

BUDGET AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

2.00 P.M.

2ND NOVEMBER 2004

PRESENT: Councillors K. Budden (Chairman), S. Bray, T. Clifford, M. D. Greenall, P. Robinson, R. Sherlock and J. Whitelegg.

Officers in Attendance:

Corporate Director (Central Services)
Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services (Part)
J. Doble – Principal Democratic Support Officer
J. Glenton – Democratic Support Officer

Apologies for Absence:

Councillors J. Gilbert, T. Johnson and J. Kirkman.

13 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 28th September 2004 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

14 BUSINESS PLAN MONITORING: HEALTH AND STRATEGIC HOUSING

The Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services advised Members that Health and Strategic Housing Services covered a wide range of functions, from the Environmental Health side, which was responsible for the protection of the community and environment and statutory, strategic and advisory services, through to the Strategic Housing aspects of private sector housing issues, which now included Homelessness, responsibility for which had transferred from Council Housing Services.

She informed Members that she was aware of the budget variances that had been identified within the homelessness area and the presentation she would give to the Panel would be on the Lancaster District Homelessness Strategy. Members noted that the Homelessness Act 2002 required local authorities to carry out a review of homelessness and homeless services and to put together and publish a Homelessness Strategy, which had to be kept under review and renewed every five years in consultation with stakeholders.

Members were advised that the Strategy was subject to targets, which meant that the Council had to end the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for homeless families with children, except in emergencies, and even then for no longer than six weeks, and a reduction in the levels of rough sleeping. Members noted that the Sustainable Communities Plan was interlinked and the regional and national picture affected the Lancaster District.

The Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services reported that the Floating Support scheme worked in partnership with local housing associations to support

tenants and help them sustain their tenancies and remain in their homes, and this had received a 300% increase in funding within the last few months.

Members were informed that responsibility for homelessness had transferred from Council Housing Services due to the enhanced links which Strategic Housing Services had with private landlords, and it was noted that the parties involved in implementing the legislation worked together through the Homelessness Forum and additionally that a mediation service was provided by the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS).

The Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services advised Members that emergency accommodation was provided at no cost to the Council in association with County Palatine, who could access Housing Benefit money, and that work was being undertaken with the YMCA to support the Young Persons' Lodging Scheme and options for single homeless people were being looked at. It was noted that secure accommodation with YMCA rent helped the Passport to Housing Scheme and that landlords were being encouraged to buy up houses and make them available for long-term accommodation.

Members were advised that there had been a 57% increase in acceptances for 2003/04 due to the Homelessness Act and as a result of the current housing market conditions. It was noted that there had been 329 Council Housing re-lets in 2003/04, which was down 20% from 2002/03. The Council's acceptance rate was high in relation to the population of the District and the assessment criteria and legislation were being looked at to see if it was possible to be more discriminating as to who should be accepted. As a result of this, there had been an increase in the number of complaints to the Ombudsman and in the number of reviews undertaken.

Members observed that the unintentionally homeless were the Services' priority, with the main reasons for homelessness being termination of private sector housing at 24%, parental exclusion at 19% and domestic violence at 11%. It was noted that cases for people who had not paid rent were being looked at to ascertain whether they were unable to pay or whether they had intentionally not paid, and this was causing more complaints and reviews.

The Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services reported that future steps would be to agree the priority actions, set SMART targets, review the working group and network arrangements, and establish monitoring systems. Members noted that the budget for homelessness was £153,000 and that it had been calculated that 70% of this (£112,000) would be received back. Expenditure of £160,000 for the year had been predicted. It was hoped that next year's expenditure would be £50,000, with 60/70% coming back from Housing Benefit and 40/50% in the following year.

It was reported that 759 people had applied for accommodation with over 400 acceptances, which was high compared to South Lakeland District Council at 153 and Fylde at 49, and was the highest acceptance rate within Lancashire. It was noted that at, typically, £60 per night, Bed and Breakfast was expensive and would adversely affect the budget. It was reported that if a person presented themselves from out of the area, it was now legally possible to pay their train fare back, which was cheaper than providing accommodation.

Members were advised of staffing problems within the Service and the backlog which had arisen due to them, which meant that people were not being discharged from Bed and Breakfast quickly enough, and it was noted that although the number of people going into Bed and Breakfast was decreasing, because of the backlog, this would not be reflected in the budget. The staffing problems were due to an employee being off on long-term sickness and a vacant post. When fully staffed, there would be three full-time Housing Officers and a Manager and secondments had taken place to address the present situation. Training would take place in March 2005 to bring officers up to speed.

Members queried why there should be such a demand for accommodation in the District and were advised that this could be due to the volume of cheap accommodation in the West End of Morecambe. It was noted that 90% of the people who applied for accommodation were local and that the number of people applying from outside the District was decreasing. People from outside the District could only be considered if they had lived locally or had a family connection.

The Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services' attention was drawn to the Council's Best Value Performance Indicator relating to the average length of stay in Bed and Breakfast accommodation, which compared unfavourably to the All England top quartile, and the need for documentary evidence of a plan being in place and managed to address the problems. The Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services reported that the processes were in place and the Authority was working in partnership towards preventing homelessness, but progress had been hampered by the staffing problems in Strategic Housing Services, which were being resolved. Members noted that if figures were reduced as from now and March, the year-end figure should be favourably affected.

Members were advised that County Palatine had obtained properties, but had experienced problems in securing building contractors and companies to refurbish the properties. It was hoped that all the properties would be completed by the end of March 2005. It was reported that registered landlords or owners were being encouraged to bring empty properties back into use and that, whilst Compulsory Purchase Orders had not been used at present, they were a possibility.

It was suggested that an outside body, such as Lancaster University, should be brought in to analyse figures and see if there were trends there, as they would have the research capacity to do this.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services for her presentation and copies of the presentation slides were requested for distribution by Administration Services.

Resolved:

That the Principal Democratic Support Officer liaises with Councillor Whitelegg to progress matters and to consider involving Lancaster University to analyse the reasons for the high homelessness figures.

(The Head of Health and Strategic Housing Services left the meeting at this point.)

15 STAR CHAMBER – UPDATE

The Leader of the Council gave Members an update on the Star Chamber process. Members were advised that the Chamber had considered each Council Service and looked at sets of proposals. The Head of Financial Services had requested the information currently available to provide projections in connection with the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Members were informed that potential savings of approximately £400,000 had been identified already this year, which would be achieved if the Council accepted the proposals made by Cabinet, and further work was being undertaken to identify additional savings of approximately £200,000 for 2005/06 and £900,000 for 2006/07 that were necessary to keep Council Tax increases down below 5%.

The Leader reported that the cash offices at both Town Halls were to be closed and replaced with a service at Post Offices, which was free to the public. This would increase accessibility to services and reduce the Council's costs. It was noted that staff who worked in the cash offices had received a long period of notice and would be covered by the Council's Redeployment Policy.

Members were advised that the Star Chamber process had identified cuts and savings and more radical solutions would be looked at next, including the proposed restructuring of Services. Through Star Chamber and the Medium Term Financial Strategy the traditional Local Authority pattern of looking at budgets in October to December would change and effectiveness would be examined throughout the whole of the year.

Members were informed that some proposals would not be achievable immediately, for example, the cost-saving, joint procurement of goods and sharing of services with other Local Authorities. It was noted that some mid- and short-term proposals had not been costed-in as these were in the process of being explored, and the possibilities of ceasing carrying out an activity, changing the manner in which it was done or delivering the same thing, but differently, would be looked at. It was noted that Star Chamber was looking at the Corporate Plan and reviewing what was done at present, with a view to improving services. It was reported that it would only be possible to understand the financial position once all the processes were together.

The Chairman thanked the Leader for his report.

(The Leader left the meeting at this point.)

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

16 UPDATE REPORT ON ALTERNATIVE SOFTWARE PACKAGES

The Principal Democratic Support Officer advised Members that staffing and resource problems had hampered progress in considering alternative software packages to Microsoft Office, both in terms of the report for the Panel and the pilot project using Star Office. Members noted that assessing the number and cost of Microsoft Licences currently in use by the Council and the suitability and potential

benefits to the Council of using alternative open source products to Microsoft Office would be a substantial piece of work, which would take time to complete, and should be a recommendation for inclusion in the Information Services Business Plan.

Resolved:

That the Principal Democratic Support Officer draws up a draft report on alternative software packages, in consultation with Councillor Whitelegg.

17 WORK PROGRAMME

Members requested that substitutes be provided with meeting details in future.

Resolved:

That substitutes be provided with meeting details in future.

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Chairman

(The meeting finished at 3.40 p.m.)

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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on (01524) 582068, or, alternatively,
email JGlenton@lancaster.gov.uk**