



NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL

FULL COUNCIL

Date: 27 June 2005

Item No.

Directorate: Governing

Author/Contact Officer: Members of the
Backward Looking Group –
Councillors Mason, Massey, Allen)

**HOUSING OPTIONS
APPRAISAL – BACKWARD
LOOKING INVESTIGATION**

Purpose of Report

To communicate the findings of the independent investigation overseen by the Looking Back Group of Councillors on the Housing Options Appraisal.

Recommendation

That the Council notes the findings of the external investigator Phillip Mears and refers the recommendations made in his report to Councillor David Palethorpe, Housing Portfolio holder and Mairi McLean, Chief Executive to ensure they are addressed, as appropriate in the future. In particular, that consideration be given to implementing the ODPM guidelines (Code of Practice on Consultation) on community consultation to ensure future consultation processes are in line with best practice.

Introduction

At the Council Meeting on 16 May when the report on the Housing Options Appraisal was withdrawn, the Leader of the Council indicated that two investigations, to be led by Councillors, would be established to “look back” at how the Housing Options Appraisal had been put together and to “look forward” at how it can be managed to an outcome.

The Looking Back Group met on 10 June with the external investigator Phillip Mears. At that meeting the Group agreed the Terms of Reference. The Terms of Reference can be seen at Appendix A. The Group also discussed the scope of the investigation and key lines of inquiry.

The Group has since considered various drafts of the investigator’s report and

the report was finalised on 20 June. A copy of the final report can be found at Appendix B.

Key Findings

The main finding in the report is that the survey of tenants conducted by Birmingham Cooperative Housing Services can reasonably be relied upon for the purposes of the Council making reading a decision on the Housing options Appraisal.

Considering each of the terms of reference, the following conclusions are made in the report:

(a) Appointment of BCHS as Independent Tenant Advisors

“the appointment of BCHS as ITA’s took place prior to the HOAP project being formally launched. Apart from the supporting role provided by Mr Swann, I have been unable to identify any involvement of Council officers or members in the appointment process. Having spoken to Mr Swann and Mr Genus, and having reviewed the documents relating to the appointment, it would appear that the appointment process was conducted in the correct manner”

(b) Matters relating to postal survey conducted by BCHS

“the postal survey formed an integral part of the work that BCHS were required to undertake as part of their ITA role, therefore it was not the subject of a separate contract. The low response to the survey had a significant impact on the project as a whole in that it meant that a door to door survey had to be commissioned. I consider that there are lessons that the Council can take on board in this regard”.

(c) Commissioning BCHS to carry out door-to-door survey

“Although concerns over the award of the contract had been expressed by Councillor Beardsworth, based on the evidence I have reviewed and the background circumstances, I consider that the decision was made for sound reasons. Ms Bellis was aware that BCHS had experience of coordinating surveys of this type for other local authorities. Their role as ITA’s meant they were very familiar with the background to the survey. Furthermore their quote was more competitive than that submitted by Matters of Fact.

It should also be borne in mind that of the 1013 surveys carried out, only one specific complaint has been received concerning the conduct of interviewers”.

(d) Quality Control Issues relating to the surveys

“the errors identified were of major concern to the Council and resulted in the decision on the Housing Options process having to be delayed. It also

resulted in the Council's competence in the handling of the process being called into question by sectors of the media.

The wording of the form in my view contributed to the level of perceived anomalies by not making it clear that the respondent was only supposed to tick one preference in relation to questions 3 and 4. Mr Stevens stated that the wording on the form had been signed off by the Project Board and Communications Group (sub-group of the Board) before the survey was launched.

Although it is disappointing that a number of inputting errors did occur, - particularly bearing in mind the effect it had on the Council, it should be borne in mind that the further exercises carried out by the Council's Internal Audit Team and BCHS have shown that the original results obtained are essentially valid.

The second quality control point concerns the door-to-door survey and largely focuses on the measures put in place to ensure the interviewer did not seek to unduly influence the views of the tenant.

As part of my investigation I conducted telephone interviews with 11 tenants that had been interviewed by BCHS. As part of the sample 4 tenants who had been interviewed by the interviewer at the centre of the allegation from the unions were selected. Out of the 11 interviewed, 7 could recall the answers they gave to the interviewer. My results showed that the interviewer had accurately recorded the answers given by those tenants. None of the tenants felt that the interviewers had attempted to influence their opinions.

To conclude, based on the information I have reviewed, I have no reason to believe that there was any bias demonstrated on the part of the interviewers.

(e) Responding to concerns raised by tenants and other local residents

"both Board members and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee were aware of concerns expressed about the work carried out by BCHS. It is interesting to note that the majority of concerns raised came from a small group of residents opposed to the options appraisal process.

From the papers I have reviewed it would appear that residents were given numerous opportunities to voice their concerns. The role played by Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in particular meant that residents were given the opportunity to have their concerns addressed by leading players in the project.

Recommendations

The report presents a number of recommendations that are more in the nature of observations or lessons learnt. The main issues raised were around a lack of ownership of the project, process issues and improving the quality of the way in which the Council conducts surveys. It is proposed that these be considered by

Councillor David Palethorpe, Housing Portfolio holder and Mairi McLean, the Chief Executive to ensure they are addressed, as appropriate, in the future. In particular, that consideration be given to implementing the ODPM guidelines (Code of Practice on Consultation) on community consultation to ensure future consultation processes are in line with best practice.