

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
HOUSING POLICY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
MONDAY 21 OCTOBER, 2013 AT 4.00 P.M.
IN THE CIVIC CENTRE, BEECROFT ROAD, CANNOCK
PART 1

PRESENT: Councillors:

Kraujalis, (Chairman)
Grice, Mrs. D. (Vice-Chairman)
Allen, F.W.C Toth, J.
Allt, Mrs. A Bernard, Mrs. A. F.
Dudson, A

By invitation: Councillor Mrs. M. A. Davies, Health and Wellbeing Portfolio
Leader

9. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Molineux, G. N.

10. Declarations of Interests of Members in Contracts and Other Matters and Restriction on Voting by Members

No other declarations of interests were made in addition to those already confirmed by Members in the Register of Members' Interests.

11. Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 12 August 2013 be approved as a correct record and signed.

12. Place (Housing) Priority Delivery Plan 2013-14

Consideration was given to the Housing Priority Delivery Plan 2013/14 quarter one performance (Item 4.1 – 4.10 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management gave explanations for each of the three targets that have not been met so far.

Item 4.3 – Place (Housing) 3

Performance was 1% below the target for the quarter- this was due partially to a number of sickness absences where cover could not be made although the tenants were informed if this was the case. Another contributing factor was computer records not being completed correctly. This has now been rectified and was having a positive impact on the performance target.

Members were generally happy with the level of performance and on balance the figures were positive. Members queried whether Cannock Chase DC figures were comparable with other housing authorities. The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management replied that for certain indicators Cannock Chase DC was in the top quartile. Members asked whether there were any appointments that had been missed due to tenants not being in at the appointed time. The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management replied that in some situations this had happened.

A Member had received a complaint from a tenant who was confused as to why the operative undertook the repair but only partly completed it; the operative then disappeared and reappeared later. The Member wanted to know if this was standard practice. The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management explained that internally the section has their own set of Performance Indicators one of which is measured against the number of repairs completed on the first visit. When a tenant contacts the section regarding a repair a lengthy dialogue is entered into to ensure that as much information is gathered to make an informed decision as to what the repair would consist of so that the operative would be able to meet this target. However, this may not always happen as tenants do not always explain fully what is required or when the operative arrives on site the job may be bigger than first anticipated. The operative may need more specialist material than is on the van or it may be that a different trade is required. The operative should inform the tenant what is happening at every stage but the Head of Housing Services and Waste Management admitted that on occasions this may not occur.

Item 4.4 – Place (Housing) 7

The target for the number of vacant dwellings was 1% which had been included in the Business Plan due to past performance. The normal or expected target was 2%. As a result of changes to the allocations policy and the introduction of the Social Sector Size Criteria more transfers had occurred which had culminated in more voids. Some of these properties needed major refurbishment to bring them up to the Decent Homes Standard which meant they had been void longer. With the increase in voids the target of 1% was not realistic and Cabinet on 19 September, 2013 followed by Scrutiny on the 9 October, 2013 had agreed to increase the target to 2% for the remainder of the year.

The Chair commented that he felt that Housing PDC should have also been included in the discussion of the recommendation to increase the target. A Member explained that the Housing PDC was not a Scrutiny Committee and had no scrutiny function therefore this recommendation did not have to come to

this Committee. However, every PDC Chair is invited to Cabinet and can voice their concerns on behalf of the PDC.

Members noted the reasons behind the target increase of 2%.

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The target of homeless decisions to be determined within 33 days was 75% however at the end of quarter one only 60% had been met within the 33 day deadline. The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management explained that during April and May it had not been possible to meet the target. However, resources from the Homelessness Prevention Fund budget have now been used to fund a part time post on a fixed term contract. This had proven successful and since the appointment of the officer the target in June had been reached.

RESOLVED:

That the Housing Priority Delivery Plan 2013/14 quarter one actions and performance be noted.

13. Cannock Chase Housing Market Assessment – Summer 2013

Consideration was given to the Report of the Head of Housing and Waste Management (Item 5.1 – 5.15 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management commented that it had been reported in the newspapers recently that West Midlands and Wales house prices had dropped which tied in with the contents of the report submitted.

He further informed the PDC that Council on 23 January 2013 had agreed to participate in the Local Authority mortgage scheme with Lloyds Bank Plc which went live on 16 May, 2013. This scheme was similar to the Governments Home Buy scheme but with a mortgage limit of £135,000. Under the Council/Lloyds Bank scheme there had been 9 completed mortgages with a further 4 mortgage approvals.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the Housing Market Assessment be noted.

14. Reinvigorating the Right to Buy

Consideration was given to the Report of the Head of Housing and Waste Management (Item 6.1 – 6.7 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management explained that there was a statutory duty to inform tenants of any policy changes and that it was considered that this duty had been met last Autumn when an article on the Right to Buy Scheme (RTB) changes was included in 'Hometalk'.

A Member questioned whether when a tenant went through the Right to Buy process it was explained to them that the repairs and general upkeep of the property was now their responsibility. The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management informed the Members that information was given out during the process; and that tenants were also urged to seek independent legal advice.

Further discussion followed regarding the use of receipts from RTB sales. Members recalled that there was a government commitment to replace every additional home sold under the RTB with a replacement rented property and asked whether this would occur in the Cannock Chase area.

The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management outlined the system for the division of the RTB resources between the Council and the Government, details of which had been reported to cabinet on 21 June 2012. He also advised that the Governments RTB replacement commitment was a national target and the Government had stated that one for one replacement would not take place in every local authority area. It was noted that in Cannock Chase the Council would need to sell at least 25 dwellings per annum before sufficient resources were generated for a single replacement dwelling.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET:

That Cabinet, at its meeting to be held on 21 November 2013, is recommended to not include any further articles in the Council's 'Hometalk' magazine, on the basis that tenants are already aware of the Right to Buy policy changes through the Autumn 2012 'Hometalk' article.

15. Introduction of a 52 Week Rent Year

Consideration was given to the Report of the Head of Housing and Waste Management (Item 7.1 – 7.4 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management explained that the introduction of Universal Credit for new tenants next year would impact on tenants benefit income and effect the old 50 week rent year (i.e. whereby tenants had 2 free weeks rent over Christmas). A number of Local Authorities were therefore moving to the 52 week year to align with the monthly payments of the Universal Credit.

The Council would continue to make individual agreements with tenants who wanted to keep the 2 rent free weeks at Christmas or at any other time in the year. Members questioned whether these individual agreements would cost the Council to implement. He assured Members that the small cost to the Council was outweighed by positivity from the tenants and increasing the ease

for them to pay which would hopefully reduce arrears.

A Member asked for a further explanation on Universal Credit and what this meant for people affected. The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management explained that Universal Credit in basic terms meant that people would have all their benefits paid as one lump sum every month i.e housing benefit, child benefit, working tax credits etc. This would mean that the tenant would have to budget this money for the month ensuring that they paid their rent and council tax.

The Chair commented on the realistic choices that perhaps people with drug or alcohol dependencies would make. The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management reported that there would be some exemptions to Universal Credit and that there were pilot projects being undertaken at the moment. These were showing that more exemptions were needed than had previously been forecast. The Government's policy on Universal Credit had not as yet been finalised and it was expected that it would incorporate some of the lessons from the pilot projects.

Members queried what the Council would do to ensure that the rent would get paid to avoid further arrears. The Head of Housing Services and Waste Management advised Members that a campaign to encourage payment by direct debit would be undertaken in the future.

Members were concerned that the Council could find itself in financial difficulty if tenants did not pay their rent.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET:

That Cabinet, at its meeting to be held on 21 November 2013, is recommended to introduce a 52 week rent year for 2014-15 and subsequent years.

16. Review of Work Programme – 2013-14 Municipal Year

Consideration was given to the Housing PDC Work Programme for 2013-14 (Item 8.1 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

RESOLVED:

That the updated Housing PDC Work Programme for 2013-14 be noted.

The meeting closed at 4.50pm

CHAIRMAN