help regarding the ongoing issue relating to the various graves at Brandon that had sunk due to the collapse of underlying tunnels from the now defunct Brandon Colliery. It was agreed that these issues be passed to the City of Durham's Street Scene Technical Officer to respond to Councillor Lodge direct.

5. Any Other Business

- 5.1 The Chair informed the Panel that the topic of Council House Repairs had been brought forward from its scheduled review date and would be looked into at the upcoming November meeting.

The Meeting terminated at 6.25 p.m.

REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

REVIEW OF SCRUTINY OF COUNCIL HOUSE REPAIRS

1. Background

Following the original Scrutiny as part of the Building Services Best Value Improvement Plan in July 2003, this topic had been reviewed by the Panel on a number of occasions. The last review had been carried out in March 2006, and at that time, a number of further recommendations had been made. It was agreed that progress on these recommendations be reviewed in October/November 2006.

2. Actions

The Head of Property Services, Head of Community Services and Operations Manager attended the Panel's meeting on 10th October 2006, together with the Portfolio Holder for Housing. Members were advised as to progress made towards the recommendations contained in their last report.

3. Outcomes

Staff Training/ Telephone System

Ongoing staff training, in conjunction with Property Services, was being given to CityInfo staff. There were now 21 full time trained repairs staff, together with 4 FTE part time staff, giving a total of 25. A new booklet giving tenants property details to assist them in reporting repairs was currently being prepared. Further training for staff would take place as this was introduced to tenants.

Three vacancies had now been filled, and a further 2 were being recruited. The Head of Community Services was confident that peak period demand could now be met.

Re-let Times

Information was circulated showing the 56% decrease in the repairs backlog. The Operations Manager explained how the figures had been achieved, and while the Head of Property Services acknowledged that these figures could be described as a 'snapshot' of the time they were produced, he confirmed that the necessary staff were available to bring about this reduction in the backlog.

The voids tracking system was working well, with Property Services having now taken responsibility for what were previously 'grey' areas. The process was becoming much more efficient, with properties being returned to Housing more rapidly. Details of void turnaround times for the last four years, together with information for the current year to date were circulated to Members. It was noted that the target for this year had already been achieved.

Computer Management System

A report had been submitted to Council in August 2006 regarding the procurement of new computer system.

4. Recommendations

- (i) That the Head of Property Services, Head of Community Services and their staff be formally thanked for their efforts in bringing about the improvements noted.
- (ii) That the topic of Council House Repairs be reviewed in early 2008, following the introduction of the new computer system, and the opportunity for staff to become accustomed to its use.

Community Services Scrutiny Panel
December 2006

**QUESTIONING PLAN
PLANNING SHEET**

TOPIC FOR SCRUTINY: Gypsy & Traveller Unauthorised Encampments
Purpose of Review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To look at problems surrounding unauthorised encampments of Gypsies and Travellers
Specific issues to be looked at <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Procedures and responsibilities involved.
Required Outcomes
Possible Risks <ul style="list-style-type: none">

KEY TASKS	
<p>Documents/evidence/research</p> <p><i>What?</i> County Council Accommodation & Support Needs of Gypsies & Travellers Local Development Framework Scrutiny Report of Permanent Encampments</p> <p><i>Why?</i></p>	When
<p>Consultation</p> <p><i>Who/what?</i></p> <p><i>Why?</i> T</p>	When
Witnesses	When

QUESTIONING PLAN

Who? Why?	
Project start date:	Draft report deadline: Project completion date: