

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Environment and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

held on Tuesday, 5th July, 2011 at Committee Suite 1,2 & 3, Westfields,
Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillor L Gilbert (Chairman)
Councillor G M Walton (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors A Barratt, P Butterill, H Davenport, K Edwards, R Fletcher,
M Grant, P Groves, P Hoyland and B Silvester (substitute)

Apologies

Councillors D Druce

110 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/WHIPPING DECLARATIONS

There were no declarations of interest.

111 ALSO PRESENT

Councillor J Macrae Prosperity Portfolio Holder

112 OFFICERS PRESENT

Caroline Simpson – Head of Regeneration
Karen Carsberg - Strategic Housing Manager
Adrian Fisher - Head of Planning & Housing
Nic Abbott - Homechoice Team Leader
Mark Nedderman – Senior Scrutiny Officer

113 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/ OPEN SESSION

There were no members of the public present who wished to address the Committee.

114 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2011 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

115 CHESHIRE EAST HOUSING STRATEGY

Karen Carsberg attended the meeting and gave a presentation on the Council's Housing Strategy which was currently in its public consultation period.

Karen explained that the process to produce the strategy had started with a number of consultation events in 2010.

The strategy set out the vision and priorities for housing between 2011 and 2016.

The Council's vision stated that housing supported the creation of balanced and sustainable communities in Cheshire East, where all residents could achieve independent living in good quality affordable homes that were appropriate to their needs.

The strategy had the following 5 priorities:

- Delivering market and affordable housing
- Making the best use of our existing stock
- Meeting the needs of our most vulnerable residents
- Meeting the needs of an ageing population
- Investing in our neighbourhoods

Karen explained that the Council was facing a serious shortfall in affordable housing provision, as a significant proportion of houses in Cheshire east were unaffordable for first time buyers due to the level of deposit required by lenders. There was also a shortage of both private and social rented accommodation with 80% of Cheshire of Cheshire East housing stock being in owner occupation.

Karen also reported upon the Council's policy to bring back into use the 3000 properties known to be empty in the Borough. The Council ultimately had enforcement powers to bring them back into use. However, the Council had developed a toolkit for landlords which provided a range of solutions to avoid the enforcement route.

In response to a question about how the Council engaged with landlords who were not based in the Borough, Karen explained that the Council supported two very active land lord forums split between North and South of the Borough.

In response to a further question regarding what partnership arrangements existed in Cheshire East with Social Housing providers, Karen explained that all the key agencies were brought together on a regular basis (Cheshire East Strategic Housing delivery group) and through the Local Area Partnerships (LAP's) and that specifically within the Congleton LAP, there existed a separate Housing sub-group.

In response to a question regarding powers available to the Council to protect affordable housing schemes, Karen explained that through section 106 agreements, affordable housing could be preserved in perpetuity as affordable housing. However, in some cases, owners had the ability to 'staircase out', potentially having the ability to own 100% of the property.

A definition of affordable homes could be found in Planning Policy Statement 3(PPS3) which stated that affordable housing should: meet the needs of eligible households including availability at a cost low enough for them to afford, determined with regard to local incomes and local house prices, include provision for the home to remain at an affordable price for future

eligible households or, if these restrictions are lifted, for the subsidy to be recycled for alternative affordable housing provision.

RESOLVED – That the presentation be noted

116 **ALLOCATIONS POLICY**

Nic Abbott Cheshire Homechoice team leader attended the meeting and provided a presentation on the review of Council's Housing allocations policy, Cheshire Homechoice. The Committee also considered a report of the Head of Planning and Policy.

Cheshire Home choice was the Choice based lettings partnership between Cheshire East Council and the registered providers of Social Housing in Cheshire East. Cheshire homechoice was launched in April 2010 and was a partnership between Cheshire East Council, Cheshire peaks and Plains, Plus Dane and Wulvern.

Cheshire Home choice had been operating effectively for 12 months. However there were some areas of the allocations policy that needed improving or reviewing in light of lessons learned and in preparation for changes anticipated through the Localism Bill.

Nic reported that there had been very few formal complaints received from customers, and those that had been received related to procedural matters rather than policy.

Nic explained that the process should be completed by January 2012 and would include:

- Undergoing consultation with customers based on their opinions on Housing priorities
- Working closely with partners to resolve some of the issues identified
- Conducting an event with Members of the Council and Partner Board members to further consult on the process
- Taking guidance from Support Agencies and Customers
- Testing the policy to try to identify any errors
- Re-registering & re-assessing all applications to avoid duplication and further complication for customers

In response to a query about how the policy reflected the needs of young people particularly former cared after children who were seeking accommodation, Nic explained that such individuals were given a high welfare banding in the allocations policy and the Council worked very closely with Children's Services, and Members of the Corporate parenting Board.

RESOLVED – That the report and presentation be received.

117 **HOME IMPROVEMENT AGENCY**

Karen Carsberg explained the background of the Home Improvement Agencies which provided services to older or disabled that lacked either the financial capacity or personal resources to organise home repairs or adaptations themselves in order to retain independent living.

The role of a Home Improvement Agency was:

- Provide support to assist vulnerable people through the complex process of home repairs and adaptations.
- Helping people to find ways to pay for the repairs and adaptations, including applying for disabled facilities grants, home repair loans and equity release products
- Providing technical advice on the options available and producing architectural drawings and specifications, and assisting people through the planning and building regulations application processes
- Assisting people to employ reputable contractors and carrying out quality checks on the work
- Signposting and referrals to other services to help the vulnerable person address other housing related issues that are affecting their ability to continue living independently in their own home.

Karen explained that the Council currently supported 3 HIA's which were:

- In-house by the Strategic Housing division of Planning and Housing – for Congleton;
- Mears, a national social housing repairs and domiciliary care provider – for Crewe & Nantwich; and
- Regenda, a registered housing provider – for Macclesfield.

The Council had undertaken a review of HIA's in 2010, which highlighted the need for a single HIA. The Council had therefore embarked upon a procurement process which had culminated in 3 tenders being received to provide the Council with a home improvement agency service. In August, Cabinet would be asked to decide which of the tenders it preferred and would therefore be asked to provide the service in house.

RESOLVED - That the presentation be received and Karen Carsberg be requested to provide a copy of the report scheduled to go to Cabinet in August 2011 to Members of this Committee at the time of publication.

118 **UPDATE ON ALL CHANGE FOR CREWE**

Caroline Simpson attended the meeting and gave a presentation on 'All Change for Crewe' a project started two years ago to revitalise the economy of Crewe.

Caroline provided statistics comparing the Economic growth of Crewe with that of the north west region and the national position. It was clear that Crewe had lagged behind.

Caroline explained the links between the level of population in Crewe and economic growth which would be addressed in the Local Development Framework (LDF) process.

Caroline also referred to the re-franchising of the North West mainline rail services and that Crewe station re-development would have to be at the forefront of any re-franchising proposals.

RESOLVED - That Caroline Simpson be requested to submit a progress report on 'All change for Crewe' to a future meeting.

119 **OPTIONS FOR REVISED PUBLIC TRANSPORT CRITERIA**

The Chairman informed the Committee that all Members of the Committee had received by email a copy of the revised transport criteria which took account of the Comments made at the previous meeting of the Committee held on 21 June 2011.

The Committee sought further information about whether any of the 'Safer routes to school' would be affected by changes to bus route support resulting from the new public transport criteria

RESOLVED – That Chris Williams Transport Manager be requested to clarify whether the revised criteria will have any impact on safer routes to schools.

120 **WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The committee considered a report of the Borough Solicitor setting out the work programme for 2011/2012.

RESOLVED – That the report be received

121 **FORWARD PLAN - EXTRACTS**

The Committee considered extracts from the current forward plan.

RESOLVED – That the extracts be noted.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 4.15 pm

Councillor L Gilbert (Chairman)