

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 4 March 2010

PRESENT: Councillor John Batchelor – Chairman
Councillor James Hockney – Vice-Chairman

Councillors: Val Barrett
Liz Heazell
Mike Mason
Bridget Smith

Roger Hall
Mervyn Loynes
Deborah Roberts
Bunty Waters

Councillors David Bard, Trisha Bear and Charles Nightingale were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers: Patrick Adams
Andy Glaves
Stephen Hills
Jo Mills
Jackie Sayers

Senior Democratic Services Officer
Home-link Manager
Corporate Manager, Affordable Homes
Corporate Manager, New Communities
Scrutiny Development Officer

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Janice Guest and Julia Squier.

33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Bridget Smith declared a personal interest in the item on Youth Participation Strategy.

34. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 February 2010 were agreed as a correct record.

35. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None.

36. YOUTH PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

Councillor David Bard, Portfolio Holder for New Communities, introduced this draft Strategy which sought to provide clear guidance for the Council to translate the good intentions, Government guidelines and local authority strategies into meaningful effective ways for children and young people to be represented and influence the decision-making process.

Use of resources

He explained that the Strategy was a work in a progress and the Council had limited resources in this area not least due to redundancies in the New Communities section. In response to the suggestion that the Council was taking on too much, Councillor Bard explained the importance of working in partnership with other authorities on the issue of youth participation. It was suggested that there were insufficient resources available to set up a cross-departmental Children and Young People's Group to co-ordinate youth participation. It was unclear how much could be achieved if the bid for external funding for the projects in the Strategy was unsuccessful.

Councillor Bard explained that the expression "children and young people" meant

anyone under the age of 18 or up to 25 if they had learning difficulties.

Format of the strategy

Members of the Committee made the following suggestions regarding the format of the Strategy:

- It needed to be more concise and written in plainer language
- Voluntary groups, such as the scouts and guides should be included
- Reference should be made to the 2012 Olympics
- It needed to include a summary
- It needed to contain a greater number of specific examples
- It needed to highlight how it would benefit young people

Youth participation projects

The Committee welcomed the number of participation projects detailed in section 3.2 of the report. Councillor Bard explained that success could be measured by the number of youth participating in a project.

Youth participation in parishes

It appeared that not all villages had received the same level of support. Surprise was expressed that only five parish councils had showed an interest in receiving further support from the Youth Participation Officer.

Next steps

The Corporate Manager for New Communities explained that the Strategy linked to the Service Plan and also to the Council's Action for 2010/11 regarding positive activities for young people that she welcomed feedback. It was understood that the author of the Strategy had taken voluntary redundancy and that within the new service structure, the lead development officer for young people would be Tracy Mann. It had just been reported that the joint-funded Youth Participation Officer post, who was employed by Romsey Mill, would shortly be taking up a new position.

Conclusion

It was **agreed** that the Committee should receive this Strategy again, but in a simpler and more concise form, with specific examples of how the Strategy would benefit young people.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Bard and the Corporate Manager – New Communities for their attendance and informative answers.

37. PRESENTATION FROM THE HOUSING PORTFOLIO HOLDER

This item was discussed after the item on the Choice-Based Lettings Policy.

Councillor Mark Howell gave a brief presentation on his responsibilities as Housing Portfolio Holder. He warned that the Council operated within the rules set by Supporting People and it was unknown what changes they would implement in the future.

Sheltered Housing's kitchens

It was understood that staff were required to go on a hygiene course to allow the kitchens in the Sheltered Housing complexes to continue to be used. A press release to this effect had been issued.

Tenant outings

In response to questioning Councillor Howell explained that the Council's Wardens

encouraged residents to organise their own outings, as Wardens could no longer organise these events themselves, due to changes introduced by Supporting People, which placed an emphasis on empowering older people to do such things for themselves as far as possible.

Travellers

Councillor Howell explained that he was the Lead Member for Travellers, for issues unrelated to planning, and he assured the Committee that the Council treated the Travellers equally, and he challenged any suggestion that they were treated either favourably or unfavourably compared to other residents.

Equality

Councillor Howell explained that the Corporate Governance Inspection of 2007 had rightly identified equality as an area in which the Council needed to improve, but since then an Equalities Officer had been appointed and improvements had been made. He reported that more work was to be done and that a Peer Review Equality Assessment would be carried out this summer.

Tenant representation

Councillor Howell explained that there were no immediate plans for an elected tenant board; he added that we have high levels of tenant satisfaction.

Areas for future input by the Committee

In response to questioning the Corporate Manager, Affordable Homes suggested that the Committee might look at work on a new regulatory framework for housing, which was to be introduced during 2010/11.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Howell and the Corporate Manager for Affordable Homes for their attendance and informative answers.

38. SCRUTINY OF CHOICE-BASED LETTINGS (CBL) POLICY

Councillor Mark Howell, the Housing Portfolio Holder, presented this item which reviewed the actions already in place under the Home-Link scheme to ensure all applicants are able to access the scheme. It was noted that bids could be made by telephone, text or by website. Councillor Howell explained that the Council's Choice-Based Letting scheme was one of the best in the country and the Home-Link Manager acted as a mentor to other local authorities seeking to emulate our scheme.

Choice based system

The Home-Link Manager explained that scheme provided choice for those seeking a home in the District. The aim was to reduce the number of non-bidders. The Home-Link Manager explained that a statutorily homeless applicant who had not successfully bid after three months may be offered a direct let, however this would depend on a number of factors, one of which might be the availability of properties during that three-month period which would meet the applicants need. If this was the case, the applicant might have their bidding period further extended.

Allocations system

The Home-Link Manager explained that a Choice Based letting-system for the allocation of properties was much more transparent and easily understood by those on the waiting list than under the previous points system. Bidders could also more accurately self-assess themselves under this type of scheme than the points system.

Non-bidding in bands A & B

It was noted that some families in bands A and B had very specific requirements regarding the type or location of their home, which is why they do not bid every time.

Support for those unable to bid

It was explained that some people were unable to place their own bid for a variety of reasons. In such cases Council staff bid on their behalf. Members of the Committee were already aware of this and thanked officers for the excellent support provided.

Rough sleepers

It was noted that the scheme had been amended to upgrade rough sleepers from a Band C to Band B, although it was noted that there were no rough sleepers currently in the District.

School places

It had been suggested that applicants wishing to move had sometimes found this difficult to do, due to the lack of places available at some local schools. It was noted that there was a link on the Council's website to the local education authority, to encourage prospective tenants to ascertain whether school places were available, before they bid for a property. The Home-Link Manager outlined the scheme's future plans to make more information available to applicants on education, which might prove useful when considering which properties to place a bid on. If space permitted, the applicant's welcome letter to the Home-Link scheme would also be amended to remind them to check the availability of school places first.

Overcrowding

The Home-Link Manager agreed to provide the Committee with some basic information in relation to the definition of statutory overcrowding. The scheme's own approach to non-statutory overcrowding meant that in some circumstances children would be expected to share a bedroom.

Families in three-bed properties

It was understood that families requiring a two-bed property could apply for three-bed properties, because of a lack of supply of two-bed properties. This could be beneficial as it allowed a family to grow into a property.

Home-link magazine

Members were encouraged to look at the fortnightly Home Link magazine which gave detailed feedback about applicants who had successfully bid for a home. Although it was noted that unfortunately some Councillors had objected to receiving this publication, it remained available to them in the Members room at the Council's offices.

Effect of economic downturn

It was understood that there had been a significant increase in the number of people requiring housing advice, but the actual number of bidders had remained at a similar level. In response to concerns regarding staff capacity the Corporate Manager – Affordable Homes explained that temporary staff had been brought in to respond to the increase in demands for housing advice, although this made it difficult to set the budget.

Resources

It was noted that the Council did not have the resources to check all the properties before they were advertised and so relied on the information on the application form.

Service improvements

Some potential actions aimed at service improvement were described at paragraph 14

of the report. The Committee supported carrying out as many of the additional actions as could be achieved within existing staff resources.

Incentives to downsize

The Committee agreed that all Members should be informed that incentives were no longer provided to those who move to a smaller property, as this change was not universally known.

Handout for Members

The Corporate Manager for Affordable Homes agreed produce a handout for Members explaining how the banding process works, and the statutory definition of terms such as over-crowded and homeless.

The Chairman thanked the Corporate Manager for Affordable Homes, the Home-Link Manager and the Housing Portfolio Holder for their attendance and informative answers.

39. MONITORING THE EXECUTIVE

Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder meeting on 17 February 2010

Councillor Roger Hall encouraged members of the Committee to read a report on changes to housing benefit suggested by the Department of Work and Pensions, which was considered by the portfolio holder.

40. DRAFT AGENDA PROGRAMME AND PROGRAMME OF KEY DECISIONS

The Committee agreed that

- The Corporate Plan would not be discussed at the next meeting
- The Economic Development Strategy would not be discussed at the next meeting
- The Complaint Handling process would now be discussed in June, instead of April to allow for a full year's data to be presented
- The Finance Task and Finish Group's final report would be discussed at the next meeting

The Chairman agreed to consider whether the Committee could add value by scrutinising the appointments process for senior officers. It was noted that the scrutinising of the running of Council meetings was likely to be a matter for the Corporate Governance Committee.

The Committee **NOTED** the amended work programme.

41. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted that the next meeting would be held at Foxton Village Hall on Thursday 1 April at 5:30 pm.

The Meeting ended at 7.45 p.m.
