

Time Commenced – 6.00 pm
Time Finished – 8.15 pm

Cost of Living Overview and Scrutiny Board

22 September 2014

Present: Councillor Dhindsa (Chair)
Councillors Harwood, A Holmes, Stanton and Tittley

07/14 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashburner and Bayliss.

08/14 Late items

A late scoping report in relation to the review of Affordable Housing was circulated for consideration alongside the Work Programme and Topic Review report, detailed at minute 15/14.

09/14 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

10/14 Forward Plan published 2 September 2014

The board considered the Forward Plan which was published on 2 September 2014.

Resolved to note the Forward Plan.

11/14 Homelessness Strategy

An interim report of the Strategic Director of Adults, Health and Housing on the Homelessness Strategy was presented. The report detailed the three strategic priorities of the strategy, namely to:

- Maintain and improve measures to prevent and reduce homelessness
- Promote financial inclusion and manage the impacts of welfare reform
- Further strengthen partnership working and the coordination of housing services with other support services.

It was reported that a consultation with service providers was ongoing and that the process was due to end on 31 October 2014. Initial feedback from the consultation was provided.

Members asked about private landlord practices, with one example cited where a landlord had sought 30 months rent. It was suggested by members of the board that landlords had the ability to be more selective and demanding due to the struggles many people faced to buy property. Officers present acknowledged that there were

some dubious practices in operation, but that they were in the minority. However, it was acknowledged that the lack of regulation made it difficult for the council to affect this. It was further acknowledged that such practices ran the risk of negatively impacting on those who could not afford the luxury of paying large sums in advance.

Members asked about the previous Homelessness Review and to what extent the recommendations arising from it had been put in place. It was confirmed that some recommendations had resulted in action while others could not be due to resource implications.

Clarification was sought on when the finalised strategy would be implemented. It was confirmed that, following the consultation, it was proposed to take the report to Council Cabinet for approval in January 2015. The Chair proposed that the board should consider the report prior to it being presented to Council Cabinet in order that members could offer views.

Resolved to:

- 1) Endorse the work undertaken so far, particularly the formation of a homelessness panel to co-ordinate partnership working and monitor progress and outcomes;**
- 2) Request a six-monthly report updating the board on progress and outcomes of the Homelessness Strategy following its implementation;**
- 3) Request that recommendations made by the former Planning, Housing and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Board on this topic be addressed and integrated where possible within the new Homelessness Strategy; and**
- 4) Request that the draft Homelessness Strategy be presented to the board prior to it being presented to Council Cabinet.**

12/14 Council tax charges on empty property 2015-16

A draft report proposed to be presented to Council Cabinet at its meeting on 19 November 2014 was provided. The draft report made a number of recommendations to Council Cabinet on a charging schedule for council tax payable on empty or unoccupied properties. It was reported that the proposed changes resulted from feedback and experience in the 20 months since the previous charging schedule had been put in place.

Five proposed changes were included in the draft report to Council Cabinet, with the most notable being that an exempt period of 28 days would be applied from when a property became empty or unoccupied. It was reported that this proposal would address tax payers' perception of unfairness and demonstrated that the council listened to the public's concerns.

Members asked what action could be taken when property owners persistently avoided paying council tax on empty properties. Officers advised that the process could be long and arduous, particularly when the council did not know the whereabouts of the property owner, but that the council continued to pursue and used any powers at its disposal to do so. It was reported that it was difficult to put a timescale on the likely period between payment being pursued and the ultimate

sanction – compulsory purchase of the property – being put in place, but that mechanisms such as liability orders ensured the council was able to protect its interests.

The board asked whether the challenges faced by the council would be alleviated if a register of landlords was established. It was suggested that even creating a consolidated list was likely to be fraught with difficulty, due to their being no obligation for landlords to declare. A number of other suggestions to enhance the proposals were suggested, including incentivising landlords to declare properties as empty by making the 28-day exemption subject to it being volunteered by the landlord. It was acknowledged that making better use of exemption schemes could be mutually beneficial, though their implementation was dependent on resource which was not necessarily available. Incentivising the exemption scheme was not, however, possible as it could only be applied across properties rather than being caveated.

Resolved to:

- 1) Endorse the draft report;**
- 2) Request that the possibility of sharing an empty homes list with councillors be investigated in order to facilitate the monitoring of empty properties by ward councillors in their areas; and**
- 3) Request that a baseline number of fluid empty properties be established to provide a more accurate picture of the number of medium to long-term empty homes.**

13/14 Buy Local

A report of the Director of Finance and Procurement was considered. The report provided an update on the Buy Local initiative, which sought to maximise the economic benefit from procurement expenditure.

The report detailed the various areas through which the initiative had sought to meet its objectives. These included internal actions that had been taken, engagement with organisations including the Chamber of Commerce, and awareness and promotional events. It was reported that between 2011 and 2013, the proportion of Derbyshire-based suppliers to the council had increased from 39 per cent to 55 per cent, and the number of East Midlands-based suppliers had risen from 51 per cent to 66 per cent.

Following questions by members, the director confirmed that even where organisations beyond the city, county and region were selected, it was requested that local labour be utilised. It was acknowledged that although this could be requested, it could not be enforced.

Resolved to:

- 1) Recommend that the procurement team increase the number of local suppliers promoted for inclusion when lower value quotations are sought from one to two;**
- 2) Recommend that involvement with voluntary and community groups should be widened to include more organisations;**

- 3) Invite representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and Federation of Small Businesses to attend a future meeting of the board to discuss what further appropriate steps could be taken;**
- 4) Request that officers look at ways in which the council can further promote the use of Source Derbyshire to SMEs in the city; and**
- 5) Request that consideration be given to ways in which SMEs can be encouraged to work together to assist each other.**

14/14 Local Authority Mortgage Scheme

A report of the Director of Finance and Procurement detailed the success of the local authority mortgage scheme which had been approved by Council Cabinet in November 2012.

It was reported that the early forecast that 40 loans would be available was exceeded. Some 49 applications had been received and 42 of these had gone through to the completion stage. It was confirmed that there were no arrears or repossessions on the scheme. The average value had been around £110,331, with the average loan being £103,273.

Members of the board were pleased with the success of the scheme and proposed that it should be restarted. The board was advised that this was not possible at the current time because the lending partner, Lloyds, was no longer offering the product and was unlikely to do so until a national scheme had been completed in 2016.

Resolved to

- 1) Commend the excellent outcomes of the scheme; and**
- 2) Continue to seek ways of repeating the scheme in the future should the opportunity arise.**

15/14 Work programme and topic reviews

The board considered a report detailing the current work programme and making proposals for future topic reviews. The late report on reviewing affordable housing was considered.

Resolved to give further consideration to the late report on reviewing affordable housing at the next meeting.

MINUTES END