

COUNCIL MEETING 16 DECEMBER 2003

REPORT OF COUNCILLOR GREG GARNER - HOUSING SERVICES

The theme for this quarter's Full Council is to provide a further update on the two major housing projects currently in progress i.e Housing Best Value Review and the Council Housing Stock Option Appraisal. In addition, all Councils are targeted to have nil families in B&B accommodation by April 2004, I will also comment on progress in this area.

Housing Best Value

Work began in October 2002 with a review of baselines for all 23 housing service areas. Further development of the scope led to a themed approach of:

- Customer Services – ‘the people’ (our role as landlord and service provider)
- Decent Homes for All – ‘the homes’ (the accommodation we provide)
- Capacity Building – ‘our ability’ (back office functions e.g. IT, financial management).

Three theme working groups and specialists in each of the four Cs (Challenge, Compare, Consult and Compete) report to a Core group of representatives from service users, partners, housing and corporate staff, Members and officers.

Customer Services have drawn together a great deal of baseline information around stakeholders, consultation with users and partners, participation, access issues, hard to reach groups and those with particular needs, communications and working with other agencies. We are benchmarking with Best Practice providers.

Decent Homes are looking at partnering arrangements for repairs and planned maintenance. A “voids” working group is improving processes to create greater efficiencies. With respect to the private sector, a County-wide approach is moving towards a Home Improvement Agency. Again, we are benchmarking with Best Practice providers.

A draft improvement plan is being developed during the Best Value process. The review is due for completion in April 2004. As the stock options appraisal is an integral part of the review the decision on this will be included within the improvement plan.

Council Housing Stock Options Appraisal

Since the beginning of October, a great deal of work has been undertaken by a number of staff, assisted by the Tenants Forum, Members, DOME who are the Tenants Independent Advisors (ITA) and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) who are the Council's Specialist Help. The main areas of work that has now taken place are:

- i) A number of varied of communications have been produced. For example:
 - a) Article in the Core Brief
 - b) Newsletters to Tenants
 - c) Newsletter type articles to Non Tenants through for example the Weekly Bulletin
 - d) Briefing Note to Members
 - e) Presentations to all Housing Staff and a large number of Non Housing Staff
 - f) Information Pamphlet to all staff in their pay packet
 - g) Setting up a Web Site
 - h) Press Release
 - i) Information Pack to all the Council's Partners
- ii) Undertaking a Risk Assessment
- iii) Options awareness training to the Steering Group, Members of the Housing Review Panel, Executive and Group Leaders.
- iv) Completion of key documents such as the Communication Strategy and Tenant Empowerment Strategy and passing these to the Community Housing Task Force (CHTF) for comment.
- v) DOME sending a newsletter and undertaking Road Shows with Tenants to advise them about the Stock Options Appraisal.
- vi) Initial report completed by PWC.

With reference to point vi above, PWC have produced a report for the Housing Review Panel and the Executive (for presentation w/c 8th December), providing a detailed analysis of the first Phase of the Stock Options Appraisal. The report also provides a new financial base position and assessment of the Council's ability to deliver on all of its Housing Priorities through four main options. These options are:

- i) Continued Ownership and Management of the Housing Stock
- ii) Arms Length Management (ALMO)
- iii) Private Finance Initiative (PFI)
- iv) Stock Transfer

The report produced by PWC and the work to date has completed Phase A of the Stock Options Appraisal and is in line with the timetable. The next phase is to communicate further with our tenants, key stakeholders and partners in the new calendar year and fully engage with them to obtain their views. Equally important, is to consider the implementation of the recommendations made by PWC.

In light of the comments made by PWC that we need to undertake a validation of our stock condition survey information, it is believed prudent to move the completion of Phase B of the Stock Options Appraisal from April to July's Full Council. This will enable a more comprehensive assessment to be undertaken of the findings of the Housing Best Value in April and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in May.

Bed and Breakfast

At the end of week 35 (Friday 5th December) we have spent £216,000 out of an original budget of £243,000 this allocation was increased in June by £50,000. Housing Benefits and charges have brought in income of £46,000 to date i.e. a net spend of £176,000.

As at Friday 5th December there are eleven families in Bed and Breakfast and nineteen singles.

We continue to develop new and existing initiatives to help combat the problem of homelessness, recent initiatives include:

Cash Incentive Scheme:

The Cash Incentive Scheme is a cost effective way of gaining access to Council Housing by offering existing tenants £20,000 (just increased from £10,000) towards fees and deposit for tenants contemplating home ownership within the private sector. As at 6 weeks ago only one CIS had been completed this year, since the increase in funds, there has been positive response of which 8 are being processed through legal channels.

Private Sector Leasing:

This is where the Council enters into a contract with private landlords to house homeless families, but with the Council as tenant. The rent on a three bed house under this scheme costs the Council about £550 per month. This is equivalent to the average expenditure per week for a family in B&B. The Council benefits financially as does the client as they now have their own front door and enhanced self esteem.

We have just completed the first house under the Private Sector Leasing Scheme, four others are going through the legal process. We aim to have eight units in Taunton by April and have just been offered three flats in Wellington.

We expect with careful management that this will be sufficient to meet the Government's target of no families in Bed and Breakfast by April nevertheless we will continue to explore all channels and to keep our minds and options open.

Councillor Greg Garner