

Minutes

Community Services Scrutiny Panel

Town Hall, Tuesday 8th November 2005 at 5.30pm

Present: Councillors Howarth, Griffin, Hepplewhite, Hoggood, Kinghorn, Moderate, Norman, Robinson, Walton and Young

Also Present: Councillors Cowper, Dickie, Kellett, Marsden, Pitts, Simmons and Turnbull

1. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 11th October 2005 were confirmed as a correct record.

3. Further Discussion on the Playing Pitch Strategy

The Chair advised Members that the Playing Pitch Strategy had now been recommended by the Scrutiny Committee for submission to Cabinet. The Panel wished, however, to continue to scrutinise certain aspects of the Strategy.

The Policy and Regeneration Manager was in attendance at the Meeting and he advised Members that the issues that had been noted for further scrutiny were generally consistent with those areas identified in the Strategy as weaknesses.

The Chair observed that these issues would broadly split into two areas:-

- (a) physical problems e.g. changing facilities, drainage issues and trespassing, and
- (b) links to other organisations.

Panel Members were asked by the Chair to split into two working groups, one to discuss the issues. Group A consisted of Councillors Kinghorn, Moderate, Robinson, Walton and Young. Group B comprised Councillors Griffin, Hepplewhite, Hoggood, Howarth and Norman. Non-Panel Members in attendance at the Meeting were given the choice to join whichever group they wished.

Notes of Group discussions are attached at Appendix A.

The Panel reconvened and the Chair asked Members if they felt additional meetings to discuss this topic were required to supplement the scheduled Meetings. Members were in agreement with this.

Note: Councillors Griffin and Pitts left the Meeting at 6.15pm

The Policy and Regeneration Manager advised Members that the weaknesses identified within the Playing Pitch Strategy were currently being investigated, and work on a Green

Space Study would be commencing shortly. Any issues identified as weaknesses on the Playing Pitch Strategy may also be included in this study. It was also noted that there was a need for more co-ordination between organisations providing coaching, playing facilities etc.

Members asked the Policy and Regeneration Manager to identify pitches where changing facilities are currently provided, and also which pitches are available and who uses them.

4. Actions for Next Meeting

- Arrange Speakers to attend future Meetings
- Arrange additional Meeting on this topic

The Meeting terminated at 6.30pm

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DRAFT 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

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

REVIEW OF SCRUTINY OF COUNCIL GARAGES

1. Background

The topic of Council Garages was considered by the Community Services Scrutiny Panel in 2005, following concerns that some garages were being used inappropriately.

The Panel's report and recommendations were approved and adopted by Cabinet in October 2005, and the Policy on Council Garages was approved in September 2006. The topic as a whole was due for review in November 2006.

2. Actions

The Council's Housing Manager was in attendance at the Meeting on 8 November 2006 to update the Panel with developments since the adoption of the recommendations in the report, and provide a summary of work undertaken since the July Meeting of the Panel, where the Policy and Tenancy Agreement were agreed.

3. Outcomes

The new Policy and Tenancy Agreement were approved by Cabinet in September 2006. All new tenants since 1 October 2006 have signed this Agreement.

Additionally, one of the recommendations in the report of October 2005 was that all existing tenants sign the new Agreement. The Rents Section is currently reviewing garage tenants' rent accounts so that any action which could lead to termination of the tenancy can be taken before the new Agreements are issued by Housing to tenants for signature. The new Agreement will be sent to existing tenants during December 2006, and it is anticipated the process of having them all signed will be a fairly long one. It is hoped all garage tenants will have signed the new Tenancy Agreement by the beginning of the next financial year. Also, as requested by Members, tenants are being asked to report any inappropriate used of garages of which they are aware.

Housing Officers are continuing to try to let empty garages, and the future of those garages where there is no demand is being considered. For example, three garages had recently been demolished in Esh Winning due to anti-social behaviour issues.

A programme of regular inspections had been recommended by the Panel. Unfortunately, this had not been possible to implement due to limitation of resources. Although understanding the nature of this problem, Members continue to express concern about this.

4. Recommendations

In view of issues noted in the report, and progress made so far, the Community Services Scrutiny Panel recommend the following:-

- (i) That the Review Report be accepted.

- (ii) That thanks be expressed to staff who have worked towards achieving the Recommendations contained in the Scrutiny of Council Garages Report, as approved and adopted by Cabinet in October 2005. The writing of a Policy and administration of the New Tenants' Agreement were particularly commendable.
- (iii) The need for resources to be made available for the development of inspection routines was re-emphasised, and twice yearly inspection was recommended, Members having expressed concern that due to resource implications it had not been possible for a system of regular garage inspection to be established.
- (iv) That the topic of Council Garages be reviewed again in January 2008.

Community Services Scrutiny Panel
December 2006

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REPORT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

Homelessness Scrutiny

The Panel was tasked with scrutinising the Homelessness Service for Durham City Council.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Council is legally obliged to assist person who present themselves as homeless, whether by providing them with advice, housing or such other support as they may require.
- 1.2 On 23rd February 2004 the Scrutiny Committee tasked the Community Services Scrutiny Panel with looking at the service which is provided to the homeless in the Durham City district.

2. Aims

- 2.1 The aim of the Scrutiny was to look at the service offered to the homeless and see if there were areas of delivery that could be improved.
- 2.2 The Panel also wanted to see what the Council were doing to try and reduce homelessness through prevention.
- 2.3 It was felt that it would be necessary to talk to other agencies to get an independent view of the service offered and advice on what could be done to improve the service.

3. Actions / Information Gathered

- 3.1 A preliminary meeting identified that it would not be appropriate to limit the remit of the scrutiny to an examination of BVPI 183 (a) and BVPI 183 (b) identified within the Council's Corporate Performance Plan as these indicators covered only a small part of the homelessness service (Bed and Breakfast accommodation).
- 3.2 In the financial year 2003 / 2004 the homelessness figures for Durham were:-
 - 359 applications. Of these:-
 - 212 identified as homeless and in priority need
 - 146 were pregnant or had dependant children
 - 20 were homeless, in priority need and intentionally homeless
 - 97 were homeless with no priority need
 - 30 were not homeless

Homelessness Strategy

- 3.3 The Panel were advised of the legal requirements before an applicant could be considered as homeless, and the tests which Housing Officers needed to apply to determine whether the applicant was homeless, and if so, whether there was priority need. The Panel learned that the Council only has a duty to provide emergency accommodation to those who are homeless and in priority need. Further, the person must approach the Council for assistance.

3.4 There are four main Government set targets that the Council must achieve in respect of homelessness:-

- Reduce rough sleeping
- Reduce reliance on B & B accommodation for families with children
- Reduce the main causes of homelessness
- Reduce repeat homelessness

3.5 It was confirmed that there is a requirement for the Council to have a Homelessness Strategy to help achieve these targets and that, for this to be prepared, the Council employed consultants to do a review of the service in 2003. The same consultants were then employed to write the Homelessness Strategy for Durham City Council.

Homelessness Action Plan

3.6 The Homelessness Strategy was adopted by the Council in 2003 and lasts until 2008. A 5 year Action plan was developed as a result of the strategy. T The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has declared that the Homelessness Review and Homelessness Strategy are satisfactory. It appears that the Action Plan is being followed and the Homelessness service is as a result improving. The Panel received information as to recent progress and forthcoming action. It particularly welcomed the delegation of responsibility for homelessness to one officer to enable closer case monitoring and supervision. The desire to provide floating support and more housing advice was noted.

Other Agencies

3.7 The Panel also heard from a representative from Centrepoin, a charity which is concerned with the provision of housing for people. The charity is based in London but works all over the country and although not providing housing in Durham, they are involved in working with local authorities to improve the homelessness service in that they develop relationships between agencies such as District Councils, County Council and other charities. The representative suggested that the Council should consider offering supported accommodation for vulnerable people to prevent repeat homelessness, or at worst a tenancy support officer such as that employed by wear Valley District Council.

3.8 A Housing Action Partnership comprising the County Council, Supporting People and the seven District Councils of County Durham has been formed in the Durham area and this group has been successful in securing funding to provide a Mediation service for the homeless and potentially homeless in County Durham.

3.9 The Panel also visited the Council's emergency temporary accommodation in Gilesgate and Brandon to see for themselves the level of accommodation which was being offered. An additional unit is planned subject to availability.

4. Outcomes

4.1 The Homelessness Review appears to be a comprehensive and accurate statement of the Council's position when the review was carried out.

4.2 The Homelessness Strategy seems to address all of the issues raised in the Review and is programmed for implementation through the Action Plan.

4.3 The Council seems to be working well with other Local Authorities and relevant agencies to improve the provision of services to the homeless and potentially homeless in County Durham.

4.4 The standard of emergency temporary accommodation which is offered by the Council is good and those making use of the facilities appear to appreciate the service they are being offered.

4.5 The Panel are indebted to all those who contributed to the scrutiny process.

5. Recommendations

5.1 That the Council should continue to progress and monitor the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan

5.2 That measures to prevent repeat homelessness, should continue to be developed.

5.3 That the development of Partnership working should continue to be encouraged.

5.4 That the adequacy of resources within the Housing Section should be reviewed to support the future monitoring and supervision of the Service.

5.5 That the Council should progress the provision for additional emergency accommodation as soon as possible.

5.6 That the Panel review the progress of the Homelessness Action Plan within two years.