

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

15TH NOVEMBER, 2011

A MEETING of the REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL was held at the MANSION HOUSE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY 15TH NOVEMBER, 2011 at 11.30 A.M.

PRESENT :

Chair – Councillor Jane Kidd
Vice-Chair – Councillor Richard Cooper-Holmes

Councillors Jill Arkley-Jevons, Marilyn Green, Deborah Hutchinson, Ted Kitchen, David Nevett, John Sheppard and Yvonne Woodcock.

Also in Attendance :

Paul Smillie – Unite
Councillor Ray Mullis, Cabinet Member, Portfolio – Housing
Councillor Bob Johnson
Gary Wells, Assistant Director, Strategic Housing

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Joe Blackham, Barry Johnson JP and GMB Invitee Paul O'Brien.

	ACTION
24. <u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</u> There were no declarations made at the meeting.	All to note
25. <u>MINUTES OF THE REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING, HELD ON 4TH OCTOBER, 2011</u> <u>RESOLVED</u> that the Minutes of the Regeneration and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel Meeting held on 4th October, 2011 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair. The Chair asked that a briefing note be produced in respect of the one-stop-shop alignment solution for business support and the skills review being undertaken by Doncaster Chamber.	All to note Scrutiny Consultant

26. PUBLIC STATEMENTS

There were no Public Statements made at the meeting.

All to note

27. COUNCILLOR RAY MULLIS – PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING

Councillor Ray Mullis, Portfolio Holder for Housing presented the Strategic Housing Priorities for 2011/14.

Councillor Mullis began by reiterating the priorities he addressed at the meeting on 21st June, 2011 which were as follows:

- to have less empty properties and better standards in private sector housing;
- more affordable housing and new homes in general;
- ensure the decency programme was developed;
- improve the focus on effective governance and performance management of St. Leger Homes by DMBC and to enable St Leger Homes to have more autonomy to deliver;
- improve the range of housing options for people at threat of homelessness or in housing need;
- to ensure the Council have the ability to deliver our priorities in accordance with increased value for money and customer satisfaction.

The Panel was informed of the Strategic Housing Priorities 2011/14 which included the following:

1) To improve the quality of housing

It was noted that a new St Leger Homes (SLH) Management Board was now in place.

The quality of housing was to be improved by the delivery of an information, advice and support programme to Private Landlords. This would also include working in partnership with them to improve standards and develop new services and where necessary use enforcement.

The delivery of SLH's annual delivery plan would be monitored, with the signing off of a new plan for the coming year. The Council would also work in partnership with SLH to deliver the SLH Managing Agent Scheme.

The big issue regarding the decent homes programme would be reviewed and amended in light of the revised allocation. Housing standards on council owned sites via a new build programme would be improved. It was noted that a new build had recently taken place at Denaby.

Members were pleased to note the improved housing offer for older people via new extra care housing provision, a scheme would be opening in Kirk Sandall and Edlington next year and this would be closely developed with Adults and Communities.

In partnership with SLH, the Council was contributing to raising awareness/providing advice to increase energy efficiency in homes and reduce fuel poverty for residents. The Panel was advised that private housing was below SLH energy efficiencies.

2) To improve housing choices for residents

An advice and support programme was being delivered for people affected by the threat of homelessness, the issue of which was especially problematic at this time.

The development of accommodation pathways for 16 and 17 year olds at threat of homelessness, especially if they came from Local Authority care, was also being addressed.

Joint housing priorities and CYP, Health and Crime and Neighbourhoods were to be developed by working jointly with the Cabinet Holders for Children and Young People, Adult, Social Care and Health and Neighbourhoods respectively, including a new centre in Bentley that encouraged independent living where young people were able to stay overnight. It was also noted that anti social behaviour was now part of the SLH budget spend.

3) To improve our local neighbourhoods and communities

The process of developing neighbourhood investment plans was being piloted in Edlington, Denaby and Mexborough.

The building rate of new homes at present was low due to constraints on development and engagement was taking place with private developers (local and national) to increase this.

An affordable housing programme, including Gypsy and Traveller provision would be delivered and the Council was in close contact with Government departments.

A programme was being delivered to introduce empty properties back into use, with financial assistance being offered to private owners of empty premises.

Members were advised that as the Hit Squads gain intimate knowledge of housing stock in the areas they were dealing with, they could assist in the appraisal of existing stock.

The Council were to develop new proposals to build council houses/bring empty properties back into use and Councillor Mullis advised the Panel that a Mayoral priority was to build new houses but in reality finding the means and opportunity had been difficult. It was noted that if council housing went under SLH then the 'right to buy' scheme could be protected.

4) To ensure the Council's housing services contribute to the recovery plan

Members were informed that a publication had been available since June that detailed the challenge ahead including facts and figures for better homes in better places.

The Chair thanked Councillor Mullis for his presentation and invited questions and comments from the Panel which focussed on the following issues:

In response to a Member's question, Councillor Mullis advised of the Mayor's intention that members of the armed forces be given priority in respect of housing issues once they become civilians again.

It was noted that the Housing Improvement Board would not be continuing any longer and though it had been helpful, it had served its purpose.

The Chair reported that the subject of gypsies and travellers was on the forward plan to produce a policy of allocations.

It was noted that the Government had asked for the Council's opinion but the Government's suggested rules would be to practically double the amount of sites in the Borough.

The Assistant Director, Strategic Housing advised the Panel that there were two differing views as follows:

1. to do nothing which would then mean illegal encampments would be set up;
2. to agree sites in the Borough.

The Assistant Director also reported that a Multi-Agency Working Group had been set up and the current approach was to set up politically acceptable sites, but as the Council would not approve them, officers could not move forward. The Panel was advised that a report would be presented to a future Scrutiny meeting with a list of politically acceptable sites.

Under new guidance, there is no gypsy and traveller required needs assessment, though the Assistant Director informed the Panel that from a planning perspective, an assessment was required and there was a need to meet the shortfall throughout the Borough over the next 5 years and to look at acceptable sites to accommodate the shortfall.

A Member reported that residents in the Bentley Ward considered that they had more than enough gypsy and traveller sites at present. The Member also reported that the housing investment plans were an excellent way forward.

The Assistant Director reported that the issue in respect of gypsies and travellers needed to be formula driven by the Government. A Member questioned if there was a large gypsy and traveller community would it attract more gypsies and travellers into the area. Members were informed that the Planning Department had responded to the Government, that the needs assessment required changing.

It was noted that it may be possible for authorities to reach capacity levels of how many sites were available to gypsies and travellers.

The Panel was advised that Local Authorities could produce a formula themselves, but this would need to follow Planning and Legal requirements in case of any illegal encampments that were appealed.

In answer to a Member's comment that Doncaster could say that the needs of the gypsy and traveller community had been met, the Assistant Director replied that the Council were looking at how to define local need and would put the Member's view forward to the Planning Department.

AD Strat Hsg

A Member considered that Doncaster currently had more gypsy and traveller sites than was required legally and the Council needed to take a harder stance and move travellers on from any illegal sites.

At the request of Members, the Assistant Director undertook to provide a list of current traveller sites and also a list of the disputed and illegal sites in the Borough to the Panel.

AD Strat Hsg

It was reported that two semi detached houses that had been adapted to create 'Harmony House', a new centre in Bentley for young people with disabilities to create independent living, did not seem to be in use and a Member asked the Assistant Director for clarity on how often the house was used.

AD Strat Hsg

A discussion took place regarding empty houses that from a year ago had reduced from 6,000 to 4,600. Some grants were available and a Member asked if there was anything else that could be done to bring empty houses back into use.

Councillor Mullis reported that when the rates and utility bills were not paid, a property would then be classed as empty. The Assistant Director advised that data was being analysed more to understand the variations and it would take around 3 months for a property to be brought back into use. The focus was more on properties that were empty longer than 3 months, with emphasis on 3-6 months as these could be brought back into use quicker.

The cost for properties empty over 6 months would be more but local knowledge could be used to address problem issues. It was understood that there would be different solutions for different properties.

A Member raised the issue of the change in benefit policies that would occur in January 2012 as the low rent of properties in Doncaster may mean an influx of people requiring homes from

more affluent areas that would be affected by the changes. This migration of needy people could cause more problems to Doncaster.

The Assistant Director reported that there was 5,000 people in council houses in Doncaster that were under occupied that would be affected and SLH were looking to assist them. In Doncaster there was an over supply of three-bedroom properties and an under supply of less than three-bedroom properties and the Assistant Director considered this would see a change in where people chose to live.

In January there would be 750 residents in Doncaster in larger accommodation that would be affected by the changes to the benefits system.

It was reported that some private landlords were considering not to house residents in receipt of housing benefits and only to attract people that could meet the rental price. There were others that were looking to see how they could meet the accommodation needs of residents within their revised amount, once the benefit change had taken place.

A Member questioned the long waiting time for occupational therapies. The Assistant Director informed the Panel that the issues were also closely linked with Adults and Communities who had been asked to profile a list including the cost and then to set up a business plan to address the backlog. It was noted that this would need to be part of the budget process and the therapies required would be subject to a tendering process.

A discussion took place surrounding adapting 1 bedroom bungalows to become 2 bedroom and the Assistant Director reported that SLH had developed a proposal to extend some and Members could contact them direct for further information.

Members were concerned that adaptations were not undertaken all at the same time, so the process of completion was lengthy. The officers were visiting properties to assess them and then going straight back to the office to write up their findings each time, instead of undertaking a few visits together.

The Vice-Chair considered that SLH ought to undertake the assessments and adaptations as they completed them quicker. The Assistant Director advised Members that the Council had changed the procurement rules and if there was an in-house provider they had to be used and the question was really for the Adults and Communities Panel to respond.

All to note

A Member recalled lists of people in arrears being presented as an exempt part 2 item and queried the process now. The Assistant Director reported that this was an area that had been flagged up to SLH by the Audit Commission Inspection. There had now been around 98% collected with 2% in arrears.

If residents did not pay rent, became evicted and therefore homeless, a Member considered that no help should then be provided. The Assistant Director responded that this would depend on specific issues and work was undertaken with SLH to assist in payment arrangements.

In response to a query regarding the loss of rental income for council properties, the Assistant Director considered that there were 450 council properties empty and would approach SLH to provide the amount for the loss of income. It was noted that the amount of properties was within the target levels set.

Councillor Mullis considered that the rent collection by SLH was operating well but held the opinion that this would be challenged in the new year when the new rules in respect of rooms would be in place.

The Assistant Director informed the Panel that Councillor Mullis and the Mayor would be meeting shortly to discuss next year's priorities.

A question was asked regarding how many enforcement notices were issued, the timeline and criteria for private landlords. The Assistant Director advised Members that there were specific timelines to be followed, which included an informal process first and then a formal enforcement and prosecution. He considered that some prosecutions needed to take place to send a clear message that empty properties would not be tolerated.

A Member appreciated the work undertaken by the empty properties team and would like to see more prosecutions taking place as areas needed to be made more attractive.

In respect of empty properties and homelessness, a Member considered that these issues should be connected and the Assistant Director informed Members that empty homes were identified through the council tax database.

Members were concerned with the new procurement rules and the prices charged to the Council by the private sector and if work undertaken was really value for money.

The Chair thanked Councillor Mullis and the Assistant Director for the priorities and responses to Members questions.

RESOLVED

The Panel agreed for the recommendations to be completed from the meetings that had taken place this morning and circulated to all.

All to note

(1) The Assistant Director to contact the Planning Department in respect of whether Doncaster could say that the needs of the gypsy and traveller community had been met in the Borough;

AD Strat Hsg

(2) a list of current traveller sites and a list of disputed and illegal sites in the Borough to be provided to the Panel; and

AD Strat Hsg

(3) the Assistant Director to confirm how often 'Harmony House' in Bentley was being used.

AD Strat Hsg

28. REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL WORK UPDATE AND PROGRESS WITH THE 2011/12 WORK PLAN

Members were provided with an update to the Regeneration and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel on progress with the work plan for 2011/12. The report allowed the Panel to monitor what developments had been made, work that had been undertaken in relation to the work plan, information, updates and correspondence since the meeting held on 4th October, 2011.

The work plan was a live document that allowed the Panel to review it in order to develop and reprioritise items where necessary.

The Panel noted that for the 19th December meeting, there would be three reports presented, Delivery of Regeneration, Environment through Localism Bill and Opportunity Centres. It was noted that Councillor Cynthia Ransome, Cabinet Member and Portfolio Holder for Communities; Street Scene; Environment Protection would be attending the December meeting.

RESOLVED that the Panel:

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| <p>(1) received and commented on the progress made against the work programme and briefing notes were to be provided on the following issues:</p> <p>CCQ
Skills Review
Aligned Solution for Business Support 'One-Stop-Shop'
Invest in Doncaster
Digital Region;</p> | <p>All to note

Scrutiny
Consultant</p> |
| <p>(2) noted and approved the action plan which updated the Panel on recommendations made to the Executive, it was noted that the Chair had asked Rob Vincent that in respect of SMC, any options be presented to Scrutiny;</p> | <p>All to note</p> |
| <p>(3) noted the correspondence made between the Panel and the Executive;</p> | <p>All to note</p> |
| <p>(4) noted the update provided on the DMBC internal review into Opportunity Centres;</p> | <p>All to note</p> |
| <p>(5) noted the briefing note on Tourism within Doncaster and the work of Doncaster Tourism;</p> | <p>All to note</p> |
| <p>(6) formally agreed the membership of the working group as Councillors Jane Kidd, Richard Cooper-Holmes, David Nevett and Barry Johnson and Terms of Reference established for policy development work towards the Environmental Strategy; and</p> | <p>All to note</p> |
| <p>(7) agreed that recommendations following the informal meeting looking at affordable private housing developments could be agreed outside of the formal scrutiny process and circulated at the next formal meeting on the 19th December 2011.</p> | <p>All to note</p> |