

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

**Held on Thursday, 26 April 2012 at 2.00 pm in the
Anglia Room, The Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham**

PRESENT

Mr C G Carter	Mr R.G. Kybird
Mr K.S. Gilbert	Mrs S.M. Matthews
Mrs D.K.R. Irving	Mr R. R. Richmond
Mr T. J. Jermy (Vice-Chair, in the Chair)	Mr J.D. Rogers
Mr A.P. Joel	Mr B. Rose

Also Present

Mr S.G. Bambridge	Mrs L.S. Turner
Mr T R Carter	

In Attendance

Sarah Bruton	- Environmental Services Manager
Stephen James	- Senior Internal Consultant
Antony James-Orekogbe	- Principal Officer - Housing Options
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer
Maxine O'Mahony	- Director of Commissioning
Darryl Smith	- Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling)
Teresa Smith	- Committee Officer (Scrutiny & Projects)
Roger Wilkin	- Interim Housing Manager

43/12 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 15 March 2012 were confirmed by a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

44/12 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Byrne and Mr Cowen.

45/12 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

46/12 DECLARATION OF INTEREST (AGENDA ITEM 4)

Mr R Richmond declared a personal interest in Agenda Items 7a, 8 and 9 by virtue of owning property in Breckland with tenants receiving Housing Benefit.

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**47/12 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING
(AGENDA ITEM 5)**

Mr Bambridge, Mr Carter and Mrs Turner were welcomed to the meeting.

**48/12 EXECUTIVE MEMBER PORTFOLIO UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM
6)**

Due to the recent changes to Executive Members, this item was withdrawn.

49/12 TASK AND FINISH GROUPS (AGENDA ITEM 7)

(a) Housing Task & Finish Group

Mrs Matthews, Chairman of the Housing T&FG, advised that the Group had met twice since the last Commission meeting.

One meeting had considered the Homelessness Business Plan (which was on the agenda for discussion today) along with a brief discussion on Breckland Keyselect and how that was operating.

The second meeting had focussed on the draft Allocations Policy. That had been drawn up based on the discussions at a previous T&FG meeting where the Group had debated what they wished to see in the new policy. The document would be consulted on with partners and applicants on the housing register. The Group would then consider those comments before passing a completed document to the Commission.

It was anticipated that the Group would meet one more time in June following the consultation and that the policy would be presented to the Commission at its July meeting.

**50/12 THE HOMELESSNESS STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLAN
(AGENDA ITEM 8)**

The Principal Officer - Housing Options presented the report which looked at the Service over the next two years including implementing changes brought in by the Government.

The report had been reviewed by the Housing Task & Finish Group where many suggestions had been made. It had also been presented to Exec Board. All amendments had been included in the final draft before the Commission.

The report focussed on homelessness solutions and in particular the prevention of homelessness and the reduction of temporary accommodation costs. The aim was to provide a service which met the needs of the community whilst offering value for money.

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All the issues had been addressed in the Action Plan set out in the report.

Mr Gilbert noted that the rent and deposit loan scheme had been outsourced to the Norfolk Credit Union. He asked if they were being more successful at collecting repayments than the Council had been.

The Principal Officer - Housing Options explained that the scheme had required a lot of staff resources to chase repayments. The Credit Union had more resources and was therefore more successful. The Council had previously had to top-up the pot, but under the new arrangements no additional money was required.

Mr Kybird noted that most of the solutions set out in the Action Plan used existing resources and gave no indication of savings.

The Principal Officer - Housing Options advised that staff resources were already in place. Investment had been made to upgrade IT systems which improved efficiency. The Service review, which was currently underway, would add to the savings.

There being no further comments, the report was otherwise noted.

51/12 BRECKLAND TENANCY STRATEGY (AGENDA ITEM 9)

The Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling) presented the report and advised that the Council had not previously had a Tenancy Strategy but were required to adopt one by the Localism Act.

The Strategy provided a framework for the allocation of social housing. It had been reviewed by the Housing Task & Finish Group. Initially it had been proposed to have a 10 year tenancy, but after discussion with representatives from Housing Associations that had been amended to a five plus one year introductory tenancy. Supported housing would not be part of the flexible tenure arrangements. Flexible tenancies would lead to more houses being available over time.

Mr Gilbert raised some concerns. He asked about recent reports of Councils moving tenants out of their areas. He was aware that a Nottingham Housing Association had purchased some houses in Watton for Nottingham residents and asked what percentage of the housing stock was being occupied by people from outside the County.

The Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling) advised that under the changes to the Allocations Policy (which was

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currently being reviewed) the Council would be able to require tenants to have a local connection. However, she explained that the houses purchased in Watton had not formed part of the affordable allocation of that site and there was nothing to stop a Housing Association buying houses on the open market. Usually, if a Housing Association could not find tenants for its properties, they approached the Local Authority to fill the vacancy from their Register. The housing team had not been informed of any purchases of this nature.

Mr Gilbert then asked about Housing Association properties being sold on because they were in poor repair. What happened to the money from the sale and why weren't Ward Representatives consulted?

The Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling) acknowledged that this was a growing problem and a new process had been introduced to ensure that Housing Associations consulted with the Council before disposing of stock. They had to get the Council's permission and explain why they were selling. If disposals were agreed the Council would seek to have the money re-invested in the District but that was a matter for negotiation. Under the recently agreed scheme, Ward Representatives would be consulted.

Mr Kybird asked if it was the cost of bringing properties up to the agreed Decent Homes Standard that was causing properties to be disposed of and was advised that in recent cases there had been significant structural problems with the houses making disposal a better business option for the organisation concerned. The Officer did not think that the Decent Homes Standard was a big issue. However, there were concerns about the condition of stock that was being allocated when vacant.

Mr Bambridge supported the idea of the Strategy but wanted every effort to be made to assure people that it did not mean they would only be able to occupy a property for five years.

The Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling) agreed and said that the correct message needed to be delivered. It was the exception to end a tenancy after five years, not the norm, but there would be instances when a move would be required, as inappropriate tenancies could not be encouraged.

With regard to the maintenance of Housing Stock, the Chairman asked if Housing Associations were required to audit the stock they held. He was advised that there was a process in place to ensure that the Council was kept informed.

Mr Rogers noted that the development on the RAF Watton site had more than 200 houses owned by Registered Social Landlords, although there had been no requirement for the higher

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level percentage of affordable houses because they had been given permission before that policy was adopted.

The Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling) was aware that the Housing Associations had bought additional stock on that site, but they had given nomination rights to the Council.

The Chairman thanked the Principal Housing Officer (Strategy and Enabling) for her report, which was noted.

52/12 WHEELED BIN POLICY (AGENDA ITEM 10)

The Environmental Services Manager presented the report which set out proposals to charge for wheeled bins for new properties from 1 June 2012. Developers would be informed through the planning process.

It was expected that £30,000 income per year would be generated from the charges, but that was dependent on the number of new properties to be built and the size of bins required.

Mr Gilbert could not support the proposal. There had been a lot of concerns raised when the matter had been mentioned at the previous meeting but those concerns had not been addressed.

He then went on to raise the following points:

- What if a householder refused to buy bins?
- How could the Council get occupants to pay?
- The aim was to recover costs from the Developer, but what if they refused?
- What would happen to existing planning permissions?

He pointed out that the Council was aiming to maintain its frontline services and suggested that most residents would say that having their rubbish removed was a frontline service. He was concerned that the report said there were no significant risks identified. He thought that there were many risks, including health and safety risks. If rotting rubbish was left it would lead to smell, obstruction of the footway, rats and fire hazard.

He proposed that the Commission should not support the proposal.

The Executive Member for Localism, Communities and Environmental Services said that the Council had had to look radically at making savings or generating income. The proposal complied with legislation and followed in the footsteps of many other Councils.

Mr Joel asked if the bins would belong to the householder and

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move with them to another property. He was also concerned about extant permissions. He was advised that there were two options with regard to existing planning permissions; the Council could either only charge for properties given permission after 1st June 2012, or they could charge the residents. The residents would be paying for the provision of the bin. The bin would belong to the property.

Mr Bambridge was surprised at the issues raised. He did not think the proposal represented much extra cost to a new house.

The Chairman asked for a breakdown of the costs for providing wheeled bins to new properties and what the total expected income would be.

The Environmental Services Manager explained that the current cost of providing two bins to a property including delivery was £54. The proposed charge covered the cost of the bin, its delivery and the administration costs of delivering the service.

Mr Richmond asked what would happen if a bin was stolen, and was advised that the charge was only for new properties. Stolen or damaged bins would still be replaced by the Council free of charge.

Mr C Carter was delighted that the Commission had the opportunity to discuss the proposal but disappointed at the lack of detail in the report. He thought that the key issue was income. The cost to the Developers was negligible.

The Chairman noted that it was all about Developers recognising the cost to the community of new development.

The proposal not to support the recommendation was not seconded. An alternative proposal to require a more detailed report with proper costings was made and seconded, but not supported.

RESOLVED to **RECOMMEND TO CABINET** that Members endorsed the introduction of a policy to charge for the provision of wheeled bins (black and green) for new properties.

53/12 SHARED SERVICES (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 11)

The Senior Internal Consultant provided a verbal update on Shared Services.

He advised that the project was on track to deliver on schedule. The consultation period had ended and responses would be considered as part of the drafting for the final report.

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The Chief Executive had been appointed Joint Chief Executive for the purposes of implementation. The slotting in process would shortly be undertaken.

The final report would be presented to all three Councils on 24 May, when a final decision would be taken on whether to proceed or not.

The Chairman thanked the Senior Internal Consultant for his update.

54/12 HEALTH & SCRUTINY (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 12)

Mr Kybird advised that the last meeting had coincided with the Breckland full Council meeting and the Group AGM so neither he nor Lady Fisher had been able to attend.

55/12 SCRUTINY CALL-INS (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 13)

None.

56/12 COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION (STANDING ITEM)(AGENDA ITEM 14)

None.

57/12 WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 15)

Mr Bambridge asked for an update on the action / progress of the Task & Finish Group which was considering the alternative power supply for Elizabeth House.

Mr Kybird (Chairman of the T&FG) advised that due to personal circumstances there had been a delay. A meeting would be arranged and a report would be made to the next meeting.

The Chairman suggested that the new Executive Members should be invited to the Commission and it was agreed that Mrs Gould would be invited to the next meeting and Mr Sherwood and Mr Wassell to following meetings.

58/12 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 16)

The arrangements for the next meeting on 7 June 2012 were noted.

The meeting closed at 2.55 pm

CHAIRMAN