

## **SCRUTINY BOARD (NEIGHBOURHOODS AND HOUSING)**

**WEDNESDAY, 11TH OCTOBER, 2006**

**PRESENT:** Councillor R Pryke in the Chair

Councillors J Akhtar, P Ewens, A Gabriel,  
M Phillips, M Rafique and D Schofield

### **30 LATE ITEMS**

The Chair indicated that the following late items would be admitted to the agenda for consideration at the meeting – agenda item 11 ‘Homelessness Strategy’ and agenda item 12 ‘Performance Indicators.’ These items had been listed on the agenda, however these reports had not been available at the time of agenda despatch.

### **31 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

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 P Ewens – Declared a personal interest as a Member of Leeds North West ALMO Board (Minute no. 36 refers.)

Councillor A Gabriel – Declared a personal interest as the Chair of the Beeston Hill and Holbeck Regeneration Board (Minute no. 37 refers.)

Councillor D Schofield – Declared a personal interest as a Director of South East Leeds ALMO Board (Minute no. 36 refers.)

### **32 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

It was reported that apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Armitage, Atkinson and Hyde.

### **33 MINUTES - 6TH SEPTEMBER 2006**

**RESOLVED** – That subject to the agreed addition of the following paragraph to Minute No. 23 (Questions to the Director) the minutes of the previous meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2006 were agreed as a correct record: ‘The Board discussed the issues raised in a letter sent by Ward Members to tenants of Leeds South Homes in April in order to clarify the situation regarding decency money and its allocation, alleged diversion and its expenditure. The Board noted that a letter of clarification was sent to tenants by Leeds South Homes. Representatives from the department explained to the Board that the procedures for allocating and spending decency money were transparent and audited. The Executive Board Member with responsibility for Neighbourhoods and Housing commented that under no circumstances could money be diverted from this fund.’

### **34 MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 4TH SEPTEMBER 2006**

Draft minutes to be approved at the meeting  
to be held on Wednesday, 8th November, 2006

**35 RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 4<sup>th</sup> September be noted.

**36 MINUTES - EXECUTIVE BOARD - 20TH SEPTEMBER 2006**  
**RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the Executive Board meeting held on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2006 be noted.

**37 MINUTES - THRIVING COMMUNITIES CORPORATE PRIORITIES BOARD - 14TH SEPTEMBER 2006**

Neil Evans, Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing, attended the meeting to respond to any questions arising out of the minutes and any associated issues.

Discussion on the following topics then ensued:

- Whether a duty of care should be extended beyond the age of 18 to those young people leaving local authority care;
- Progress made by the authority in reducing the number of void properties in the city (Minute No. 37 also refers;)
- The scope and possible implications of the current Area Management Review;
- Office accommodation for Neighbourhoods and Housing staff;
- The result of the ballot in the recent ALMO Review and the process likely to be adopted to establish the three new ALMOs.

**RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the Thriving Communities Corporate Priority Board meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2006 be noted.

(Councillor Akhtar joined the meeting at 10:10 am during consideration of this item.)

**38 EMPTY PROPERTY STRATEGY**

The Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing submitted a report advising the Board of the revised Corporate Empty Property Strategy for 2006 – 2010 and associated updated targets. Appended to the report for Members' information was a copy of the strategy, which had been updated in August 2006.

Jon Hough, Environmental Health Project Manager, Neighbourhoods and Housing and Neil Evans, Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing attended the meeting to present the report and to respond to Members' queries.

The Board were informed that the revised strategy reiterated the authority's approach to empty properties as proactive rather than reactive. The strategy dated back to 1999, when a pilot scheme had taken place in Beeston Hill and Holbeck. Over time the strategy had evolved to become city-wide, however its main thrust was still concerned with regeneration. The strategy recognised the need to deal with the underlying causes that lead to properties becoming empty and the affect this has upon areas, particularly in terms of deterring outside investment. The meeting heard that the overall void rate throughout the city, calculated in July 2006, stood at 5.45%.

Members raised the following issues in relation to the report:

- The benefit of one over-arching strategy for the city but the recognition that different areas often required different solutions;
- The use of recent housing legislation in tackling the problem of empty properties, such as selective licensing;
- Problems anticipated with student housing in this regard, which was of particular concern given the current trend for purpose-built student accommodation in the city;
- The fact that many properties in the city are empty despite the current demand for affordable housing;
- The negative effects of void properties upon those areas most in need of investment and regeneration;
- Recognition of the success of the authority's work in securing empty properties which has led to a low number of instances of squatting.

The Board expressed the hope that funding for the strategy would continue. The Chair thanked Officers for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

**RESOLVED** – That the revised Empty Property Strategy be noted and approved.

### **39 HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY**

The Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing submitted a report detailing information relating to the key challenges facing the Council in relation to tackling homelessness in the city and how the Homelessness Strategy proposed to address these challenges.

Bridget Emery, Head of Strategic Commissioning, Neighbourhoods and Housing and Neil Evans, Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing, attended the meeting to present the report and respond to Members' comments.

Members heard that under the 2002 Homelessness Act the authority is required to develop a Homelessness Strategy for the city. This had first been developed back in 2003, with the current strategy designed to run up until 2010. Officers reported that significant progress had been made in responding to homelessness in the city since the strategy was first introduced. The report detailed how the authority had begun to focus on prevention initiatives in the first instance, as well as dealing with homelessness when it occurred.

The revised strategy, as well as working in conjunction with other initiatives such as the Empty Property Strategy, sets out the Council's plan to meet the target to reduce the number of households placed in temporary accommodation by 50% by March 2010, which was recently set by the Department of Communities and Local Government for all local authorities.

Members went on to discuss the following points in relation to the report:

- Where individuals living in sub-standard accommodation fit within the strategy;

- The need for the Council to work closely with the ALMOs on the issue of homelessness;
- Increasing financial pressures on some households and the importance of the authority providing advice on this issue as part of measures to prevent homelessness;
- Whether migrants coming into the city were placing any additional pressures on the homelessness figures.

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

**RESOLVED** – That the contents of the report be noted.

#### **40 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

The Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing submitted a report which set out performance information for the Neighbourhoods and Housing department against a range of Best Value Performance Indicators and other key national and local indicators for the year 2005/06.

Neil Evans, Director of Neighbourhoods and Housing, attended the meeting to present the report to Members and respond to any comments.

The meeting heard that overall during 2005/06 there was an improving trend, however there were a small number of performance indicators in which performance was shown to have declined on the previous year, but there were often explanations for these figures. For example, whilst there was shown to be a decline in BV-212 (Average time taken to re-let local authority housing) the Director explained that this was largely due to the letting of properties that had previously been labelled 'difficult to let.' Whilst this had obviously had a negative impact on the performance indicator, it was deemed to be positive for the department in terms of service delivery.

Members noted that progress had been made in other areas, notably BV-66a, rent collection and arrears, (where the proportion of payments made via direct debit had contributed to the improvement) BV-64, private sector dwellings returned to occupation, (which had seen marked improvement this year) and BV-63, energy efficiency SAP rating of local authority owned dwellings, (which had benefited from the ALMO investment strategy.)

The Board then went on to discuss the contents of the report and its implications.

**RESOLVED** – That the contents of the report be received and noted.

#### **41 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 October to January 2007. Members noted that the acquisition of additional commercial premises in the Beverleys Regeneration area had been delayed at the current time. The Board had visited this area as part of the Inquiry into Regeneration in Beeston Hill and Holbeck at the previous meeting (Minute No. 27 refers.)

The Board were invited to comment on and make amendments to the work programme, as appropriate. Members queried whether the Lettings Policy Update, which was scheduled for the January 2007 meeting, should be considered prior to the forthcoming restructure of the ALMOs. It was therefore agreed that a summary report would be provided before this date.

**RESOLVED** – That the contents of the report and the revisions to the work programme be noted.

**42 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> November 2006 at 10:00 am (pre-meeting for Board Members at 9:30 am.)

(The meeting concluded at 12:00 pm.)