

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Portfolio Holder's Meeting held on
Wednesday, 23 September 2009 at 6.00 p.m.

Portfolio Holder: Mark Howell

Councillors in attendance:

Scrutiny and Overview Committee monitors: Janice Guest

Scrutiny and Overview Committee monitors
and Opposition spokesmen: Liz Heazell

Also in attendance: Mrs VM Barrett, SGM Kindersley, Mrs BZD Smith.

Officers:

Stephen Hills	Corporate Manager, Affordable Homes
Guy Moody	Democratic Services Officer
Anita Goddard	Housing Services Manager

14. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

15. GAMLINGAY: WARDEN SERVICE AT AVENELLS WAY AND GRAYS ROAD - PETITION

The Housing Portfolio Holder opened the meeting and welcomed those residents of the Sheltered Housing Scheme that were in attendance.

The residents were advised that the meeting had been called to enable the Portfolio Holder to receive and consider the contents of a petition containing 28 signatures received from the residents of the Sheltered Housing Scheme at Avenells Way and Grays Road, Gamlingay.

By way of introduction the Portfolio Holder highlighted three areas of concern for the Housing Service that affected the Sheltered Housing Schemes. Those present were advised that:

1. For every £1 collected in rent 56p was paid to central government as part of the negative housing subsidy;
2. Supporting people budgets were being reduced and, there being a move to the floating support scheme, tenants would be assessed for their support requirements and given a choice of service provider;
3. Rents from general needs housing were subsidising tenants in sheltered schemes by approximately £600,000 per year

The Housing Portfolio Holder emphasised that the decisions the council faced were the result of financial, rather than political pressures, and stressed that no decision had yet been made. The purpose of the meeting, he advised, was to listen to the concerns of residents.

Concerns raised and replies:

Warden Service

The petitioners raised the following concerns about the warden service at the Avenells Way scheme:

- Wardens that had left were not being replaced.
- Residents were paying the same service charges for a reduced service.
- Off-site wardens had led to increased response times for cord pulling emergencies.
- Wardens had been removed from sites by stealth.
- Agency workers were more expensive than the Council's own staff.
- Wardens provided a useful link to the resident's family and performed other essential tasks.
- It was asked how much would it cost to provide on-site warden cover for the scheme on a 9-5 basis as previously enjoyed?
- In reply to a direct question from the Portfolio Holder the unanimous view from the meeting was that a warden was wanted on site.

In reply, the petitioners were advised:

- Overall about 10 wardens had left the Council and their posts were being kept vacant in the anticipation of having to make savings in the service. It was anticipated that this level of vacancy would negate the need for redundancies.
- Many wardens had wanted to move off site because of the level of disturbance that they had experienced when off-duty. Additionally the working time directive meant that many wardens had been working too many hours and were therefore working illegally.
- Agency wardens were used to cover unexpected absences and there was no extra cost to the Council over and above the cost of a council employee.
- Tenants were advised that the cost of an on-site warden would be approximately £37,000 per year plus extra costs for covering absences.
- Anita Goddard, Housing Services Manager, advised the tenants that the service charges for the scheme did not cover the costs and it was running at a loss. Additionally the Sheltering People funding was also running at a loss.

Site issues

The petitioners raised the following concerns about site maintenance and letting policies:

- In the event of sheltered schemes being abolished would an empty property be let to anybody, including those with children?
- A request for the whole site be made properly secure was made.
- Instances of anti social behaviour in Robinson Court were alleged.
- The access path had been used by horse riders and motorcyclists
- Residents in Blythe Way felt excluded from the scheme.
- One of the tumble driers in the community facility was broken and had not been repaired or replaced.
- Outside repairs were not being undertaken.
- Specific repair needs were highlighted at three properties:
 1. Footpath repair at 15 Avenells Way
 2. Footpath repair at 23 Avenells Way
 3. Guttering repair at 20 Blythe Way

In reply, the petitioners were advised:

- Councillor Kindersley advised the tenants that the council was aware of the issues with Robinson Court and that officers were working to resolve the situation.
- Tenants were asked to record evidence of the misuse of the path and to report instances to the police on the non-urgent number.
- There would be a sensitive lettings policy to ensure that vacant properties within existing schemes would be let to appropriate tenants.
- Tenants were advised of the correct authority (parish, district or county) to whom to report faults.
- Rebates would not be made if services such as grass cutting were reduced.
- The council was looking at hiring equipment (such as tumble driers) but it was expensive to do so as industrial specification equipment would be needed.
- Tenants were advised to use the 'proper' channels in the first instance to raise the need for repairs.

Other Issues

Petitioners raised the following other concerns:

- There were too many office staff at the expense of front line workers
- Why was £800,000 wasted in the housing transfers exercise
- Was the sheltered housing service seen as an easy target for savings

In reply the petitioners were advised:

- Councillor Heazell advised the tenants that a review had suggested that the support section at South Cambridgeshire Hall was understaffed, using four officers to support the scheme. On occasion these staff would sometimes be seconded to frontline (warden) duties.
- That had the housing stock transfer gone ahead the new housing association would have been paying in the region of 20p in the pound interest charges
- 72% of tenants voted to stay with the council. The offer document outlined the consequences of retention and those consequences are now being realised.
- Councillor Bridget Smith drew the tenants' attention to the corporate plan and highlighted that the council needed to improve its score whereby people thought that they could have an influence on the outcomes of Council policy.
- The Portfolio Holder said that he would guarantee to try to improve on the engagement statistics in the corporate plan. He also confirmed that the minutes of the meeting would be acted on, explaining that other councillors would hold him to account.
- It was confirmed that all areas of housing services were under review to identify potential savings and the portfolio holder added that the sheltered housing service would be the last area considered,
- Stephen Hills confirmed that nothing had been decided over the future of the sheltered housing schemes.
- The Portfolio Holder confirmed that his priority would be to protect the sheltered housing service and save jobs wherever possible.

There being no other questions or comments the Portfolio Holder closed the meeting and thanked the petitioners for their comments and concerns which were **NOTED**.

The Portfolio Holder requested that a copy of the minutes be sent directly to Mr Doug

Gilbert, the lead petitioner.

Action: Guy Moody

The Meeting ended at 7.10 p.m.
