

16 SEPTEMBER 2009

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

HOUSING REVIEW PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing Review Panel held at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Wednesday, 16 September 2009.

p Cllr Mrs A J Hoare (Chairman)
p Cllr Mrs P Jackman (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

e S P Davies
p P C Greenfield
p P E Hickman
p Mrs K J Lord

Councillors:

p Mrs M McLean
M P Reid
D J Russell
p R A Wappet

In Attendance:

Councillor:

Mrs J L Cleary (Housing Portfolio Holder)

Housing Policy and Report Focus Group Representatives:

Mrs P White

Officers Attending:

D Brown, R Topliss, Ms M Stephens, and for part of the meeting, Ms P Lewis and Mrs D MacLean.

14. MINUTES.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2009, having been circulated, be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

15. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

No declarations of interest were made by members in connection with any agenda items.

16. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION.

No issues were raised during the public participation period.

17. TUNSTALL PROGRESS UPDATE.

The Panel at the work programme workshop had requested that Tunstall be invited to a Panel meeting to give a progress report on their activities.

Ms Sally Riley, Account Manager from Tunstall, was in attendance and updated members with the progress of the service.

Tunstall Ltd had put substantial investment in to their operations centre including a robust emergency back up system to ensure that in the event of a power failure or a disaster the service continued.

The Panel was pleased to hear that high on Tunstall's agenda was ensuring that a high quality service was provided to its clients. This was achieved by regularly monitoring response times of calls and investing in continuous training for its 70 operators.

The location of the company often raised queries with customers in relation to emergency response times. The geographical positioning of Tunstall had no bearing on this as local emergency services were called. Although personal and local knowledge was sometimes lost through using Tunstall, they provided a rapid response to calls.

Tunstall actively encouraged customers regularly to put in test calls in order to familiarise themselves with the system. Equally, the Council regularly asked sheltered housing tenants and lifeline users to use their pendants and pull cords, instead of independently calling emergency services. Response to emergencies through Tunstall was quicker and enabled speedier access to buildings for the emergency services. Tunstall also held records of individuals' medical requirements which helped in emergency situations.

Tunstall was regularly audited and had had its last audit in February. The audit was a huge success with Tunstall passing without any observations. Tunstall would pass on a copy of the audit results to the Council for information.

Tunstall had given a presentation to the Tenants Forum earlier on in the day and this had proved highly successful. Tenants had been wary in the past of an outside provider but were more than satisfied with the service Tunstall provided.

The Chairman thanked Ms Riley for an informative presentation.

18. DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT WAITING LIST (REPORT A).

The Panel at their work programme workshop had requested that a progress report on the waiting list for Disabled Facilities Grant be submitted for discussion.

The Housing Technical Team had been carrying a number of vacancies for a number of years but since July 2009 was now fully staffed with recent appointments of a Surveyor and Housing Administrators. It was hoped that with a full complement of staff, significant developments would take place to reduce the waiting time for clients.

The number of enquiries being received by the team was steadily increasing and putting additional pressure on the new team. This rise had not come as a surprise considering the demographics of the New Forest and the rise in its older population. However, the team was hopeful that they could release up to five new cases per week, which should have a positive impact on the total number on the waiting list and the length of wait.

There were a range of performance indicators for this service which would be included in the housing performance indicators in the future for members' scrutiny and monitoring.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the information contained in the report be noted;
- (b) That the Panel's appreciation of the hard work of officers be noted; and
- (c) That a progress report be submitted to the Panel in six months time.

19. FLOATING SUPPORT SERVICE (REPORT B).

The Panel considered the role of the District Council's new Floating Support Service which currently provided a variety of support to tenants over the age of 55. The service was funded by Hampshire County Council Supporting People to enable 112 clients to benefit from the service. The contract ran from April 2009 until March 2012 and was to enable delivery of the service for older people with support needs and assist them in staying in their own homes.

Members felt there would be a considerable growth in demand for this service over the coming years owing to the steady increase in the numbers of older people in the district. Members expressed concerns regarding the future funding and continuation of the service past 2012. Officers assured members that the future planning of the support service had taken this into consideration and demand would be met within the resources. Members would be kept regularly informed on the resources for the service.

Members expressed the view that with the potential for the service to expand in the future the current level of staffing would be insufficient to cope with this demand. Officers assured members that as part of the review of sheltered housing, all staffing resources across services would be examined as and when necessary to ensure continuation of key services.

Members supported the new service and wished it success for the future.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the information contained in the report be noted;
- (b) That any changes to the service including resource constraints and funding past 2012 be reported to the Panel; and
- (c) That the Panel notes that a staffing review will be undertaken and offers their assistance to officers regarding staffing implications in the future.

20. ST ANTHONY'S PROGRESS/MONITORING OF TENANTS – VERBAL UPDATE.

The Head of Housing informed the Panel that progress was being made to move the current tenants to suitable temporary accommodation. Members were pleased that tenants were moving to an improved living environment.

21. HOUSING BUILDING PROJECT PILOT (REPORT C).

The Government had brought forward several initiatives and proposals to encourage the development of housing, particularly affordable housing. These included the Kick Start programme of £400 million to unlock stalled sites, the opportunity for Local Authorities to bid for a ring fenced pot of Social Housing Grant, and the consultation on changes to the capital and revenue funding rules for the HRA.

Of particular interest to NFDC had been the establishment of a challenge fund of £50m Social Housing Grant, ring fenced for Local Authorities, to be matched with £50 million prudential borrowing, which aimed to develop in the region of 900 new houses across the country in 09/10 and 10/11. More recently this sum had been considerably enhanced in Building Britain's Future.

The provision of affordable housing was a key corporate priority for NFDC. Recent discussions between Housing Officers and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) had indicated that the HCA would be supportive of a small scheme from the New Forest, as a pilot for what could be a much larger programme in the future. Through the framework agreement with IESE (Improvement and Efficiency South East), a partnership of Local Authorities, funded by Communities and Local Government to establish efficiencies in procurement across the South East, NFDC had been able to undertake a process to identify a preferred partner to take a bid and development forward.

Social Housing Grant would make up 50% of the costs of the development. Should the bid be successful the remainder of the funding would be made up by the Council through borrowing, the cost of which would be covered by the income stream raised from the new housing.

Members expressed the view that the opportunity to return to building Council houses was an exciting one for the Council and had many positive aspects such as owning the assets, building on Council owned land and adding to the Council's housing stock. The opportunity to start with a small scheme would identify any issues which would need to be addressed before moving to a larger programme.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet be advised that the Housing Review Panel strongly supports the Pilot scheme and that the key priorities of any building project should reflect the need for houses to be built to code 4 or above and that family sized properties should be predominant.

22. REFORM OF LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING FINANCE (REPORT D).

The Government in July 2009 had issued the long awaited consultation paper on the reform of council housing finance. The Panel considered a suggested response to the questions posed by the Government within the paper.

It was agreed that the reform of council housing finance was long overdue and the Panel was supportive of the principle of changing the current format of the housing revenue account for a fairer system. However, they were disappointed at the lack of detail in the consultation paper which meant that the Council was not able to comment fully. Until the situation with the notional national housing debt was resolved it was difficult to ascertain clearly what the impact might be on New Forest District Council.

With a favourable conclusion of the debt issue there could be an opportunity for the Council to have significantly more income available than currently, that could be invested in new council owned homes and improved services for tenants.

The Panel would welcome changes to council housing finance and awaited further clarification from the Government on the details of proposals.

RESOLVED:

That the draft response to the consultation as set out in Appendix 1 to Report D to the Panel be recommended to the Cabinet for approval.

23. HOUSING PERFORMANCE INDICATORS 2008/09 (REPORT E).

The Panel considered actual performance and targets for the Housing Service.

A number of questions regarding the indicators and reported performance were asked of the officers.

Officers informed the Panel that there had not been any negative impacts on the collection of, or increase in instances of, rent arrears in light of the recession. In respect of the number of notices of seeking possession orders, it was rare that the Council evicted tenants as this was a costly exercise, however, in extreme cases of arrears this was necessary.

The number of homeless was reasonably low as officers thoroughly investigated all applications and invested significant time and effort to prevent instances of homelessness.

Members noted the high cost to the Council to repair empty properties. The Head of Housing informed members that EMT had recently approved the creation of a Property Inspection Assistant post. Members would receive information on this post at their November meeting.

Members discussed the high cost of rubbish clearance and concerns regarding the potential increase in instances of fly-tipping. Housing Officers monitored waste on the Council's estates and offered advice on waste disposal.

The Panel noted with pleasure the satisfaction results of the Housing Service and congratulated officers for achieving high results against the demanding performance indicators.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted and that Housing officers be congratulated for their hard work in meeting challenging targets.

24. WORK PROGRAMME 2009/10 (REPORT F).

The Panel considered the current work programme and items identified at the work programme workshop held on 17 June.

Members were happy that the programme set out in Appendix 2 to Report F to the Panel adequately reflected the topics discussed at the workshop and that this be agreed subject to the inclusion in the November Panel meeting that the Property Inspection Assistant post be examined.

RESOLVED:

That the Panel's work programme as set out in Appendix 2 to Report F be agreed subject to the amendment that the Property Inspection Assistant post be examined at the November Panel meeting.

CHAIRMAN

(HRP160909)