

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 14th July 2014

Present: Councillor J Oakes (Chair)
Councillors, Bleakley, Creaser, Kempson, McInnes (substituting for Hughes), Procter and Sandiford

Keith Pilkington, Co-opted Member

In Attendance: Stephen Stray, Planning Manager
Rebecca Lawlor, Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager
Andrew Buckle, Head of Customer Services and ICT
Councillor Serridge, Portfolio Holder for Customers, Legal and Licensing
Councillor Jackson, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health
Councillor Lamb, Portfolio Holder for Operational Services and Development Control

2 members of the public

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Hughes and Councillor Alyson Barnes.

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETINGS

Resolved:

That the minutes of the last meeting held on 23rd June 2014 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Oakes declared an interest in item D1, Vacant Homes Strategy, as she was a landlord in the Borough.

Councillor Kempson declared an interest in item D1, Vacant Homes Strategy, as he was a landlord in the Borough.

4. URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

There were no urgent items of business.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chair agreed to deviate from the Procedure for Public Speaking and allow the members of the public to ask questions as the reports were discussed.

No questions were raised at this point.

6. CHAIR'S UPDATE

The Chair informed Members of the numerous policies which would be presented to the next meeting in September.

7. VACANT HOMES STRATEGY AND HHR2 RISK (the number of long term empty properties increase)

The Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager informed Members that the purpose of her attending the meeting was following the Q4 Integrated Performance Report which indicated that HHR2 was identified as a 'risk' area and indicated that the risk remains because of the housing market and that further homes may fall into this category over time.

The Council's Vacant Property Strategy was adopted by Cabinet in 2010 and was a five year policy, which highlighted a number of actions to try to reduce empty properties in Rossendale.

When the policy was developed there was a dedicated Empty Homes Officer, but funding for this post ceased in 2011.

The Homes and Communities Agency granted £4.6m to bring 474 properties back into use throughout Pennine Lancs, with £1.3m given to Rossendale to bring 120 homes back into use.

The Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager explained the process of high/low and medium risk cases, indicating that through an automated process they were able to produce letter for low/medium risk cases and keep track of these using the automated process.

Those graded as 'high' were the ones that do not engage with the Council and are more complex to deal with. Contact is continually being made until the only options are a CPO or enforced sale on the property.

The Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager gave examples of some of the properties classed as 'high risk' long term empty properties. She indicated that each ward had 3 or 4 properties that were potentially an issue to the Council.

The Council had so far been successful in refurbishing 66 properties on a five year lease and they had the ability to set up a safe-house-scheme, working closely with Inspire and STAR. Money is made available through the Revolving Loan Scheme which is basically an arrangement which allows for the loan amount to be withdrawn, repaid, and redrawn again by the Council in any manner and any number of times, until the arrangement expires.

The Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager explained that Rossendale was the collecting agent for all properties across Pennine Lancs. The Director of Finance was currently producing a monetary proposal to reflect the risk that the Council take on 'empty homes' work on behalf of other local authorities.

The Council had put a bid in for another 100 properties as part of the THI for Bacup and also for Haslingden at a cost of £21k per unit on the revolving loan scheme.

The Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager indicated that she was concerned about the deleting of properties on the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) website and she raised these concerns with the Communities and Local Government Officer, but no response had been received.

It was agreed that a letter should be sent to the local MPs asking them to raise the Council's concerns in Parliament regarding the deletion of properties through the VOA website, as this deprives the Council of financial income and provides no incentive for the owner to bring properties back into use.

Members asked for copies of the list of empty properties and also a list of successful properties that had been refurbished.

A question was asked about whether the Council could use Consultants to deal with difficult properties and the Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager commented that the Council has looked at CPOs and whether they could commission external solicitors to do the work, but Officer input was still required and Consultants would need to be involved in the whole process.

Questions were raised which the Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager responded.

Resolved:

1. That the information be noted.
2. That a letter be sent to the two local MPs raising concerns about properties being deleted from the Valuation Office Agency database.
3. That the Council need to identify what resources could be made available to address high priority long term difficult empty properties.

8. INTERIM POLICY – HOT FOOD TAKEAWAY

The Planning Manager informed Members that the Interim Hot Food Takeaway Policy was originally produced in 2009 and presented to Scrutiny in 2011 when it was updated, with minor revision.

Between 1st April 2013 and 31st March 2014 the Council had only received 4 hot food takeaway applications, with 1 being approved, 1 refused and 2 being withdrawn. An application was going to DC in July for a unit in Bacup.

The Planning Manager indicated that the Interim Policy needs to be updated to refer to development control policies within the adopted Core Strategy. The Interim Policy also needs to be refreshed to take account of new public health guidance. In the longer term the Planning Manager indicated that it is likely to be appropriate for the Site Allocations and Development Management Development Plan Document (DPD) to include a policy on Hot Food Takeaways. This would then provide a basis for amplification by way of a Hot Food Takeaway Supplementary Planning Document which would have more weight than the interim policy.

Concern was raised about 'pop-up shops' which can open for 2 years without planning permission. The Planning Manager informed the Committee that under this permitted development change as a result of changes in national regulations, owners of property in certain commercial uses can change use without the need for planning permission, including for restaurant use but not Hot Food Takeaways. They can also do one further change of use within the two year period. After 2 years from commencement the use reverts back to the original use. As a result, they would need planning permission to continue to operate in the new use.

Some Members expressed concern that 'pop-up' shops are opening as restaurants but are more likely to be operating as hot food takeaways. Members asked how this could be monitored and enforced against. The Planning Manager commented that if Enforcement Officers receive complaints that this is happening they would go out and investigate. Whilst a degree of ancillary takeaway services can occur alongside restaurant use, where there is evidence that the main use is not restaurant use, enforcement action would be taken where it was expedient to do so. Evidence on the balance of use would include checking arrangements for tables and seating arrangements but could also be established by taking action such as serving Planning Contravention Notices on the owner.

A number of questions were raised as to how the Council could better control the changes of use in the future. The Planning Manager responded to the questions indicating he was not aware of a way of providing a blanket ban. He reiterated the need to refresh the interim policy, and in the longer term include a Hot Food Takeaway Policy in the Site Allocations and Development Management DPD and prepare a Supplementary Planning Document.

Resolved

- 1) That the Corporate Scrutiny Committee supports the preparation of a refreshed Interim Hot Food Takeaway policy by March 2015.
- 2) That in the longer term, a Hot Food Takeaway Policy is included in the Site Allocations and Development Management DPD and a Hot Food Takeaway Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

9. CAPITA PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – CS5 & CS6

The Head of Customer Services and ICT provided an explanation as to why the performance of CS5 (% of calls answered by Coventry Call Centre within 20 seconds) and CS6 (% of abandoned calls at Coventry call Centre) showed 'amber' in the quarter 4 integrated performance report.

The Capita contract was amended in relation to the number of calls answered within 20 seconds from 90% to 70% from 1st July 2011 and the Council received a reduction in the Capita contract for this change.

In 2113/14 the Council agreed to charging working age benefit customers 8.5% for Council Tax, this increased in 2014/15 to 20%. There had also been some technical changes in relation to Council Tax exemptions which added to the complexity of the calls as well as affecting call volumes. This has meant that the average call handling time has increased which impacts on staff ability to answer calls within 20 seconds.

When asked if the target could be increased from 20 seconds, the Head of Customer Services and ICT indicated that these would be reviewed in November or December.

A member asked if an explanation could be included on the Council Tax bill as to why there had been an increase and also include a list of other agencies that they can go to for help. It was also suggested that the offer of 12 monthly payments should be marketed better.

The Head of Customer Services and ICT suggested that he come along to another meeting of the Committee prior to the Council Tax bills going out in the public domain so that Members can review them before they are printed.

The Portfolio Holder for Customer Services, Legal and Licensing indicated that the concerns of the Committee had been put on the next agenda for the Capita Board meeting for discussion and he would feedback the Committees comments to the meeting.

There were 5051 notices issued by the Council Tax team in 2013/14 as compared to 2012/13. In April and May 2014 there have been 676 more pre-summons notices issued. Again these figures impact on the number of calls received by the call centre.

Traditionally March is always a 'spike' and better resources were needed to cope with these 'spikes'.

There was discussion about the IT systems and the Head of Customer Services and ICT informed the Committee that revenue and benefits was done online and these are processed quicker. There are plans to put online devices in the one stop shop as Universal Credit will also bring challenges as this is also done online.

RESOLVED:

1. That a further report be brought to the Committee towards the end of the financial year, together with a draft copy of the Council Tax bill for the Committee to review and make comment prior to it being printed.

The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and closed at 8.15pm

Signed
(Chair)

Date.....