

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE
BOURGES & VIERSEN ROOMS, TOWN HALL, PETERBOROUGH
ON
18 JANUARY 2012**

Present: Councillors Todd (Chairman), S Day (Vice Chairman), G Simon, G Casey,
C Burton, JR Fox, and M Jamil Cllr

Also Present: Ansar Ali Police Authority Representative

Officers in Attendance:	Paul Phillipson	Executive Director of Operations
	Paulina Ford	Senior Governance Officer
	Dania Castagliuolo	Governance Officer
	Adrian Chapman	Head of Neighbourhood Services
	David O'Connor-Long	Legal Officer
	Sian Peer	Commissioning Officer
	Leonie McCarthy	Social Inclusion Manager
	Sean Evans	Housing Needs Manager
	Sarah Hebblethwaite	Deputy Housing Needs Manager
	Sharon Malia	Acting Strategic Housing Manager
	Jo Hodges	Senior Neighbourhood Enforcement Officer - Central & East

1. Apologies

There were no apologies received

2. Declarations of Interest and Whipping Declarations

There were no declarations of interest

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2011

The minutes of the Strong and Supportive Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 9 November 2011 were approved as an accurate record.

4. Call In of any Cabinet, Cabinet Member or Key Officer Decisions

There were no requests for Call-in to consider

5. Tackling Poverty

The report provided Members with an update on work being undertaken within Neighbourhoods in partnership with Children's Services to tackle poverty in the city. It explained how tackling poverty was fundamental to the whole Sustainable Community Strategy and formed part of the Single Delivery Plan. The Officers informed the committee of the conference on Tackling Poverty that was held in December 2011 by Neighbourhood Services, Children's Services and local Registered Social Landlords and the outcomes were laid out in the report.

The committee was asked to:

- Support the current work of the Tackling Poverty Partnership
- To be mindful of their statutory duty to address poverty through partnership working
- To understand the breadth of the workforce who need to be aware of tackling poverty in their work and decision taking
- To acknowledge the scale of the issue and give priority attention to it
- To consider how poverty underpins all our work and commit to make this part of our core business

Observations and questions were raised around the following areas:

- Members were concerned with how Peterborough was coping with new arrivals and rough sleeping. *The Social Inclusion Manager advised the committee that there had been a reduction in the number of rough sleepers amongst migrant workers. There had been a very coordinated approach when dealing with new arrivals who found themselves destitute. Peterborough City Council were running a pilot scheme for a service that helped reconnect migrant workers and this was an ongoing project. Meetings were being held with Kingsgate and other churches and organisations such as the Soup Kitchen to provide a more coordinated approach to lift people out of poverty. New arrivals in to the city were being treated as any other individual in the city and would be fed in to the main stream services and offered opportunities. Welfare and benefit reforms had changed and migrant workers were now able to access benefits and welfare that they were previously unable to.*
- Members asked how up to date the figures were that had been quoted in the presentation *Members were informed that the figures had been provided by Children's Services at a conference that had been held in November and that the strategy had been written this year. The Head of Neighbourhoods advised the committee that the data from March 2011 related to the previous year and a lot of the data was from the annual return.*
- Members queried where the data had come from and felt that it was not providing an accurate picture. *The Head of Neighbourhoods explained that most of the data in the presentation and within the report came from the Department for Works and Pensions because the measure of poverty was based upon the take up of certain benefits and that local proxy measures were also being used. Members were advised that the key information was the difference between the local and national average and the difference was the relative impact that was important and this would help understand the level of the problem in the city. When the census was published later in the year this would provide up to date figures on income levels, deprivation levels and levels of inclusion.*
- How are you going to reach more deserving families? *This would be done by tasking the voluntary sector to receive grants for next year and they would be asked to identify the key issues in their areas and how funding should be distributed. The Head of Neighbourhoods added that the important group of people who needed help were the families who were at risk of becoming vulnerable or entering poverty. It was suspected that this group would be far larger than the people already in poverty. Data would need to be used along with information and contacts to understand how to get to that group of people and try to stop them from reaching poverty,*
- Councillor Casey had attended the conference on Tackling Poverty in November and commented on how interesting and informative it was. How were all the ideas taken from the conference being processed and what were the next steps? *Officers informed the Committee that there had been a workshop held that had taken the first idea that had been identified about people in acute need and how to map all the services that were available. A list of programmes was being put together from the outcomes based on what was needed in Peterborough also using what people said at the conference along with ideas that had been brought to the conference around what they are doing in other parts of the country. The workshop will pick up the acute need initially then from that it will identify what action needed to be taken on the basis of what was learnt from the*

conference. *The action plan and programme of work will demonstrate what came out of the conference and how it would be delivered.*

- Had a detailed action plan been produced from the outcomes of the conference? *The Head of Neighbourhoods advised that there had been an influx of information after the conference. The team had been overwhelmed by the level of engagement and commitment. The team had been working intensively over the last few weeks to try and simulate the information received and identify any duplication or where something was unique and needed investment. What would emerge from this work would be much more detailed action plans. This report was an introduction to the theme and there would be a number of workshops taking place over the next few weeks. Ideas would be developed and any resource requirements or blockages would be identified. A work programme would then be produced including a proper debate around what the outcomes of the conference were and how they had been simulated in to the eleven themes.*
- Members were concerned with how people who were at the bottom of the ladder and could not pay their bills and did not have bank accounts could be helped. They also questioned whether all the partner organisations had the ability to make a difference once all of the strategies were in place. *The Social Inclusion Manager advised that it was about skilling up every contact with the knowledge of what help was available. She stated that with welfare and benefit reform on the horizon there was a larger need to tackle problems therefore it was important that the necessary people were trained to deliver the help needed. The Head of Neighbourhoods explained that tackling the poverty issue was not optional as the reality for the council and its partners was that if the poverty issue was not tackled then it was going to cost them a lot more money to function. People in poverty may not be employed and often had other very complex issues such as criminality in the household and they may need to access social services or additional support. They could meet all sorts of complications which cost money so it needed to be seen by partners as good business sense.*
- Members suggested that a coordinator be put in place to prevent families getting the same help from all of the different organisations. *The Social Inclusion Manager advised that there had already been a few offers from different organisations for volunteers to coordinate food banks, There were all sorts of mechanisms across the country that were not yet being tapped in to and also funding opportunities that could be applied for if they had the appropriate programmes to put the bids in for.*
- Members were concerned about employers coming to Peterborough and using the issues that Peterborough had to pay lower salaries. What could be done to safeguard salaries? *The Head of Neighbourhood Services advised that tackling Poverty was one of 27 projects that sat within the Single Delivery Plan. Members were informed that there was an opportunity to join projects together e.g. tackling poverty, growth of the city, job creation, house building and how vulnerable families were supported. The aim was to raise levels of aspiration and the profile of the city in order to start to see growth and investment. Poverty had originally been a key delivery item for Children's Services but Neighbourhoods also wanted to deliver on tackling poverty. It was the first time the two services had worked closely together on a particular issue.*
- Members stated that attracting students to the city and keeping them here was also an important factor so the acquired skills could be kept within the city.
- Members queried whether the Family Recovery Project was also included in Neighbourhoods. *Officers advised the Members that the project was structured in Children's services but the Lead Director responsibility was with the Executive Director of Operations. The Executive Director of Operations advised that he would bring a presentation to the Committee at a future meeting on the Family Recover Project.*
- Members were concerned about the low uptake of children receiving free school meals and asked what was being done about it. *The Head of Neighbourhoods informed members that he found this to be a problem across the city and they needed to understand the reasons why people did not take up free school meals. A big part of Tackling Poverty would be to understand what was available and what the blockages were to stop people obtaining benefits like free school meals.*

ACTION

1. The Committee noted the report and fully supports the actions being taken by the Tackling Poverty Partnership to tackle poverty in the City.
2. The Director of Operations to bring a presentation on the Family Recovery Project to the Committee at a future meeting.

6. Homelessness Prevention – Housing at the Heart of the Community

This report was presented to the Committee to provide Members with an update on the Homelessness Prevention report that was previously brought to Scrutiny on 9 March 2011 and to update members on the work being carried out by the Strategic Housing and Enforcement Officers in preventing homelessness in Peterborough.

The key issues raised in this report were as follows:

- Homelessness in Peterborough
- Rough Sleeping in Peterborough
- Repossessions in Peterborough
- The Rent Deposit Scheme
- Single Persons Homelessness
- Future Changes and the Impact on Peterborough
- Changes to Local Housing Allowances and Welfare Reform
- The Peterborough Homes Allocations Policy
- Other Impacts on Homelessness in Peterborough
- The Housing Enforcement Role in Preventing Homelessness
- Empty Homes
- The Work of Care and Repair Home Improvement Agency in Preventing Homelessness
- Supporting People to Maintain their Accommodation
- Taking households out of Fuel Poverty – Providing Affordable Warmth for Vulnerable Householders
- Implications

Members were asked to scrutinise the approaches taken and the progress and achievements made in relation to the homelessness prevention activity across the Strategic Housing Services and by Housing Enforcement Officers. Members were also asked to provide challenge where they felt necessary and to suggest ideas and initiatives to support further improvements.

Members were advised that the draft Homelessness Strategy, Housing Allocations Policy and Empty Homes Strategy was going to be brought back to the committee for Scrutiny at a later date.

Observations and questions were raised around the following areas:

- Members were concerned that funding had been restricted for the Mortgage Rescue Scheme and wanted to know how effective the service would be. *Members were advised that the funding that was originally put in place was a national funding scheme that was operated regionally. It ran on a first come first served basis and for the first year the scheme was in place all funding was made use of. Due to lack of resources Central Government had decided that the scheme could not be sustained so they introduced a new product which was not as generous. The funding that was put in place had been reduced, the eligibility criteria had changed for mortgage rescue and the scheme became more difficult for households to access. Locally it was then decided that the funding would*

be split across the local authorities in the region which reduced the success rate down to two possible cases in Peterborough. This arrangement had now been changed and it was now far easier to access the funding and it had returned to the first come first serve basis. Officers were hopeful that Peterborough would take the majority of the nine allocations available to the eastern region.

- *Members asked the officer to describe how the system worked. Members were advised that in general a family would approach the council for help because they had fallen in to financial difficulties with their mortgage. The mortgage lender would then need to inform the housing department who would then write to the home owner. They would be referred through to the housing department and assessed. If they qualified for the scheme under the homelessness legislation then they would continue to reside in the property and pay rent to the social landlord.*
- *Members complimented and acknowledged the invaluable service that the Care and Repair service provided.*
- *Members questioned whether there was the option for the tenants to part purchase at a level the tenants could afford. Officers advised members that there was a shared equity scheme available, where a person could purchase a percentage of a property and then part own the property. If the person then found work they could purchase more of the house back from the Housing Association and potentially own the house again. There had been two successful cases in the last year. The take up for the scheme had not been popular.*
- *Members asked why the scheme had not been very successful. Officers advised that when people were assessed to see if they qualified for the scheme, shared equity would be looked at in the first instance. Both schemes were promoted and it was just that in many cases shared equity had not been an option. In some cases the Housing Association would only offer the Shared Equity Scheme and not the Mortgage Rescue.*
- *Members referred to page 43 of the report, the case study titled 'Adaptation' and queried whether there were many cases similar to this one. Members were advised that this case was very common and the Disabled Facility Grant allowed people to live independently.*
- *Members queried the relationship between the mortgage companies and the Housing Department. Members were advised that some of the mortgage companies did not always follow the set protocol. It was however in their interest to work with the Local Authority as significant costs could be incurred with the repossession process and they would lose out. There was therefore quite a good success rate.*
- *Members queried as to what would happen if a family had a three bedroom house and they wanted to sell it back to put into the housing stock to make more room for families in need of housing. Currently if this were to happen the sellers would not be able to get accommodation or sheltered housing due to having savings. Was there any way this could be resolved in future. Members were advised that they do assist a lot of people in this situation. They were informed that the uptake for sheltered accommodation from owner occupier groups was high. Officers advised that it was a discussion they needed to have with their housing providers to see if there was any interest as it needed to be affordable for them to take on*
- *Members referred to page 35, case study – 'Negotiation with an Owner of a Long – Term, Problematic, Empty Property' and asked what the time scale was for the owner of a property to sell the house on and who decided its value. Officers advised that it may take a while to come to a resolution with careful negotiation people were brought on board to talk to families' and to work with and be sensitive to the home owners and their families. There were enforcement options available but it was a lengthy process and for cases that went to the Residential Property Tribunal, the average length of time the properties had been emptied was seven years. Substantial evidence needed to be built up for enforcement cases to ensure success. The Empty Homes Officer was currently working on 480 long term empty properties.*
- *Members asked whether the Housing Section work with any other agencies. The Officer advised Members that they work with Adult Social Care and various other support networks.*

- Members were concerned with whether the public were aware of the seriousness of the issues in Appendix six, Case Study –‘Poor Housing Condition in a Property Occupied by a Vulnerable Owner’ and was there any way of checking the systems. *The Officer advised that Housing Enforcement working with landlords automatically required a gas safety certificate and they advised landlords that they need to provide gas checks. If they failed to do this they were reported to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE).*
- Members referred to page 20 of the report relating to Housing of Multiple Occupation (HMO). Why were the Millfield and New England the only areas being targeted? Was the work being managed well and what could be done with the landlords to encourage them to work better with their tenants? *The Officer advised members that with HMO Licensing it was only three storey houses that were required to be licensed and controlled across the city. Members were also informed that there was a good success rate in prosecuting landlords who did not comply with the regulations although it could take years to gather the evidence for the prosecution. The Selective Licensing Scheme had proven to have greater control and knowledge as it meant that everything within a specific area would need to be licensed in order to operate.*
- Will this be extended to other parts of the city? *It would depend on how overpopulated an area was and the level of problem, individual houses could be tackled immediately.*
- Members asked whether there were any leaflets or information that landlords could distribute to their tenants regarding the bin system in Peterborough to encourage good practice as a lot of tenants did not comply with this system. *The Officer advised members that there was not any information for landlords at present.*
- Members were concerned that the Housing allowance for rent was going to be reduced for people on benefits and asked how the city was going to cope with this. *Officers explained that they were currently doing some work with the Housing Benefit service prior to transfer to Serco to produce a database of people who were going to be affected by this reduction. They had been looking at 380 households who were aged between 25 and 34 and have found that 200 would be affected. Members were advised that there would be a transition protection for people whose anniversary of their claim was between now and the 1 April. Those tenants would get nine months notice, although those after 1 April would immediately have their housing benefit reduced. The data will be passed on to the Housing Department and there will be an officer working in the background to get a stock of properties available to use as shared accommodation for people who were at risk of becoming homeless.*

Members congratulated Sarah Hebblethwaite and her team on all the work that had been done to reduce homelessness within the city.

ACTION

The Committee noted the report and requested that Housing Officers bring back to the Committee the new Empty Homes Strategy at a future meeting.

7. Forward Plan of Key Decisions

The Committee received the latest version of the Council’s Forward Plan, containing key decisions that the Leader of the Council anticipated the Cabinet or individual Cabinet Members would make during the course of the following four months. Members were invited to comment on the Plan and, where appropriate, identify any relevant areas for inclusion in the Committee’s work programme.

ACTION AGREED

The Committee noted the Forward Plan and agreed that there were no items for further consideration.

8. Work Programme

Members considered the Committee's Work Programme for 2011/12 and discussed possible items for inclusion.

ACTION AGREED

To confirm the work programme for 2011/12.

11. Date of Next Meeting

Wednesday 7 March 2012

The meeting began at 7.00 and ended at 8.23 pm

CHAIRMAN

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