

THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE SERVICE DELIVERY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON MONDAY 6 MARCH 2006

Present: Councillor D Raine (Chair)
Councillors S Bishop, D Chaytor,
A J Holmes, Mrs E Huntington,
Mrs A Naylor and C Walker

and T Taylor

Also Present: Councillor D Myers – Executive Member for
E-government and Scrutiny Liaison
Councillor A Collinson
Mr D Carpenter – Premier Waste

1. **APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE**

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor H High.

2. **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 13 February 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

3. **MATTERS ARISING**

(i) **Monitoring Performance of East Durham Homes
(Minute No. 5(i) refers)**

The Scrutiny Support Manager explained that in response to questions raised by Members, investigations had been undertaken and responses given to the individual Members concerned.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

(ii) **Complaints Analysis Report
(Minute No. 7 refers)**

The Scrutiny Support Manager advised that he had e-mailed the Management Team and requested that all service units report any thank you's received to Customer Services.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

4. **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 21 February 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

RESOLVED that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

5. **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

6. WORK PROGRAMME ISSUES

(i) HRA Housing Business Plan

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing Strategy which gave details of the progress achieved with the targets of the Housing Business Plan and the progress achieved with the transition of the Business Plan Working Group to the Housing Strategy Group, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Members were advised that the housing stock in 2001 had been 12,297 and the number of empty properties was 910, 7.4% of stock. The current housing stock figure was 9,328 properties as at February 2006 and the voids total was 433, 4.6% of the stock.

Details of the reduction over the last eight years was attached to the report at Appendix 1.

The operational context and role of the Housing Business Plan Working Group had changed and its remit now needed to be reviewed and changed accordingly. Government Office North East had recently confirmed that the HRA Housing Business Plan complied with the Government's highest assessment standard of fit for purpose.

Appendix 2 to the report was the monitoring report detailing the achievements made with the Business Plan targets.

It was proposed to change the Business Plan concept from operational activity to focus strictly as a Housing Strategy Group with a remit of monitoring, reviewing and overseeing the Council's wider housing role, including the development of a Housing Strategy, Older Persons Housing Strategy, Private Sector Housing Renewal and Partnership Working with Registered Social Landlords and Private Sector Housebuilders.

The Principal Policy Officer explained that two bids had been submitted for Argyle Place in South Hetton and Lee Terrace in Shotton and it was hoped that a decision would be received in the next two weeks. He added that he would keep local Members informed of the progress.

The Principal Policy Officer explained that the District Council was working together with all of the Durham Districts on reviewing lettings policies and the introduction of a choice based lettings system. Choice based lettings would be implemented on a phased approach, although a lot of work was still to be done. A project launch would be held on 16 March which included all key partners.

A Member queried if the Scrutiny Committees would be involved in the proposed changes to the Business Plan Working Group. The Principal Policy Officer explained that once agreement was received from the Management Team, the report would go through the political process for endorsement.

A Member queried how many homes fell into the Decent Homes standard category. The Principal Policy Officer explained that he did

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not have details to hand but would obtain the information and pass to the Scrutiny Support Manager.

A Member referred to Steering Groups involving all stakeholders for Eden Hill and asked who was involved. The Principal Policy Officer explained that the Steering Groups involved local residents, Members and dealt with issues in their locality. With regard to Eden Hill, a special meeting had been arranged for 23 March to look at options around the area. This area had been designated as an area that needed to be addressed. The Head of Planning and Building Control Services explained that there was a lot happening in North Peterlee and the Council were looking at a series of options.

T Taylor referred to long term voids that were being brought back into use and asked if Housing Strategy monitored how many long term voids there were. The Principal Policy Officer explained that Housing Strategy did monitor the long term voids and East Durham Homes had commenced a Marketing Strategy for rent.

T Taylor requested an update on what was happening with Hawthorn Square in Seaham. The Principal Policy Officer explained that there was to be no proposed changes and East Durham Homes were investing in some of the properties. People had been concerned regarding demolition works.

The Executive Member for E-government and Scrutiny Liaison explained that he was the local Member for Hawthorn Square and two meetings had been held with the Residents Association. The empty houses had been allocated and the residents were relatively happy.

The Chair thanked the Principal Policy Officer for his report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

(ii) **Planning and Building Control Quarterly Performance Report**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Planning and Building Control Services which provided information on the performance of the Planning and Building Control Services Unit, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The report was in an interim format pending the new Service Plan which would be in place by the end of the current quarter.

Details of achievements and non-achievements in the Service Plan, Best Value Performance Indicators, Strategy documents, Risk Management Action Plans and other tasks and targets were detailed in Appendix 1.

The Head of Planning and Building Control Services explained that the new development control system went live in December, achieving the appropriate Priority Service Outcome PSO G07 by the December deadline. As a result all 21 'Pendleton Points' were earned which would translate directly into Planning Delivery Grant for the coming year. The new system was still experiencing I.T. teething problems which could have an impact on performance during the current year.

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The remaining components of the new I.T. system including Building Control were on programme to go live in March 2006.

The Head of Planning and Building Control Services gave details of the performance in Development Control, Development Plans and Engineering and Countryside Teams.

The Head of Planning and Building Control Services explained that the moratorium on highways maintenance expenditure imposed by Durham County Council was still a concern and whilst alternative schemes had ensured continuity of work for highways operatives, the impact on budgets for the coming financial year still needed to be managed.

A Member referred to appeals against decisions and explained that a lot of Councillors were not fully aware of the procedure for submitting an appeal. He suggested at the next presentation to District Council, it would be helpful if this could be brought to Members' attention. The issue regarding unauthorised conservatories was also a major concern and it was suggested that an article be placed in Infopoint regarding the need to seek planning advice before building a conservatory.

A Member asked what the teething problems were with the I.T. system. The Head of Planning and Building Control Services explained that the introduction of the new system gave the opportunity to move work away from frontline staff to technical staff. This needed to be done in order to improve service standards.

A Member queried why Durham County Council had reduced the funding for Highways maintenance. The Head of Planning and Building Control Services explained that the District Council had managed the reduction very well in the current financial year but could only deliver services that resources were available for.

A Member referred to enforcement and asked if there was any progress on resourcing this further. The Head of Planning and Building Control Services explained that the report was currently being prepared which would address the issue of enforcement.

The Chair thanked the Head of Planning and Building Control Services for his report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

(iii) **Environmental Health and Licensing Unit Performance Report for the period 1 April 2005 to 31 December 2005**

Consideration was given to the report of the Environmental Health and Licensing Manager which provided information on the performance of the Environmental Health and Licensing Unit, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The work of the Environmental Health and Licensing Unit was divided according to teams and the report provided individual details:-

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(i) Commercial Enforcement Team

Details were given of food safety and infectious disease control, food premises inspection, complaints relating to food safety or food premises, cases of food related infectious disease and outbreaks of infectious disease, health and safety at work enforcement, pollution control, authorised process inspections, assessment of local air quality, investigation of pollution and noise complaints and contaminated land assessment.

The Environmental Health Officer post that had been vacant for 12 months had now been filled.

(ii) Licensing Team

The Licensing Team administered licences and enforced standards regarding taxis, public entertainments, lotteries and amusements and businesses involving animals.

With regard to the Licensing Act 2003, all licences and certificates applied for were processed and issued before the operational date. Despite an intensive targeted programme of information and education, one premises did not apply in time and found itself unable to trade after 24 November 2005, due to objections from local residents. The matter was heard before the Licensing Sub Committee and the premises finally opened in early December.

A joint enforcement protocol between the Police and the Licensing Authority was being progressed and should be in place early in 2006.

(iii) Environmental Enforcement Team

The Street Wardens now operated from Peterlee, Seaham and Easington Police Offices which was proving to have great benefits in promoting joint working with Police Beat Officers and Community Support Officers.

Details were given of joint patrols with the DVLA Enforcement Team and the number of spot fines issued for dog fouling. The number of fines was slightly below target but this could be attributed to resources being diverted to operating a free dog chipping scheme in partnership with the Dogs Trust which had resulted in 879 requests for free dog chipping.

The post of Environmental Services Manager (Enforcement) has now been filled and would be commencing employment on 13 March 2006.

(iv) Environmental Strategy Team

The post of Environmental Services Manager (Strategy) had been advertised once again and a suitable candidate had been

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appointed and would be commencing employment on 13 March.

The Environmental Health and Licensing Manager explained that tonnage of material collected via the Kerb It Scheme had increased by 25% on the previous year's figures and the participation rate was around 40%-45%. The green waste scheme had been extended to run into November and had now restarted. There had been a minor problem with the cold snap as this had caused the green waste to freeze in the bottom of bins and the operatives had been unable to collect the waste. 600 houses had been added to the scheme due to the green waste collection being upgraded to a larger vehicle. People who were not on the Green Waste Scheme were given a free garden composter and the Council would collect their waste free of charge.

It was estimated that the District Council would hit the target for recycling or composting 25% of all household waste generated in the District which greatly exceeded the Government's target of 18%.

The Environmental Health and Licensing Manager introduced David Carpenter from Premier Waste who had been invited to the meeting to answer any queries regarding the Kerb It Scheme.

D Carpenter explained that the Kerb It Scheme was going very well. At the end of 2004/05, 2560 tonnes had been collected and at present 3,000 tonnes had been exceeded and was up by 31% from the previous year.

Members were advised that there had been a record tonnage collected in January and was 70% up from the previous years average so the number of complaints received during January must be taken into perspective with the large number of tonnage collected. The crews were working long hours and rushing around to cope with the volume.

D Carpenter explained that the drivers did not monitor the put out rate exactly, they used a thumb count to estimate and at present it was 45-50%. Easington District had two vehicles collecting recycling but in the last nine months it had been necessary to use a third vehicle. Recycling was looking very positive and it was thanks to the Council using initiatives, for example putting stickers onto the bins, that had increased the tonnage overnight.

Members congratulated Officers on the increase in the tonnage but explained that when the Kerb It bins were emptied and left outside the house, on a windy day the boxes ended up blowing down the street. It was felt if the boxes were placed on the other side of the fence, this would solve the problem.

D Carpenter explained that the crew were carrying out the procedures correctly as they were meant to, turning the boxes

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upside down and this did reduce the box blowing away. He explained that he would ask the crews to go the extra mile on a windy day and put the boxes behind the fence. He explained that there was going to be a trial commencing to remove carrier bags from the black boxes and this should help with the problem of littering the streets.

The Environmental Health and Licensing Manager explained that if Members had any problems with the operatives collecting the Kerb It waste, details should be taken and reported to Envirocall. Premier Waste could then investigate the matter further.

A Member referred to licensing and asked if there was enough resources to provide efficient and effective enforcement. The Environmental Health and Licensing Manager explained that there was a Licensing Manager and three Enforcement Officers who would check the licensing premises and respond to complaints.

T Taylor referred to the closure of the rent offices and asked how payment could be made for special collections. The Environmental Health and Licensing Manager explained that members of the public could send a cheque through the post, pay at Easington Council Offices Cash Office or phone and use a telephone transaction.

T Taylor explained that a lot of people had no cheque books or credit cards and would have to travel to Easington to pay for a special collection and this was a matter of concern.

The Environmental Health and Licensing Manager explained that the special collections were to be reviewed that month and payment would be considered in that process.

T Taylor referred to permits for taking refuse to civic amenity sites and asked if it was possible for the District Council to issue them. The Environmental Health and Licensing Manager explained that the District Council had requested authority to issue permits but this had been declined by the County Council.

The Director of Community Services explained that there was only a small proportion of special collections that needed to be paid for and the vast majority was removed free of charge. Fly tipping was being monitored and more people were reporting incidents. Surveillance cameras were being used in hotspot areas and the Council would be prosecuting offenders.

The Chair thanked the Environmental Health and Licensing Manager and the Director of Community Services for their report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

9. **ADDITIONAL URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS**

In accordance with the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, Section 100B(4)(b) the Chair, following consultation with the Proper Officer, agreed that following items of business, not shown on the Agenda, be considered as a matter of urgency.

10. **COLLABORATIVE WORKING BETWEEN THE DISTRICT COUNCIL, PARISH COUNCILS AND EAST DURHAM HOMES (AOB)**

Councillor Collinson queried if there were any clearly defined procedures for removing fly tipping, street cleansing and litter picking in order to reduce duplication of work by Parish Councils, the District Council and East Durham Homes.

The Director of Community Services explained that East Durham Homes was not planning to do anything radical with the changes to their estate management procedures. The District Council would be speaking to them in relation to dovetailing in the Clean and Green Scheme. With regard to the spring cleans, the District Council and East Durham Homes worked side by side and the District Council worked very closely with Town and Parish Councils.

A Member commented that there was a very good partnership in Murton between the Parish Council and the District Council.

The Director of Community Services explained that there were a number of partnership schemes in operation with Parish Councils. A workshop would be held with Parish Councils to share good practice.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

11. **PROPOSED CLOSURE OF SUB POST OFFICES (AOB)**

The Chair explained that he had received a newspaper article from Councillor High regarding the potential closure of 10,000 Sub Post Offices by 2010. He explained that if this happened it would cause a lot of problems for the more vulnerable members of the community who did not have bank accounts.

It was suggested that a letter be sent to the two MP's for the area – J Cummings MP and Rt Hon Tony Blair – expressing the concerns of the Service Delivery Scrutiny Committee regarding the potential closure of sub post offices in the District.

RESOLVED that letters be sent to John Cummings MP and Rt Hon Tony Blair expressing concern regarding the potential closure of sub post offices in the District.