

**WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**COUNCIL CHAMBER, WYRE FOREST HOUSE, FINEPOINT WAY, KIDDERMINSTER**

**THURSDAY, 4TH OCTOBER 2012 (6.00PM)**

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**Present:**

Councillors: H E Dyke (Chairman), T Ingham (Vice-Chairman), R Bishop, C Brewer, L Davies, N Gale, J Greener, P B Harrison, J A Hart, P V Hayward, V Higgs, H J Martin, D C H McCann, B McFarland, M Rayner, C Rogers, J A Shaw, D R Sheppard, S J Williams and G C Yarranton.

**Observers**

Councillors: J-P Campion, I Hardiman, A T Hingley, M J Hart and M Price.

**OS.42 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A M Sewell.

**OS.43 Appointment of Substitutes**

Councillor J A Shaw was appointed as a substitute for Councillor A Sewell.

**OS.44 Declarations of Interests by Members**

Councillor H E Dyke declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in agenda item no. 5 - Wyre Forest District Council Tenancy Strategy as her husband is employed by The Community Housing Group.

Councillor G C Yarranton declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in agenda item no. 5 - Wyre Forest District Council Tenancy Strategy, as he is a board member of The Community Housing Group.

Councillor N Gale declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in agenda item no. 5 - Wyre Forest District Council Tenancy Strategy, as she is a board member of The Community Housing Group.

Councillor M Rayner declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in agenda item no. 5 - Wyre Forest District Council Tenancy Strategy, as she is a board member of The Community Housing Group.

Councillor B McFarland declared an Other Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in agenda item no. 5 - Wyre Forest District Council Tenancy Strategy, as he is a board member of The Community Housing Group but received no allowance and also an Other Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in agenda item no. 7 – Recommendations from the Housing Review Panel, as his parents were currently undergoing a Disability Facility Grant assessment.

Councillor J Greener declared a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in agenda item no. 5 - Wyre Forest District Council Tenancy Strategy, as she is a board member of The Community Housing Group.

**OS.45 Minutes**

**Decision: The minutes of the meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2012 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.**

Councillors H E Dyke, N Gale, J Greener, M Rayner and G C Yarranton left the meeting at this point, (6.06pm).

**OS.46 Wyre Forest District Council Tenancy Strategy**

The Committee considered a report from the Principal Strategic Housing Officer which outlined the District Councils expectations on how social housing stock in the area should be managed in terms of lettings, rents and disposals and also outlined the District Council's policy on use of the private rented sector for the discharge of homeless duty.

Members were led through the report and a debate ensued. In response to a Members question, the Principal Strategic Housing Officer advised that the high value areas related to rural areas and a family sized house would potentially be a three-bedroom plus property.

Members thought that four bedroom houses were not being used to their full potential and they could be adapted more appropriately.

Councillor M J Hart arrived at the meeting at this point, (6.18pm).

In response to a Members' question on social housing and the allocation of houses, the Strategic Housing Services Manager reported that there was an income threshold in the Council's new Allocations Policy but this did not prevent any person from being added to the housing allocation list. Further proposals would be made to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee early in 2013 following the new Code of Guidance and this would include consultation proposals. Properties were allocated depending on housing needs.

Members thought that the number of responses received to the online questionnaire was low and it was confirmed that the questionnaire had been placed on the Council's website, published at the Worcestershire Hub and was able to be viewed on the Homechoice Plus system.

**Agreed: To recommend to Cabinet:**

**The Tenancy Statement be approved.**

Councillors H E Dyke, N Gale, J Greener, M Rayner and G C Yarranton returned to the meeting at this point, (6.26pm).

**OS.47 Revised Statement of Community Involvement – Consultation Draft**

The Committee considered a report from the Senior Forward Planning Officer which asked for Members approval to undertake a six week consultation on the Draft

Revised Statement of Community Involvement.

Members were led through the report and asked what constituted as a neighbourhood forum and who decided if it was viable. The Senior Forward Planning Officer replied that a neighbourhood forum needed to meet certain criteria and consist of 21 members drawn from the community. The Group then applied to the District Council who would establish whether the criteria had been met. Moreover, if planning advice was needed, the Council were duty bound to provide support.

It was confirmed that 30% of the District's population was aged 60 or over.

**Agreed: To recommend to Cabinet:**

**That subject to any additional amendments/comments that the Local Development Framework Review Panel may make, the Draft Statement of Community Involvement as set out at Appendix 1 of the report to Overview & Scrutiny Committee be approved for a six week consultation.**

**OS.48 Recommendations from the Housing Review Panel**

The Committee considered a report from the Principal Strategic Housing Officer which outlined the recommendations from the Housing Review Panel regarding the Disabled Facility Grant (DFG's).

The Chairman of the Housing Review Panel presented the recommendations and reported that the panel had worked hard and had received updates from Worcestershire County Council and occupational therapists which had helped in making the recommendations. He thanked the officers for their involvement which had proved helpful and asked Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to take on board the recommendations and recommend to Cabinet.

Members were concerned about the lack of growth in DFG's as the overall fund had not been increased for many years and felt the Council could do more with help from their internal funding. Moreover, it would also be important to engage with the County Council and the NHS to look towards them for alternative funding methods. Help had been offered by Worcestershire County Council to help the Council in a bid to obtain further funding.

A concern had arisen from the Housing Review Panel was the amount of money being spent inefficiently, i.e. wet rooms being installed instead of a shower and the number of times applications were seen before being agreed.

In response to a Member query, the Committee were advised that the waiting list for adaptations was 265 households equating to an estimated cost of £1.6m for the work to be carried out.

Members congratulated the Housing Review Panel for the in-depth work that had taken place and that it had given everyone a chance to be involved. The meetings had been lengthy and detailed and the advice received from officers had been excellent.

**Agreed: To Recommend to Cabinet**

1. That provision is made in the budget for the 2013/14 financial year and beyond to continue to provide a financial top up above the current minimum government grant of £444k to support DFG provision in order to meet the needs of the Wyre Forest District residents.
2. That Cabinet aims to continue to provide the current level of top up funding from 2013/14 , thus enabling an overall fund of £800k to be maintained or if possible exceeded the support for the funding of DFG's.
3. That a 2 tier element be introduced into the budget allocation to ensure that a proportion of the DFG budget be set aside exclusively for Category 3 needs cases.
4. That Cabinet explores alternative funding mechanisms to support the top up, including, but not limited to:
  - Prudential Borrowing.
  - A first priority for Right to Buy monies.
  - Any unallocated funding from the Regional Housing Pot.
  - Any alternative sources of funding available to the Council, e.g. New Homes Bonus.
  - External Partnership funding from social care partners, e.g. County Council and the NHS.
5. That Cabinet agree the provision of an alternative adaptation grant/loan mechanism that can be achieved as quickly as possible for simple cases of level access showers and/or stairlifts for example and that such an alternative is used to incentivise self funding or alternative funding sources. Such Adaptation assistance to be developed with partner agencies to minimise processes and the number of steps necessary under the full DFG system and to be used as an alternative but not replacement for DFG's.
6. That any necessary amendments to the Housing Assistance Policy be made in support of any of the above alternative funding options.
7. That a review of the process of dealing with DFG's be undertaken on a Systems Thinking basis.
8. The Cabinet provides funding or supports funding from external sources for the post of an Occupational Therapist additional to the current District provision, subject to investigation and confirmation of likely costs and benefits.

**OS.48 Feedback from Cabinet**

**Agreed: The content of the Cabinet action list, following consideration of the recommendations from the meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2012 be noted.**

**OS.49 Work Programme**

Members were advised that the Government had announced that they may not make their Autumn budget statement until December 2012 and this could have an effect on the proposals from Cabinet but the Leader of the Council stated he would ensure that papers would be prepared for the December 2012 meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

**Agreed: The work programme be noted.**

**OS.50 Press Involvement**

There were no future items that might require publicity.

The meeting ended at 7.13 pm.