

ITEM 4

Time started – 6.00pm
Time finished – 8.40pm

COMMUNITY COMMISSION 26 OCTOBER 2009

Present: Councillor Grimadell (Chair)
Councillors Bayliss, Chera, R Khan, Leeming, Lowe and Redfern

45/09 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Richards.

46/09 Late Items introduced by the Chair

In accordance with Section 100(B)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the Chair agreed to admit the following item on the grounds that comments were required from the Commission before the next scheduled meeting of the Commission:

- Exeter House

47/09 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Bayliss declared a personal interest in Minute 53/09 as he is a board member for Derby Homes.

Councillor Redfern declared a personal interest in Minute 53/09 as she is a board member for Derby Homes.

48/09 Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on 16 September 2009 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

49/09 Call-in

There were no call-ins to report to the Commission.

50/09 Councillor Call for Action

There were no Councillor Calls for Action to report to the Commission.

Responses of the Council Cabinet to any reports of the Commission

51/09 Cabinet response to Minute 81/09 Public Conveniences – A City Wide Strategy

Members considered the response of the Cabinet to the report of the Commission on Public Conveniences – A City Wide Strategy. Councillor Bayliss stated that he was underwhelmed with the response and that it lacked direction.

Resolved to note the response and that the Chair and Vice Chair draft a letter to the Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture expressing their concern about the lack of progress.

Items for Discussion

52/09 Budget Strategy Briefing

The Commission received a presentation by the Corporate Director of Resources outlining the budget strategy for 2010/11 to 2012/13. He stated that this year they would be approaching the budget differently. The budget will be constructed by adopting a strategic approach. Previously departments have been allocated cash limits and have had to operate within those parameters. This time all budgets have been considered within the Council as a whole.

The Corporate Director of Resources outlined the pressures on the Council that have been budgeted for such as £1.5m from 2011/12 because of a revaluation of the Derbyshire Pension Scheme and £600k from 2012/13 for the Building Schools for the Future project.

He also highlighted possible savings such as the DECATS scheme and dividing the pressures through the whole Council.

Mr McLure also referred to potential budget pressures that allowance had not yet been made, for example, several social care issues and flood prevention, Case law may deprive 16 and 17 year olds of Housing Benefit and instead have to be met from Children and Young People budget

Councillor Leeming asked if these projections had been based on the recession continuing and when the recession would ease. The Corporate Director of Resources said that the position globally and nationally is very bad. Some economists have predicted that it could be 2031 by the time the country has paid back what it has borrowed during the crisis.

Councillor Redfern asked if the Council could opt out of its commitments to climate change. The Corporate Director of Resources stated that there are very heavy penalties to any Council that were to not meet its commitments to climate change and the Council should be very wary of adopting that approach.

The Chair asked for more information to be provided after the meeting on the issue of benefit Housing Benefit entitlement from 16/17 year olds.

Resolved to note the presentation.

53/09 Housing Stock – Under Occupation

The Commission considered a presentation by Murray Chapman, Housing Services Manager at Derby Homes, on under occupation of their housing stock. He stated that there are certain guidelines which housing organisations must operate within when allocating homes to families. For example a separate bedroom for a couple, a separate bedroom for each person over 21 and separate bedrooms for children of opposite sexes aged 10-20. In Derby more than 71 percent of properties are owned by the occupier, roughly 13 percent are run by the Council, seven percent are operated by housing associations and private landlords let out a further 7 percent.

He stated that overcrowding in houses in Derby is not a large problem and is relatively low in all areas. However, around 45 percent of council houses are classed as under occupied and 31 percent of housing associations are similarly categorised. Derby Homes operates incentive schemes to approach residents who live in under occupied homes to entice them to move to a more suitable property. The housing association currently offers a £1,000 cash incentive with up to £700 in removal and reconnection costs and has been operating since August 2008. The scheme is offered to anyone releasing a property that will free up an additional bedroom. So far the scheme has paid out £57,000 and 71 people remain on the scheme waiting list. The process can be quite long as residents have expectations about where they are prepared to live. He stated that the main aim of the under occupation incentive scheme was to free up family accommodation.

Councillor Leeming asked for a breakdown to be provided to the Commission of those residents currently on the council house waiting list based on whether they are lone occupants, partners and families and how many are in each family. Councillor Leeming asked if the scheme also applies to elderly residents and if pressure is applied to them to accept a move. The Housing Services Manager said that elderly residents would be approached but they would not be pressured into relocating if they did not wish to. Every incentive package would be offered to residents on a voluntary basis.

Resolved to note the presentation and for a breakdown of the residents on the Homefinder Register list be sent to Commission Members.

54/09 Reform of Council Housing Finance – Draft Consultation Response

The Commission received a report by the Director of Corporate and Adult Services informing the Commission of the Council's draft response to a consultation by the Department for Communities and Local Government

(CLG). The Assistant Director for Housing and Advice stated that the CLG have consulted councils on potential reform of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). He explained that the proposals would allow councils to come out of arrangements and keep rents from their council house stock for themselves in return for shouldering some of the current national level of debt.

Councillor Bayliss asked how capital receipts would be divided in future, how much income this would likely generate in the long term and should the Council strengthen the ring fencing on the income gained from capital receipts? The Assistant Director for Housing and Advice stated that the Council would keep 100 percent of the capital receipts. This could be channelled into new housing or the upkeep of existing properties. He stated that the changes to the HRA could potentially bring in £400m of funding over the next 30 years and that would more than offset the £200m of debt the Council would have to take on. He suggested that the ring fencing should remain in place on the finance generated by council housing but there should be some flexibility which in Derby is preceded by tenant consultation. For example there are no grants to convert homes for disability access. Funding could be used to pay for these.

The Assistant Director for Housing and Advice informed the Commission that any change to the current HRA would require primary legislation because it affects more than 200 local authorities. That process would most likely happen in 2012/2013. However, Derby has requested in the consultation response to be put through on an individual basis prior to the next general election, if the terms were right. The Chair asked what risks are there to the Council by coming out of this scheme. The Assistant Director for Housing and Advice stated that the main risk to the Council is that the Government would control the rent levels and if they were to decide to set rent levels lower than expected then this would have a financial impact on the Council's income.

Resolved to endorse the response made to the CLG, including the bid to be fast tracked to achieve an early exit from the current subsidy system.

55/09 An Evaluation of Neighbourhood Working in Derby

The Director of the Community Safety Partnership presented a report to Members that she had commissioned De Montfort University to undertake which evaluated the current system of neighbourhood working in Derby.

The Director of the Community Safety Partnership stated that the researchers had been asked to evaluate the following question; 'how well are the neighbourhood arrangements in Derby working?' with reference to the following themes:

- The strategic priorities of Derby Community Safety Partnership
- The strategic priorities of Derby City Council, NHS Derby City and Derbyshire Police

- Direction of Government policy
- Good practice from elsewhere

The evaluation has identified that there is a widespread commitment to neighbourhood working with varied commitment based on the individual organisation's strategic agenda. The neighbourhood boards have been set up to act as a driving force to empower the neighbourhoods but sometimes they lack the capacity to do so.

The research suggested that neighbourhood working in Derby still needs to be at the forefront despite the recession and public spending cuts. Strategies for neighbourhood working need to be more long term in future and move away from the current fire-fighting culture.

Councillor Bayliss stated that he did not think that the report was critical enough. He expressed concern that the report had revealed that some departments of the Council were not as committed to neighbourhood working as some of the other partners. He said that neighbourhood managers should be able to inspire and motivate these sections of the Council to come and take part in the process. The Director of the Community Safety Partnership stated that some officers struggle to come and address the public so some work may be needed to coach these individuals. Councillor Bayliss stated that both councillors and officers should have training on how to deal with difficult members of the public.

Councillor Redfern expressed concern that the neighbourhood forums and boards were not given enough financial backing to succeed.

Resolved to:

- A. Note the final report from De Montfort University;**
- B. Consider the specific proposals in the report to be produced by the Director of the Community Safety Partnership when they are available**
- C. Register that the further development of Neighbourhood Working is dependent of longer term budgetary commitment to ensure the retention of the managers who the keystones to the structures; and**
- D. Record that there is a significant need for training to hone the skills of both councillors and officers' skills when dealing with difficult public meetings.**

56/09 Exeter House

Members considered a report by the Corporate Director of Corporate and Adult Services requesting authorisation from the Cabinet Member for Housing and Environment to spend an additional £100,000 to fund additional fire safety renovations at Exeter House.

Derby Cityscape unveiled its masterplan to redevelop the north riverside area to the Cabinet in February 2005 which they approved at that meeting. A revised proposal was submitted to the Cabinet and approved on 3 July 2007. These proposals included the redevelopment of the area surrounding Exeter House. On 31 July 2007 Cabinet authorised an initial demolition notice. This was issued on 20 September 2007 and since then 17 households have been vacated.

The Environment Agency has published a draft strategy on potential flooding issues in Derby and this has impacted on the north riverside masterplan. The plans to demolish Exeter House have since been reviewed and the Cabinet have now decided to bring the premises back into use. This will cost £350,000 and will involve refurbishment of the units and a basic level of defence against flooding. However, fire officers have raised concerns on the internal layout of the flats. To comply with the fire officers suggestions an additional £100,000 is needed.

Councillor Bayliss stated that his view remained unchanged on Exeter House and it should be demolished. He proposed that the Commission should recommend that Cabinet should demolish the premises and not spend the money to renovate the building.

The Chair asked for clarification of the fire safety issues that affect the building. Sharon Hancock, Housing Performance Manager, stated that the issues on fire safety only affect the flats on the second floor. The primary escape route is funnelled through the kitchen. This needs to be remodelled. If a fire was to occur in the kitchen then residents would not be able to escape as the windows are too high to safely escape from. The improved layout would add in a hallway to route residents away from the kitchen and to safety.

Councillor Redfern expressed concern that in redeveloping these flats the Council would be ignoring the advice of the Environment Agency and exposing future residents to the threat of flooding.

Resolved to recommend that Cabinet do not proceed with the £350,000 refurbishment of Exeter House and that the additional £100,000 should not be authorised.

57/09 Retrospective Scrutiny

There were no items of retrospective scrutiny. Councillor Bayliss requested that any proposals that arise from Community Safety Partnership's Evaluation of Neighbourhood Working in Derby should be brought to the Commission (minute 55/09 refers).

58/09 Council Cabinet Forward Plan

Members considered the current forward plan and the items which fall into the

Commission's remit.

Resolved to:

- A. Recommend that Cabinet take a decision on the Tenancy Sustainment Team report subject to the Commission passing comment;**
- B. Review the outcomes of the Fly Tipping Review report six months after implementation; and**
- C. Recommend that the Homelessness Strategy come back before the Commission to comment.**

59/09 Matters referred to the Commission by Council
Cabinet

There were no items referred to the Commission by Council Cabinet.

MINUTES END