

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

COMMUNITY & REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

THE EARL BALDWIN SUITE, DUKE HOUSE, CLENSMORE STREET,
KIDDERMINSTER

THURSDAY, 8th OCTOBER 2009 (6:00pm)

Present:

Councillors: Mrs H E Dyke (Chairman), J Phillips (Vice-Chairman), J Baker, G H Eeles, M A W Hazlewood, M B Kelly, M W Partridge, M Price, M J Shellie, D R Sheppard, N J Thomas, and G C Yarranton.

Observers

Councillors: J-P Campion, and Mrs F M Oborski.

C&R.39 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors: D R Godwin, Mrs P V Hayward, D J Millis, K H Prosser, and S J Williams.

C&R.40

Appointment of Substitutes

Councillor J Baker was appointed as a substitute for Councillor K H Prosser. Councillor M W Partridge was appointed as a substitute for Councillor S J Williams. Councillor N J Thomas was appointed as a substitute for Councillor D J Millis.

C&R.41 Declaration of Interests

Councillors M B Kelly, M J Shellie, and G C Yarranton declared a personal interest in Agenda Item No. 6 – “Update Report on the Provision of Choice Based Lettings for the Allocation of Properties from the Housing Register” as they are board members of the Wyre Forest Community Housing Group.

C&R.42 Minutes

Agreed: The minutes of the meeting held on 3rd September 2009 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

C&R.43 Wyre Forest District Council Health Action Plan

A report was considered from the Principal Health and Sustainability Officer which outlined the proposed Wyre Forest District Council Health Action Plan for 2009/10.

The Strategic Housing Services Manager presented the report and informed Members that endorsement was sought of the Wyre Forest District Council Health Action Plan, in order to fulfil a requirement in the Council Business Plan.

Members were advised that the Action Plan served to coordinate the Council's position on health matters, and aimed to strengthen Council leadership on health issues.

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Furthermore, the aim of the Action Plan was to build upon the existing work being carried out in this area, such as the County and District Health and Wellbeing Theme Groups.

A Member raised the issue of the Worcestershire Community Leadership for Health Fund, and suggested that County Council Members be contacted to ascertain how they planned to utilise their individual fund allocations. The Member stated that in the previous year there had been limited interest from the public and community groups in applying for the funds, and that this should be pursued to identify any funds yet to be allocated, and to ensure that the relevant Members were informed as to how to allocate the funds.

A Member asked whether the Council had any employee schemes for membership at health and leisure facilities within the District. The Principal Strategic Housing Officer responded that the Council had a "Hearts Card" employee membership scheme at its leisure centres, and that this scheme could benefit from further promotion.

In response to a query from the Chairman, the Strategic Housing Services Manager confirmed that in item 1.2 of the appendix to the report, references to the "Members newsletter" referred to the Members Information Bulletin, and that the content in question would also be posted onto the Intranet. Furthermore, in response to item 3.2 of the appendix to the report, the Strategic Housing Services Manager advised that she would need to respond to the Committee at a later date to clarify the details of the "Life Channel".

In response to item 2.3 of the appendix to the report, a Member questioned whether the Council encouraged employees to walk. In Response the Strategic Housing Services Manager informed Members that the Council encouraged staff to walk to work, and had previously run a scheme of lunchtime walking which had ceased. Furthermore, the reintroduction of this scheme was being encouraged.

A Member queried whether the Action Plan was aimed at the general community or internal Council staff, as the report referred to both. The Strategic Housing Services Manager responded that the Action Plan primarily was focused internally, but also reached out to the Community through The Hub and the Life Channel.

The Chairman added that the purpose of the Action Plan was to set an example – as the Council could not promote healthy living to the public if it did not promote healthy living internally, and that the Action Plan would form part of an overall strategy of health improvement.

In addition, a Member suggested that a further Action Plan focusing upon community health, from a multi-agency perspective would be beneficial. In response, the Chairman added that the Health Improvement Coordinator could be called upon to update the Committee on the overall strategy of health improvement.

Agreed: The Wyre Forest District Council Health Action Plan 2009/10 be recommended to Cabinet to recommend to Council for adoption.

C&R.44 Update Report on the Provision of Choice Based Lettings for the Allocation of Properties from the Housing Register

A report was considered from the Principal Strategic Housing Officer which updated Members on the progress of the Choice Based Lettings for the Allocation of Properties from the Housing Register scheme, which highlighted how the system has impacted upon service delivery since being introduced.

The Principal Strategic Housing Officer informed the Committee that the scheme was agreed by Council in July 2007, following a Government requirement that all Councils adopt such a scheme by 2010. Since the introduction of the scheme, it had increasingly been known as the "Home Choice Plus Scheme". The Council was a participant in the Home Choice Plus Scheme Partnership along with Worcester City Council, Bromsgrove, Malvern Hills, Stratford-on-Avon, and Wychavon District Councils.

Members were advised that generally properties had been allocated to households with the highest need in the District. In addition the Home Choice Plus Scheme Partnership was undertaking a review, which would include: equality of access, allocation policy, partner experience, customer-facing paperwork and forms, and user group and customer consultations.

A discussion ensued, some of the key points raised were as follows:

- A Member had received several complaints from across the District concerning allocations arising from the Home Choice Plus Scheme.
- A Member perceived that previously Housing Officers had been able to use their discretion and knowledge of family problems in the allocation of properties, but now this knowledge and judgement had been taken out of the process. Furthermore, the Member perceived that the scheme weakened the ability to manage the housing stock, and this had led to antisocial behaviour problems, with the Antisocial Behaviour Team seemingly engaged in "fire-fighting" the problems. In response, the Strategic Housing Services Manager informed Members firstly that ownership over the Allocations Policy belonged to Council, and secondly that the ethos of the Home Choice Plus scheme was to make the lettings system transparent, and to ensure there are no contraventions of the Housing Act 1996 in the way properties are allocated.
- The Strategic Housing Services Manager advised Members that the aim of the system was to allow Service Users to see why they had been denied particular properties, and to enable them to challenge decisions where they believe they have not been correctly made.
- A Member perceived that the Home Choice Plus system did not work, and that not having the ability to deny individual families access to particular properties could lead to social problems. The Member also suggested that those without internet access, or understanding of the system could be disadvantaged. In response, the Strategic Housing Services Manager advised that the speed of bidding was not a factor in allocation decisions, and that those without internet access could bid by telephone, or make use of trained staff at The Hub who would bid on behalf of Service Users.
- A Member questioned whether the new system could lead to an increase in applications where applicants were not truthful about whether they had past convictions, and lead to subsequent eviction and re-housing difficulties when it

was discovered. The Chairman advised that under such circumstances there would be no obligation to re-house tenants.

- A Member questioned whether the Council retained a veto over decisions made by The Community Housing Group. The Chairman responded that the statutory responsibility remained with the Council and the Strategic Housing Services Manager advised that The Community Housing Group was contracted to abide by the Council Allocations Policy.
- A Member stated that when Service Users wished to contact The Community Housing Group via their Councillor, they subsequently were required to fill out a data protection form before the Councillor proceeded.
- A Member who was on the board of The Community Housing Group offered to communicate any concerns other Members had about the system to future board meetings.
- The Chairman suggested a future training session on the Home Choice Plus Scheme, possibly to be held in a Quarterly Scrutiny Briefing.
- The Solicitor advised Members that the Housing Officers worked within the limitations of a statutory framework and the partnership arrangement meant that feedback could be exchanged with other Councils.

Agreed: The report and subsequent comments be noted.

C&R.45 Bridge Street Partnership Scheme in Conservation Areas – Grant Applications

A briefing paper was considered from the Conservation Officer which informed Members of two applications for grant funding under the Bridge Street Partnership Scheme in Conservation Areas, and sought the Committee's support for their approval.

Members were informed that since the scheme started in 2007, there had been some significant under-spends, but after being expanded to include York Street, New Street, and the remainder of the High Street, interest had increased, with three grants already approved in 2009.

Members were informed that the grant applications in question were for 7 York Street and 20 Bridge Street, Stourport.

A Member enquired as to the definition of a 'modern fake sash window'. The Conservation Officer advised that such windows were those that had been modified to tilt rather than slide vertically.

In response to a question from a Member, the Conservation Officer advised that the two properties were both ground floor shops, with upstairs residential accommodation. In addition, the grants contained a claw back clause, should the properties be sold on.

Agreed: The two grants be supported and recommended to the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration to agree.

C&R.46 Recommendation Tracking Form 2007/08

The Committee considered a report detailing the outcomes of recommendations to Cabinet from Scrutiny Committees in the municipal year 2007/08.

Members were advised that the report listed decisions from all of the Scrutiny Committees, and not just those which fell within the terms of reference of the Community & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee.

In addition, the outcomes of recommendations to Cabinet from the following year, 2008/09 would be considered at a future meeting.

Agreed: The information be noted.

C&R.47 Work Programme

The Committee reviewed the Work Programme for the current municipal year.

Members were advised that the item "Feedback from the District Representative on the County Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee" would be deferred indefinitely until the Committee in question resolved a Work Programme.

The Item "KTC3 Update" Would be deferred indefinitely should there be insufficient updated information to present.

The Chairman informed Members that a guest from the Police Authority would be attending the 3rd December 2009 meeting, on the topic of Crime and Disorder.

Agreed: To note the changes to the Work Programme.

C&R.48 Press Involvement

No items were identified which might require press involvement at present.

C&R.49 Exempt Information

Decision: Under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act, 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of "Exempt Information" as defined in paragraphs 3, and 6 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

C&R.50 Summary of Minutes

The following proceedings were considered after the press and public had been excluded from the meeting. A summary of the minutes relating to these items has been made as "exempt Information" would be disclosed if the minutes were published in full.

C&R.51 Minutes

The exempt minutes of the meeting held on the 3rd September 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and were signed by the Chairman.

The meeting ended at 19:11 pm.