

SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting held 10th November, 2011

PRESENT: Councillors Chris Weldon (Chair), Jenny Armstrong, Joan Barton, Alison Brelsford, Tony Damms, Anders Hanson, John Knight, Martin Lawton, Diane Leek, Robert Murphy and Chris Rosling-Josephs.

.....

1. WELCOME AND HOUSEKEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

1.1 The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting and outlined basic housekeeping and fire safety arrangements.

2. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS

2.1 There were no items identified where the public and press should be excluded.

3. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

3.1 Apologies for absence were received and substitutes attended as follows:-

Apologies

Councillor Jillian Creasy
Councillor Steve Wilson
Councillor Frank Taylor

Substitutes

Councillor Robert Murphy
No substitute nominated
No substitute nominated

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIPPING

4.1 There were no declarations of party whipping, and Members declared the following personal interests in Item 7 on the agenda – Housing Revenue Account Reform (Self-Financing):

- Councillor Joan Barton – Member of Sheffield Homes North Area Board
- Councillor Tony Damms – Member of Sheffield Homes Board of Directors
- Councillor Diane Leek – Member of Sheffield Homes North West Area Board
- Councillor Chris Rosling-Josephs – Member of Sheffield Homes South East Area Board

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 **Petitions**

There were no petitions submitted by members of the public.

5.2 **Public Questions**

- 5.2.1 Martin Brighton questioned whether the Scrutiny Committee could state its understanding of what should be happening in terms of the responsibilities and roles of Tenants and Residents Associations (TARAs), whilst indicating what it is it could do to not only stop alleged unacceptable practices, but prevent recurrence and restore functionality to TARAs.

In response, the Chair stated that whilst he did not believe there had been any unacceptable practices connected with TARAs, particularly actions to stop representatives being able to put forward their views, he would forward the issues and question raised to the relevant Cabinet Members (Councillors Harry Harpham and Mick Rooney), requesting them to provide responses.

- 5.2.2 Yvonne Collins raised a number of concerns regarding the operation and decision-making powers of the Challenge for Change Steering Group and questioned whether the Scrutiny Committee could look at the papers she had provided and circulated at the meeting, regarding the concerns now raised, and provide some reasonable and relevant answers.

In response, the Chair stated that this issue was to be considered as part of the Committee's Work Programme 2011/12 and Ms. Collins and colleagues would be invited to the meeting at which the issue was to be discussed, to enable them to put forward their views.

6. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

- 6.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 8th September, 2011, were approved as a correct record.

7. **HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT REFORM (SELF-FINANCING)**

- 7.1 Liam Duggan, Strategic Housing Service, Communities Portfolio, submitted a report on the planned change in funding arrangements for Council housing, which would comprise a move from the current national subsidy system to a system of local self-financing. The move was to be made using powers in the Localism Bill and would represent a significant change to Council housing finance and would have major implications for all local housing authorities with retained stock.

- 7.2 In support of the report, Mr. Duggan gave a presentation on the various aspects of the change, including the indicative financial settlement from the Government, the advantages and disadvantages of the new self-financing system, the criteria in terms of investment, an overview on the Business Plan

which was presently being developed in respect of Council housing in the City and details of the links to the review of the Lettings Policy, which the Scrutiny Committee was currently involved in.

7.3 Members of the Scrutiny Committee raised a number of questions and the following responses were provided.

- The remaining 25% Right to Buy receipts would have to be invested in either housing or regeneration activity.
- Council Housing rents had historically been lower than Housing Association rents, and it was expected that Council Housing rents would rise to just above inflation levels, resulting in such rents matching Housing Association rents and Council Housing rents in other areas of the City at some point in the future.
- The formula for calculating rents was based on the value of the property as at 1999, the number of bedrooms in the property and regional earnings.
- The total rents paid through benefits, directly to the Council, as landlord, amounted to approximately £85m during the 2011/12 financial year. Overall, approximately 65% of rental income was paid direct to tenants' rent accounts, through benefits.
- The percentage figure in terms of Right to Buy receipts that the Treasury would continue to keep, has always been 75%.
- Details in respect of the number and location of adapted Council properties would be available.
- It was accepted that there was a potential for delays in terms of rent payments under the new system, on the basis that benefit payments would be made direct to the tenants and not automatically to the Council, through their rent accounts. This is something that will need to be reviewed as it was viewed as one of the highest risks associated with the new system.

7.4 Members also made the following comments:-

- The biggest risk of the new processes involved the Housing Benefit finance being paid directly to tenants. There was an urgent need to work up strategies in order to mitigate against this key risk.
- It was important that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan, welfare changes and the work in connection with the review of the Lettings Policy were all linked together.

- There was a need to ensure that the Lettings Policy, following the review, was easily understood by tenants in order to make the best use of the existing housing stock.
- HRA self financing has very important links to the Lettings Policy.
- There were serious concerns regarding the lack of a strategy in terms of cash flow. The financial model for HRA self financing was being based on key assumptions and the Business Plan had been modelled on a worst case scenario in terms of welfare reform changes.

RESOLVED: That (a) the contents of the report now submitted, together with the information now reported as part of the presentation, the responses provided to the questions and the comments now made, be noted;

(b) the above comments and observations in terms of the management of the transition from subsidy to self-financing be taken into consideration as part of the drafting of the Business Plan for Council Housing, which will be considered by the Cabinet at a meeting to be held in January 2012;

(c) a note comprising the concerns of this Scrutiny Committee be forwarded to the Sheffield Members of Parliament, with a request that they lobby the Government on these issues and in connection with this, consideration be given to linking up with other local authorities and registered social landlords, with the aim of strengthening the views in terms of key risks; and

(d) Liam Duggan be requested to provide an update in terms of the concerns raised at this meeting, focussing specifically on the key risks, at the Committee's meeting to be held on 12th January, 2012.

8. INTEGRATED ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR REVIEW

- 8.1 The Scrutiny Committee considered a joint report of Simon Mitchell, Safety Neighbourhood Manager and Chief Inspector Paul McCurry, Head of Community Safety, containing proposals in terms of improving the Council's ability to respond to anti-social behaviour (ASB) in a co-ordinated way, and for the benefit of people living in Sheffield, following a review of the City's approach to ASB carried out in May, 2011.
- 8.2 Simon Mitchell reported that although performance in the City, terms of dealing with ASB was good, particularly in comparison to other core cities, there were still a number of issues that needed to be addressed, primarily that the various services were not joined up, which had often lead to an inconsistent approach and duplication of effort and resources. One of the main suggestions for improving this area of work was the establishment of a central Partnership Tasking Team and tasking process, which it was hoped would provide a more co-ordinated way of identifying priorities, promoting joint working and providing an improved outcome for members of the community. Mr. Mitchell reported on the structure of the proposed Partnership Tasking Model, referring to issues regarding intelligence, Police "Place Based" tasking, the establishment of a Partnership Tasking Team, Area Tasking and

Community Tasking. He also referred to the role of elected Members in the resolution of area-based community safety issues.

8.3 Members of the Scrutiny Committee raised a number of questions and the following responses were provided:-

- The new system would not result in the establishment of an extra team, but would comprise a revised role for the existing team. There was a need for the Council and the Police to be more open to the community in terms of information sharing and intelligence gathering
- It has been accepted that a number of the Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) and Police and Communities Together (PACT) meetings had not been as effective as others, in terms of the lack of seniority of partner representatives attending such meetings, the lack of attendance by partner representatives and a general lack of enthusiasm from both local residents and partners.
- Although efforts were being made to encourage the public to use the "101" non-emergency number to report ASB, a number of people had indicated that they preferred to ring Sheffield Homes or other agencies on the grounds that they believed that the issues would be dealt with better and more quickly.
- It was believed that links with Elected Members had improved since the Safer Neighbourhood Officers joined the Community Assembly Teams and there was a need for any changes in structure to reflect this.

8.4 Members also made the following comments:-

- A common approach in terms of dealing with ASB across the City was required.
- All members would like to be kept informed of specific problems of ASB in their Wards.
- There was a lack of consistency in terms of the effectiveness of NAG and PACT meetings across the City, so there was a need for a new system.
- There was a need for more member involvement on the grounds that they had knowledge of specific issues in their Wards. Members need to be kept informed of specific issues so that they could pass this information on to the public, when asked.
- The Sharrow/Broomhall NAG was very effective and this and other NAGs that operated effectively should be allowed to continue.

- In terms of the effectiveness of the NAGs, partner agencies needed to ensure that, following meetings, their staff were tasked to take relevant action.

RESOLVED: That (a) the Scrutiny Committee:-

(a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the responses provided to the questions and the comments now made; and

(b) in the light of the information contained in the report, and the comments now made, supports:-

- (i) the formation of the Partnership Tasking Team;
- (ii) the roll-out of the tasking process;
- (iii) a review of the area-based Neighbourhood Action Group (NAG) and Police and Communities Together (PACT) structure to improve area-based working and community involvement; and
- (iv) the Community Safety Team in broadening the role of elected Members in decision-making and problem-solving around area-based community safety issues and community engagement.

9. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- 9.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would be held on Thursday, 12th January, 2012 at 2.00 p.m. in the Town Hall.