

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

COMMUNITY & REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

THURSDAY, 3RD FEBRUARY 2011 (6.00PM)

Present:

Councillors: H E Dyke (Chairman), J Phillips (Vice-Chairman), J Baker, R Bishop, A J Buckley, B T Glass, J Greener, I Hardiman, M A W Hazlewood, J Holden, M Price, J A Shaw and S J Williams.

Observers: Councillors: G W Ballinger, M B Kelly and F M Oborski.

C&R.77 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors: D J Millis, K H Prosser and D R Sheppard.

C&R.78 Appointment of Substitutes

Councillor A J Buckley was appointed as a substitute for Councillor K H Prosser and Councillor B T Glass was appointed as a substitute for Councillor D R Sheppard.

C&R.79 Declaration of Interests

Councillors A J Buckley, J Greener and M B Kelly declared a personal interest as they are Members of the Board of the Community Housing Group.

C&R.80 Minutes

Decision: The minutes of the meeting held on 6th January 2011 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

C&R.81 Kidderminster Town Centre manager – Annual Update Report

A report was considered from the Town Centre Manager that updated Members on the work, progress and achievements of the Town Centre Manager over the last 12 months.

The Town Centre Manager presented her report and drew Members' attention to the following points:

- The funding for the role had been extended until 31st May 2011.
- The role could be likened to that of Shopping Centre Manager.
- The Town Centre Partnership had looked at the current business plan and model in detail to ascertain whether they were fit for purpose.
- Members were apprised of the events which had taken place which included the Christmas Lights being switched on, publication of the first Town Centre

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Christmas promotional leaflet, the Kidderminster Canal Festival and Kidderminster's first Charity Fashion Show.

- Work was currently being undertaken on holding another fashion show, producing another town centre leaflet for spring/summer 2011 and holding another Canal Festival.

Whilst there was uncertainty at the current time as to the future of the Town Centre Partnership it was considered that the position would become clearer at the Annual General meeting which was due to be held on 2nd March 2011. The Town Centre Manager agreed to extend an invitation to all Members to this event.

The Policy and Regeneration Manager informed Members that during an audit of the Town Centre Manager's role and the Town Centre Strategy it was found that there was an uneven representation of retail and business members and this was an issue that needed to be addressed. A report would be taken to the Town Centre Partnership meeting regarding this issue.

In response to a query from a Member it was clarified that there was a budget proposal to consider extending the Town Centre Manager's role to cover Stourport, Bewdley and Kidderminster as part of the regeneration strategy.

A discussion ensued on the makeup of the partnership and it was concluded that many of the larger retailers were not interested in attending meetings of the partnership whereas the smaller independent retailers found the meetings beneficial.

Agreed: The report be noted and the Town Centre Manager be commended for the work she had undertaken.

C&R.82 Review of Allocations Policy

A report was considered from the Strategic Housing Services Manager that outlined a series of proposed changes to the Allocations Policy that the Home Choice Partnership wished to consult on before taking a final amended policy through Council later in 2011.

The Strategic Housing Services Manager presented her report and advised Members that the review of the Allocations Policy had commenced in 2009 and had now reached a conclusion. New statutory guidance had been issued and the Council's policy had been checked against the guidance to ensure that it encompassed the guidance and to ensure that the policy was legally compliant.

The key changes were highlighted as follows:

- **Social Need** – the policy had been emboldened and gave more detail as to when the Council would award social need points and who was responsible for agreeing to them.
- **Disrepair** – other types of disrepair would be considered within the banding system.
- **Direct Lettings** – clarification had been made as to the circumstances when a specific property would be allocated to a specific person and the reasons for this.
- **Reasons why people were missed for offers**– the allocations policy made

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it clearer why people were skipped with rent arrears being the most common reason that a person slipped down the housing list..

Also, changes had been made to the allocations policy either to meet good practice standards or to give more information regarding the policy which took on board some criticisms that had been made:

- **Overcrowding** – there was now a distinction between being overcrowded and severely overcrowded and consequently a higher banding would be given to households where they were lacking three or more bedrooms.
- **Medical Need** – severe and enduring mental health problems were now included as well as physical disabilities.
- **Local Lettings Plans** – the policy now explained when local lettings plans might be used.
- **Financial Threshold** – this was included to clarify the procedure for applicants who had savings or an income which was substantial enough for them to resolve their own housing difficulties. It was noted that if the applicant had substantial savings they were likely only to be awarded a bronze banding as it was necessary to ensure that social housing was given to people with the greatest need.

Members were advised that people who were on the waiting list had been surveyed and a 12% response rate had been achieved (which equated to just under 200 people). The purpose of the survey had been to measure how accessible the system was and to ascertain whether those on the waiting list understood the banding system and to identify how many people accessed the internet.

The survey asked respondents how easy they found the internet application was to complete and also asked those who had not submitted a bid why they had not done so. The survey identified that quite a high percentage of people on the waiting list did not want to move so they had subsequently not submitted a bid but it also identified people who did not know how to bid and those who did not realise that they needed to bid.

With regard to having a local connection to the district, over 89% of respondents perceived that having a local connection should give a higher priority. Some work was being undertaken by Wychavon District Council on local connection and this would be included in the allocations policy. Some work was also being undertaken on checking the equality impact assessment to make sure accessibility was no an issue. Members learnt that there was a duty to consult with people affected by changes.

A debate ensued and the following questions were raised:

- The Strategic Housing Services Manager was asked how the direct lettings system operated and who made decisions on allocation. In response Members were advised that a senior officer or manager of the provider concerned made the decision.
- A Member expressed concern about the number of people identified in the survey that did not know how to bid. In response the Strategic Housing Services Manager advised that more work would be done to address this matter. She perceived that more vulnerable people might require help from staff such as those at the Council Offices in Oxford

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Street, Kidderminster.

- A Member perceived that there should be some form of weighting for applicants from rural areas. The Strategic Housing Services Manager stated that the Council would try and address rural lettings in terms of new developments.
- Concern was expressed about some advice given to an applicant from a member of staff at Oxford Street. Members were advised that complaints procedures were available for both the District Council and the Community Housing Group and if there were concerns they should be addressed through this avenue.

Recommended to Cabinet:

That the draft allocations policy be agreed (to include the two amendments set out below) and that full consultation be undertaken with stakeholders and applicants on the housing register:

- 1. It is recommended that the Appeals Scheme is made more accessible to people who apply for properties.**
- 2. More comprehensive feedback should be given to all applicants on the Housing Register so that they are aware of how the system works, what their banding is and what the likelihood is of them being rehoused.**

C&R.83 Feedback from Cabinet

The Committee considered the Cabinet Action List from the 25 January 2011 which outlined the recommendations regarding the Housing Services Assessment and Improvement Plan and the Parking Review Phase II Review Panel.

Agreed: The contents of the Cabinet Action List be noted.

C&R.84 Work Programme

Members considered the revised work programme that had been drawn up following consultation between the Chairman, the Director of Planning and Regulatory Services and the Principal Committee Officer.

Agreed : the revised Work Programme be adopted.

C&R.85 Press Involvement

There were no items that required press involvement.

The meeting finished at 6.48 pm.