

THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE REGENERATION SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON MONDAY 10 DECEMBER 2007

Present: Councillor D Raine (Chair)
Councillors S Bishop, Mrs S Forster,
H High, A J Holmes, Mrs B A Sloan,
D J Taylor-Gooby and C Walker

Also Present: Councillors A Napier, B Quinn and R J Todd

1 **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 19 November 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

2 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

(i) **PCT - Big Conversation (Minute No 8 refers)**

Councillor D J Taylor Gooby reported that he had attended a consultation event held by the PCT to develop plans for health and health care priorities to be commissioned over the next 5 years, details of which had been circulated to each Member.

Details of the main issues discussed were outlined and the two main issues, which were seen as priorities, were as follows;

- to ensure the “levelling up” of services within County Durham was not at the expense of services that were scheduled for Easington being withdrawn.
- to ensure that projects such as the Wheatley Hill Clinic and Peterlee Urgent Care Centre were honoured.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

3 **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 27 November 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

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

4 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

(i) **Renewal of the Contract for the Kerbside Collection of Materials for Recycling (Minute No 8 refers)**

Councillor H High referred to the Executive’s decision related to the award of the contract for the kerbside collection of materials for recycling and to the waiving of the call-in process in respect of this decision. He indicated that a full explanation had been given at the Council meeting held on 6 December 2007 as to the reasons why the waiving of call-in had been agreed.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

5 PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no members of the public present.

6 FEEDBACK FROM SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD

At the last meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board held on 3 December 2007 the following issues were discussed: -

- (i) Waiving of call-in in relation to the renewal of the contract for the kerbside collection of materials for recycling;
- (ii) Scrutiny review of East Durham Local Strategic Partnership

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

7 SERVICE UNIT PERFORMANCE REPORTING – HOUSING SERVICES

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing which provided performance information in respect of East Durham Homes (EDH) and the housing service for the first two quarters of the current financial year, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The Head of Housing explained that the Council's housing service unit was made up of the following: -

- Housing Renewal;
- Housing Policy and Strategy;
- Supported Housing;
- Service Support.

Members were advised that all service areas managed by EDH and those in the housing service were subject to performance monitoring, details of which were set out in Appendix 1 and 2 to the report.

It was explained that it had previously been practice to set performance targets annually, however from April 2007 targets had been profiled on a quarterly basis, with the exception of those indicators that were collated annually. This would produce a more robust performance monitoring system particularly in areas where there might be seasonal fluctuations or planned work at various times throughout the year.

Information was also provided which showed the performance of EDH and the housing service in relation to other organisations. Also included were trends in performance from the end of the 2nd quarter 2006/2007 to that at the end of the 2nd quarter 2007/2008.

Councillor B Quinn expressed concern at the number of empty private properties and asked what action the Council would be taking to tackle this. I Morris advised that the vacant post of Empty Homes Officer had been filled and together with

enforcement powers available to the authority in relation to empty dwellings within the District it was hoped to reduce the number of empty properties.

Councillor D J Taylor Gooby queried the position in relation to affordable housing. I Morris advised that the Council had agreed that all new housing development schemes should include an element of affordable housing. The target was 20% on all developments over 15 units.

The Chair referred to the Landlords Accreditation Scheme and the possibility of it becoming compulsory. I Morris stated that there were 116 accredited landlords covering 519 properties within the District. With regard to a compulsory scheme it was explained that an application had been made to the Secretary of State and the process involved was outlined. If successful it would be run as a pilot then rolled out to other areas of the District. Any landlord who owned property and wanted to let it out would need a licence and this would involve checks on the property and the landlord being vetted.

Councillor A J Holmes referred to the 100% customer satisfaction result and asked how many people had actually been surveyed. It was explained that everyone who used the service had been surveyed and whilst I Morris did not have the exact figure this could be provided for Councillor Holmes following the meeting.

AT THIS POINT COUNCILLOR MRS B A SLOAN AND D J TAYLOR GOOBY DECLARED A PERSONAL AND PREJUDICIAL INTEREST AND LEFT THE MEETING.

With regard to EDH there had recently been a review of the 17 key indicators previously selected for monitoring purposes, which comprised 5 Best Value Performance Indicators and 12 locally agreed indicators. Following the review there were now 18 key indicators selected for monitoring that comprised 5 Best Value Performance Indicators and 13 locally agreed indicators, details of which were outlined in the report.

Appendix 1 to the report set out EDH performance against these indicators and targets which had been set.

To summarise, 9 of the 15 indicators were on target, 2 were within the 5% tolerance and 4 were not on target. Of the 7 indicators where benchmarking information was available 1 represented upper quartile performance and 6 represented median quartile performance. In comparison to performance at the end of the 2nd quarter 2006/2007 there had been an improvement in 12 of the indicators and a reduction in 2. There was no information for the other indicator, which had previously been collated annually.

Overall there had been a significant improvement in performance in relation to the key indicators that were monitored. With regard to the 4 key indicators where targets had not been met, details were provided in Appendix 1 to the report.

Councillor B Quinn referred to the high level of rent arrears and the importance these played in the Council achieving 2 star status. I Morris advised that the trend indicated there was an improvement but this was no guarantee to achieving 2 star status. P Tanney, Chief Executive of EDH advised that this was a good indication which would help to achieve 2 star status however it was not the only significant factor and there were other equally if not more important indicators that would be taken into account.

Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee – 10 December 2007

Councillor B Quinn pointed out that the number of lettable voids had decreased. P Tanney advised that in relation to void performance 120 lettable voids had been reduced to 54 and was continuing to improve. It was explained that in the past a quota system had been in operation where only so many voids were completed per month. Discussions were currently being held with the Director of Finance to release funding to carry out more, as it was false economy to leave properties stood empty. I Morris advised that there were various issues around the void budgets which needed clarification. P Tanney explained that there were a number of different targets within the overall target for lettable voids and whilst some of the sub targets were not hit the overall average relet time was reducing.

Councillor A Napier queried the target of 45 days for the average relet. I Morris advised that initially this target had been stretching but achievable however, the target had been exceeded at the end of the 2nd quarter and was 34 days. P Tanney advised that targets were set at the start of the financial year and were based upon previous years performance. Over the next 3 years it was hoped to achieve upper quartile performance and discussions were being held with the Director of Finance to consider how investment could be financed to allow performance to move towards top quartile. In order for this to be achieved proper resourced plans were needed to achieve real service improvements.

Councillor H High expressed concern in relation to the performance indicators which had been deleted. I Morris explained that a number of the key indicators were a duplication of each other and there was no merit in measuring both. This had resulted in a number of indicators being deleted and others, which were more relevant, being added.

Members were advised that in the first two quarters of 2006/2007 EDH received a total of 166 complaints of which 75 were found to be justified. A breakdown of complaints by service area was outlined in the report. During the same period there were a total of 53 complaints received across most of the service areas.

I Morris advised that with regard to the Capital Programme at the end of the 2nd quarter the overall spend was below that projected but not of such an order to be of concern. Action had been taken to bring the spend back into alignment with the profile in the 3rd quarter.

Councillor B Quinn made reference to a scheme at Chapel Hill I and II where 110 houses were scheduled to have PVC windows installed. Initial works on other schemes had uncovered problems which resulted in the scheme being delayed. Councillor Quinn acknowledged the budget situation but was concerned that tenants had not been advised of the situation and had expected the scheme to start in September. Councillor S Bishop advised that he was unaware of the problems with this scheme and felt tenants should have been made aware of the situation as well as local Members. In reinforcing these comments, the Chair stressed that poor communication between EDH and tenants affected not only the company's reputation but also that of local Ward Members. He also stated that whilst he was aware of procedures in place within the company for dealing with Councillor complaints, these often failed proving an additional source of frustration for Members.

P Tanney advised that it was unacceptable that tenants who expected a scheme to start in September had not been advised of the delay. It was an issue that would need to be investigated and in future tenants and local ward Members would be kept up to date. Councillor R J Todd asked if an amount had been put aside for contingencies. I Morris advised that historically a contingency budget was set

Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee – 10 December 2007

however against a budget of £8.5M this was very small. Councillor R J Todd advised that slippage on such schemes was damaging to the Council's reputation.

There had been a review of the 28 key indicators from the housing service that had previously been selected for monitoring purposes. Following the review there were 30 Key indicators, which comprised 5 Best Value Indicators, and 25 locally agreed indicators, details of changes were outlined in the report.

In summary 2 of the 30 Key indicators were collated annually. Of the remaining 28 there were 23 on target, 1 was within the 5% tolerance and 4 were not on target. Of the 3 indicators where benchmarking information was available 1 represented upper quartile performance and 2 represented median quartile performance.

In comparison to performance at the end of the 2nd quarter 2006/2007 there had been an improvement in 12 of the indicators, performance had remained the same for 6 and there had been a reduction in 4. There was no information available for 6 of the indicators that were only introduced this year and the other 2 were collated annually. Of the 4 indicators that were not on target performance had improved in 3 of these in comparison to the same period last year and there was no information available for the other indicator.

Councillor H High referred to the number of complaints resolved to the satisfaction of complainants. I Morris outlined the Council's complaints procedure and P Tanney outlined the various stages of EDH complaints procedure.

Councillor A J Holmes referred to the 75 complaints that were found to be justified. I Morris explained that out of 8,500 properties a total of 166 complaints were received and only 75 were found to be justified. This was not felt to be an unacceptable figure and proved that when things went wrong action was taken.

I Morris stated that all the Best Value Performance Indicators were subject to internal scrutiny.

P Tanney proceeded to cover issues related to EDH which included project groups, performance monitoring, budget deficit and future actions.

Councillor B Quinn referred to work which was undertaken by EDH on behalf of DAMHA and Three Rivers Housing which had been highlighted by the Audit Commission. P Tanney advised that work was still undertaken on behalf of Three Rivers and acknowledged that issues associated with this had been criticised by the Audit Commission.

Councillor B Quinn asked if there was any internal scrutiny of EDH. P Tanney explained that there was no formal internal scrutiny process but there was a formal committee and board structure in place and there was adequate external scrutiny and for individual Member complaints there were procedures in place.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance at the meeting.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.