

**MINUTES**

**Community Services Scrutiny Panel**

**5<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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



## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**

#### **REVIEW OF SCRUTINY OF HOMELESSNESS**

##### **1. Background**

The Council is legally obliged to assist anyone who presents themselves as homeless, whether by providing advice, housing or other support.

The Homelessness Strategy was prepared in 2003, and was one of the areas looked at when the Panel considered Homelessness in 2004. The Panel's report was approved and adopted by Cabinet, with a recommendation that it be reviewed within two years.

##### **2. Aims**

The Panel wished to consider what progress had been made towards the recommendations made in their last report on this topic, and also to consider any further recommendations that could be made in light of further information that was presented to them.

##### **3. Actions**

The Strategy and Development Manager, Homelessness Prevention Officer and Project Manager from DASH attended the Panel's meeting on 5 December 2006 to update Members with progress.

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.

###### **(a) Domestic Violence**

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.

###### **(b) Moving-on Accommodation**

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.

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.

(c) Private Rented Sector

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.

(d) Funding Opportunities

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

#### **4. Outcomes**

In respect of the recommendations made in the 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 felt that additional 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.

According to a previous survey the number of people said to be sleeping rough in Durham was recorded as nil. The Panel questioned whether this was the case and asked that this be reviewed.

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.

## 5. Recommendations

- (i) That the Council continues to progress and monitor the Homelessness Strategy an Action Plan and works with Partners to provide support and prevent repeat homelessness.
- (ii) That the information leaflet on domestic violence be circulated to all Members for information.
- (iii) That the Council aims to retain the position of Homelessness Prevention Officer beyond the expiry of the fixed term contract in 2008.
- (iv) That the Review of Rough Sleeping be updated, possibly by the subject being brought to the attention of the county-wide Housing Action Partnership.
- (v) That representatives of Durham County Council and County Durham PCT be invited to attend a Panel meeting to discuss homelessness in relation to mental health issues and support provision, and that this be arranged for six months' time.
- (vi) That the Panel receives and update on the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan after they have been reviewed by the Authority in 2008, the Panel's recommended review date being July 2008.

Community Services Scrutiny Panel  
January 2007





## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **DRAFT REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**

#### **SCRUTINY OF GYPSY/TRAVELLER SITES**

##### **1. Background**

In September 2005, the Head of Planning Services presented a report to Cabinet on 'Preferred Options Report for Housing', which identified potential options for future planning policy for housing within the District. The preferred options as set out in the report were agreed. One of these options was to 'seek one additional gypsy/traveller site within the Durham City district'.

The topic had been suggested for Scrutiny to allow further assessment of the District and County prospective with regards to Gypsy and Travelling communities.

##### **2. Aims**

The aims of the Scrutiny were:

- To build up more accurate knowledge of the local provision for Gypsies and Travellers, additional services that may be required and the effects;
- To consider the effects of either, providing or not providing, one additional site in the Durham City District, as per the Authority's original preferred option;
- To review the current provision across the district and evidence of need;
- To discuss alternative approaches to accommodation provision;
- To make recommendations based on the above factors.

##### **3. Actions**

During the planning of this Scrutiny, a number of witnesses were suggested. Accordingly, following a presentation by the County Council's Welfare Rights & Travellers Liaison Team Manager and the City Council's Policy and Regeneration Manager at the commencement of the topic, the following witnesses attended various Panel Meetings and provided information:-

- Neil Laws - Environmental Health Manager (City of Durham)
- Lynne Boyd - Housing Manager (City of Durham)
- Richard O'Neil - Consultant on Gypsy/Traveller Issues
- Sue Green - Co-ordinator – Ethnic Minority and Traveller (Durham County Council)  
Achievement Service
- Martin Woods - Consultant on Gypsy & Traveller Needs Assessment

The Panel also felt that it would be beneficial to visit a high quality gypsy/traveller site for comparison. Unfortunately, the lack of such a site locally made this impossible.

##### **4. Outcomes**

*N.B. Evidence of witnesses to be summarised with more detailed documentation in Appendix, but likely to draw attention to our findings re:*

- Brief statement of the National picture
- Diversity of the travelling communities

- Summary of needs of the settled and travelling communities and effects of unauthorised encampments
- Durham City Council current site provision
- Local Authority's legal requirements
- Addressing Educational obligations and needs of Ethnic Minority and Traveller Children;
- Views on the 'one additional site' option
- Alternative forms of provision
- Need to await the outcomes of Durham County Council (and poss. NE Assembly) Gypsy/ Traveller Needs Assessment
- Acknowledgement of the complexity of the situation and need for Durham City District to take positive steps to work with DCC in a joint approach to Traveller provision

## **5. Recommendations**

In view of the evidence presented, the Community Services Scrutiny Panel recommend:-

(i) That Option 2 in the 'Preferred Options Report for Housing', as presented to Cabinet on 12 September 2005, should not be pursued.

(ii) That in preparing the submission version of the Planning for Housing, the present preferred option be replaced by a more general approach to Gypsies and Travellers that will take account of the benefits of providing well appointed, smaller, more diverse sites.

(iii) That consideration be given to more innovative ways of providing small transit sites, including private sector approaches and possible public/private partnership.

(iv) That a detailed, but not site specific, policy be drafted that would take account of the emerging County and District wide consultation on the Needs Assessment for Gypsies and Travellers.

(v) That this Authority seeks to work positively with the Durham County Council and other District Councils across the County.

(vi) That all witnesses who presented information, and shared their views with the Panel, be thanked for their helpful contributions to the Scrutiny.

(vii) That the Scrutiny be reviewed at an appropriate time after the County Council Needs Assessment has been made available and no later than January 2008.