

COUNCIL MEETING - 15 OCTOBER 2002

REPORT OF COUNCILLOR STONE (HOUSING SERVICES)

Housing Review.

As the Housing service has to undergo both a Best Value Review over the next 12-18 months and a review of the options for the future of the Council's housing stock it is now proposed to carry out these two exercises as a single review. It is hoped that this will save time and resources and reduce the duplication of effort which would be involved in separate reviews.

The Housing service can be broken down into 16 different aspects which would be the subject of a Best Value review. Several of these have already been completed but all will now become part of the forthcoming comprehensive review. This will of course be a daunting task for the officers involved as all the usual demands of running the service will of course need to be met at the same time. I hope Members will bear this in mind in the coming months.

Government propose further changes to Housing finance.

A further round of radical changes to the way that Housing finance is dealt with between Local Authorities and Government is now being considered. While changes aimed at simplifying the over-complex system which we presently have would be welcome, the initial proposals for some areas appear to risk further centralisation of decision making into Government hands.

One of the fundamental issues we shall be hoping to see from Government is a recognition that there is a serious housing crisis in the South West of England as well as in the London area. Significant changes are proposed in deciding how to allocate housing investment programmes and how to use the resources generated from Council house sales. Key issues will be the need to provide additional resources for areas like Taunton Deane where housing need is greatest and to ensure that Councils are given the ability to allocate resources in their area in a way which reflects their own local knowledge and priorities.

Housing/ Planning review of gypsy site provision.

Following two decisions in the past year by Planning Inspectors to over-rule the refusal of planning consent by the Council at two sites to the East of Taunton officers are now being asked to take a more corporate view of the gypsy site issue. Inspectors reports indicate that it is no longer sufficient to view these appeals as purely planning issues. While the two appeal decisions both suggest that they should not be viewed as setting a precedent, it is obvious that the issues such as availability of alternative accommodation and the personal circumstances of the individual gypsy families involved must be recognised as valid issues about which the Council must be better prepared to submit evidence at a public enquiry.

Councillor Phil Stone

