

SOCIAL ISSUES SCRUTINY PANEL

16 March 2006

Attendance:

Councillors:

Hammerton (Chairman) (P)

Chapman (P)
Coates
Hutton
Love (P)
Maynard (P)

Nunn (P)
Quar (P)
Rees
Saunders (P)
Steel (P)

Deputy Members:

Councillors Berry (Standing Deputy for Councillor Coates), Jackson (Standing Deputy for Councillor Hutton) and Pines (Standing Deputy for Councillor Rees)

Others in attendance who addressed the meeting:

Councillors Collin (Portfolio Holder for Healthy and Inclusive Communities) and Hiscock (Portfolio Holder for Housing)

Others in attendance who did not address the meeting:

Councillors Davies

1. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillors Coates, Hutton and Rees.

2. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Panel held on 30 January 2006 be approved and adopted.

3. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were no questions asked or statements made.

4. **SUPPORTED HOUSING PANEL**

(Oral Report)

Ms Diana Wooldridge, Chair of Winchester Area Community Action Group (WACA) detailed to Members the work of the Supported Housing Panel to date and answered a number of questions.

Ms Wooldridge explained that the Supported Housing Panel was a sub-group of the Inclusive Housing Forum, itself organised and serviced by WACA.

Responding to questions, Mrs Wooldridge reminded Members that in most cases, the allocation of accommodation for clients remained the responsibility of housing providers, including the Council. She explained that the Panel undertook liaison with providers and support agencies to ensure that individual client cases were progressed and received the necessary support. The Panel also sought to ensure that clients did not remain in supported accommodation that was no longer appropriate to their level of required care.

On behalf of Members, Councillor Love, as the City Council's representative on the Supported Housing Panel, thanked Mrs Wooldridge for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the content of the presentation be noted.

5. **BUSINESS PLANS 2006/07**
(Report SO22 refers)

Councillor Hammerton declared a personal (but not prejudicial) interest in respect of this item as she was a non-executive member of Mid Hampshire Primary Care Trust and also Chairman of Bishops Waltham and Meon Valley Citizens Advice Bureau.

Councillor Love also declared a personal (but not prejudicial) interest in respect of this item as the Council's representative on the Supported Housing Forum.

The Chief Executive advised that the section of the Divisional Plans referring to 'Summary of Progress in 2005/06' was intended as background to the actions to be taken under Key Service Priorities in 2006/07. It was also clarified that more detailed information on progress on these matters had been referred to as part of the quarterly monitoring presented to the Panel over the last year and would be included in out-turn reports to the next meeting of the Panel.

The Panel referred to the Business Plans as set out as appendices 1 – 4 of the Report and the Director of Communities and Portfolio Holders for Housing and Healthy and Inclusive Communities (as appropriate) answered questions and provided additional detail regarding specific programmes of work and allocation of resources.

(i) **Community Development 2006/07 Business Plan**

Responding to discussion of the requirements to develop a multi-partnership Children and Young People's Strategy and Action Plan, the Director advised that the incorporation of 'play' within the strategy was in its wider context and not just limited to the provision of playgrounds. It was agreed that the development of the Plan should involve a Member if possible.

As a Ward Member for Whiteley, Councillor Chapman expressed concern at the target date to produce a development plan for the Meadowside Centre, Whiteley, by January 2007. The Director advised that the Plan was part of a wider review of the delivery of leisure facilities throughout the District and was not related just to the Meadowside Centre. The proposals by Hampshire County Council to construct a new school for Whiteley on recreational land attached to the Meadowside Centre, also needed to be taken into account.

The Director advised that the outcome of the Outreach Project on street drinkers would be reported to the Community Safety Partnership in April 2006 (HIC09). The review had been undertaken over a three month period taking

into account the operation of the alcohol exclusion zones over the winter months and the implications these had on the activities of street drinkers.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Community Development 2006/07 Business Plan be supported and that the following points be noted:

(i) That development of a Children and Young People's Strategy and Action Plan include representation from a Member.

(ii) That in respect of Target HIC08, a representative from the Hampshire County Council Detached Youth Work Project be invited to address a future meeting of the Scrutiny Panel to update Members on its work, specifically that related to the Council's work in partnership with regard to safer and more inclusive communities.

(ii) Extract from Revenues Division 2006/07 Business Plan (Benefits)

RESOLVED:

1. That the extract from Revenues Division 2006/07 Business Plan (Benefits) be supported and that the following point be noted:

(i) That performance indicators referring to the average time to process new claims and changes of circumstances be presented in context to upper quartile national indicators.

(iii) Strategic Housing Division

RESOLVED:

That the Strategic Housing Division 2006/07 Business Plan be supported.

(iv) Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan – 2006/07 Update

Mr Rickman addressed the Panel with TACT's comments on the HRA Business Plan following their consideration of the document at their meeting held on 15 March 2006. In summary, Mr Rickman specifically referred to matters related to future funding for the HRA, including potential pressures to the repairs and maintenance programme as well as changes to allocation procedures and void maintenance. Mr Rickman also reminded Members of the Council's recent representation to the Government regarding the 'Fourth Option' in connection to the calculation of subsidy for the HRA.

The transcript of TACT's comments was distributed to Members and is set out as follows:

"The Council, like TACT, has difficult times ahead. We for our part will be keeping in close touch with the "House of Commons Council Housing Group" and "Defend Council Housing".

We need to do so, for tenants with ever increasing rents, council tax and other soaring bills must be sure of Best Value for their money.

The Council for their part with ever decreasing funding and an uncertain future have to protect tenants' interests to the full.

We are aware at any stage the Government can change the goal posts and indeed often do so. For this reason alone long term planning is not easy.

TACT always has the uncertainty regarding pressure from the Government as to who will be their landlord by 2034.

This report shows what they hope to achieve and TACT will fully support them. However, we have concerns that will not go away:

1. Future funding for the HRA
2. The need to speed up allocations and voids. We know Choice Based Lettings is coming but not for two years or more.
3. Finding other uses for void sheltered housing needs to be a priority. The drain on the HRA cannot be allowed to go on.
4. Repairs and Maintenance – The standards of repairs and maintenance cannot be allowed to drop because of funding cuts. Our rents will be on an ever upward spiral to meet Housing Association rents. Tenants will expect the same standards of repairs and maintenance as housing association tenants.
5. Meeting the Decent Homes standard is well under way. But meeting the need to provide affordable housing without giving away HRA land is not. It is for this reason that TACT will be pursuing the fourth option. Along with many other councils and tenants our thanks to the Council and Cabinet for their cooperation in this matter.
6. Safeguarding our environment is another important issue and looks promising. If the required funding can be maintained. Energy efficiency improvements to housing stock will always be welcome along with funding to take improvements to a new level as new products become available.
7. Housing Options Appraisal – In July 2005 the City Council completed a comprehensive appraisal of the future management of council housing. What the Government did not make clear at the time was the choice for the FOURTH OPTION.

Since the lobby of Parliament on the 8 February 2006 they have not been able to hide this option from tenants. Tenants for their part are not going to let them forget we know that the Governments in the past have already made their minds up and just go through the formalities of consulting tenants. Well this time they have a fight on their hands! Tenants are wise to the blackmailing tactics and want to stay with their councils and councils have the right to build council houses.

8. Performance Management – TACT are pleased to note that the City Council has subscribed to the national “Housemark” service and that effective benchmarking comparisons across a wide range of housing providers can be made and used to analyse and influence future proposals for services.
9. Funding 2006-2010 – To achieve and maintain “decency standards” per se by 2010 was estimated to cost £1.7m. The Council had total funding of £6.6 million available for 2005/06 and need to find savings of £400,000 per annum to balance the budget and programme overall. Whilst savings have to be made TACT are concerned regarding the effect it will have on tenants and the HRA overall. We can only repeat that Best Value must be the keyword at all times and contractors must live up to their contracts and not expect to be bailed out when the going gets tough as no doubt it will.

We realise that if 40% of our housing revenue did not get taken away from us the task would be a lot easier. We cannot be sure of the Government’s plan for our future. However, TACT will do its best for the tenants and to this aim will cooperate with the Council as often as it can to achieve these aims and to keep the Council as our landlord for future generations”.

The Panel was generally supportive of all of TACT’s comments including the pursuit of the ‘Fourth Option’. The Director of Communities explained that the Fourth Option related to the calculation of subsidy for HRAs, that currently was seen to be inequitable. He confirmed that the Council was therefore considering joining the ‘Association of Retained Council Housing’ although this had yet to be agreed by Council.

A Member requested that officers ensure a more consistent approach to defining empty properties within the Business Plan. The Panel also referred to matters relating to the repairs and renewals programme and its impact upon the Council’s ability to achieve and maintain the Decent Homes Plus Standard by 2010.

Members specifically referred to the increased demand for disabled adaptations and the Director confirmed that increased budget provision had been allocated in recent years. However, demands in this area continued to increase. A Member suggested that particular mention be made within Section 7 of the Business Plan (Service Priorities for 2006/07) of other measures to ensure the continued delivery of the service to clients. Councillor Hiscock (Portfolio Holder for Housing) responded to recent press coverage regarding a tenant awaiting adaptation of her bathroom.

Members discussed proposed measures to achieve a balance of costs falling on the HRA. The Director explained that ongoing proposals to reduce the deficit would be covered in future quarterly monitoring reports.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan – 2006/07 Update be supported and that the following points be noted:

(i) That TACT's comments with regard to the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan (HRA) 2006/07 Update, be endorsed.

(ii) That the Scrutiny Panel is generally supportive of the pursuit of the 'Fourth Option.'

(iii) That a more consistent approach to how all empty properties are defined within the Business Plan be considered.

(iv) That mention be made within Section 7 of the Business Plan (Service Priorities for 2006/07) of measures to ensure the continued delivery of Disabled Adaptations to clients.

6. **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

RESOLVED:

That the Work Programme for the Panel as set out in Report PS223, be noted.

7. **VOTE OF THANKS**

The Panel thanked the Chairman for her guidance and the officers for their hard work and support during the past Municipal Year.

The Chairman reciprocated appropriately.

The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and concluded at 9.10pm

Chairman