

NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

13th September, 2011

PRESENT – Councillor Thistlethwaite (in the Chair), Councillors Donoghue, Harman, L. Haszeldine, Hutchinson, Kelley, Knowles, Maddison and York. (9)

APOLOGIES – Councillors D. Jones and Lister. (2)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson, Assistant Director Community Services, within the Services for Place, Anthony Sandys, Head of Revenues and Benefits and Lesley Coatsworth, Tenant Empowerment Officer, within Services for People.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Glynis Johnson, Vice Chair of the Tenants Board.

NS5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

NS6. MINUTES - Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 28th June, 2011.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes be approved as a correct record.

NS7. NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES WORK PROGRAMME – Discussion ensued on the proposed work programme and possible review topics for this Scrutiny Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year 2011/12. In considering areas to include on the work programme, Members were reminded of the need to take into account the reduced resources available within the Authority and the need to ensure that any work undertaken had demonstrable outcomes and contributed to the work of the Council and its strategic aims and objectives.

References were made to the need to continue to monitor the Street Scene Services and support Street Scene in engaging with the local community; assist with the implementation and development of the Litter Initiative project; to assist in raising general awareness of the Housing Benefit Reforms and to examine the transformation projects within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee.

Discussion also ensued on the need to scrutinise private sector housing and the need to involve private landlords to provide affordable housing.

RESOLVED – (a) That it be recommended to the Monitoring and Co-ordination Group that the following areas of work be included on the work programme of this Scrutiny Committee for the remainder of this Municipal Year 2011/12 :-

- (i) Housing Benefit Reforms;
- (ii) Private Sector Housing; and
- (iii) Street Scene Litter Initiative project.

(b) That any potential pieces of work that members would like to be considered as part of the work programme be forwarded to the Chair.

NS8. ANNUAL REPORTS TO TENANTS – The Director of People submitted a report (previously circulated) presenting the Annual Report and Summary (also previously circulated) that will be sent to all Council tenants in October 2011 and to seek Members approval.

Lesley Coatsworth, Tenants Empowerment Officer introduced the 2011 Annual Report and gave an overview on the progress that the Housing Service have made in the last year with particular focus on the five main standards that were identified as being important by tenants and the Tenants Services Authority. It was highlighted that in April, 2010 the Tenant Services Authority became the new regulator for all social housing providers in England and they have produced a list of six national housing management standards that applied to all providers whether they were local authority, housing association or other form of provider.

Glynis Johnson, Vice Chair of the Tenants Board gave an overview of the role of the Tenants Board, the work that they have undertaken and the task and finish groups that they have established ranging from Street Scene to Gas Safe Champions.

Members acknowledged and thanked Glynis for dedication and the work that has been undertaken by the Tenants Board.

RESOLVED – (a) That thanks be extended to Glynis Johnson, Vice Chair of the Tenants Board and the Tenants Board for their commitment and work they have undertaken.

(b) That the Annual Report be approved for publication and submission to the Tenant Services Authority.

NS9. IMPACT OF THE HOUSING BENEFIT REFORMS – The Director of People submitted a report (previously circulated) providing Members with an overview of the reforms to the Housing Benefit scheme that have been introduced in April, 2011, together with future planned reforms and their impact on affected residents.

Anthony Sandys, Head of Revenues and Benefits introduced the report and highlighted that in April, 2011, the Department for Work and Pensions had introduced a significant programme of reform to the Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit scheme with the purpose of reducing the cost of the scheme nationally, improving the working incentives of the scheme and achieve the Governments objective of ‘making work pay’, reducing the complexity of the scheme and pave way for the introduction of Universal Credit, which would replace housing benefit from 2013.

The submitted report outlined the changes that had already been introduced from April, 2011, which were the restrictions on Local Housing Allowance to the four bedroom rate, the introduction of the new maximum Local Housing Allowance rate, to enable the amount any person receives to be capped, the removal of the Local Housing Allowance excess provision, transitional protection, changes to direct payment provisions and safeguarding, additional room for non-resident carer, increases to non-dependent deductions and the increases to Discretionary Housing Payments.

Particular reference was also made in relation to the extension of the Housing Benefit shared accommodation rate to people aged under 35 that would be introduced from January, 2012 and also the changes that would be introduced from April, 2013.

Discussion ensued on the shared accommodation rate for single people being raised to 35 from January, 2012 and the affects this would have on individuals and the potential burden this would have on this Authority on the number of people being made homeless, the documentation that has been sent to individuals who would be affected by the changes to the scheme, the need to help individuals affected prior to the implementation of the changes to the shared accommodation rate for single people and the possibility of establishing a task and finish review group to assist in raising general awareness of the impacts of the changes in benefits and signposting affected individuals to external agencies for advice prior to the changes being implemented and issues occurring.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be noted.

(b) That it be recommended to the Monitoring and Co-ordination Group that a task and finish review group be established to assist with and examine the Housing Benefit Reforms.