

SCRUTINY BOARD (NEIGHBOURHOODS AND HOUSING)

WEDNESDAY, 6TH DECEMBER, 2006

PRESENT: Councillor R Pryke in the Chair

Councillors J Akhtar, P Ewens, R Finnigan,
G Hyde, M Phillips, M Rafique and
D Schofield

55 CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

The Chair opened the December meeting of the Scrutiny Board (Neighbourhoods and Housing) by wishing those present a Merry Christmas. Members heard that performance management information from the Neighbourhoods and Housing department had been circulated for information. The Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing, Neil Evans, was in attendance at the meeting. The Chair therefore invited the Board to put any questions to the Director at this point in the meeting.

Brief discussion then ensued around the following topics:

- The department's various housing-based strategies and the need for these to work in conjunction with one another and not exist in isolation;
- The progress being made in the transition to the three new ALMOs;
- Performance management statistics for the department;
- Members' concern about the quality of some private rental properties used as temporary accommodation in the city.

The Board were informed that they were welcome to forward any information they received regarding poor quality temporary housing provision to the Director for further investigation by the department.

(Councillor Akhtar joined the meeting at 10:15 am during these discussions.)

56 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Members declared personal / prejudicial interests for the purpose of Section 81 (3) of the Local Government Act 2000 and paragraphs 8 to 13 of the Members Code of Conduct:

Councillor J Akhtar – Declared a personal interest as a Member of Leeds East ALMO Board (Minute no's. 55 and 62 refer.)

Councillor P Ewens – Declared a personal interest as a Member of Leeds North West ALMO Board (Minute no's. 55 and 62 refer.)

Councillor G Hyde – Declared a personal interest as a Director of Leeds East ALMO Board (Minute no's. 55 and 62 refer.)

Councillor D Schofield – Declared a personal interest as a Director of South East Leeds ALMO Board (Minute no's. 55 and 62 refer.)

57 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Armitage, Atkinson and Gabriel.

58 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING - 8TH NOVEMBER 2006

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 8th November 2006 be approved as a correct record.

59 MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 6TH NOVEMBER 2006

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 6th November 2006 be noted.

60 MINUTES - EXECUTIVE BOARD - 15TH NOVEMBER 2006

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Executive Board meeting held on 15th November 2006 be noted.

61 PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR HOUSING STRATEGY

The Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing presented a report seeking the Board's endorsement of the Leeds Private Rented Housing Strategy. The strategy was appended to the report for information. Members heard that the strategy had been devised by a multi-agency group and was still a work in progress. It was intended to provide a partnership framework to support the work of the Council, in conjunction with private landlords, towards improving the quality and supply of private rented housing in the city.

Andy Beattie, Deputy Chief Environmental Health Officer, Neighbourhoods and Housing, attended the meeting to present the report and respond to Members' comments and questions.

The Board went on to discuss the following points in relation to the report:

- The need for the Authority to work closely with organisations such as UNIPOL and ensure that information is shared;
- The effect of the housing benefit Pathfinder scheme in restricting the choice available to claimants seeking to secure private rented properties;
- Moves being made, particularly through the new licences for Houses in Multiple Occupation, to ensure landlords take a degree of responsibility towards any anti-social behaviour occurring within their properties;
- Work currently being undertaken to produce a register of landlords, as part of the new licensing arrangements, and the benefits of this list in terms of tackling anti-social behaviour and poor landlords;
- The predicted increase in numbers of students living in purpose-built accommodation, the likely effect of this upon the private rental market and steps being made to address this surplus;

Following the discussion it was agreed that additional information be circulated to Members regarding the Pathfinder Housing Benefits scheme. The Chair thanked Officers for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED – That the Leeds Private Rented Housing Strategy be endorsed and a further report on the issue be brought to the Board in six months time.

62 LOCAL LETTINGS POLICY UPDATE

The Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing presented a report from the Strategic Landlord Group updating the Board on the operation and review of Local Lettings Policies (LLPs) and their expected impact within the new ALMO structure.

Simeon Perry, Strategic Landlord Officer, Neighbourhoods and Housing, attended the meeting to present the report and respond to Members' comments and queries.

Members heard that LLPs were permitted under the Homelessness Act 2002 provided they do not discriminate, they are consistently applied and housing need is addressed. It was explained that some LLPs had always existed in Leeds but these had never before been formalised. However, in January 2005 Executive Board had approved the creation of LLPs, following which five ALMOs had stated their preference to implement LLPs. These would continue to function following the impending ALMO restructure.

The Board were informed that the most common type of LLP related to age preference, i.e. properties with poor sound insulation are often not suitable for housing younger people due to an inability to support their lifestyle. Around 12.3% of council stock was subject to such a policy. The second most prevalent form of LLP are those in place to ensure that people from a particular areas with proven local connections are able to be re-housed in high demand areas. Three area housing offices (Garforth, Kippax and Wetherby) currently operate such a policy, equating to 3.6% of the total Council housing stock.

Members discussed the following points arising from the report:

- The problems associated with applying LLPs requiring local connections to popular areas with low housing supply;
- The view that by applying LLPs to areas, not just specific buildings, a two-tier system which is not transparent has been created;
- The very small proportion of houses in popular areas that do become available for rent – since January 2006 it was reported that only six properties in Kippax had been advertised;
- The advantages of LLPs such as their contribution towards creating stable communities by housing extended families in particular areas;

Officers reported that the Department for Communities and Local Government had recently undertaken research on choice based lettings which had

examined the situation in Leeds. It was agreed that this report would be circulated for Members' information.

The Chair thanked Officers for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED – That the contents of the report be noted.

63 EASEL REGENERATION AREA - UPDATE

The Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing submitted a report updating Members on the progress of the East and South East Leeds (EASEL) regeneration initiative. The Board heard that the programme had commenced in 2004, when the Council and the ALMOs had undertaken to attract a development partner to assist in bringing about change to the area, with a focus on housing market renewal. Following a competitive procurement process, Bellway Plc had been appointed as preferred bidder, although the report stressed that negotiations were still ongoing at this stage.

The report outlined the steps that had been taken to date to implement the initiative and informed Members that it was anticipated that work could begin on sites in Gipton and Seacroft in 2007, subject to the completion of successful negotiations with Bellway Plc. The Board heard that a Regeneration Investment Plan would need to be devised as part of the process. This would set out what the Authority and Bellway were committed to achieving within the first five years of the scheme, which was anticipated to run for around twenty-five years.

Phil Joyce, Project Development Manager, Neighbourhoods and Housing, attended the meeting to present the report and respond to Members' questions and comments.

The Board discussed the following points in relation to the report:

- The expected timeframe for concluding procurement negotiations with Bellway Plc;
- The areas identified for regeneration works and the need to ensure that all sites undergo early works to boost community confidence in the scheme;
- The need to focus on issues such as education and leisure provision, employment and the environment alongside the drive for housing market renewal;
- The benefits and disadvantages of embarking upon such an ambitious programme, spanning a wide geographical area;
- The need to improve consultation with local communities affected by the proposals and further raise awareness, particularly due to the scale of the project.

The Chair thanked Officers for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED – That the contents of the report be noted.

(Councillor Rafique joined the meeting at 11:15 am during consideration of this item.)

64 LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN'S ANNUAL LETTER

The Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing presented a report on the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter. The 2006 letter had previously been submitted to the Board, at which time the increase in Ombudsman complaints relating to housing had been noted and a further report requested.

The report provided an analysis of Ombudsman complaints relating to repairs and lettings received between April 2005 and September 2006, along with proposals for future action to address any emerging issues. It was acknowledged that improving communication with the customer was a priority, along with ensuring complaints were reported to officers with the authority to progress matters and a strengthening of governance arrangements with the ALMOs.

The Board discussed the contents of the report and possible reasons for the apparent rise in complaints relating to the department. In conclusion, Members acknowledged that there were improvements to be made to reduce the number of Ombudsman enquiries and that these were currently being actioned.

RESOLVED – That the information contained in the report be noted and the situation continue to be monitored and, if necessary, a further report to be submitted to a future Board meeting.

(Councillor Finnigan joined the meeting at 11:35 am, during consideration of this item.)

65 WORK PROGRAMME

The Head of Scrutiny and Member Development submitted a report which detailed the current work programme of the Board, including scheduled and unscheduled items.

Appended to the report for Members' information was a copy of the Forward Plan for December to March 2007.

The Board agreed that an issue raised regarding any corporate communications published by the Neighbourhoods and Housing department could be considered at the January meeting if possible. This was following a request from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for individual Boards to investigate practices regarding publications within their departments. Two separate reports on prostitution and the Single Regional Housing Pot would be brought to the Board in February and March respectively.

Members discussed the issue of the effect of new planning guidance upon housing provision in the city and the numbers of one-bedroom flats being built

in the city as opposed to family housing and suggested that further scrutiny of these matters be considered.

RESOLVED – That the contents of the report and the revisions to the Work Programme be noted.

66 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

Wednesday 10th January 2007 at 10:00 am (pre-meeting for Board Members at 9:30 am.)

(The meeting concluded at 11:45 am.)