

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY, 2 DECEMBER 2014

Councillors Present: Peter Argyle (Substitute) (In place of Laszlo Zverko), Brian Bedwell (Chairman), Jeff Brooks (Vice-Chairman), Paul Bryant (Substitute) (In place of Sheila Ellison), Dave Goff, Roger Hunneman, Alan Macro, Garth Simpson, Virginia von Celsing, Quentin Webb and Emma Webster

Also Present: Cathy Dodson (Housing Options Team Leader), Ian Priestley (Chief Internal Auditor) and Rachael Wardell (Corporate Director - Communities), David Lowe (Scrutiny & Partnerships Manager) and Charlene Myers (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Sheila Ellison, Councillor Mike Johnston and Councillor Laszlo Zverko

PART I

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2014 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following amendments:

- **Page 2, Item 46, Paragraph 7:** Councillor Roger Hunneman stated that the statistics **did not** include those of the North West Reading CCG but rather those of the Newbury and District CCG only.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. Actions from previous Minutes

Councillors' Bedwell, Brooks and David Lowe would meet with the Chief Executive on the 8 December 2014 to discuss the affordable housing lesson learnt from the Parkway development in particular.

4. West Berkshire Forward Plan 17 December 2014 to 31 March 2015

The Commission considered the West Berkshire Forward Plan (Agenda Item 5) for the period covering 17 December 2014 to 31 March 2015.

Resolved that the Forward Plan be noted.

5. Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission Work Programme

The Commission considered its work programme and the proposal to include an item which would seek to review the operations of the Royal Berkshire Hospital maternity unit which provided both pre- and post-natal services to local residents.

Members concluded that the review could offer significant value to local residents. Therefore, the item would be added to the work programme and scheduled for discussion in March 2015.

Councillor Roger Hunneman proposed that the item incorporated a review of staff resources and maternity cover in general. The Commission supported the proposal.

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Councillor Garth Simpson advised that the BID was conducting a review of on-street parking in Newbury (OSMC/12/149); He suggested that, following completion of the review, the topic would be considered by the Commission.

Resolved that:

'Maternity Cover in West Berkshire' would be added to the work programme.

6. Items Called-in following the Executive on 20 November 2014

No items were called-in following the last Executive meeting.

7. Councillor Call for Action

There were no Councillor Calls for Action.

8. Petitions

There were no petitions received at the meeting.

9. Housing allocations policy

The Commission considered a report (Agenda Item 10) concerning a review of the Housing Allocations Policy.

Cathy Dodson thanked the Commission for inviting her to provide an update on the housing allocations policy, 12 months post implementation, and to raise awareness of the proposed future amendments.

Members were reminded that the Council's current Housing Allocation Policy was adopted in October 2013. The Commission had agreed to assist in the development of a new policy and subsequently established a task group.

Cathy Dodson advised that the task group approach was a positive experience and extended her gratitude from the Housing Service for their assistance in formulating the policy. The Committee were advised that the input from Members was well valued and ensured that the final outcome was robust and appropriate.

An extensive test was undertaken, prior to the implementation of the Housing Allocation Policy, to confirm that those in most need of housing would still be eligible. Cathy Dodson stated that the service was satisfied that the Housing Allocation Policy continued to support applicants who were vulnerable and considered to be in the greatest housing need.

As part of the implementation all existing Common Housing Register (CHR) applicants were required to complete an online re-registration form. The new application form required significantly more information than was previously gathered. The information which had enabled the team to map service users more effectively.

In order to include vulnerable applicants the service offered either face-to-face appointments or telephone support in order to complete the re-registration process.

All applicants on the CHR who completed the re-registration process were provided with an online personalised housing options action plan. The plan summarised the available options based on the responses provided in the application. The provision of the plan

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continued to be an ongoing feature and one which generated positive responses from both service users and partner organisations.

All applicants who completed the re-registration process were sent a letter confirming their status on the CHR and their allocated number of housing need points. The letter advised applicants of their right to request a review if they were dissatisfied with the outcome. Cathy Dodson advised Members that the service had received 20 requests, post-implementation.

Members were asked to consider section 2.7 of the cover report. It detailed the current number of applications on the CHR.

Live Applications (Not all in Housing Need)	2602
Qualifying Applications	1074
Non Qualifying Applications	1528
One Bed Need	1342
Two Bed Need	880
Three Bed Need	292
Four + Bed Need	88

Cathy Dodson summarised the implementation process as being efficient and well received by the majority of applicants. The new policy effectively allocated social housing to those households considered to be in the most housing need. In addition, the deferral process within the Housing Allocations Policy had been effective at prompting some applicants to address their former rent arrears and pay other monies owed to the Council.

Members were advised that, in December 2013, the Government published new statutory guidance - 'Providing Social Housing for Local People' (DCLG, Dec 2013). Subsequently a review of the Housing Allocation Policy was undertaken and a number of amendments had been proposed to ensure that it reflected the requirements of the new statutory guidance.

The proposals had been presented to Corporate Board and were scheduled for consideration by the Executive on 18th December 2014.

The key changes to the proposed policy were:

- Qualification - amend the local connection qualifying criteria to residency or meaningful paid employment of at least 16 hours a week for 2 consecutive years (Other aspects of local connection criteria remain the same);
- Social tenants and labour mobility – to allow for exceptions to local connection qualifying criteria to be applied to certain social tenants who need to move in order to sustain or take up employment;
- Foster carers – inclusion in the policy to award an additional bedroom for approved foster carers;
- Homeless Households – new wording inserted to allow deferral of a CHR application for a minimum period of 4 months when a household is placed into temporary accommodation following acceptance of a full homelessness duty.

An eight week public consultation had been undertaken to consider the impacts of the proposed changes. The consultation was successful in generating a high level of participation and overall the responses were positive.

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Councillor Quentin Webb asked whether Section 106 agreements would be considered in conjunction with section 13.2 of the Housing Allocations Policy. Cathy Dodson stated that Section 106 agreements would take precedence over Rural Exception Sites.

Councillor Alan Macro asked whether the service was confident that the re-registration process had encompassed all residents who met the housing needs criteria. Cathy Dodson advised that applicants who were previously on the CHR had 6 weeks to re-register and received reminders in the post if they had not completed the online form. Following that period, any applicants who had not registered were then contacted by phone to encourage re-registration. The service retained applicants' housing points for 6 months in the eventuality that the applicant had not been able to re-register sooner.

Cathy Dodson advised that approximately 500 applicants had not re-registered but the current number of applications on the CHR was similar to before. The service considered that the re-registration activity allowed the CHR to reflect those people with the most housing needs.

Councillor Macro questioned the practical use of the qualification criteria and suggested that it could be flawed. He provided an example of a resident who moved properties across Local Authority borders without realising, a move that would impact on their eligibility for local housing. Cathy Dodson advised that the Council amended the policy according to the 'Providing Social Housing for Local People (DCLG, Dec 2013)' guidance. The Commission heard that the service had to comply with the statutory guidance and the proposed change ensured compliance with the new policy. Cathy Dodson explained that the change would have minimal impact on the number of eligible cases as examination of previous applications showed that the majority had a local connection already.

Councillor Roger Hunneman asked when Sensitive Lets could be used as he was concerned that they could inadvertently discriminate against some groups of applicants. Cathy Dodson explained that the Council would ask the Registered Landlord to justify their rationale in order to manage equality concerns.

In response to questions asked, on eligibility according to travel time, Cathy Dodson advised that the recent guidance stated that it would be acceptable to include travel from up to 90 minutes into the area without a local connection but solid evidence of employment would be required in order to meet the qualification criteria.

Councillor Jeff Brooks challenged the proposal to change the Homeless Households wording. He stressed that the proposal restricted the service from considering cases before the 4 month deadline by restricting any form of discretionary action. The Commission discussed the proposal and determined that a discretionary element would be desirable and that the wording should be changed accordingly.

Resolved that:

- (1) The Policy should be reviewed again in 6 months to consider the amendments incorporated within the last 12 months.
- (2) The Homeless Households guidance should be altered to incorporate a discretionary element which would enable to service to consider exceptional cases prior to 4 months.

10. Self Insurance Fund

Councillor Alan Law introduced the report (Agenda Item 11) concerning the Self Insurance Fund. Councillor Law reminded the Commission that he had asked for a review to include:

1. The identification and recommendations on the required level of reserves to be held in the fund;
2. To recommend the balance that should be held between the assumed level of risk and size of the reserve;
3. A review the last 3 years of claims and performance.

The Commission heard that an actuarial review was completed in July 2012 and again in October 2014. In between the two reviews the forecast funding requirement had changed from £1.5m in 2012 to £2.4m in 2014. But, it was not clear why the review had required a reserve fund of £1.24m and a further provision of £1.17m.

Councillor Law explained that previous claims information was not easily available, as evidenced in support of an increase in reserve but such detail was critical in order to understand the level of risk.

The Commission was asked to review the topic and consider the accuracy of the recommendations provided by the actuary.

Councillor Jeff Brooks stressed that he could not consider the topic in full without historic data. The information would influence the Commission's understanding of liability and risks which were essential elements of the review.

Ian Priestley advised that the actuarial review considered the date on which a claim was made rather than the completion date. The data was not available in full because it covered a wide cross section of dates. Councillor Brooks challenged the Officer's response and suggested that irrespective of dates it could still be possible to consider trends and inform the review.

In response to questions asked by the Commission, Ian Priestley advised that service areas had reserve funds to cover insurance claims. The Self Insurance Fund was retained in order to manage overspend.

The Commission challenged the processes between calculating perceived risk and planning risk which in turn influenced the reserve fund. However, they concluded that without historic data it had not been possible to review the topic in full.

The Commission requested that the review took place in the form of a task group. David Lowe advised that an attempt had been made to conduct a task group review but due to limited resources it was not possible. He would liaise with the Head of Strategic Support to agree the most effective method of supporting the Commission with their review.

Resolved that:

- (1) The topic would be deferred until such time when the historic data would be available to consider liabilities and actual risk.
- (2) The topic would be considered in the form of a task group.

11. Scrutiny Recommendations Update

The Commission considered the Scrutiny Update Report (Agenda Item 12).

Resolved that the report be noted.

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(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.35 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature