

Northampton Borough Council

Overview and Scrutiny Housing Repairs Task and Finish Group

30 August 2006

Present: -

Councillor Anjona Roy
Councillor Sally Beardsworth
Councillor Michael Hill

Interim Chair

Ann Timpson
Norman Adams

NTACT – Co-Opted Member
NTACT – Co-Opted Member

Carl Grimmer
Richard Fitzhenry
Bob Turrell
Tracy Tiff
Margaret Martin

Corporate Manager
Property Maintenance Manager
Project Manager (Voids)
Scrutiny Officer
Consortium

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Eldred and Malpas.

At this point the Task and Finish Group was informed that due to work commitments, Councillor Brandon Eldred, Chair, had stepped down as Chair of the Task and Finish Group as he is unable to commit to this important work. He passed his apologies onto to the Group.

Due to there being just two Councillors present at this point in the meeting, it was suggested by Councillors Beardsworth that Councillor Roy be elected Interim Chair of this Task and Finish Group and that the Chair for the remainder of the review be formally elected at the next meeting. Councillor Roy supported this suggestion.

The Task and Finish Group conveyed its disappointment that there were just two Councillors present at this point of the meeting.

Agreed:

- (1) That Councillor Anjona Roy be elected Interim Chair of the Housing Task and Finish Group.**
- (2) That the Chair for the remainder of the review be elected at the next meeting.**

2 Minutes

Subject to the inclusion of A Timson and N Adams (Co-Opted Members) to the list of attendees, the minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 2006 were agreed.

Matters Arising

Regarding the Decent Homes Standards, and the suggestion that tenants should be asked to provide both a `wish list' and a `reality' list, the Chair commented that this was concerned with the tenants identifying their expectations in a `perfect world' and then for the Task and Finish Group to prioritise the list.

3(A) Update on the Door Entry System

R Fitzhenry advised that the above report was an update of progress to date, following the report that had been produced in January 2004, which identified the issues and problems that existed in relation to repairs, maintenance and replacement programmes of door entry systems.

Flat blocks situated across the Borough had historically been a target for vandalism and associated anti social behaviour. As a potential solution to reduce this significantly the property maintenance division embarked on a programme of installing door entry systems, which commenced over fifteen years ago and utilised a variety of systems and materials, with the objective to obtain the most cost effective solution. It was emphasised that this was an issue that all Local Authorities faced. The resulting systems had been subject to continued vandalism and resulted in a significant cost related to repair work as a consequence which impacted on the overall repairs budget for the housing stock as a whole. It was essential to ensure that all issues of anti social behaviour and vandalism are tackled as this would directly reduce the cost of repairs to door entry systems.

It was clarified that there is no provision identified for capital replacement in 2006/2007.

R Fitzhenry confirmed that there was little evidence of progress regarding the recommendations contained in the earlier report that had been submitted to a preceding Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2004.

The Task and Finish Group commented: -

- It was acknowledged that work had not progressed on the recommendations contained in the previous report on Door Entry Systems.
- The Group needs to look at the existing situation, what had been done previously, future investments and investigate the checks that need to be put in place
- It would be beneficial for Neighbourhood Wardens to report their findings
- In London, discussions are being held about the possible removal of all the door entry systems
- There would be a need for substantial capital for standardisation to be implemented.
- There is a need for a budget for staff training.
- It would be beneficial for the Scrutiny Officer to carry out research to ascertain whether reports had been submitted to Cabinet over the previous 12 months.
- Information regarding damage to door entry systems needed to be quantified.
- At the public meeting, tenants could be asked what communication had taken place with them regarding community safety, CCTV and door entry systems.
- There is a need to 'feed into' the Asset Management Strategy.

The Task and Finish Group heard: -

- It was difficult to quantify the damage to door entry systems. The Council has implemented national standard rates that provide very accurate costings to jobs and this information could be supplied to the Task and Finish Group.

- The work of the previous Overview and Scrutiny Committee on door entry systems provided a good starting point. However, the Council now has a range of new systems, such as, new technology and Neighbourhood Wardens. There is a need to look at door entry systems widely.

The Chair suggested that the following be provided for the next meeting: -

- The current position and projected future position for door entry systems and budget information, such as a cost benefit analysis of implementing a good door entry system in comparison to the damage already caused.

AGREED: That the information detailed above be provided to the next meeting.

3(B) Decent Homes Delivery and Compliance

R Fitzhenry apprised that the current approach would allow the Authority to comply with the Decent Homes legislation by December 2009. The Stock Option Appraisal process identified that the Authority could meet the criteria identified by the standard under the retention option and that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was sustainable. The retention option only allows compliance to the basic standard and there is currently insufficient funding to meet an aspiration standard – the ‘Northampton Standard.’

The delivery programme had been identified by using the stock condition information currently available and resources had been targeted in accordance to those properties, which currently failed, and those which would potentially fail during the next four years. This formed part of the property maintenance programme.

The Authority would need to assess the longer-term demands of meeting the standard after 2010 and ensure that a robust Asset Management Strategy and investment planning were in place to ensure vigorous delivery was maintained in balance with all the repairs obligations that fell within the responsibility of the Authority.

The Task and Finish Group commented: -

- That the Group should be issued with a copy of: -
The Stock Condition Survey
Decent Homes Action Plan
- That the Group could investigate the robustness and credibility of the process and look at some of the central precepts to inform the Asset Management Strategy.
- There is a need to know that new builds do not encompass ‘mistakes of the past’, such as the need to remove all the flat roofs and replace them with pitched ones.

The Task and Finish Group heard: -

- The Decent Homes Action Plan was ongoing work and 30% of the housing stock had been surveyed. The more surveys that are undertaken the more accurate the data would become. Plans were in place to carry out work in conjunction with external consultations. Any information supplied at this stage would be out of date.
- There are no precepts on the outcome of the Asset Management Strategy; sustainability is wider than maintenance costs.
- Two presentations on the methodology for the Asset Management Strategy were scheduled for Monday 11 September and Thursday 14 September and the Group

would be sent invitations to attend. Copies of the presentation slides would be submitted to the next meeting.

The Chair requested that the following information be provided to the next meeting: -

- The delivery programme and a further update on the methodology including: resources, what has been targeted, and what, if any, targets are anticipated to fail over the next four years.

AGREED: That the information detailed above be provided to the next meeting.

3(C) 5-Year Capital Programme

In response to R Fitzhenry's query, the Chair confirmed that it would be beneficial to circulate the spreadsheet detailing previous 5-Year Capital Programme to the Group. It would also be beneficial for the Group to receive details of the plans for this year, how the decisions were made and budget allocation for the following two years.

C Grimmer advised that the Council was aware of the major repairs allowance for the next two years but the Housing Revenue Account had not been confirmed. Documents such as the Asset Management Strategy, Best Value Performance Indicators, the Corporate Plan and the Improvement Plan would be the drivers for the budget allocation for the next two years. Departmental Service Plans would look at the delivery. The Council was aware of the work that needs to be carried and this would be updated during the next two to three months and would contain additional robust information which would then inform the Asset Management Strategy.

In response to the Group's comment that part of its work was to inform the Asset Management Strategy, C Grimmer reported that Councillor involvement in this Strategy would be required at the outcomes stage. The Chair added that it would be helpful for the Task and Finish Group to analyse the methodology and noted that this would link into the presentations that were scheduled for mid-September.

C Grimmer confirmed that he would provide details of this year's Capital Programme and priorities to the next meeting. Details of timelines for the Asset Management Strategy, such as when it will be included on the Forward Plan, when it would inform the budget and when it would be submitted to Cabinet, would also be provided.

AGREED: (1) That the information detailed above be provided to the next meeting.

(2) That the spreadsheet detailing previous 5-Year Capital Programme be circulated to the Group.

3(D) Progress on the Voids Review

B Turrell advised that he had been seconded to the Post of Project Manager (Voids) until 31 March 2007. He was looking at the voids process holistically. There were a lot of ongoing initiatives.

By 31 March 2007, the target for the voids turnaround was 35 days. Currently, this is at 70 days.

The Task and Finish Group heard:-

- The Voids Working Party had been reformed and was chaired by B Turrell. The actions were focussed through the managers directly responsible for the voids process.
- The Action Plan would be developed and owned by the Voids Working Party

- The Voids Working Party was arranging visits to comparator Local Authorities such as Ipswich, Charnwood and Colchester. A visit had already taken place to Leicester who's turnaround for void properties was 24 days.
- The Voids Project Action Plan would follow the format of the Improvement Delivery Plan and would detail timelines.
- The majority of key staff in Property Maintenance had been interviewed.
- Current reports were a `snap shot' in time and did not provide the management information required to understand and track key movements
- The possibility of daily reports was being investigated.
- There was a need to ensure IBS software would provide business intelligence reports.
- A new housing system was being procured and the voids management module had been prioritised.
- Rent loss due to voids was in the region of £1,000,000 per year.
- Introductory Tenancies had been put in place for new tenants.
- The Council carried out checks to ensure that its properties are kept to the lettable standards.
- A meeting would be arranged with the Corporate Manager and the Portfolio Holder regarding seven void properties that require a considerable amount spent on them (approximately £20,000) to bring them up to the lettable standard.
- Should a Council property be sold on the open market, the Council is permitted to keep 25% of the sale and the rest goes to the Government.

The Task and Finish Group commented: -

- Details of the visit to Leicester City Council should be circulated to the Group.
- The relevant sections of the Improvement Delivery Plan should be circulated to the Group.

The Chair requested that the following information be submitted to the next meeting: -

- Details of the visit to Leicester City Council.
- Improvement Delivery Plan – relevant sections in relation to Housing Repairs and Voids.
- Further details on the Voids Action Plan, including timelines.

AGREED: That the above information be provided to the next meeting.

3(E) Details of Visits to Best Practice Council

B Turrell advised that the Voids Action Group had recently visited Leicester City Council and suggested that it might be beneficial for the Task and Finish Group to visit Leicester.

The Voids Action Group had scheduled a visit to Ipswich City Council on 19 September. The Group would also be visiting Colchester City Council who had introduced Choice Based Lettings and Charnwood Borough Council. All of these Local Authorities were noted for their best practice. Leicester was recording good results and was using the same software package that Northampton wanted to implement. Both Ipswich and Leicester are the top quartile for their voids turnaround.

The Chair suggested that feedback from the visit to Leicester City Council be provided. She added that the Group needed to investigate general repairs and look at a best practice Local Authority in this respect. It was suggested that staff suggest a Local Authority of best practice to visit. Further research could be carried out by visiting a Local Authority of best practice, desktop research and looking at Best Value Performance Indicators. It was

suggested that D Robertson be invited to give evidence to the next meeting on BVPIs in respect of Housing Repairs.

- AGREED:**
- (1) That D Robertson be invited to attend the next meeting and give evidence on Housing Repairs' BVPIs.
 - (2) That evidence be acquired on a Local Authority of best practice by:-
 - (a) Visiting a Local Authority of best practice – staff to suggest a best practice Local Authority
 - (b) Desktop research
 - (c) BVPI information

3(F) Arrange visits to void properties

The Chair commented that there was a need for the Group to look at voids properties with the surveyor. This would take approximately half a day and the Chair suggested a morning visit. She further suggested that the two co-optees be asked to put forward four void properties to be visited. Suggested dates for the visits would then be emailed to the Group.

- AGREED:**
- (1) That the two co-optees be asked to suggest four void properties for the Group to visit.
 - (2) That suggested dates for the visits to be emailed to the Group.
 - (3) That an update to be given to the next meeting.

4 Publicity for the public meeting of the Task and Finish Group.

Consideration of this item was deferred to the next meeting.

5 Suggested External Expertise

The Group was advised that its scope included the following:-

Format of Evidence Information

Evidence from a fellow researcher

Methods Used

External Organisation to be asked to carry out an assessment on a Council property such as elderly persons' accommodation.

The Group heard that a number of organisations would be able to carry out an assessment on a Council property such as elderly persons' accommodation but would potentially require a resource to acquire. There were a number of organisations/consultancies which have the expertise, such as the CIOH (Chartered institute of housing). Alternatively another Local Authority could be asked to assist. The Chair suggested that this information could be acquired when the Group makes its visits, for example, ascertaining where staff acquired their expertise. Additionally, the information could be acquired at the public meeting, ascertaining an elderly person's point of view of what was ideal living accommodation.

In response to a request for the Group to define the nature of the evidence that it would require from the research from the UCN or similar educational establishment, the Chair suggested that staff be asked to provide suggested bullet points for research, such as Asset Management Strategy. This would form the basis for the research scope and would be emailed to the Group for comment. Once approved, the UCN or Birmingham University

(INGLOV) would be contacted and asked to carry out the research and report back by end of November 2006.

- AGREED:**
- (1) That staff provide suggested bullet points for research such as the Asset Management Strategy which would form the basis for the research scope. This would then be emailed to the Group for comment.
 - (2) Following the Group's approval of the research scope, a local university would be contacted regarding carrying out the research and asked to report their findings by the end of November 2006.

6 Schedule of meetings

The schedule of meetings was noted as: -

Wednesday 20 September
Wednesday 18 October
Wednesday 15 November
Wednesday 13 December

At this point the Group heard that discussions had been held with the previous Chair regarding asking the relevant Portfolio Holder(s) to provide evidence to a future meeting and *Evidence Gathering – Defining Questions to be put to the Portfolio Holder(s)* had been agreed as an agenda item for the next meeting. It was further agreed that the Portfolio Holders be asked to attend the meeting on 18 October. The Chair suggested that it would be beneficial to hold a pre-meeting with the lead Overview and Scrutiny Councillors for Housing Repairs. It was noted that Councillor P Flavell was the Portfolio Holder for Local Environment which included housing repairs and Councillor Y Miah the Portfolio Holder for Housing. Councillor M Pritchard is the Lead Overview and Scrutiny Councillor for Local Environment and Councillor L Mason the Lead Overview and Scrutiny Councillor for Housing. A meeting would be set up with the two lead Overview and Scrutiny Councillors and the Chair of the Task and Finish Group to obtain their views on what questions should be put to the Portfolio Holders. These questions would then form the basis of the questions to be put to the Portfolio Holders and would be discussed at the next Task and Finish Group meeting. All members of the Task and Finish Group would be notified of the meeting date and invited to attend.

- AGREED:**
- (1) That a meeting be arranged with the two lead Overview and Scrutiny Councillors for Local Environment and Housing regarding devising possible questions to be put to the Portfolio Holders.
 - (2) That Evidence Gathering – Defining Questions to the Portfolio Holders be an agenda item at the next meeting.
 - (3) That the Portfolio Holders be asked to attend the meeting on 18 October.

The agenda for the meeting on 20 September would include: -

- **Election of Chair of the Task and Finish Group for the remainder of the review.**
- **Evidence Gathering – Defining Questions to the Portfolio Holders**
- **Evidence Gathering – BVPI Information** D Robertson
- **Door Entry Systems** - The current position and projected future position for door entry systems and budget information, such as a cost benefit analysis of implementing a good door entry system in comparison to the damage already caused.

- **Decent Homes Delivery and Compliance** - The delivery programme and a further update on the methodology including: resources, what has been targeted, and what, if any, targets are anticipated to fail over the next four years.
- **Progress on the Voids Review** - Details of the visit to Leicester City Council.
- Improvement Delivery Plan – relevant sections in relation to Housing Repairs and Voids. Further details on the Voids Action Plan, including timelines.
- **Publicity and format for the Public Meeting of the Task and Finish Group now 15 November 2006**
- **External Evidence – Progress Report**
- **Report back on visits to Void Properties**
- **Visit to Best Practice Local Authority – Progress Report**

The meeting closed at 18.30pm