

Cherwell District Council

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at Bodicote House, Bodicote, Banbury, OX15 4AA, on 31 January 2012 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor Kieron Mallon (Chairman)
Councillor Lynn Pratt (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Ann Bonner
Councillor Tim Emptage
Councillor Chris Heath
Councillor Alastair Milne Home
Councillor Neil Prestidge
Councillor Leslie F Sibley
Councillor Daniel Sames
Councillor Trevor Stevens
Councillor Lawrie Stratford
Councillor Rose Stratford

Also Present: Councillor Barry Wood
Councillor D M Pickford, Lead Member for Housing

Officers: Tim Mills, Private Sector Housing Manager
Helen Town, Strategic Housing Officer
Marianne North, Housing Needs Manager
Karen Muir, Corporate System Accountant
Catherine Phythian, Team Leader, Democratic and Elections

41 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

42 Urgent Business

There was no urgent business.

43 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 6 December 2012 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Council's Approach to Empty Homes

The Chairman opened the discussion by praising the Lead Member for Housing and the staff of Housing Services for their hard work and significant achievements in reducing the levels of homelessness and improving housing standards in the district. The Chairman explained that this agenda item was an opportunity for the Committee to learn more about the steps being taken by the Council to bring empty homes into use and to consider the proposals for the strategic approach to empty homes that it is intended should form part of the new Housing Strategy.

The Private Sector Housing Manager presented the report and reminded the Committee of the range of initiatives, such as loans, leasing and brokering, and home improvement grants, currently used by the Council to bring empty homes back into use. He explained that there were an estimated 600 empty properties across the district but that very few represented a serious social, environmental or safety problem for the Council.

The Private Sector Housing Manager highlighted the four principles, which it was proposed, would underpin the Council's approach to empty homes in the future:

1. The Council wants empty homes to be used.
2. The Council will encourage and facilitate their re-use (e.g. by providing advice, grants and loans).
3. The Council will take action to resolve specific issues caused by empty homes (where powers permit).
4. The Council will take action to secure re-use of empty homes where a business case exists.

The Committee noted that the Council had not previously considered use of Empty Dwelling Management Order or Compulsory Purchase Order powers as a means of restoring empty dwellings to use because of the potentially significant cost and uncertainty of outcomes. However, in future the application of the four principles outlined in the report would include consideration of their use when a suitable business case could be established.

The Strategic Housing Officer briefed the Committee on some of the practical issues faced by the Council in bringing empty properties back in to use. She emphasised the importance of promoting a collaborative approach with Registered Providers and with private and corporate landlords of both residential and commercial properties. The Committee noted that given the subject matter the negotiations were often protracted and complex.

The Housing Needs Manager informed the Committee that the number of people on the Council's housing register had been increasing steadily over the past year and a further rise was anticipated in 2012-13 as the government's changes to the benefit system took effect.

The Lead Member for Housing emphasised that every empty property added to the district's housing stock, whatever the type of tenure, would release another housing unit and ultimately assist the Council in meeting its statutory obligations on housing. She concluded by urging the Committee to agree that

the Council should be prepared to use strong measures such as Compulsory Purchase Orders or Empty Dwelling Management Order, when and if the circumstances justified such action.

The Committee welcomed the report and confirmed their support for the four principles as an excellent, pragmatic and low risk approach to tackling one of the housing issues in the district. They agreed that it was important to prioritise the cases and use the measures to address properties which had been empty for some time or which posed other economic and social issues. It was important that the Council's approach should not be seen as a disincentive to people buying properties as an investment strategy or as a further complication for properties in probate. The Committee urged the Lead Member and officers to ensure that the work was publicised to residents.

Resolved

- (1) That the actions being undertaken to address empty homes issues be noted and welcomed.
- (2) That the principles set out in the report as the basis for the Council's approach to empty homes be supported.
- (3) That the proposal that the Head of Regeneration and Housing, in consultation with the Lead Member for Housing, should be responsible for considering the business case for intervention to return specific empty properties to use be supported.
- (4) That the Lead Member for Housing be requested to submit a further report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to provide further details of the approach taken by Registered Providers to manage the empty homes on their stock within the district.

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Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2011- 2012

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Law & Governance which updated Members on the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2011/12.

Forward Plan

The Committee agreed that there were no items on the Forward Plan for February – May 2012 that they wished to include on their work programme in 2011/12.

Potential Work Programme Items 2011/12

Strategic Tenancy Policy

The Committee noted that the Strategic Tenancy Policy was scheduled to be discussed at Executive in March 2012. They asked that it be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 13 March 2012.

Agenda for 13 March 2012

The Committee confirmed that the Lead Member for Planning should be invited to the meeting in March 2012 to discuss the Local Development Framework.

Resolved

- (1) That there were no items in the current version of the Forward Plan (February – May 2012) to be included on the work programme for 2011/12.
- (2) That the current Overview and Scrutiny element of the work programme for 2011/12 be noted and that the Strategic Tenancy Policy be added to the work programme for March 2012.
- (3) That it be noted that the agenda items for the 13 March 2012 meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be the Local Development Framework and the Strategic Tenancy Policy.

The meeting ended at 8.00 pm

Chairman:

Date: