

Extract of the Minutes of the Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee - 23rd January 2012

Item 5 – Council Wide Budget 2012-15

The Committee considered key areas that the Reporting and Monitoring Working Group had made recommendations for the Overview and Scrutiny to investigate and comment upon.

These were:-

- Restructure of Community Safety and Licensing Administrative Functions
- Reducing the cost of Bed and Breakfast accommodation through the use of Council Housing.
- Enhanced Housing Management Charge
- Withdrawal of Funding of Police Community Support Officers

The main points of comment in relation to housing were:

Enhanced Housing Management Charge

Mr Townsend spoke as an individual who as a vulnerable adult lives in sheltered accommodation. He felt that the wardens did a very good job and was concerned that these proposals may place them under threat.

Mr Townsend conveyed concerns regarding the budget proposal regarding enhanced housing management charges.

He stated that there were problems with anti social behaviour in his area and that vulnerable people felt unsafe. He considered that the Council should be taking more action to ensure that these concerns seriously and that resources should be concentrated on areas of concern.

The Chair thanked the member of the public for his address.

The Committee queried what services this charge would fund and who would be likely to be affected by its introduction.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Councillor Mary Markham, addressed the Committee.

The service would be designed to provide support for vulnerable people in matters relating to their tenancy. It might cover matters such as helping them with benefits, repair work reporting, ensuring there are mechanisms to pay their rent. They would also receive regular visits to make sure that they were supported. This group of people are amongst those most at risk of losing their tenancies; this service would be geared to preventing that wherever possible.

Qualifying tenants would be identified via the Gateway process.

The proposed charge was £15 per week and would usually be covered if the tenant were on housing benefit. Approximately 65 / 70 % of tenants are currently receiving benefits.

It was not yet decided on what level of additional staffing might be required. That would be subject to negotiation and also the numbers of people who were eligible for the charge.

The Committee asked for percentages of those presenting as homeless that were classed as vulnerable. Currently it is around 20% of all those presenting as homeless.

Whilst generally supporting the introduction of the service, the Committee raised concerns that there wasn't a corresponding increase in resources allocated to dealing.

There was also concern as to how the Government's proposed cuts to housing benefit would affect the levels of benefit paid.

The Portfolio Holder emphasised that currently many of the concerns that are raised regarding housing tenancies are those surrounding vulnerable tenants.

Officers undertook to circulate figures on the numbers of tenants affected by this proposal.

It was confirmed that the existing service standards would be amended if this proposal were introduced.

The Chair raised concerns whether the proposed budget savings would be achieved.

The Committee heard that the Audit Committee would consider the impact of Welfare benefit reforms at a future meet

Reducing the cost of Bed and Breakfast Accommodation through use of Council Housing

The Committee queried how the costs of using bed and breakfast accommodation would be reduced.

The Housing Portfolio Holder, Councillor Mary Markham, addressed the Committee.

She advised that if people who have presented themselves as homeless are rehoused in bed and breakfast accommodation then they are not eligible for housing benefit. If they are housed in accommodation funded through the Housing Revenue Account benefit can be claimed. The proposal is therefore to set aside some properties for use in these situations.

The Committee was advised that there are currently 29 families in temporary emergency accommodation. 16 are in bed and breakfast accommodation. The current proposal is to identify 15 properties.

The Committee welcomed any move that provided an alternative to bed and breakfast accommodation but was concerned as to whether this level of provision would be sufficient. There were concerns that this problem would get worse particularly in the light of welfare reforms.

In response to a query how the proposed saving of £100,000 had been calculated, the Committee heard that this was an estimate, however, a full risk assessment had been undertaken to ensure that there is available finance in

the reserves should the risk be greater. The biggest risk is the number of people presenting as homeless.

The Localism Act will introduce changes in how private rented properties can be used and there could be opportunities for the Council to discharge some duties into the private rented sector. It was accepted that it was not possible to get any clear view of the numbers that might present as homeless.

Officers undertook to circulate the criteria for Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) to the Committee.

In response to a question, members of the Committee were assured that officers had tried to identify long-term empty properties and get them back into use, but these were privately owned properties and there were limitations to the Council's powers.

In response to a request for details of the percentage of social housing need that is met by the private sector, the Committee was advised that details of the numbers of people that the Council was offering advice and assistance who take up private sector tenancies could be provided.

Councillors commented that there was a need for partnership working with housing associations, in response; the Committee heard that details of the current work and proposed work that the Council is currently doing with housing associations could be provided to the Committee.