

MINUTES

Community Services Scrutiny Panel

5th December 2006

Present: Councillors Howarth (in the Chair), Hepplewhite, Hopgood, Kinghorn, Moderate, Robinson, Taylor, Wolstenholme and Young

Also Present: Councillors Bell, Cowper, Kellett, Lodge, Marsden, McDonnell, Smith and Thomson

Anne Delandre - Strategy & Development Manager (City of Durham)
Becci Gibson - Homelessness Prevention Officer (City of Durham)
Sean McDonnell - Project Manager (Durham Action on single Housing)

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Griffin and Walton.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 8th November 2006 were confirmed as a correct record.

3. Report on Review of Council House Repairs

The report was approved and it was agreed that it be referred to Scrutiny Committee for their consideration.

4. Report on Review of Council Garages

The report was approved and it was agreed that it be referred to Scrutiny Committee for their consideration.

5. Review of Homelessness

The Strategy and Development Manager, Homelessness Prevention Officer and Project Manager from DASH were in attendance to discuss progress made on this topic since the Panel's Report of January 2005.

Members were advised that all local authorities were required to produce a Homelessness Strategy, and that this was to be revised every five years. City of Durham's was due for review in 2008 and work on this had already commenced. The Strategy was monitored on a monthly basis, and outstanding actions had been prioritised. Four focus groups had been set up to progress these actions.

One focus group looked at issues to do with domestic violence. A Domestic Violence Co-ordinator had recently been appointed, and there was a multi-agency approach to dealing with this area. It was requested that the information leaflet on Domestic Violence be circulated to all Members for information.

The provision of moving on accommodation was considered by a second focus group. Problems occurred in providing this accommodation, particularly for people with additional needs e.g. people recently release from prison or young single mothers. Some limited floating support could be

arranged. The introduction of starter properties was being investigated, however this would require intense revenue support. Some funding may be available from the Supporting People Fund, and there was ongoing dialogue with various partners to try to raise the necessary funding. The Council was in a position to provide properties, but there was a reliance on outside agencies e.g. DASH, DISC and DART to provide additional services and support.

The Council had a duty to provide accommodation for homeless people with priority need but advice and help might also be given to some people who did not have priority.

With regard to temporary accommodation, DASH could provide accommodation and support for up to 28 days. As properties were vacated, there were usually other occupants waiting to move in.

A number of properties were available in the Gilesgate area for this purpose, and therefore the property at Redwood, Brandon was no longer needed and had been closed. It had also become a target for vandalism.

Note: Councillor Bell left the Meeting at 6.10pm

A post of Homelessness Prevention Officer had been created by the Council, paid for using Government funding. This post was funded until March 2008. If at this time, the funding was no longer available, the Authority would have to decide whether to retain the post and fund it. This post had been filled in June 2006, and to date, 106 cases had been dealt with, or were currently ongoing.

Homelessness prevention relied on having time to prevent someone becoming homeless e.g. through rent arrears or inability to meet mortgage payments. It was noted that there was a difference between those who were unable to pay and those who were unwilling. There was a need to identify those who were potentially vulnerable to losing their tenancy to provide early advice and assistance.

35 applicants had re-presented themselves as homeless in the last year.

The reasons for repeat homelessness were often complex and frequently related to domestic violence. Measures to prevent this relied on the combined working of Council Officers and support agencies.

A third focus group considered issues about the private rented sector, such as access to bonds, and where landlords requested say a month's rent in advance. It was noted that Housing Benefit did not always cover market rents being charged for some properties.

The fourth group were tasked with exploring funding opportunities. The skills and experience of the Council's Funding Officer was used for this.

A Member asked if the number of 'rough sleepers' in Durham was known and was told that the last survey in 2003 returned a nil outcome. Members requested that this aspect of homelessness be reviewed.

Note: Councillors McDonnell, Marsden and Kellett left the Meeting at 6.40pm

Note: Councillor Smith left the Meeting at 6.45pm

Members noted that, in respect of the recommendations made in their previous report, the Homelessness Strategy was being monitored, reviewed and revised, measures to prevent repeat homelessness were being developed, particularly by the new Homelessness Prevention Officer, partnership working with DASH, DISC etc continued to be developed, an additional member of staff had been appointed at Housing specifically to deal with homelessness prevention, and additional emergency accommodation was provided via DASH.

It was agreed that more information was required by the Panel on mental health issues and homelessness, and it was suggested the Durham County Council and the PCT be invited to a future meeting to consider this area. The Panel agreed that the post of Homelessness Prevention Officer was of great benefit, and should be retained by the Council, and felt a review of this topic in 12 months would be appropriate.

The Panel thanked officer and the DASH Project Manager for their attendance and helpful information. They were complimented for the energy and dedication that they brought to their work.

6. Any Other Business

There was no other business to discuss.

The Meeting terminated at 7.10 pm