

STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, 12 MAY 2010

Councillors: Ellen Crumly (AP), David Holtby (A), Roger Hunneman (SP), Mollie Lock (AP), Alan Macro (Vice-Chairman) (P), Irene Neill (Chairman) (P), Ieuan Tuck (P)

Also Present: Mel Brain (Housing Strategy Manager), June Graves (Head of Housing and Performance), Andy Tubbs (Chief Adviser for School Improvement), Stephen Chard (Policy Officer)

PART I

4. Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting were received on behalf of Councillor Mollie Lock and Councillor Ellen Crumly. Councillor Roger Hunneman substituted for Councillor Mollie Lock.

5. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16 February 2010 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

6. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

7. Housing Partnership briefing

The Committee received a briefing on the work of the Housing Partnership (Agenda Item 4).

June Graves provided the Committee with the following information on the work of the sub-partnership:

- The new Housing Strategy was out for consultation. The Strategy and associated action plan were owned by the Partnership.
- The key actions for the period 2010 to 2015 were:
 1. Prevention of homelessness.
 2. Provision of new affordable housing to meet urgent and identified need.
 3. Green and sustainable activities that reduced fuel poverty and CO2 emissions.
 4. Focus on meeting the needs of rural communities.

It was questioned whether the target of having 25% of new affordable homes in rural areas was sustainable. June Graves advised that the planning system did take into account sustainability for new developments, there were also rural exception sites.

5. Partnership working to maximise efficiencies.

The target to explore opportunities for new development via Single Conversation and Total Place were then discussed. June Graves explained that in some ways these initiatives were linked. Single Conversation encouraged partnership working across local authorities and Berkshire wide work was being considered. Similarly Total Place looked

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to combine resources across local authorities and organisations to see what improvements could be made. Pilot schemes were being evaluated for Total Place.

- Plans were in place to widen the Partnership's membership to enhance involvement from the private sector.
- The effectiveness of the Partnership had been reviewed during 2009 and this had led to a number of actions being highlighted. There had been complete agreement to these actions from the members of the Partnership, in order to make improvements and address challenges.
- A challenge nationally was the reduction of public sector funding and therefore funding for affordable housing. This was another area where closer partnership working and pooled resources were required.

Discussion then returned to the 25% target of affordable homes in rural areas and it was queried how this target, and the corresponding number of units, related to the number of new homes indicated through the Core Strategy. June Graves and Mel Brain agreed to explore this further with Planning.

June Graves concluded her presentation by stating that one of the main purposes of the Partnership was effective communication in order to keep residents and organisations informed of initiatives etc. In addition, while the Partnership would not build homes, there were practical initiatives that could be developed in partnership, i.e. engaging the private sector. The Partnership was felt to be a more effective way of working on housing initiatives than the Council operating in isolation.

RESOLVED that June Graves and Mel Brain would explore how the 25% target of affordable homes in rural areas related to the number of new homes indicated through the Core Strategy.

8. Empty Homes

The Committee considered a report (Agenda Item 5) providing an update on progress of the Empty Homes Strategy (EHS) 2008-2011.

Mel Brain introduced the report and made the following points:

- The EHS was adopted in July 2008. Prior to this, there had been no co-ordinated approach to tackling the issue of empty homes since a Sovereign funded secondment came to a close in 2003. There had been no dedicated resource for this work between 2003 and 2008.
- Since 2008 the Council has made a capital allocation of £75,000 per annum to support the implementation of the EHS with a 0.5 FTE post assigned to the work. The current Capital Programme showed the funding ending from 2014/15 onwards.
- Empty homes were seen as a wasted resource and the purpose of the EHS was to bring them into use. This was not specifically for affordable housing and only applied to residential dwellings.
- As of 1 April 2010, there were 1419 empty dwellings in West Berkshire, excluding second homes, of which 407 had been empty for longer than 6 months. This represented approximately 2.26% of the overall housing stock. This figure had decreased since April 2008, but the Council could only report on those dwellings which had been brought back into use following the Council's involvement.
- Property owners were encouraged in a number of ways to bring dwellings back into use. This included financial assistance via the Empty Homes Grant, the Empty

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Home Flexible Loan or a combination of both. In all cases, a land charge was placed against the property as financial security for the assistance provided.

- However, many owners were resistant to the Council's approaches and it was at this point that enforcement action was considered. This was supported by powers held by the Council, for example, by Building Control, Environmental Health and Planning and were intended to deal with specific nuisance issues or dangerous structures. If a local authority had undertaken work in default under these powers then it was possible to enforce the sale of a dwelling.
- Another possibility was the Public Request to Order Disposal which enabled members of the public to request disposal of certain publicly owned property.
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) was another step a local authority could take to ultimately secure that a dwelling became and remained occupied either with or without the owners consent. However, EDMO's would first need to be authorised by the Residential Property Tribunal.
- The first year of the EHS had been one of putting procedures in place and training staff. Although a proactive approach had still been taken in contacting property owners.
- The EHS adopted the former Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) definition for monitoring purposes. This definition was "the number of non-local authority owned vacant dwellings returned to occupation or demolished during the financial year as a direct result of action by the local authority". This did not require dwellings to have been vacant for 6 months or longer and therefore monitoring was extended to include the use of the Threshold Loan Scheme (TLS) for homes that had been vacant for less than 6 months.
- The target was to bring 18 homes back into use every year, with at least 4 of the empty homes brought back into use via grant funding. This target reflected a best value annual improvement of 2.5% of the total long term empty stock, this was based on the advice of the Empty Homes Agency. If this was fully applied then the target could actually be reduced to 10 dwellings.
- In 2009/10, 57 homes had been brought back into use based on the BVPI definition. 43 were via the TLS with Q4 figures yet to be included and the remaining 14 were as a result of direct intervention through the EHS. It was added that homes brought back into use as a result of the first letter of encouragement were not included in this figure.
- Grant funding had not needed to be used for any of the 14 homes brought back into use and therefore this funding could be legitimately used for enforcement action.
- An Empty Homes Panel had been formed to help manage the most difficult cases for dwellings that had been empty for a considerable length of time and whose owners had been resisting the advice and financial assistance on offer. The Panel intended to meet quarterly and would involve the Portfolio Holder and Ward Members.

Members then asked Mel Brain a number of questions and she responded as follows:

- Homes could remain empty for a variety of reasons and was not just for homes that required major work. This included a dwelling being purchased as an investment; where an owner was not confident to let the property; or where an owner was unsure how to make best use of it.

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- Cases varied and so therefore did the approach taken in terms of enforcement. Many standard letters were sent and extensive dialogue was engaged in to seek to bring a home back into use before enforcement became an option. The impact these methods had were being tested.
- People who owned a second home could previously pay a reduced Council Tax. However, this was no longer the case and property owners did, in some cases, use that as a defence for not bringing the property back into use. Mel Brain agreed to investigate whether the Council had the power to increase Council Tax for those owning a second home.
- The detailed work that was required for many properties could take considerable time. However, occupying these properties did have a positive impact in communities.
- On the topic of additional resources, June Graves acknowledged that this would enable more work to be done which could raise the number of dwellings brought back into use.
- While it was not possible for a non residential property to be brought into use, there was the potential for a Registered Social Landlord or a developer to purchase a property on the open market and bring it into use in that way.

RESOLVED that Mel Brain would investigate whether the Council had the power to increase Council Tax levels for those owning a second home.

9. Scrutiny review into the performance of schools in West Berkshire

The Committee considered the report outlining the results of the investigation into the performance of schools in West Berkshire (Agenda Item 6).

Members discussed the draft recommendations and in the main these were approved. However, amendments were requested to the following recommendations:

- Minor amendments were requested to recommendations 4 and 6.
- Andy Tubbs raised a concern that while it was a good recommendation, there was no budget to support recommendation 12 for teacher retraining and suggested that the recommendation should state this was subject to resources. A Member suggested that this could be seen as an invest to save area.
- It was suggested that the responsibility for recommendation 14 (to commit resource levels for School Improvement) rested with the Executive rather than the individual Portfolio Holder. In addition, it was felt that the recommendation should be amended to say that resource levels should be increased and not just maintained.
- Discussion then followed with regard to the Standards and Effectiveness Panel and recommendation 15. A view was given that the scrutiny review pointed to a need for an increased profile for the Panel and that the recommendation did not reflect that. It was stated that the Panel did highlight the majority of schools that had caused concern following school visits and it was therefore felt that the Panel was working effectively. Andy Tubbs added that Headteachers valued the informal Member visits which encouraged openness. The Terms of Reference for the Panel had been updated and as part of this it had been suggested that the reports produced by Members should be received by the Select Committee as Part 2 reports. The reports were already usefully shared within the Education Service.

RESOLVED that the amended recommendations would be circulated to the Scrutiny and Partnership Manager, who produced the report, and to the Select Committee for final

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approval. The report would then be sent to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission for their endorsement.

10. Work Programme

The Committee considered the work programme for 2010/11 (Agenda Item 7).

Agenda items for the next meeting on 8 July 2010 were agreed as:

- A briefing on the work of the Greater Greenham Project.
- Implementation of the Social Inclusion Strategy.

The timescale for the work to support small schools meant that it was unlikely that a report would be received by the Select Committee until its meeting scheduled for 21 October 2010.

In its place, it was suggested that an item should be added to the agenda to consider whether the difficulties reported by a number of local authorities with primary school placements had an effect in West Berkshire.

RESOLVED that the work programme would be noted.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.10 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature