

## **Executive – 11 August 2009**

- Present:** Councillor Henley (Chairman)  
Councillors Coles, R Lees, Paul, Prior-Sankey, Mrs Smith,  
A Wedderkopp and Mrs Wilson
- Officers:** Penny James (Chief Executive), Tonya Meers (Legal and Democratic Services Manager), John Williams (Chief Housing Officer), Stephen Boland (Housing Estate Manager), Lydia Baker (Housing Accountant), Ian Jamieson (Acting Section 151 Officer) and Richard Bryant (Democratic Services Manager)
- Also present:** Councillors Mrs Allgrove, Beaven, Bishop, Bowrah, Brooks, Critchard, D Durdan, Farbahi, Mrs Floyd, Gaines, Guerrier, Hayward, Ms Herbert, Miss James, Mrs Lees, McMahon, Meikle, Morrell, Mullins, Murphy, O'Brien, P Smith, Mrs Stock-Williams, Stuart-Thorn, Watson, Ms Webber, D Wedderkopp and Mrs Whitmarsh.  
Ken Marshall and Dustin Etherington (Tenants Forum)

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm.)

### **63. Apology**

Councillor Slattery.

### **64. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 15 July 2009, copies of which had been circulated, were taken as read and were signed.

### **65. Public Question Time**

Councillor Meikle, as a member of the public, made reference to the recommendations the Community Scrutiny Committee had made to the Executive in connection with the Brewhouse Theatre. The portfolio holder's article in the last Weekly Bulletin had not addressed the central question posed by scrutiny.

Effectively the Committee had challenged the financial judgement of the Executive over the proposed two year run of grant to the theatre. The Committee had simply requested the Finance Officer to be asked again whether such a move was ill advised. If it was considered to be unwise, then the Scrutiny Committee would be content and would not press the matter further.

As the Executive would not now have the call in on its agenda, it was hoped that by asking the same question of the Leader, this quite reasonable question would be answered in public.

In response, Councillor Henley confirmed that the decision reported through the Weekly Bulletin had been made in accordance with the Council's Constitution.

He felt that the subject had been well aired over the past few weeks and that there was no need for further discussions. He added that the Executive had worked closely with the Brewhouse Board and a satisfactory conclusion had been reached with them.

**66. Declarations of Interest**

Councillors Henley, Paul and Prior-Sankey declared personal interests as Members of Somerset County Council. Councillor Coles declared a personal interest as a Director of Southwest One. Councillor Mrs Smith declared a personal interest as an employee of Somerset County Council. Councillor Morrell declared a personal interest as the owner of leasehold properties. Councillors Brooks and Stuart-Thorn declared personal interests as Council tenants.

**67. Rent Increase Decrease**

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the proposed reduction of the rent increase which had been introduced at the beginning of the current financial year.

Shortly after the Council set its budget at Full Council on 17 February 2009, the Government made a surprise announcement which sought to enable Councils to reduce their rent to a national average of 3.1%. Following consultations, the Government released a new formal subsidy determination for each authority.

The Government had indicated that it would fund the reduction in the rent increase by increasing the Council's subsidy. In practice this meant the Council would pay less in Negative Subsidy.

The average rent for a Taunton Deane Tenant was set at £63.96 in February, but this would reduce to £62.10 if the rental increase was reduced.

There would be no significant impact on service or investment because the loss in income would be compensated through the subsidy determination. However, there would be additional IT and administrative costs, estimated at £15,000, which would not be covered by the Government and which, therefore, would slightly reduce the Housing Revenue Account Working Balance.

The proposed decrease had been provisionally scheduled to operate from 5 October 2009, which was exactly half-way through the rent year.

Reported that a publicity campaign would be mounted to prevent, as far as possible, any confusion tenants might have as a result of the proposed

changes.

The 41% of tenants who received full Housing Benefit would experience no financial gain and the further 18% who received partial Housing Benefit would only receive a reduced gain. It was also therefore important to manage expectations amongst those on benefit.

Further reported that whilst the major cost of this one off adjustment would be covered by the Government, this loss of rent operated year upon year and as yet there was no certainty that the reduction in Negative Subsidy payment would continue after this financial year.

Members were invited to consider two options - To maintain the average rent increase of 6.2% that had been agreed at Full Council on 17 February 2009 or to recommend a reduction in the rent increase to a local average of 2.95%. The Executive decided to support the latter option.

**Resolved** that Full Council be recommended to reduce the rent increase agreed earlier in the year (as part of the budget-setting process) to a local average of 2.95%.

#### 68. **Tenant Empowerment in Taunton Deane**

Considered report previously circulated, concerning Tenant Empowerment in Taunton Deane.

During the past year, a small group of tenants had examined the opportunities available to have more say in the way in which their homes were managed.

The way in which social landlords were regulated was undergoing fundamental change with the creation of the new regulator, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA). The TSA, which was currently the responsible regulator for housing associations, would take formal responsibility for the regulation of Local Authority landlords from April 2010.

The TSA was committed to improving the deal for tenants via a new standards framework, with tenant empowerment key to a cultural change in the way social landlords engaged with their tenants.

It was essential for the Council to review its tenant involvement arrangements and work towards a model which would begin the movement of direct influence over investment and services to a new representative body of Councillors and tenants. The Tenants' Empowerment Group (TEG) felt that whilst the Council consulted with tenants, they had little influence.

Following a series of meetings, a report on behalf of the tenants' group had been prepared titled "Tenant empowerment in Taunton Deane : Next steps", a copy of which was submitted for the information of Members.

The report provided an opportunity for the Council to make a significant difference by taking tenant involvement to level not seen before in Taunton Deane. It suggested the creation of a Tenant Services Management Board of ten tenant representatives and two Councillors, one from each of the main parties. The Board would be non-political and charged with the responsibility for ensuring the best possible standards of service delivery to tenants.

The report described the Board's remit as including:-

- involvement in setting the budget and determining spending priorities;
- reviewing and revising policies;
- involvement in agreeing and reviewing contracts;
- staff appointments including a role for tenants in interviewing;
- monitoring service quality;
- considering complaints and appeals;
- making proposals for future development including identifying new build opportunities;
- developing the capacity to progressively manage services; and
- supporting and encouraging tenant and resident management in local neighbourhoods.

It was felt a new partnership agreement would formalise the relationship in a positive and constructive way and confirm the tenant at the heart of all decision-making.

The Board would also have a key role in self-assessment of the landlord service against the new standards and regulatory framework being developed by the Tenant Services Authority (TSA).

The Council was transforming itself by means of the Core Council Review, and the suggested new Board would be a good "fit" with the stated principles of the review and in particular its commitment to community engagement.

Recruitment to the Board would offer opportunities for the development of individuals and training opportunities would be made available. A publicity campaign leading on these and other positive benefits would be created to attract members to the TEG.

Noted that to progress the work involved in the creation of a Tenant Services Management Board, it would be necessary to employ a specialist officer on a temporary basis.

The proposals for tenant empowerment had been considered by the Community Scrutiny Committee where they had generally been supported.

**Resolved** that:-

- (1) The creation of a Tenant Services Management Board comprising ten tenants and two Councillors (one from each of the main parties) be approved;
- (2) The Chief Housing Officer and Housing Operations Manager be authorised to begin the work necessary to create an operational Tenant Services

Management Board by April 2010;

- (3) Full Council be recommended to approve a supplementary estimate from the Housing Revenue Reserves of £20,000 to employ a temporary consultant Tenant Empowerment Officer to progress the work involved;
- (4) The options for resourcing tenant empowerment within the consideration of Phase 4 of the Core Council Review be examined by the Chief Housing Officer and the Housing Operations Manager; and
- (5) Increased tenant empowerment be adopted as one of the guiding principles of the Core Council Review.

(The meeting ended at 7.12 p.m.)