

Executive – 11 April 2006

Present:- Councillor Williams (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs Lewin-Harris (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Bradley, Cavill and Garner

Officers:- Mrs P James (Chief Executive)
Mr M Western (Head of Housing)

Also Present:- Councillors Mrs Allgrove, Biscoe, Bowrah, Coles, Croad, Guerrier, Hayward, Henley, Lees, Lisgo, Murphy, Phillips, Stone, Stuart-Thorn, Wedderkopp and Mrs Whitmarsh.

(The meeting commenced at 7.46pm)

36. Apologies

Councillors Bishop, Edwards, Hall and Leighton.

37. Public Question Time

Councillor Henley, as a member of the public, asked the following questions:-

- (i) If a Conservative candidate for Blackbrook and Holway was elected, would his policies be respected?

Councillor Williams replied that anyone in the Conservative Group was able to take any issue forward.

- (ii) Would Councillor Williams rule out building houses on Holway Green? Could he give a yes or no answer?

Councillor Williams replied that no decision had yet been made, but that he would consider and properly examine any proposals.

Patricia Rowe, a Council tenant stated that in a survey carried out by Aldbourne Associates, only 6% of tenants said that they knew nothing about the transfer, but the report appeared to have spun the results.

Mrs James replied that the facts had been given and the report was available to everyone.

38. Review of Housing Transfer Project

Considered report previously circulated, concerning the recent review of the Housing Transfer Project by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC).

This matter had been considered by the Housing Review Panel at an earlier meeting at which members of the Executive had been present.

The Council had previously made a decision to explore a new stand-alone Registered Social Landlord (RSL), as a result of stock option appraisal work that was commenced in 2002.

The Government had directed all Councils to carry out options appraisals of its stock by July 2005. This Council had been accepted on the stock transfer programme in May 2005 and had two years from that date to complete a transfer.

The Council was clear that stock transfer was the only option that would secure its housing priorities including Decent Homes and established the Housing Transfer Project to carry out work. Officers and external advisors supported the project and a Shadow Board for the potential new RSL had been set up.

The intention had been to ballot tenants in the Spring/Summer 2006, but a review of the project had suggested that the timetable should be increased and project management and governance arrangements refreshed.

Aldbourn Associates had undertaken some market testing of tenants which indicated that almost half of the tenants were undecided as to how to vote. However, tenants had not been through the consultation process and therefore, their choices were based on a lack of understanding.

The Government of the South West (GOSW) had made it clear that it was the Council's duty to ensure that all tenants were adequately informed and it would not be in everyone's interest to progress to a Spring/Summer ballot.

The Project Manager had recently left the Council and this had impacted on the project. A 'stock take' was commissioned by PWC and their findings were:-

- The timetable needed to be adjusted to devote more time to the informal consultation process with tenants and staff;
- The offer document required development ahead of further detailed consultation with tenants;
- Given the current resourcing difficulties, the project team needed to be restructured to include staff from the Housing Service;
- The Shadow Board development needed to continue and the relationship between the Board and the Council needed to be strengthened; and
- A revised ballot timetable would add costs to the process.

Extensive consultation had taken place over a short time frame and a common objective of all stakeholders was to enable an informed decision to be made by tenants and to ensure the process that the Council undertook was sound and met criteria clearly set down by GOSW.

An increase in the level of face-to-face meetings with tenants was required, with clear, relevant and targeting consultation. The proposal was to extend the consultation period to at least over the summer period.

Detailed work programmes had to be developed to enable everyone involved to be clear on the implication of a Yes or No vote. The work programme would have four streams:-

- Programmed maintenance and improvement;
- Services;
- Elderly Services; and
- Anti-Social Behaviour/estates improvements.

The work would be lead by an existing Housing Manager, but needed to be prioritised. It would integrate the Savills work on stock condition and the work on tenants' priorities and would be completed before the intensive consultation in the summer.

It was felt that the project team needed to be integrated into mainstream business and the suggestions were:-

- The Project Director and Officer champion would be Shirlene Adam and the Member champion would be Councillor Garner;
- A Project Co-ordinator role would be integrated with the Head of Housing role and would be responsible for Project Co-ordination and delivery;
- A full-time Project Officer would support the Co-ordinator, the Housing Managers and the lead advisor on consultation;
- A full-time Project Administrator would support the Council and Shadow Board structure; and
- PWC would provide support to the Shadow Board for 2.5 days per month.

It was felt that Governance needed to be strengthened and a Project Board, consisting of Council, Shadow Board and Tenant representatives would be formed to steer the Project.

Also, an Elected Member Advisory Panel, consisting of cross-party Members would be formed. The Panel would:-

- Provide political direction to the project;
- Review project progress; and

- Ensure that the process was properly aligned at all stages to the corporate strategic outcomes required.

The Officer Steering Group would be supplemented with an Officer Working Group to complete the majority of the work.

It was suggested that the timetable be extended to allow for the Project management difficulties, the Offer Document work and the additional consultation required and it was anticipated that a ballot would take place at the end of the year, subject to soundings being taken in the Autumn.

The timetable had cost implications which reflected the additional work of officers and lead advisors.

Details of the costs for the Project Team, Advisors and Consultation were given.

The PWC report encouraged early debate by Corporate Management Team (CMT) and Members on:-

- The level of minimum capital receipt required;
- The use of that receipt;
- The corporate impact of transfer; and
- Outline decisions about the retention or transfer of Housing Revenue Account non-dwelling assets and other services, for example the DLO, Deane Helpline and Strategic Housing Services.

The residual capital receipt would be reinvested in furthering the Council's housing objectives which was in line with current guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).

The Housing Transfer Project was a key priority for the Council and without transfer the Council believed that it could not deliver the standard and quality of service that tenants had previously enjoyed.

Savills stock condition survey showed a shortfall of £2 million per year until 2010, in order to meet the Decent Homes standard.

Affordable Housing was also a key corporate priority and the potential Capital receipt would enable the Council to continue to support this priority. The recent Ark survey had increased the number of Affordable Social Houses in the Deane from 131 to 256 and developers were required to provide 290 affordable homes per annum.

More work was required to enable tenants to make an informed choice. The timetable needed to be extended although this would mitigate additional costs of £180,000. Whilst the costs were significant the project had to go ahead in order that the Decent Homes standard could

be achieved and a quality housing service and more affordable homes could be provided.

RESOLVED that the recommendations of the Housing Review Panel be agreed and :-

- The timetable for the project be extended to 31 December 2006;
- A transfer to the Stock Option Reserve of £180,000 be made from the Housing Revenue Account working balance;
- The revised project management arrangements be noted; and
- The revised governance arrangements be noted.

(The meeting ended at 8.15pm)